Application of Phi29 Motor pRNA for Targeted Therapeutic Delivery of siRNA Silencing Metallothionein-IIA and Survivin in Ovarian Cancers

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Ovarian cancer is a highly metastatic and lethal disease, making it imperative to find treatments that target late-stage malignant tumors. The packaging RNA (pRNA) of bacteriophage phi29 DNA-packaging motor has been reported to function as a highly versatile vehicle to carry small interference RNA (siRNA) for silencing of survivin. In this article, we explore the potential of pRNA as a vehicle to carry siRNA specifically targeted to metallothionein-IIa (MT-IIA) messenger RNA (mRNA), and compare it to survivin targeting pRNA. These two anti-apoptotic cell survival factors promote tumor cell viability, and are over-expressed in recurrent tumors. We find that pRNA chimeras targeting MT-IIA are processed into double-stranded siRNA by dicer, are localized within the GW/P-bodies, and are more potent than siRNA alone in silencing MT-IIA expression. Moreover, knockdown of both survivin and MT-IIA expression simultaneously results in more potent effects on cell proliferation in the aggressive ovarian tumor cell lines than either alone, suggesting that therapeutic approaches that target multiple genes are essential for molecular therapy. The folate receptor–targeted delivery of siRNA by the folate-pRNA dimer emphasizes the cancer cell–specific aspect of this system. The pRNA system, which has the capability to assemble into multivalent nanoparticles, has immense promise as a highly potent therapeutic agent.

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INTRODUCTION

Ovarian cancer is a highly metastatic and lethal disease with an estimated 13,850 deaths annually and 21,880 new cases diagnosed in 2010. It has the highest mortality of all cancers of the female reproductive system, although it is treatable when detected early. Unfortunately, most diagnoses occur at advanced stages of disease, when the cancer has usually metastasized, spread beyond the ovary, and is difficult to treat.

Survivin has a pivotal role in tumor cell survival (reviewed in Altieri1) and is differentially expressed in ovarian tumor cells as compared to most normal tissues.2-4 Survivin expression correlates with proliferative index, clinical stage, histological grade, clinical outcome, and survival rate in epithelial ovarian and endometrial carcinomas.5-7 Preclinical studies have demonstrated that downregulation of survivin expression or function reduced tumor growth potential and increased tumor cell apoptotic rate in various human tumor models (reviewed in Pennati et al.8). These factors make survivin an attractive target for gene therapy.

Metallothionein (MT) family of metal-binding proteins confers protection against apoptosis and plays an important role in cell proliferation;7 both processes are important in carcinogenesis. The increased expression of MT in malignant as opposed to benign ovarian surface epithelial tumors and also with increasing histological grade tumors2,8 suggests a role for MT in tumorigenesis. To date, there are seven MT-I functional isoforms, but only one MT-II functional isoform (named MT-IIA) characterized. The survival of mice lacking functional MT-I and MT-IIA genes9 indicates that these proteins are not crucial factors for normal cell survival.10 However, silencing MT-IIA expression induces apoptosis in cancer cells,11-13 without augmenting the expression of MT-I isoforms, making MT-IIA a candidate for therapeutic intervention.

There has been an increased interest in RNA interference (RNAi) as a therapeutic approach for treatment of cancer. There is accumulating evidence that delivery of small interference RNA (siRNA) (targeting anti-apoptotic genes) as dicer-substrate siRNA (d-siRNA—27bp) can be up to a 100-fold more potent than the traditional 21-mer siRNA.14-16 Moreover, by coupling synthetic d-siRNA with a cancer cell–specific ligand or a RNA aptamer17,18 targeted toward a cancer-specific receptor, one can potentially target delivery of d-siRNA only to cancer cells. This mode of d-siRNA delivery is gaining importance because the preformed d-siRNA is extremely potent at gene silencing, is short lived,19,20 and is rapidly cleared by the system, eliminating long-term effects. Another approach to deliver siRNA into cells for gene therapy is with packaging RNA (pRNA) of bacteriophage phi29.21-24
pRNA is a component of the bacteriophage phi29 DNA-packaging motor.\(^\text{25,26}\) pRNA (Figure 1a) can form dimers, trimers, and hexamers.\(^\text{24,27,28}\) Each pRNA contains two functional domains. The central domain of pRNA contains two interlocking left hand and right hand loops that can be engineered to form stable intermolecular loop–loop interactions\(^\text{27}\) (Figure 1a). The DNA-packaging domain is located at the 5'3' paired ends.\(^\text{29}\) The two domains fold separately, and replacement of the packaging domain with siRNA does not affect pRNA structure, folding, or intermolecular interactions.\(^\text{29,30}\) The resultant pRNA/siRNA chimera is useful for gene therapy.

