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6 Telomerase inhibition is an effective therapeutic strategy in *TERT* promoter-mutant 7 glioblastomas models with low tumor burden

8

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24
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27
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55 **Abstract**
56
57 *Background:* Glioblastoma is among the deadliest of all cancers, with 5-year survival rates of only
58 6%. Glioblastoma targeted therapeutics have been challenging to develop due to significant inter-
59 and intra-tumoral heterogeneity. *TERT* promoter mutations are the most common known clonal
60 oncogenic mutations in glioblastoma. Telomerase is therefore considered to be a promising
61 therapeutic target against this tumor. However, an important limitation of this strategy is that cell
62 death does not occur immediately after telomerase ablation, but rather after several cell divisions
63 required to reach critically short telomeres. We therefore hypothesize that telomerase inhibition
64 would only be effective in low tumor burden glioblastomas.
65 *Methods:* We used CRISPR interference to knock down *TERT* expression in *TERT* promoter-
66 mutant glioblastoma cell lines and patient derived models. We then measured viability using serial
67 proliferation assays. We also assessed for features of telomere crisis by measuring telomere length
68 and chromatin bridge formation. Lastly, we used a doxycycline-inducible CRISPR interference
69 system to knock down *TERT* expression *in vivo* early and late in the tumor formation process.
70 *Results:* Upon TERT inactivation, glioblastoma cells lose their proliferative ability over time and
71 exhibit evidence of telomere crisis with telomere shortening and chromatin bridge formation. *In*
72 *vivo*, tumor formation is only inhibited when *TERT* knockdown is induced shortly after tumor
73 implantation, but not when tumor burden is high.
74 *Conclusions:* Our results support the idea that telomerase inhibition would be most effective at
75 treating glioblastomas with low tumor burden, for example in the adjuvant setting after surgical
76 debulking and chemoradiation.
77

78

79 **Key points:**

80 **1.** *TERT* knockdown leads to a reduction in proliferation of *TERT* promoter-mutant
81 glioblastomas

82 **2.** TERT loss only leads to prolonged survival *in vivo* if initiated in animals with low tumor
83 burden

84 **Importance of the study**

85 Given the high prevalence and clonal nature of *TERT* promoter mutations in glioblastoma,
86 telomerase is considered a promising therapeutic target for this deadly cancer. Prior studies have
87 validated this hypothesis, demonstrating that knockout of the transcription factor GABPA, which
88 selectively binds to the mutant *TERT* promoter, as well as base editing-mediated correction of
89 *TERT* promoter mutations, are selectively toxic to *TERT* promoter mutant glioblastomas.
90 However, an important limitation of this strategy is that cancer cell death upon telomerase
91 inhibition only occurs after multiple cell divisions. For this reason, it is important to define the
92 appropriate clinical setting that would maximize therapeutic efficacy of telomerase inhibitors. In
93 this study, we use CRISPR interference to demonstrate that *TERT* promoter-mutant glioblastoma
94 cells are sensitive to telomerase inhibition and undergo telomere crisis. Furthermore, we
95 demonstrate that telomerase inhibition *in vivo* is only effective if initiated shortly after tumor
96 implantation, supporting the idea that telomerase inhibition would be a suitable therapeutic
97 strategy for glioblastoma patients with low tumor burden.

98

99

100

101

102 **Introduction**

103 Glioblastoma is an aggressive cancer in dire need of therapeutic progress. Despite extensive
104 research efforts, standard therapies for this tumor have not changed substantially in over 10 years[1]
105 and 5-year survival rates continue to be less than 10%[2,3]. Strategies successfully employed in other
106 cancers, such as inhibiting mutated oncogenic drivers in the RTK-Ras-Raf pathway, have shown
107 very little efficacy[4,5]. Additionally, immunotherapeutic agents such as checkpoint inhibitors have
108 achieved some benefit in patients with germline mismatch repair deficiencies[6] but have had
109 minimal success in patients whose tumors do not harbor mismatch repair deficiencies[6,7]. These
110 challenges can partly be explained by the low mutational rate of glioblastomas compared to
111 epithelial malignancies, such as lung, bladder, endometrial or colorectal carcinomas[8]. Lastly, when
112 oncogenic mutations are present, they often exhibit intra-tumoral heterogeneity[9]. For example,
113 single-cell sequencing analysis of glioblastomas revealed that multiple activating mutations in
114 *EGFR* can be found within the same tumor as part of different subclones, which may explain the
115 lack of response or resistance to tyrosine kinase inhibitors[10].

