Differential Phosphoprotein Labeling (DIPPL), a Method for Comparing Live Cell Phosphoproteomes Using Simultaneous Analysis of $^{33}$P- and $^{32}$P-Labeled Proteins*

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We developed a differential method to reveal kinase-specific phosphorylation events in live cells. In this method, cells in which the specified kinase is inactive are labeled with $^{33}$P, whereas cells in which the kinase is active are labeled with $^{32}$P. The two cell extracts are then mixed, and proteins are separated on a single two-dimensional gel. The dried gel is exposed twice. The first exposure reveals both $^{32}$P- and $^{33}$P-labeled proteins; the kinase-specific spots are revealed because of $^{33}$P labeling. The second exposure is conducted with two acetate sheets intervening between the gel and the detection plate. This maneuver screens out the less energetic $^{33}$P-labeled proteins while allowing the more energetic $^{32}$P-labeled proteins to be detected, thus leaving only those spots that were phosphorylated independently of the specified kinase. We demonstrate the utility of this method for detecting kinase substrates in rare tissue by focusing on extracellular signal-regulated kinase-specific phosphorylation of stathmin/OP18 in primary rat sympathetic neurons. Molecular & Cellular Proteomics 5:553–559, 2006.

Phosphorylation is a major reversible protein modification. It regulates a myriad of protein functions including enzyme activity, protein-protein interaction, cellular localization, and protein degradation. It is estimated that there are about 100,000 potential phosphorylation sites in the human proteome of which fewer than 2000 are currently known (1). In addition to identification of phosphorylation sites, there is a need for quantitation of phosphorylation events especially with regard to understanding the regulation of signal transduction. Although novel and sophisticated methods have been developed to enrich for phosphoproteins or phosphopeptides prior to analysis by mass spectrometry, this approach requires large amounts of protein and so is not always feasible when using rare tissue. Moreover from the standpoint of systems biology, it may be useful to acquire an image of protein phosphorylation of the entire proteome prior to homing in on specific proteins.

Labeling cells with phosphorus-32 ($^{32}$P) has long been used as a means for identifying phosphoproteins. Principle $\beta$ emission energy for $^{32}$P is 1.709 MeV, making it highly sensitive, and its rapid uptake into cellular ATP makes it very versatile. Although it is possible to run simultaneous gels to compare changes in phosphoprotein profiles between differentially treated samples, it would be an advantage to be able to discriminate changes in phosphorylation between two samples on a single 2D gel just as DIGE is used to highlight changes in protein expression between two samples while eliminating the variability of protein separation patterns (2). We previously noted that it is possible to prelabel cellular proteins metabolically with $[^{35}$S]methionine (principle $\beta$ emission, 0.167 MeV) and then label the same cells with $^{32}$P to detect which of these proteins are phosphorylated; as $^{35}$S emission has lower energy it is possible to screen out the lower energy using a simple device such as an acetate sheet while still permitting $^{35}$S radiation to be detected (3). The maximum $\beta$ emission energy for phosphorus-33 ($^{33}$P) is 0.249 MeV, which is about 6.8 times lower than that of $^{32}$P. Hence we reasoned that it might be possible to use a similar configuration by mixing differentially treated samples, one labeled with $^{33}$P and the other labeled with $^{32}$P, and running them on a single 2D gel. This would maximize yield (especially when dealing with small samples such as rare tissue, e.g. primary neurons) while eliminating ambiguity in spot detection due to differences between the patterns of two 2D gels. Here we demonstrate the utility of this method by focusing on phosphostathmin as our test protein and primary rat superior cervical ganglion (SCG) neurons as our cell type. We chose this system because it is a good example of a rare tissue type; each ganglion yields only about 10,000 highly purified neurons.

* The abbreviations used are: 2D, two-dimensional; ERK, extracellular signal-regulated kinase; DIPPL, differential phosphoprotein labeling; araC, cytosine arabinoside; CPT-cAMP, 8-(4-chlorophenylthio)-cAMP; NGF, nerve growth factor; SCG, superior cervical ganglion; PKA, cAMP-dependent protein kinase; MEK, mitogen-activated protein kinase/extracellular signal-regulated kinase.

1 B. Amess, unpublished data.
**Experimental Procedures**

**Materials**—$^{32}$P (catalog number PBS 13) and $^{33}$P (catalog number BF 1003) were from Amersham Biosciences. $^{32}$P was an aqueous (acid-free) product, but $^{33}$P was in a dilute HCl solution ($<$0.1 m, pH 2–3) and had to be adjusted to pH 7.5 with 100 mM NaOH before use. U0126 was from Promega UK (Southampton, UK), cytosine arabinoside (araC) and 8-(4-chlorophenylthio)-cAMP (CPTcAMP) were from Sigma, and phosphate-free RPMI 11640 medium was from ICN Biomedicals (now MP Biomedicals UK, London, UK).