We have previously shown that the pRNA/si(Surv) chimera can be used for the delivery of siRNA targeting survivin into breast, prostate, and nasopharyngeal carcinoma cells.\(^\text{21–23}\) In this report, we explore the potential use of pRNA to carry siRNA specific for MT-IIA, and compare its efficacy to induce cell death with that of a survivin targeting pRNA in ovarian cancer cells. We show that the pRNA/siRNA can be processed by dicer, and can downregulate MT-IIA and survivin messenger RNA (mRNA) levels when introduced into cells, resulting in decreased cell proliferation. Moreover, the pRNA/si(MT2A) is more efficient than the synthetic 21-mer siRNA alone, in silencing MT-IIA expression. Finally, we show that

Figure 1 Sequence and structure of pRNA chimera. (a) Sketch of chimeric siRNA harbored in pRNA vector. (a) Sequence and secondary structure of (1) Ba'pRNA, (2) Ab'pRNA/si(CONT2) and Ba'pRNA/si(CONT2) dimer, (3) Ba'pRNA/si(CONT2) (control siRNA), (4) Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-1), (5) Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-2), and (6) Ba'pRNA/si(Surv). All chimeras have identical pRNA backbone sequence, whereas the sequence of siRNA are altered. (b) The pRNA/siRNA have the correct size. The Ab'pRNA, Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-1), Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-2), Ba'pRNA/si(Surv) and Ba'pRNA/si(CONT2) and Ba'pRNA (lanes 1–6) were transcribed and analyzed on a 6% denaturing gel. (c) The pRNA/siRNA have the correct intermolecular interactions. The Ba'pRNA, Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-1), Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-2), Ba'pRNA/si(Surv), and Ba'pRNA/si(CONT2) (lanes 1–5, 8–12) were analyzed on a 6% nondenaturing gel in the absence (monomers, lanes 1–5) and presence (dimers, lanes 8–12) of Ab'pRNA. The migration of the monomer Ab'pRNA (lanes 6, 7) and Ba'pRNA (lane 13) is also shown. (d) Processing of chimeric pRNA/siRNA complex into siRNA by purified dicer. The Ba'pRNA, Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-1), Ba'pRNA/si(MT2-2), Ba'pRNA/si(Surv), and Ba'pRNA/si(CONT2) (lanes 1–5, 6–10) were incubated in the absence (lanes 1–5) or presence (lanes 6–10) of dicer for 1 hour, and analyzed by 8% denaturing gel. Lane 11 represents Ba'pRNA/si(CONT2) incubated with dicer for 3 hours.
Ba′pRNA/si(MT2A) can form dimers with folate-tagged pRNA (folate-pRNA), bind to cells expressing folate receptor, and inhibit cell growth. Thus, the folate-pRNA can be used to deliver pRNA targeting expression of MT-IIA or survivin to ovarian cancer cells, making it a highly potent therapeutic agent.

RESULTS

Construction of pRNA/siRNA chimera

Phi29 pRNA contains a DNA-packaging domain as well as an intermolecular interacting domain with complementary left and right hand loops/arms (Figure 1a). To construct the pRNA/siRNA chimeras targeting either MT-IIA or survivin, the 5′/3′ helical DNA-packaging domain was replaced by the respective siRNA (Figure 1a), or by a random sequence as a control. The transcribed RNA was analyzed on a denaturing gel to verify the correct size of the pRNA/siRNA chimera (Figure 1b). As expected, the 110 nt Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-1), Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-2), Ba′pRNA/si(Surv), and Ba′pRNA/si(CONT2) (Figure 1b, lanes 2–5) ran slightly faster than the 117 nt Ab′pRNA and Ba′pRNA (Figure 1b, lanes 1, 6). To confirm that the Ba′pRNA/siRNA chimeric complexes retained their correct folding and capability for intermolecular interaction, Ba′pRNA/siRNA chimeras were mixed with Ab′pRNA and analyzed on a nondenaturing gel. The Ba′pRNA and Ba′pRNA/siRNA chimeras did not homodimerize (see Materials and Methods, Figure 1c, lanes 1–5, monomers) and efficiently formed heterodimers with Ab′pRNA (Figure 1c, lanes 8–12) as indicated by change in mobility of the bands.