116

117 Interestingly, while many activated oncogenes in glioblastoma are subclonal, *TERT* promoter
118 mutations commonly occur as clonal events[11,12]. *TERT* promoter mutations were discovered in
119 melanoma[13] and later found in up to 80% of *IDH*-wildtype glioblastomas[14,15]. These mutations are
120 thought to be responsible for oncogenic re-activation of telomerase, a reverse transcriptase
121 ribonucleoprotein complex that maintains telomere length in cells with high replicative
122 potential[16,17]. Without telomerase, cells have a finite number of divisions before telomere erosion
123 and deprotection occurs, with activation of the DNA damage response pathway and induction of
124 senescence and apoptosis[18,19]. *TERT* promoter mutations result in transition of cytidine to

125 thymidine and occur most frequently at two "hotspot" loci, named c.-124 and c.-146C, upstream
126 of the transcriptional start site[13]. Transcriptional activation was found to occur by recruiting the
127 E26-transformation-specific (ETS) family transcription factor GA-binding protein (GABP)[20],
128 which selectively binds to the mutant *TERT* promoter.
129
130 Given that *TERT* promoter mutations are frequent and among the few clonal oncogenic events in
131 glioblastoma, we hypothesized that telomerase inhibition will be detrimental to the survival of
132 tumor cells. Even before the *TERT* promoter mutations were discovered, telomerase was explored
133 as an anti-cancer target because it is expressed in tumors but not most somatic cells[21]. The presence
134 of *TERT* promoter mutations further strengthens the idea that telomerase expression in cancer is
135 an active process rather than simply a marker of immortality. Multiple studies have analyzed
136 cellular responses to short telomeres in normal cells through the use of transgenic mouse
137 models[19,22,23]. In addition, there have been several studies that explored the effects of telomerase
138 ablation in cancer cells. Early studies, using a dominant negative form of telomerase[24] and anti-
139 telomerase modified oligomers[25], have shown that telomerase loss is detrimental to cancer cells.
140 In transgenic mice, T-cell lymphomas on a telomerase-null background display a less aggressive
141 phenotype with lower penetrance and longer latency than control tumors from telomerase wild-
142 type mice, however they eventually resume growth through activation of the alternative telomere
143 lengthening (ALT) pathway[26]. In glioblastoma, loss of the β1L isoform of the GABP transcription
144 factor that drives *TERT* expression leads to cell death in *TERT* promoter-mutant cells in a
145 telomerase dependent manner[27]. Most recently, *TERT* promoter mutation correction using
146 programmable base editing was shown to lead to decreased proliferation, telomere length reduction
147 and senescence in glioblastoma cells, both *in vitro* and *in vivo*[28].

148

149 In this study, we used CRISPR interference (CRISPRi) to demonstrate that telomerase ablation
150 can lead to cell lethality in *TERT* promoter-mutant glioblastoma cells, both *in vitro* and *in vivo*.
151 This occurs over several cell divisions required to cause telomere dysfunction, with telomere
152 shortening and formation of chromatin bridges. Additionally, we utilize an inducible CRISPRi
153 system to demonstrate that *in vivo* therapeutic efficacy is only achieved when telomerase
154 expression is turned off early in the tumorigenic process. These results highlight the importance
155 of selecting a patient population with low tumor burden when considering potential clinical
156 applications of telomerase inhibitors.

157

158 **Materials and Methods**

159 **Plasmids**

160 Plasmids used in this study include newly described plasmids including pRDA355 (Addgene #
161 pending), and pLV407 (Addgene # pending), as well as previously described plasmids including
162 pLX_311-KRAB-dCas9 (Addgene plasmid #96918), pLenti-dCas9_KRAB-MeCP2[29],
163 pXPR_023d (in press), lentiGuide-Puro (Addgene plasmid # 52963), and px458 (Addgene plasmid
164 # 48138).

165

166 **Cell culture**

167 LN18, T98G and SF295 glioblastoma cells were obtained from ATCC in December 2019 and
168 genotyped using short tandem repeat analysis. The most recent date of *Mycoplasma* testing was
169 9/29/2021 for T98G and SF295 and 11/2/22 for LN18, and results were negative. Cells were
170 cultured in Dulbecco Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine
171 serum (FBS) and penicillin-streptomycin. CPDM0095 and BT112 glioblastoma neurospheres
172 were obtained from the Dana Farber Center for Patient Derived Models. Most recent date of
173 mycoplasma testing was 3/22/22 and results were negative. Cells were cultured in Neural Stem
174 Cell media supplemented with epidermal growth factor at 20 ng/mL, fibroblast growth factor at
175 20 ng/mL and 0.2% heparin.