**Preparation and Culture of Neurons**—Single cell suspensions of rat SCG neurons were prepared from 1-day-old Wistar rat pups as described previously (10, 14). Neurons were purified to 97–99% by preplating for 30 min twice on collagen in L15-CO$_2$ medium containing 5% fetal bovine serum. The non-adhering cells were collected by centrifugation and cultured on a poly-L-lysine- and laminin-coated substrate.

**Radiolabeling, Inhibition of MEK, and NGF Stimulation**—For 2D gel work, SCG neurons (about 200,000/dish) were plated for 1 h in phosphate-free RPMI 1640 medium containing 3% dialyzed rat serum (to remove any inorganic phosphate) and 0.5 mM CPTcAMP (to enable neuronal attachment to the substrate in the absence of any MEK/ERK stimulation (10, 12, 15)). Neurons were then labeled in the same medium for 3 h with $^{32}$P ($<200$ μCi/dish) or $^{33}$P ($<500$ μCi/dish) in the presence of 1 mM araC after which the MEK inhibitor U0126 (10 μM final concentration) or an equivalent amount of DMISO (0.5%) (control) was added. After a 30-min incubation with the MEK inhibitor, 100 ng/ml NGF (added from a 200 μg/ml concentrate to retain steady state labeling) was added to both experimental and control dishes for an additional 3 h. For exploratory work, SCG neurons were labeled with 0.5 mCi of $^{32}$P or $^{33}$P for 3.5 h but lysed immediately in one-dimensional Laemmli sample buffer (16).

**Sample Preparation**—Neurons were carefully washed three to four times in L15-CO$_2$ medium (containing phosphate) without serum, scraped off in 0.5 ml of medium containing 0.01% BSA, and left on ice for 5 min after which neurons were pelleted by spinning for 3 min at 4000 rpm in a microcentrifuge. The pellet containing the neurons was washed with ice-cold PBS or medium without any additions and lysed in 320 μl of IPG buffer containing 7 μM urea, 2 μM thiourea, 4% CHAPS (or alternatively 2% ASB-14), 1.2% Pharmalytes pH 3–10, 20 mM DTT, 10 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8, and bromphenol blue. The pellet was vortexed rigorously a few times for 30–60 s each time until complete solubilization was achieved and centrifuged at maximum speed in a micro-centrifuge to remove any particulate material. Approximately 1% of the volume was subjected to TCA precipitation and scintillation counting to estimate the total amount of $^{32}$P and $^{33}$P incorporation and thus adjust the respective total label content between experimental and control samples before mixing both samples (see text for additional comments). TCA precipitation was conducted in 25% ice-cold TCA (1 ml) followed by decantation onto a Whatman GF/C glass fiber filter and four washes with ice-cold 5% TCA as described previously (3).

**Gel Electrophoresis**—For the first dimension of the 2D separation, each sample was absorbed into an inverted immobilized pH gradient gel (Immobiline DryStrip, pH 3–10 nonlinear, 18 cm, Amersham Biosciences) during an overnight incubation at room temperature in a reswelling tray to allow uptake of the proteins. Isoelectric focusing was performed with a mineral oil overlay in a Multiphor II flat bed electrophoresis unit (Amersham Biosciences) set at 2 mA, 5 watts and ramped to 100 V for 1 h, 300 V for 1 h, 500 V for 1 h, 3500 V for 3.5 h, and finally 3500 V for 12 h. The strips were then equilibrated for 10–15 min with gentle shaking in a buffer containing 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 6.8, 2% SDS, 6 μA urea, 30% glycerol, and 20 mM DTT and placed on top of the second dimension gel. Proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE on a 20 × 20-cm gel containing 11% acrylamide using an in-house built apparatus (3). Protein standards (2D Bio-Rad markers) were run along with the samples to ensure equivalent patterns of protein separation between gels. For exploratory work, proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE on an 8 × 10-cm minigel, stained, dried, and imaged as above. $^{14}$C-Rainbow markers (catalog number CFA756) were from Amersham Biosciences.

**Image Analysis**—Gels were stained (and fixed) in Coomassie Blue solution, destained, dried, and exposed to a phosphorimaging screen (Eastman Kodak Co.). Screens were scanned at 88-μm resolution using an Amersham Biosciences PhosphorImager 425 as described previously (3). Data was stored as a 16-bit tiff. In some cases, acetate sheets (PPCI-SC/LE OHP photocopier film, Lloyd Paton Ltd., Manchester, UK) were placed between the screen and the dried gel as described below. The Coomassie-stained gel image was obtained by scanning with a Hewlett Packard Scanjet 5470C flat bed scanner. Raw images were imported into NIH Image 1.62 to quantify intensity of bands/spots.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We first examined whether it is feasible to use acetate sheets to screen out \( ^{33}\text{P} \) signals without affecting \( ^{32}\text{P} \) detection. Extracts from \( ^{33}\text{P} \)- or \( ^{32}\text{P} \)-labeled neurons (each labeled with 0.5 mCi of respective radionuclide) were separated either on two separate lanes of a one-dimensional gel (20 \( \mu \)l of each extract) or mixed and separated as a single sample (e.g. 40 \( \mu \)l of the mixture loaded). Fig. 1A, left, shows results obtained after exposure of the dried gel to a phosphorimaging screen for 20 h, while on the right is the same gel re-exposed for 30 h with two acetate sheets interposed between the gel and the screen. The intensity of the bands marked \( i, ii, \) and \( iii \) is given.