The pRNA/siRNA construct is processed by dicer

Next, to confirm that the Ba′pRNA/siRNA chimeras could be processed into siRNA by dicer in vitro, chimeric pRNA/siRNA were treated with purified recombinant dicer, which processes long double-stranded RNA into siRNAs. We had previously shown by 5′ end 32P end-labeling that a 22-base siRNA can be generated with high efficiency by pRNA/siRNA chimera digestion with dicer.23 Purified Ba′pRNA/siRNA chimeras were mixed with dicer, and the digested product was then analyzed on denaturing polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE)/urea gels. As shown in Figure 1d, digestion of the pRNA/siRNA chimeras by dicer resulted in production of 17–22-base siRNA (Figure 1d), which are absent in the nondicer containing lanes. This result confirms that similar to d-siRNA, the chimeric pRNA/siRNA is cleaved by dicer, and the double-stranded siRNA located at the 5′/3′ ends, are released.

Specific silencing of MT-IIA and survivin mRNA by their respective pRNA/siRNA chimera

Quantitative real-time-reverse transcription–PCR (qRT-PCR) was performed to evaluate the MT-IIA and survivin gene expression in the highly metastatic SKOV-3 cell line, as well as two primary ovarian cancer cell lines OVCA 432 and OVCA 433 obtained from patients with late-stage serous ovarian adenocarcinoma.31,32 The mRNA from all three cell lines was analyzed by qRT-PCR for MT-IIA and survivin expression. The expression of MT-IIA mRNA was found to be high in all three cell lines with SKOV-3 cells showing highest expression (Figure 2a), with comparative threshold (C_t) values of 18 per 3 ng mRNA, corresponding to around 400,000 copies of MT-IIA. The survivin C_t values were also high, with OVCA 432 cells showing highest expression (Figure 2b). Next, we transfected the pRNA/siRNA into cells and examined these cells for suppression of MT-IIA and survivin mRNA expression. MT-IIA (Figure 2c) and survivin (Figure 2d) mRNA was decreased within 24 hours after transfection with Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-1), Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-2), and Ba′pRNA/si(Surv), as compared with the control [Ba′pRNA/si(CONT2)]. This indicates that pRNA/siRNA can specifically silence expression of their respective target mRNAs.

Decreased proliferation of ovarian cancer cells transfected with the chimeric pRNA/siRNA

Previous studies have shown that downregulation of MT-IIA or survivin (recently reviewed) can result in cell death due to apoptosis. To examine whether chimeric Ba′pRNA/siRNA targeting MT-IIA and survivin can decrease cell survival, we performed cell proliferation assays 3 days post-transfection. Cells transfected with Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-1), Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-2), and Ba′pRNA/si(Surv) exhibited decreased cell proliferation compared with cells transfected with control Ba′pRNA/si(CONT2) (Figure 3a).
Moreover, when examined under a microscope, the majority of Ba′pRNA/si(MT2A)- and Ba′pRNA/si(Surv)-transfected cells were rounded with dark condensed nuclei, and detached from the cell culture plate (Figure 3b). However, we noticed that the highly metastatic SKOV-3 cells consistently showed higher levels of cell survival compared to OVCA 432 and OVCA 433 cells (Figure 3a), when transfected with Ba′pRNA/si(MT2A). We examined the transfection efficiency by co-transfecting each pRNA/siRNAs along with pGFP, and counting the number of GFP-positive cells, and by transfecting Cy3-labeled pRNA/siRNA chimeras as indicated and images were taken using an inverse microscope 72 hours post-transfection. Scale bar ~10 µmol/l. (Figure 3c, d) Survivin and MT-IIA mRNA expression in Ba′pRNA/siRNA- (2 nmol/l each) transfected cells. Cells were transfected with Ba′pRNA/siRNA chimeras as indicated and images were taken using an inverse microscope 72 hours post-transfection. Scale bar ~10 µmol/l. (Figure 3e) Cell proliferation assays at 72 hours post-pRNA/siRNA transfection at concentrations indicated.

The inhibitory function of the pRNA/siRNA is more potent than the 21-base synthetic double-stranded siRNA

Recent observations regarding the more potent interfering function of d-siRNA indicate that the chimera pRNA/siRNA should also be more effective than the 21-base siRNA in its inhibitory function. To compare the relative potencies of 21-mer siRNA and pRNA/siRNA, we transfected OVCA 433 cells with both Ba′pRNA/siRNA and the 21-mer siRNA targeted to MT-IIA. Compared to pRNA/siRNA-transfected cells, we found that higher molar amounts of siRNA were required to obtain equivalent MT-IIA gene silencing. That is, although 2 nmol/l of Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-1) and Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-2) were sufficient to induce 40–50% decrease in MT-IIA levels (Figure 2c), 33 nmol/l of the 21-mer siRNA was required to knockdown the equivalent amount (Figure 4a). This effect was reflected in the cell proliferation. Whereas a significant decrease in cell proliferation was obtained with 2 and 8 nmol/l of Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-1) and Ba′pRNA/si(MT2-2) (Figure 4b), equivalent amounts of siMT2-1 and siMT2-2 did not have any effect on cell survival. A maximum of 20% decrease in cell
pRNA Targeting MT-IIA/Survivin Inhibits Cell Growth