176

177 **Genotyping**

178 Genomic DNA was extracted from glioblastoma cell lines LN18, T98G, SF295, CPDM0095 and
179 BT112. PCR was performed using the primers annotated in Supplementary Table 1. The products
180 were then sequenced using Sanger sequencing.

181

182 **CRISPR interference**

183 Transcriptional silencing using CRISPR interference (CRISPRi) was performed as previously
184 described[30]. Cells were first transduced with pLX_311-KRAB-dCas9 or Lenti_dCas9-KRAB-
185 MeCP2[31] for *in vivo* studies. Cells expressing these constructs were then transduced with
186 pXPR_003 harboring short guide RNAs (sgRNAs) targeting *TERT* exon 1 (sgTERTe) or the *TERT*
187 promoter (sgTERTp) (Figure 1B), or as controls, the hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase 1
188 (*HPRT1*) promoter or a non-coding region of chromosome 2 (sgCh2.4). For inducible CRISPRi,
189 cells expressing dCas9-KRAB-MeCP2 were transduced with pRDA355 harboring sgTERTe. For
190 rescue experiments, cells were first transduced with pLV407 lentiviral vectors encoding either
191 GFP or TERT. They were then transduced with pXPR_023d harboring sgRNA sgCh2.2 as well as
192 sgTERTe were used (Supplementary Table 1).

193

194 **Generation of *TERT*-knockout clones using CRISPR/Cas9**

195 T98G cells were transfected with the px458 plasmid harboring sgRNAs targeting *TERT* exon 2 or
196 the *AAVS1* locus (Supplementary Table 1). GFP-positive cells were isolated using fluorescence-
197 activated cell sorting (FACS) and seeded into 96-well plates. Clones were then expanded and the
198 CRISPR target region was amplified using PCR (Supplementary Table 1); amplicons showing
199 evidence of genomic editing based on gel electrophoresis were then sequenced using next
200 generation sequencing (Illumina paired-end sequencing). Analysis of next generation sequencing
201 results was done using the NGS Genotyper v1.4.0.

202

203 **Real-Time PCR**

204 Knockdown efficiency was validated using real-time PCR. Total RNA was extracted from cells
205 and 1 µg of RNA was used for the reverse transcriptase reaction. Real time PCR products were
206 detected using SYBR green dye and primers targeting *TERT, HPRT* as well as actin (*ACTB*) and
207 glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (*GAPDH*) as controls (see Supplementary Table 1 for
208 sequence information).

209

210 **Colony formation assays**

211 Two-dimensional colony formation assays were performed by seeding 8000 cells/well as 3
212 technical replicates in a 6-well plate. After 8-10 days, the cells were fixed and stained as previously
213 described[32]. They were first washed with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), then fixed in a solution
214 of 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS for 15 minutes, then stained in a solution of 0.2% crystal violet,
215 2% ethanol for 30 minutes. Dye extraction was performed by adding 2 mL of 10% acetic acid
216 solution to the fixed and stained cells and incubating for 20 minutes. Quantification was then
217 performed by measuring absorbance at 580 nm.

218

219 **Growth curve generation**

220 *TERT*-knockout T98G clones and control clones were seeded at a density of 40,000 cells/well in a
221 24-well plate. The following day, they were transferred to the Incucyte chamber and images were
222 taken every 6 hours (25 images per well). Growth curves were plotted using the Incucyte software
223 based on percent confluency.

224

225 **Cell cycle analysis**

226 Cells were seeded at a density of 250,000 cells/well in 6-well plates. The next day, they were
227 trypsinized and fixed in cold 70% ethanol for 2 hours. They were then washed with PBS and
228 resuspended in a staining solution of 100 μg/mL RNAse A and 50 μg/mL propidium iodide in
229 PBS; incubation was for 30 minutes at 37 °C. Data was collected using a Beckman CytoFLEX
230 flow cytometer (5,000 events per sample) and analyzed using FloJo.
231

232 **Chromatin bridge analysis**

233 Cells were trypsinized and seeded on silicone-based coverslips in a 6-well plate at a density of
234 200,000 cells/well. The following day, they were fixed in a solution of 4% paraformaldeyde in
235 PBS for 15 minutes and stained using 4',6-diamidino-2-penylindole (DAPI). Images were captured
236 on a Nikon Ti-E inverted microscope with an Andor CSU-X1 spinning disc confocal system using
237 a 60x oil immersion objective. For each condition, 10 separate fields were photographed, and the
238 number of chromatin bridges were counted in each field by two independent observers.
239