Fig. 1. Testing the principle of using acetate sheets to block selectively \( ^{33}\text{P} \) emission in a mixed sample of \( ^{33}\text{P}/^{32}\text{P} \)-labeled proteins. A, SCG neurons (about 200,000 neurons/sample) were labeled with 0.5 mCi of \( ^{32}\text{P} \) or \( ^{33}\text{P} \) for 3.5 h and lysed in 40 \( \mu \)l of SDS-PAGE sample buffer. A 20-\( \mu \)l aliquot of \( ^{33}\text{P} \)-labeled (lane 1) or \( ^{32}\text{P} \)-labeled (lane 2) proteins was separated on a 10% SDS gel alongside a mixed sample containing 20 \( \mu \)l each of the \( ^{33}\text{P} \)- and \( ^{32}\text{P} \)-labeled proteins (lane 3). \( ^{14}\text{C} \)-Labeled molecular weight markers were run in lane 1. Gels were dried and exposed to a phosphorimaging screen once without (left, 20 h) and then with (right, 30 h) two acetate sheets intervening between the gel and the screen. Note the loss of \( ^{33}\text{P} \) labeling in lanes 1 and 3 in the acetate-blocked exposure but nearly full retention of \( ^{32}\text{P} \) labeling. Intensities are quantified in Table I. \( i, ii, iii \) denote bands whose intensity is quantified in Table I. B, decreasing amounts but equal volumes of each radioisotope (starting intensity, \( 5 \text{nCi; bottom line} \) were spotted onto Whatman polyethyleneimine-impregnated p81 paper. After drying, the paper was imaged for 24 h without (left) or with (right) two acetate sheets placed between the paper and the screen; the difference in intensities at this time was about 1:3 (\( ^{32}\text{P}:^{33}\text{P} \)). Hence 3 times more \( ^{33}\text{P} \) isotope compared with \( ^{32}\text{P} \) isotope needs to be used for \textit{in vivo} labeling. Note again that there is only slight attenuation of \( ^{33}\text{P} \) intensity with acetate sheets in place. Intensities are quantified in Table I. \( \text{dil}, \) dilution.
in Table I. It can be seen that $^{33}\text{P}$ labeling detected during the first exposure (lane 1) was essentially completely eliminated when the gel was re-exposed using two acetate sheets (lane 3). However, near full retention of $^{32}\text{P}$ signal was obtained in the single $^{33}\text{P}$-labeled sample (lanes 2 and 5) or in the mixed sample (lanes 3 and 6) without or with acetate. Moreover there was no interference between the $^{33}\text{P}$ and $^{32}\text{P}$ when imaged together as shown by the reconstitution of the combined values measured in the mixed sample (lane 3) when the value measured in the $^{33}\text{P}$-labeled sample (lane 1) was added to that of $^{32}\text{P}$ captured under two acetate sheets (lane 5). With one acetate screen present, $^{33}\text{P}$ radiation was still marginally detectable, whereas with three screens, the $^{32}\text{P}$ bands had become more diffuse. Notably the $^{14}\text{C}$-markers were also screened out using the acetate sheets.

As the cells in Fig. 1A were labeled with equivalent amounts of radioactivity, the amount of $^{33}\text{P}$ detected was relatively low compared with that of $^{32}\text{P}$. We therefore performed a quick test to ensure detection of equal amounts of radiation for both isotopes. For this purpose equal volumes of $^{33}\text{P}$ and $^{32}\text{P}$ were spotted onto polyethyleneimine-impregnated P81 paper at increasing dilutions. Fig. 1B shows that although theoretically the energy emitted from $^{33}\text{P}$ is 6.8-fold less than that of $^{32}\text{P}$, practically we found that the intensity of $^{33}\text{P}$ as detected by the phosphorimaging screen equaled that of $^{32}\text{P}$ when the sample of $^{33}\text{P}$ was diluted between 3–4-fold relative to that of $^{32}\text{P}$. Again detection of $^{33}\text{P}$ (Fig. 1B, right) was completely eliminated by two acetate sheets, whereas that of $^{32}\text{P}$ was hardly attenuated (see quantitation in Table I). Of course, the relative ratios of the two isotopes would have to be determined for each experiment as the half-life of $^{32}\text{P}$ is 14 days, whereas that of $^{33}\text{P}$ is 25.4 days. Using this “spot detection test,” the assay is quick and simple.