pRNA TARGETING MT-IIA/SURVIVIN INHIBITS CELL GROWTH

The mammalian GW182 protein, a major component of P-bodies, has been found to colocalize with Argonaute (Ago) proteins. It has been shown that the GW182 protein interaction with Ago2 and their colocalization at mRNPs are important in microRNA- and siRNA-mediated RNAi. Although the exact role of GW182 is not known, it has been proposed that RISC (RNA-induced silencing complex) plays a role in targeting mRNAs to GW-rich bodies where the mRNA is either degraded or translationally repressed. We thus determined whether the pRNA/siRNA chimeras localize within the GW/P-bodies complex. The pRNA/siRNA chimera was labeled with Cy3 so that it could be tracked to investigate its subcellular localization in OVCA 433 cells. As a control, the FITC-siRNA (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) was employed. Live image microscopy was performed. The Cy3 signal was magnified in panels 5 and 6. Scale bar represents 5 µmol/l.

The ability of pRNA nanoparticle to form dimers makes it extremely useful for targeted delivery of siRNA into cancer cells.

Results are presented as average ± SEM of triplicate experiments. Asterisk indicates t-test P < 0.05. (a) MT-IIA mRNA expression is downregulated in siRNA-transfected cells. Cells were transfected with siCONT2, siMT-1, and siMT-2, as indicated, and the levels of MT-IIA mRNA determined at 24 hours post-transfection. Results are presented relative to siCONT2-transfected cells, after normalization to GAPDH values. (b) Cell proliferation assays at 72 hours post-pRNA/siRNA transfections at concentrations indicated. Average of two experiments. (c) Cell proliferation assays at 72 hours post-21-mer siRNA transfections at concentrations indicated.

Inhibits Cell Growth

MT-IIA or survivin expression inhibits cell proliferation in OVCA 433 cells. Results are presented as average ± SEM of triplicate experiments. Asterisk indicates t-test P < 0.05. (a) MT-IIA mRNA expression is downregulated in siRNA-transfected cells. Cells were transfected with siCONT2, siMT-1, and siMT-2, as indicated, and the levels of MT-IIA mRNA determined at 24 hours post-transfection. Results are presented relative to siCONT2-transfected cells, after normalization to GAPDH values. (b) Cell proliferation assays at 72 hours post-pRNA/siRNA transfections at concentrations indicated. Average of two experiments. (c) Cell proliferation assays at 72 hours post-21-mer siRNA transfections at concentrations indicated.