240 **Protein expression analysis by immunoblotting**

241 Protein lysates were prepared using CHAPS lysis buffer supplemented with protease inhibitor
242 (Millipore Sigma 11697498001) and 2.5 mM $MgCl_2$. 50 μg of protein were loaded for each sample
243 and transferred to a PVDF membrane (Millipore Sigma IPVH00010). The following antibodies
244 were used: anti-TERT (Rockland 600-401-252S), anti-PARP (Cell Signaling Technologies
245 #9532), anti-cleaved PARP (Cell Signaling Technologies #5625) and anti-actin (Cell Signaling
246 Technologies #4967). Secondary antibodies included goat anti-rabbit (LI-COR Biosciences 926-
247 32211) and goat anti-mouse (LI-COR Biosciences 926-68020).
248

249 **Telomere length measurements**

250 Telomere length was measured using the Telo TTAGGG Telomere Length Assay (Millipore
251 Sigma 12209136001), based on telomere restriction fragment analysis[33]. Briefly, genomic DNA
252 was extracted from cells and 1.5 μg of DNA was digested using *Hin*FI and *Rsa*I. Digestion
253 products were separated using agarose gel electrophoresis (0.8% agarose in TAE buffer),
254 transferred overnight onto a nylon membrane using capillary action in 20X SSC buffer, and
255 crosslinked using ultraviolet light. Hybridization was performed for 3 hours using a digoxigenin-
256 linked telomere probe. The membrane was then incubated in a solution containing anti-digoxigenin
257 antibody fragments linked to alkaline phosphatase. Luminescence signal was generated using the
258 CDP-*Star* chemiluminescence substrate and detected using a chemiluminescence scanner.
259 Developed films were scanned and quantified using Fiji (ImageJ).

260

261 **Intracranial mouse injections**

262 Animal studies were performed in compliance with guidelines and regulation of the Broad Institute
263 Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). 6-week-old female NOD-*scid*
264 ILRgamma^{null} (NSG) mice weighing between 15 and 20 grams were purchased from The Jackson
265 Laboratory. Intracranial tumor cell injections were performed as previously described[27]. Mice were
266 anesthetized using isoflurane until not responsive to pinch reflex test. After preparing the surgical
267 field, a 1 cm skin incision was made in the scalp and the skull was penetrated using a drill with a
268 1.4 mm burr, 2 mm to the right of the bregma, directly posterior to the right suture. The needle
269 was then inserted at 2 mm depth and 300,000 cells in 2 μL of PBS were injected. The injection
270 was performed over 1 minute and the needle was kept in place for 1 minute after injection. The
271 surgical site was closed by suturing with 4-0 monofilament sutures. Perioperative care included

272 subcutaneous injection of 1 mg/kg buprenorphine directly after the procedure and 3 daily
273 subcutaneous doses of 1 mg/kg meloxicam starting on the day of surgery. Animals were euthanized
274 once they met humane endpoints of lethargy, neurological symptoms, or weight loss of 20% from
275 initial weight. For doxycycline inducible experiments, T98G cells harboring Lenti_dCas9-KRAB-
276 MeCP2 as well as inducible sgTERTe were injected intracranially in mice. Animals in the control
277 group received regular feed, while animals in the experimental group received feed supplemented
278 with doxycycline at 625 ppm.
279

280 **Tumor imaging**

281 Animals were anesthetized with isoflurane and received intraperitoneal injections of 150 mg/kg
282 luciferin. They were then placed in the imaging chamber of the Perkin Elmer in vivo imaging
283 system (IVIS) and bioluminescent images were captured. Luminescence was quantified using the
284 Living Image software.
285

286 **Statistical analysis**

287 Statistical methods were not used to predetermine sample size. Data in all graphs shown is
288 presented as the mean of independent biological or technical replicates as indicated in the figure
289 legends and error bars represent standard deviations. For Figures 1C, D, F, Figure 2D, Figure 3A
290 and B, and Figure 4D, H and J (bioluminescence curves), Supplementary Figure 3B, D and
291 Supplementary Figure 5 *p*-values were calculated using the unpaired t test (GraphPad Prism 9). In
292 Figures 4E, I and K and Supplementary Figure 7C (survival curves), survival analysis was
293 performed using the Kaplan-Meier method and p-values were calculated using the Log-rank test
294 (GraphPad Prism 9).
295

Results

Telomerase loss halts proliferation of *TERT* promoter-mutant glioblastoma cells *in vitro*.

We selected *TERT* promoter-mutant glioblastoma cell lines T98G and SF295 and *TERT* promoter-wildtype LN18 cells for this study. We also selected glioblastoma patient-derived neurospheres BT112 and CPDM0095. LN18 was confirmed to be *TERT* promoter wildtype, T98G and SF295 were confirmed to be heterozygous for the c.-146C>T and c.-124C>T mutations, respectively, and BT112 and CPDM0095 were found to be heterozygous for the c.-124C>T mutation using Sanger sequencing (Supplementary Figure 1). We then measured telomere length in these cell lines using the Telomere Restriction Fragment (TRF) assay[33] (Figure 1A) and found that the average telomere length is 4.1 Kb for T98G, 3.7 Kb for SF295, 5.2 Kb for BT112, 5.4 Kb for CPDM0095 and 4.0 Kb for LN18. We then applied CRISPR interference[30] to inhibit expression of the telomerase protein TERT in cell lines T98G, SF295 and LN18. Two different sgRNAs were used, sgTERTe targeting *TERT* exon 1 and sgTERTp targeting the *TERT* promoter (Figure 1B), leading to reduction in *TERT* mRNA levels of >70% for the *TERT* promoter-mutant lines and >50% for LN18 (Figure 1C). Two sgRNAs were used as control, sgCh2.4, targeting a non-coding region on chromosome 2, as well as sgHPRT1, targeting the promoter of *HPRT1*, which is not known to be an essential gene for cell survival. *TERT* knockdown led to a decrease in proliferation manifesting over a period of 69 days for T98G and 65 days for SF295. We did not detect a significant reduction in proliferation for LN18 cells over a period of over 64 days (Figure 1D). T98G and SF295 cell lines harboring sgTERTe or sgTERTp eventually restored *TERT* expression (Supplementary Figure 2A) by decreasing Cas9 expression, restoring viability and proliferative capacity comparable to control cells with *HPRT1* knockdown (Supplementary Figure 2B), which in contrast retained Cas9 expression and HPRT1 loss (Supplementary Figure 2C). The restoration of survival

320 and proliferation by loss of Cas9 expression supports the idea that telomerase-null cells are under
321 negative selective pressure. We validated these results using glioblastoma patient-derived
322 neurosphere CPDM0095. CPDM0095 cells harboring sgTERTe exhibited a reduction in *TERT*
323 mRNA levels of >90% compared to cells harboring sgCh2.2 (Figure 1E). These cells also exhibit
324 a loss of proliferation over a period of 50-80 days (Figure 1F).
325
326 To further validate the effect of *TERT* knockdown on proliferation in a clonal rather than
327 polyclonal populations, we generated T98G single cell clones harboring homozygous frameshift
328 edits in *TERT* exon 2 using CRISPR/Cas9. We identified 2 clones with frameshift edits in *TERT*
329 exon 2 corresponding to the CRISPR sgRNA binding site (Supplementary Figure 3A). *TERT*-
330 edited clones proliferated at a lower rate when compared to control clones (Supplementary Figure
331 3B). These results further support the conclusion that telomerase is essential for cell survival in
332 *TERT* promoter-mutant glioblastoma cells.
333
334 To verify whether the viability defect caused by anti-TERT sgRNAs in T98G and SF295 cells was
335 due to reduction of TERT expression, we asked whether ectopic expression of TERT would rescue
336 this growth defect. We ectopically expressed GFP and TERT in T98G and SF295 cells (Figure
337 2A). This ectopic expression led to a significant increase in *TERT* mRNA levels even when the
338 TERTe sgRNA was also expressed (Figure 2B). When we attempted to assess TERT protein levels
339 by immunoblotting, we saw a band at approximately 125 kDa only in the cells with TERT
340 overexpression (Figure 2C). This result indicates that TERT ectopic expression was successful and
341 endogenous TERT protein is not detectable by immunoblot in T98G and SF295 cells under our
342 experimental conditions. Next, we used crystal violet staining of colony formation to assess the

343 proliferation status of T98G and SF295 cells transduced with sgTERTe and the sgCh2.2 control.
344 Overexpression of wild type TERT in both T98G and SF295 cells rescued the proliferation defect
345 induced by sgTERTe (Figure 2D).
346

347 **Telomerase-null glioblastoma cells exhibit telomere shortening and evidence of telomere**
348 **dysfunction.**