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expression by qRT-PCR and found highest levels in SKOV-3 cells. pRNA-Cy3-pRNA dimer to cells with free folate (Figure 6c). Moreover, we could compete the binding of folate-receptor.41 We examined ovarian cancer cell lines for folate receptor-α for delivery into folate receptor expressing ovarian cancer cells. A number of researchers have found that folate receptor-α is highly expressed in ovarian carcinomas compared to normal tissue, with nearly 89% ovarian carcinomas staining positive for folate receptor.41 We examined ovarian cancer cell lines for folate receptor-α expression by qRT-PCR and found highest levels in SKOV-3 cells (Figure 6a). Next, we made the folate-Ab’pRNA (as outlined in Materials and Methods) and confirmed that the folate moiety does not interfere with the heterodimerization of Ab’pRNA with Ba’pRNA/siRNA chimeras. The Ba’pRNA/siRNA chimeras were mixed with folate-Ab’pRNA and analyzed on a nondenaturing gel. The change in mobility of the bands indicates that the folate-pRNA (Figure 6b, lane 4, 7, 16–18) of folate-Ab’pRNA (c) The folate-pRNA-Cy3-pRNA/siRNA binds to KB cells. Cells maintained in folate-free media treated with the dimers formed above. Cell proliferation assays were performed 72 hours post-pRNA/siRNA treatment as indicated. Effects of targeted silencing the percent of cells bound by Cy3-pRNA/siRNA. (d) The folate-pRNA-Cy3-pRNA/siRNA binds to KB cells. Cells maintained in folate-free media treated with the indicated Cy3-pRNA/siRNA dimer with either folate-pRNA or NH2-pRNA. Flow cytometric analysis was performed to determine the percent of cells bound by Cy3-pRNA/siRNA. The Ba’pRNA/siRNA chimeras were analyzed on a 6% nondenaturing gel in the absence (monomers, lanes 1–6, 10–15) and presence (dimers, lanes 7–9, 16–18) of folate-Ab’pRNA. (b) The Ba’pRNA/siRNA can dimerize with folate-Ab’pRNA. (a) SKOV-3 cells express high levels of folate receptor-α mRNA. Total RNA was extracted from HOSE 642, OVCA 432, OVCA433, and SKOV-3 cell lines, was reverse transcribed to cDNA, and was analyzed for mRNA expression by qRT-PCR. Values were normalized to GAPDH levels in the respective cell line. Error bars represent the SEM of three samples each, each performed in triplicate. Expression levels of survivin are shown relative to HOSE 642 cells. (b) The Ba’pRNA/siRNA can dimerize with folate-Ab’pRNA. The Ba’pRNA/siRNA form dimers with folate-Ab’pRNA and analyzed on a nondenaturing gel. The 22/98 Spil Ab’pRNA (lanes 1, 10), Ab’pRNA (lanes 2, 11), Ba’pRNA (lanes 3, 9, 12, 18), folate-Ab’pRNA (lanes 4, 13), Ba’pRNA/si(MT2-1) (lanes 5, 7), Ba’pRNA/si(MT2-2) (lanes 6, 8), Ba’pRNA/si(Surv) (lanes 14, 16), and Ba’pRNA/si(CONT2) (lanes 15, 17) were analyzed on a 6% nondenaturing gel in the absence (monomers, lanes 1–6, 10–15) and presence (dimers, lanes 7–9, 16–18) of folate-Ab’pRNA. (c) The folate-pRNA-Cy3-pRNA/siRNA binds to KB cells. Cells maintained in folate-free media were treated with the indicated Cy3-pRNA/siRNA dimer with either folate-pRNA or NH2-pRNA. Flow cytometric analysis was performed to determine the percent of cells bound by Cy3-pRNA/siRNA. (d) Effects of targeted silencing MT-IIA or survivin expression in SKOV-3 cells. SKOV-3 cells were treated with the dimers formed above. Cell proliferation assays were performed 72 hours post-pRNA/siRNA treatment as indicated.

DISCUSSION
The 117-nt RNA nanoparticle10 derived from the phi29 DNA-packaging RNA is ideally suited for delivery of siRNA directed toward multiple gene targets.25,26 It has the potential of being safe, noninfectious/nonpathogenic and resistant to degradation. We investigated the utility of the pRNA nanoparticle as a siMT-IIA fusion chimera to inhibit expression of MT-IIA, and induce decreased cell proliferation of pRNA/si(MT2A) chimera–transfected cells. We found that the pRNA/siRNA was processed by dicer (Figure 1, Supplementary Figure S7), localized to GW182 containing speckles, and inhibited the expression of the target pRNA Targeting MT-IIA/Survivin Inhibits Cell Growth
gene. Moreover, transfection of both pRNA/si(MT2A) and pRNA/si(Surv) individually and together, decreased cell proliferation. We found similar results in breast and prostate cancer cells (data not shown). Thus, in addition to survivin, targeting MT-IIA gene expression could be a second molecule in the arsenal for treating ovarian cancers, and this pRNA nanoparticle, is excellent for delivery of highly potent siRNA.

For the pRNA/siRNA to efficiently function in RNAi, it has to be correctly processed by dicer, and delivered to the GW-rich bodies. We have shown that both events occur and that the pRNA/siRNA chimera is highly efficient in triggering RNAi. It has recently been described where RNAi by chemically synthesized d-siRNA duplexes in the 25–30 base length range are more potent than 21-mer siRNAs in the same location. The observed increased potency obtained using longer d-siRNAs in triggering RNAi is thought to result from providing dicer with a substrate instead of a product, which improves the rate or efficiency of entry of the d-siRNA into RISC as facilitated by dicer. Alternatively, this could be due to the pRNA/siRNA-processed RISC-siRNA functioning as a multiple-turnover enzyme that recognizes and cleaves its target multiple times resulting in a more potent, longer-lasting effect. It should be noted that although 33 nmol/l siMT-IIA had similar gene silencing efficiency as 2 nmol/l pRNA/si(MT2A), the siRNA was less potent than the corresponding pRNA/siRNA at decreasing cell survival. Because negligible amounts of IFN-α and IFN-β were detected, this was not a toxicity issue. We reasoned that this could be a question of relative pRNA stability within cells, because the RNA expression studies and cell proliferation studies were performed at different time points. The siRNA might be more prone to degradation than pRNA/siRNA, and thus less effective in the long term. Alternatively, the GW/P bodies are believed to be sites of mRNA degradation as well as translational repression.