349 To understand the mechanism of proliferation arrest in telomerase-deficient glioblastoma cells, we
350 measured telomere length using the TRF assay. We measured telomere length 46 days after *TERT*
351 knockdown in control and telomerase-deficient cells. We found that the average telomere length
352 of *TERT*-knockdown cells was on average ~900 base pairs shorter than the controls for T98G and
353 ~700 base pairs shorter than the controls for SF295 (Figure 3A). Similarly, *TERT*-edited single
354 cell clones had shorter telomere length compared to control clones (Supplementary Figure 3C).
355 Short telomeres are known to cause growth arrest by senescence, apoptosis, or telomere crisis, and
356 telomere crisis is known to occur in the absence of a functioning p53 pathway[38,39,40,41]. Alterations
357 in the p53 pathway are frequent in glioblastomas, occurring in up to 85% of cases through *TP53*
358 mutations, *CDKN2A* deletion and *MDM1/2/4* amplification[42]. Both T98G and SF295 cells carry
359 *TP53* loss of function mutations (Supplementary Figure 4A) as well as homozygous *CDKN2A*
360 deletions. Upon telomere shortening and growth arrest, we did not observe an increase in apoptosis
361 markers by immunoblot (Supplementary Figure 4B). We found that telomerase-deficient cells
362 undergo cell cycle arrest, with an accumulation of cells in the S or G2/M phases of the cycle, a
363 phenotype that was pronounced in *TERT*-deficient T98G clones (Supplementary Figure 3D) but
364 not in cell populations treated with CRISPR interference (Supplementary Figure 5). This

365 difference may be due to the fact that the population of cells treated with CRISPR interference is
366 more heterogeneous than in the clones.
367
368 Regarding the mechanism of cell death induced by telomere shortening, on the chromosomal level,
369 we observed a significant increase in chromatin bridges in telomerase-deficient cells compared to
370 control cells (Figure 3B). Chromatin bridges are thought to occur from fusions between
371 dysfunctional telomeres that have become deprotected and have been described as precursors to
372 catastrophic genomic events in telomere crisis, including chromothripsis and katagesis[41].
373 Together, these findings suggest that upon telomerase ablation, glioblastoma cells undergo
374 telomere crisis.
375
376 **Telomerase inhibition *in vivo* prolongs survival only when induced in the low tumor burden**
377 **setting.**
378 To further validate telomerase dependency in glioblastoma, we generated luciferase-expressing
379 *TERT*-knockdown and control T98G cell populations and performed intracranial xenograft
380 injections into immunocompromised mice (Figure 4A). We allowed cells to proliferate *in vitro* for
381 30 days before injecting them into mice. Shortly before implantation, *TERT* mRNA levels were
382 reduced by >99% in *TERT*-knockdown cells compared to controls, and their average telomere
383 length was 3.7 Kb for control cells and 2.9 Kb for *TERT*-knockdown cells (Figure 4B). We
384 observed a significant reduction in tumor forming abilities in *TERT*-knockdown cells, which did
385 not form intracranial tumors in over 60 days (Figures 4C,D). This in turn led to significantly
386 prolonged survival for animals injected with telomerase-deficient cells versus controls (Figure 4E).
387 It is possible that the reduction in tumor-forming abilities of *TERT*-knockdown cells was due to

388 telomere shortening that took place while the cells were proliferating in culture prior to
389 implantation, rather than by the impact of loss of telomerase activity after implantation. We then
390 sought to determine the degree of tumor burden that would be required to achieve a therapeutic
391 benefit from telomerase inhibition. For this purpose, we generated an inducible CRISPRi system
392 using sgTERTe, which successfully suppressed TERT expression in vitro (Supplementary Figure
393 6). We then performed intracranial xenograft injections of T98G cells harboring the inducible
394 CRISPRi system. We divided our animals in two cohorts, one where we started doxycycline
395 feeding 40 days post-surgery and one where were started doxycycline on the day of surgery (Figure
396 4F). We found that *in vivo TERT* expression was successfully suppressed (Figure 4G). While there
397 was no statistically significant difference in intracranial luminescence in animals treated with
398 doxycycline at day 40 (Figure 4H), we detected a significant difference in intracranial
399 luminescence 73 days after tumor implantation in animals treated at day 0 (Figure 4J). Similarly,
400 we detected a survival benefit only for the group that received doxycycline at day 0 (Figures 4I,K).
401 In a follow up experiment, we administered doxycycline feed at additional intermediate timepoints
402 (days 10 and 25) (Supplementary Figure 7A). We did not observe a significant difference in
403 intracranial luminescence signal between the groups (Supplementary Figure 7B), and we only
404 observed a statistically significant prolongation in survival for animals that were treated at days 0
405 and 10 (Supplementary Figure 7C). Longer-term follow-up suggests a significant survival
406 advantage for a subset of mice treated with doxycycline to induce *TERT* silencing. There were no
407 long-term surviving mice in a 200-day experiment, in the group without doxycycline induction of
408 *TERT* silencing. In contrast, after 200 days of doxycycline treatment, there were three surviving
409 mice in the group that was treated with doxycycline at day 0 of implantation (Figure 4K) as well
410 as three surviving mice in the group that was treated with doxycycline at day 40 of implantation

411 (Figure 4I). In addition, there were 2 mice in the day 0 and day 10 induction arms, as well as 1
412 mouse in the day 25 induction arm, still surviving at day 100 in the follow up experiment
413 (Supplementary Figure 7C). Overall, these results suggest that the most appropriate clinical setting
414 for the deployment of a telomerase inhibitor might be for glioblastoma patients with low tumor
415 burden, but a subset of patients with high tumor burden may benefit as well, if the human disease
416 would recapitulate the observations seen in this mouse orthotopic model.
417

418 **Discussion**

419

420 Glioblastoma is among the deadliest of all cancers, with a median duration of survival of only 14
421 months[1]. In the past decade, there has been significant progress in understanding the genomic
422 landscape of glioblastoma, and glioblastomas were among the first tumors to be studied in The
423 Cancer Genome Atlas project (TCGA)[42]. Despite these advances, standard therapeutic options
424 have not changed significantly since 2005, when the addition of the alkylating agent temozolomide
425 to radiation therapy was found to confer an overall survival benefit of 2.6 months for all patients[1]
426 and 6.4 months for patients whose tumors harbor methylation at the *MGMT* promoter[43]. Clinical
427 trials of targeted therapeutics aimed towards mutant and amplified oncogenic drivers have shown
428 very little benefit[4,5]. These results can be explained by a unique feature of glioblastomas, which is
429 their genomic heterogeneity as evidenced by independent amplifications of multiple oncogenic
430 driver genes in distinct tumor cells[9] or by multiple activating mutations of the same driver gene in
431 distinct tumor cells[10].

432

433 In contrast, multiple studies have reported that *TERT* promoter mutations are the most common
434 clonal activating mutations in glioblastoma[11]. The *TERT* promoter mutations are therefore thought
435 to arise early in tumor evolution[11]. For this reason, *TERT* promoter mutations could provide a
436 unique therapeutic opportunity with a lower probability of exhibiting intrinsic resistance from
437 intra-tumoral heterogeneity. Prior studies have demonstrated that silencing the *TERT* promoter by
438 CRISPR-mediated ablation of the GABP transcription factor[27], or by correction of *TERT* promoter
439 mutations using base editing[28] is deleterious to glioblastoma cells. In this study, we silenced the
440 *TERT* promoter using CRISPR interference. This method leads to reliable and substantial reduction

441 of *TERT* mRNA levels. CRISPR interference can be helpful to understand the effects of
442 telomerase loss in a population of cells rather than individual knockout clones. Its advantage over
443 traditional CRISPR editing is that the degree of knockdown can be readily measured and followed
444 using real-time PCR. This is particularly useful when studying telomerase since TERT protein
445 levels are challenging to detect due to low endogenous expression in cells[44]. The limitation of
446 CRISPR interference relative to *TERT* knockout clones is that telomerase null cells are gradually
447 lost in the population over cells with wildtype *TERT* expression and low Cas9 expression. The
448 phenotype of cells in telomere crisis is therefore more pronounced in *TERT* knockout clones, which
449 are a more appropriate model to perform mechanistic evaluations of cell lethality.
450
451 We found that TERT loss in *TERT* promoter-mutant glioblastoma cells leads to a reduction in cell
452 viability associated with features of telomere crisis, including the formation of chromatin bridges
453 and cell cycle arrest. This suggests that telomerase is not only an important driver of glioma
454 initiation, but it is also key for tumor maintenance, raising the possibility that telomerase targeted
455 therapeutics may be effective at treating this deadly cancer. An important limitation of telomerase
456 inhibitors as anti-cancer therapeutics is that cell death upon telomerase loss does not occur
457 immediately but requires several cell divisions. Before considering this strategy, it is therefore
458 crucial to demonstrate whether telomerase inhibition can offer a therapeutic benefit *in vivo*, and if
459 so in what specific clinical setting. With this study, we showed that telomerase loss does not lead
460 to a survival benefit in animals with high tumor burden, but it provides a significant benefit in the
461 low tumor burden setting. Here, we should mention the limitation that our current animal model
462 data represent only the study of a single cell line, albeit under many experimental conditions. This
463 supports the idea that telomerase inhibitors could be employed in the adjuvant setting, when tumor