A working model for how RISC interacts with cytoplasmic mRNAs has been proposed where siRNA-RISC first interacts with its target mRNA. If this interaction is stable, RISC remains bound leading to translational repression and the accumulation of the mRNA/RISC in GW/P-bodies, although the molecular details of that effect remain unclear. Moreover, if RISC contains a cleavage-competent Ago protein, the mRNA is cleaved before, during, or after accumulation of the mRNA:RISC in GW/P-bodies. The stage at which endonuclease cleavage occurs would simply be a function of the relative rates of cleavage versus translation repression and GW/P-body accumulation. We found that the siRNA of pRNA/siRNA was more stable within cells, and present within the GW/P-bodies 6 days post-transfection (Supplementary Figure S2). Because MT is an extremely small protein (∼7 kDa) and MT-IIA isoform antibodies cross-react with MT-I, we could not analyze MT-IIA by western blot. However, we immunostained pRNA/si(MT2A)-transfected cells for MT expression and found lower levels of staining intensity in pRNA/si(MT2A)-transfected cells compared to control cells (Supplementary Figure S3). Moreover, we used cleavage site overlap RT-PCR to confirm mRNA cleavage of MT-2A and survivin in pRNA/si(MT2A)- and pRNA/si(Surv)-transfected cells (Supplementary Figure S4).

Relatively subtle perturbations of anti-apoptotic protein expression, stability or binding to associated molecules can irreversibly impair cell viability. We observed that the expression of survivin mRNA decreased by 20% on transfection of pRNA/si(Surv) in SKOV-3 and OVCA 433 cells, its effects on cell proliferation were >20%, depending on cell type. This could be due to the fact that survivin expression in SKOV-3 and OVCA 433 cells is three- to sixfold lower than that present in OVCA 432 cells. Once survivin expression fell below a threshold level, cell death was triggered. Hence, even a 20–30% decrease in survivin in SKOV-3 and OVCA 433 cells was sufficient to trigger cell death.

The ability of pRNA chimeras to form dimers makes them extremely useful for targeted delivery of siRNA into cancer cells. We showed that the pRNA/siRNA-folate-pRNA dimer can deliver siRNA to folate receptor-α expressing ovarian carcinoma cells. However, only 15% of the folate-pRNA dimer bound to cells. Previous studies have indicated that pRNA forms dimers with high efficiency which are very stable in solutions. The low binding efficiency to cells may reflect the degradation of pRNA in serum. To compensate for the low folate-pRNA dimer cell-binding activity, we have performed two rounds of treatment with folate-pRNA-pRNA/siRNA dimers, and observed a significant decrease in cell survival in the presence of MT-IIA and survivin targeting pRNA/siRNA, indicating the high potential of this delivery system. We are working on making the pRNA resistant to degradation, a key step essential for transition to preclinical animal trials. As a consequence of our findings, we can envision future studies aimed at cancer cell–specific, folate-mediated uptake of siRNA targeting survivin and MT-IIA as a pRNA trimer. This strategy has the potential for targeting a single cell with multiple molecules, making pRNA nanoparticle-mediated delivery ideally suited to overcome the extraordinary heterogeneity of human cancer.

In summary, we have shown that: (i) pRNA/siRNA chimera can be efficiently processed by dicer and are localized within the GW/P-bodies, (ii) pRNA/si(MT2A) is more efficient than siRNA alone in silencing MT-IIA expression, (iii) pRNA/si(MT2A) and pRNA/si(Surv) can be used to specifically silence MT-IIA and survivin mRNA expression, respectively, leading to decreased cell proliferation, (iv) folate-mediated uptake of pRNA/si(MT2A) and pRNA/si(Surv) can inhibit cell growth/survival, and (v) the combination of pRNA/siRNA targeted toward survivin and MT-IIA leads to more potent effects on cell proliferation. Thus, the pRNA/si(MT2A) chimera provides another robust subunit for construction of pRNA-based multivalent therapeutic vehicle against cancer cells.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cell culture. Ovarian cancer cell line SKOV-3, nasopharyngeal carcinoma KB cells (American Type Culture Collection, Manassas, VA), and the primary human Ovarian Cancer (OVCA 432 and OVCA 433) and the ovarian surface epithelial (HOSE 642) cell lines have been described previously and are routinely maintained in RPMI 1640 medium and supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum. Cultures were incubated at 37 °C in a humidified 5% CO₂ atmosphere; 7,000 cells were seeded into each well of a 96-well culture plate (Nunc, Rochester, NY) for in vitro experiments.