464 debulking has recently occurred and tumor burden is low. A recent study showing that telomerase
465 loss sensitizes glioblastoma cells to DNA damage[20] further supports the idea that telomerase
466 inhibitors could be offered to glioblastoma patients in conjunction with adjuvant temozolomide.
467
468 In conclusion, with this study we describe the results of *TERT* knockdown in a population of cells
469 using CRISPR interference. Using this approach, we showed that *TERT* promoter-mutant
470 glioblastoma cells are dependent on telomerase and exhibit classic features of telomere crisis upon
471 telomerase loss. Using orthotopic xenograft models, we also showed that only animals with low
472 tumor burden achieve a survival benefit from telomerase inhibition. These results support the value
473 of pre-clinical and eventually clinical investigations of anti-telomerase compounds to treat
474 glioblastoma, and they help in the identification of the patient population that would most benefit
475 from this therapeutic strategy.
476
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626 **Figure Legends:**
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628 **Figure 1:** (A.) Average telomere length of *TERT* promoter-mutant glioblastoma cell lines T98G
629 and SF295 and glioblastoma neurospheres BT112 and CPDM0095, as well as *TERT* promoter-
630 wildtype cell line LN18. (B) Two sgRNAs targeting the *TERT* locus: sgTERTp binds to the *TERT*
631 promoter and sgTERTe binds to *TERT* exon 1. (C.) Relative *TERT* and *HPRT* mRNA expression
632 after CRISPR interference treatment of T98G, SF295 and LN18 cells. Two biological replicates
633 were used. (D) Crystal violet-stained plates (left panel) and proliferation curves (right panel) of
634 CRISPR interference-treated T98G, SF295 and LN18 cells. Illustrated plates were stained 69, 65
635 and 64 days after transduction with sgRNAs for T98G (upper panel) SF295 (middle panel) and
636 LN18 (lower panel), respectively. Three technical replicates were used, and the experiment was
637 repeated for validation. (E) Relative *TERT* mRNA expression for CPDM0095 treated with
638 sgTERTe versus sgCh2.2. Four technical replicates were used. (F.) Representative images of
639 CPDM0059 cells harboring sgCh2.2 and sgTERTe 69 days post-transduction (left panel) and
640 proliferation curve (right panel). Scale bars represent 1 mm. Two biological replicates were used.
641 * = $p<0.05$, ** = $p<0.005$, ****=$p<0.0001$

642

643 **Figure 2:** (A) Design of rescue experiments. (B) Real time qRT-PCR analysis of *TERT* mRNA
644 levels in sgCh2.2-treated and sgTERTe-treated T98G and SF295 cells, with ectopic GFP
645 expression (left) or ectopic TERT expression (right). (C.) Immunoblot with anti-TERT antibody
646 600-491-252 (D.) Normalized 580 nm absorbance of crystal violet-stained plates seeded with GFP-
647 expressing T98G and SF295 cells harboring sgCh2.2 vs. sgTERTe (left) or TERT-expressing cells
648 harboring sgCh2.2 vs. sgTERTe (right). Colony formation assays were stained 32 and 35 days

after transduction with sgRNAs for T98G and SF295 cells, respectively. Three technical replicates were used, and experiment was repeated for validation. ** = $p<0.005$, *** = $p<0.001$.

Figure 3: (A) Telomere restriction fragment (TRF) analysis of SF295 and T98G glioblastoma cells with and without *TERT* knockdown, performed 46 days after induction of knockdown. Two technical replicates were used for this analysis. (B) Representative images showing chromatin bridges in *TERT*-knockdown T98G and SF295 cells. Scale bars represent 2.17 µm. (C) Quantification of chromatin bridges in *TERT*-knockdown T98G and SF295 cells compared to controls. * = $p<0.05$, ** = $p<0.005$, ***=$p<0.001$, ****=$p<0.0001$

Figure 4: (A) Schematic diagram of *in vivo* xenograft experiments. (B) TRF analysis showing average telomere lengths of T98G cells treated with sgCh2.4 and sgTERTe prior to implantation into mice. (C) Representative image of intracranial luminescence of animals harboring control and *TERT*-knockdown T98G cells; images were taken 55 days after tumor implantation. (D) Serial measurements of intracranial luminescence of animals harboring control and sgTERTe-treated T98G cells. (E) Kaplan-Meier curve showing overall survival of animals harboring sgTERTe-treated T98G cells compared to mice harboring control cells. (F) Schematic of *in vivo* experiment using a doxycycline inducible CRISPR interference system. (G) Relative *TERT* mRNA expression of intracranial tumors of animals treated with doxycycline feed versus control feed. (H) Serial measurements of intracranial luminescence of animals treated with doxycycline feed at day 40 post-surgery versus control feed. (I) Overall survival of animals treated with doxycycline feed at day 40 post-surgery versus control. (J) Serial measurements of intracranial luminescence of animals treated with doxycycline feed on the day of surgery versus control feed. (K) Overall

672 survival of animals treated with doxycycline feed on the day of surgery versus control feed. ** =

673 $p<0.005$, **** = $p<0.0001$, ns = non-significant.

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