Nomenclature, construction, and synthesis of RNA. The nomenclature of pRNA and the resulting chimeric pRNA subunits for the construction of siRNA nanoparticles have been reported. Briefly, upper-case and lowercase letters are used to represent the right and left hand loops of the pRNA, respectively. Matched letters indicate complementarity; whereas different letters indicate no complementary loops. For example, Ab pRNA contains right hand loop A (5′ G₅G₅G₅A₃C₆) and left hand loop b (3′ U₉G₅C₇C₇G₃).
which can pair with the left hand loop a' (3' C9 C10 U13 G20) and right hand loop B (5' A9 C10 C11 C12), respectively, of Ba'pRNA (Figure 1a).

The synthesis of RNA has been described previosly.20 Approximately 10 mmol/l of magnesium chloride was included in all buffers to maintain the intermolecular interaction and folding of pRNA.21,22 The DNA primers for chimeric pRNA/siRNA transcription were ordered from Sigma, St Louis, MO. The DNA products containing the T7 polymerase class II promoter as previously described,21,22 were used as substrates for direct in vitro transcription using RiboMAX T7 kit (Promega, Madison, WI). pRNA/si(Surv) represents pRNA/chimeratharborsssiRNA targeting survivin,21 pRNA/si(MT2-1) and pRNA/si(MT2-2) represent pRNA chimeras that harbor siRNA targeting MT-IA sequences “GCAAGGGGGCGTGG ACAC” and “GGCTGGCACAAAGTGCAGCT,” respectively. The pRNA/si (CONT2) chimera contains a random sequence, same as that in siCONT2 (Dharmacon, Lafayette, CO) which has been tested by the manufacturer not to downregulate the expression of any mRNA. The transcribed pRNA/siRNA were resolved on a 6% PAGE/urea gel for size and on a 8% Tris–borate–magnesium chloride PAGE for size and on a 8% Tris–borate–magnesium chloride PAGE for dimerization studies as previously described.40 Fluorescent pRNA/si (CONT2) chimera was generated using the Cy3 Silencer siRNA labeling kit (Applied Biosystems/Ambion, Austin, TX) in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

siRNA- and pRNA/siRNA-mediated downregulation of survivin and the MT-IA isoform. All siRNAs were ordered from IDT (Coralville, IA). siCONT2 (UAAGGCAUAGAAAGAUAAC) was used as the negative control (Dharmacon, Lafayette, CO) and siMT2-1 and siMT2-2 (GCAAGGGGGCGTGGCACAA and GCUCGGCACAAAGTGCAGCT, respectively) were used to target MT-IA. Ovarian cancer cells were transfected with reconstituted siRNA silencing duplex diluted in opti-MEM 1 Reduced Serum Medium (Invitrogen). Intracellular delivery of the siRNA or pRNA/siRNA was facilitated by use of lipofectamine 2000 transfection reagent (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's protocol. Transfected cells were first incubated for 5 hours prior to fresh medium replacement and maintained for another 72 hours before further analysis.

Cell proliferation analyses. Cells were transfected in triplicate with the Ba’pRNA/siRNA using lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen). Alternatively, for the folate-pRNA-pRNA/siRNA dimer studies, cells in 96-well plates were treated with 200 and 400 nmol/l folate-pRNA dimer complexes in HEPES-buffered saline (HBS) containing 10 mmol/l magnesium chloride for 30 minutes. The HBS was removed and replaced with culture media. Treatments were performed twice, on day 1 and 3. Cell proliferation was evaluated using the tetrazolium salt containing CellTiter 96 AQ solution Cell Proliferation assay. (Promega). Three days post-transfection and 4 days after the first treatment, the culture media were removed and replaced with 60 μl CellTiter 96 AQ solution One Solution reagent mix in each well according to the manufacturer's protocol. Cells were incubated at 37°C for 60 minutes. Absorbance was measured at 490 nm. Experiments were performed at least twice, in triplicate, and the percentage of surviving cells for each well was calculated as follows:

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\text{% proliferation} = \frac{\text{OD of test sample}}{\text{OD of control sample}} \times 100%. 
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Results are presented as average ± SD of triplicate experiments.

Real-time RT-PCR analysis. Total RNA was isolated using TRIZol (Invitrogen) and reverse transcribed using the SuperScript III First-Strand Synthesis System (Invitrogen). Single-stranded cDNA thus obtained was treated as template for real-time PCR analysis performed using the 7900HT Real-Time PCR System (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA). The expression of the SYBR Green reagent (Invitrogen). The primers used for the detection of the MT-IA isoform was adapted from Mididoddi et al.20 GAPDH and survivin were detected by the following primers: 5'-GAACGTTGAGGTCCAGTCA-3' (forward) and 5'-GAAACGTTCTCCGTTCAGC-3' (reverse); and 5'-GACCCGTGAGCACGTTGAGT-3' (forward) and 5'-TTCTTGCTGGGGCAGTGAT-3' (reverse). Primers were designed together with gel electrophoresis of the resulting PCR products. Relative quantification was calculated using the $C_t$ method, where $ΔC_t$ is the difference between the $C_t$ values of the target gene and the housekeeping GAPDH gene.

Statistical analysis. Each experiment was performed in triplicate, the mean ± SEM calculated for variables in each experimental group and analyzed by the Student's t-test (two-tailed). P values of < 0.05 were considered significant.

Chimeric pRNA/siRNA processing by dicer. Chimeric pRNA/siRNAs were incubated with purified recombinant RNA-specific endonuclease (dicer; Genlantis, San Diego, CA) for 2 hours at 37°C. The fragmented fragments were resolved on a 20% PAGE/urea gel.

Immunofluorescent microscopy. For immunofluorescence imaging, cells were transfected with Cy3-labeled Ba’pRNA/si (CONT2). Twenty-four hours post-transfection, cells were fixed with 4% formalin/5% acetic acid for half an hour, followed by 0.5% Triton X-100-phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) treatment (10 minutes) to permeabilize the cells. Slides were blocked with normal chicken serum, stained with mouse monoclonal anti-GW182 antibody (Clone 4B6; Abcam, Cambridge, MA) diluted 1:100 in PBS (1 hour). Alexa Fluor 488–coupled chicken anti-mouse secondary antibody (Invitrogen) was used at a dilution of 1:500. Cells were mounted using ProLong Gold Antifade Reagent with 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (Invitrogen).

Design of folate-pRNA, flow cytometric analysis, and confocal microscopy. 5'-End folate-labeled DNA oligonucleotide was obtained by 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl) carbodiimide– (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Rockford, IL) mediated –NH$_2$ group and folate–chemical reaction. The DNA was annealed with the pRNA (22/98 Spht Ab'pRNA) to generate folate-pRNA. The annealed products (folate-pRNA, NH$_2$-pRNA) were purified from 8% PAGE/urea denaturing gel.

The cell-binding studies were performed on KB cells which were maintained in folate-free RPMI 1640 medium overnight. The complementary pRNA/siRNA was stained with Cy3 fluorophores by Silencer siRNA labeling kit (Applied Biosystems) as per manufacturer's instructions prior to cell-binding studies. Approximately 700 nmol/l folate-pRNA and control NH$_2$-pRNA were each incubated with the complementary Cy3-pRNA/siRNA to form dimers. The dimers were then assayed for binding by incubation with 2 x 10$^5$ KB cells at 37°C for 1 hour. After PBS wash, the cells were resuspended in PBS buffer. In competition experiments, the cells were incubated with a 100-fold molar excess of free folate in presence of the pRNA dimers. Fluorescent Microscope (Olympus, Center Valley, PA) and Flow Cytometry (Beckman Coulter, Brea, CA) were used to observe the cell-binding efficacy of folate-pRNA complex.

For confocal microscopy, cells were grown on glass coverslips in folate-free medium overnight. Approximately 700 nmol/l folate-pRNA and control NH$_2$-pRNA were each incubated with the complementary Cy3-pRNA/siRNA to form dimers. The dimers were then assayed for binding and cell entry by incubation with cells at 37°C for 2–3 hours. After PBS wash, the cells were fixed by 4% paraformaldehyde and stained by Alexa Fluor 488 phalloidin (Invitrogen) for cytoskeleton and TO-PRO-3 iodide (642/661) (Invitrogen) for nuclei as per manufacturer's instructions. Confocal images were taken by the Zeiss LSM 510 laser scanning confocal microscope.
SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Figure S1. pRNA/siRNA do not induce high levels of interferon-α and β expression.

Figure S2. Cy3-Ba/pRNA/siRNA (CONT2) is localized within discrete speckles at 6 days post-transfection.

Figure S3. Immunofluorescence staining for MT expression.

Figure S4. Cleavage site overlap RT-PCR to demonstrate decreased levels of MT-2a and survivin products in pRNA/si(MT2A) and pRNA/siSurv transfected cells.

Figure S5. Binding and entry of folate-labeled folate-pRNA-Cy3-pRNA/siRNA dimer particle.

Figure S6. Silencing of targeted MT-IA or survivin.

Figure S7. Dicer processing of pRNA/siRNA.

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