We next examined whether this method could be used to detect kinase-specific labeling of proteins in SCG neurons. To demonstrate first that we can detect the various phosphoforms of stathmin in the neurons, SCG neurons were $^{32}\text{P}$-labeled in the presence of CPTcAMP and NGF (as well as araC; see below), and proteins were separated by 2D electrophoresis. Fig. 2A shows the overall pattern of $^{32}\text{P}$ labeling achieved (left) together with the Coomassie Blue-stained image of the gel (right). The various tiers of stathmin and the number of phosphates incorporated (P1–P4) are indicated in the rectangle using the notation described by Beretta et al. (4). The most prevalent forms on the Coomassie image are $\alpha 0$ (or N1, the nonphosphorylated form of stathmin) and $\alpha 1$, the first tier singly phosphorylated form of the protein. On the $^{32}\text{P}$-labeled gel, the N1 form is naturally absent, whereas all the other forms reported previously after in vitro phosphorylation with PKA and Cdc2 are present, namely the first tier proteins ($\alpha 1$, $\alpha 2$, and $\alpha 3$) aligning with P1, P2, and P3; the second tier spots in set 17 ($\alpha 1'$ and $\alpha 2'$) aligning with P2 and P3; and third tier spots in set 16 ($\alpha 2$ and $\alpha 3'$) aligning with P3 and P4, the most acidic phosphorylated spot. Minor $\beta$ forms were also sometimes noted, but these did not appear in all gels. These spots are annotated in greater detail in Fig. 2, C and D, as explained below.

The underlying purpose of our study was to detect ERK targets that protect against araC-induced apoptosis. NGF maintains a sustained activation of ERK (10), which partially antagonizes the proapoptotic signal induced by araC (a p53-dependent type of apoptosis (17)). Protection by ERK is thus eliminated when ERK phosphorylation and its activity are suppressed by the MEK inhibitors PD98059 (75 $\mu\text{M}$) or U0126 (10 $\mu\text{M}$) (11, 17–19). Stathmin in this context was used to demonstrate that ERK inhibition by the drug had occurred. It is important to note that to detect ERK-dependent labeled phosphoproteins using simultaneous analysis of $^{33}\text{P}$ and $^{32}\text{P}$,
the inhibitor must be used in conjunction with $^{32}$P as the image of the $^{33}$P-labeled proteins that were phosphorylated by ERK will be eliminated by the acetate sheets, leaving to appear only those ($^{32}$P-labeled) spots that were phosphorylated independently of ERK. Accordingly one set of SCG neurons was labeled with $^{33}$P (about 0.5 mCi) in the absence of U0126 to label the entire phosphoproteome cohort, whereas the other set was labeled with $^{32}$P (about 0.17 mCi) in the presence of U0126. In this case, a 3-fold higher amount of $^{33}$P radionuclide was added compared with $^{32}$P to equalize loading. Equalizing the signal of the two isotopes by varying the amount of radioactivity of $^{32}$P and $^{33}$P used to label the cells.

**Fig. 2. Evidence for efficacy of the DIPPL method.** A, low power overview of a typical 2D gel on which a $^{32}$P-labeled sample of SCG neurons has been separated; on the left is the image collected from the phosphorimaging screen, and on the right is the Coomassie Blue-stained scanned digital image. The rectangle encloses the region where the various multiply phosphorylated stathmin forms are located, the labeling indicating the three tiers identified in the text. B, stathmin phosphorylation. Serines 16 and 63 are predicted to be phosphorylated due to CPTcAMP activation of PKA, whereas serine 25 is predicted to be the major residue phosphorylated by ERK. Serine 38 is also phosphorylated by ERK, but it is not clear whether this is mediated by ERK in the neurons. C and D, schematics of the phosphostathmin forms traced from the adjacent image identified according to Beretta et al. (4). C shows the $\alpha$ forms with the arrows showing the conversion pattern expected in the presence of U0126. D traces the pattern of the minor $\beta$ forms observed with the respective expected conversion pattern. E and F, comparison of the stathmin pattern obtained when two samples are independently labeled with $^{32}$P and proteins are separated on two independent 2D gels. E, neurons were labeled in the presence of CPTcAMP and araC for 3 h, and then DMSO (U0126 solvent) was added for 0.5 h after which NGF was added for an additional 3 h. F, neurons were labeled in the presence of CPTcAMP and araC for 3 h, and then U0126 was added for 0.5 h after which NGF was added for 3 h. G and H, comparison of the stathmin pattern obtained when two samples are independently labeled as in E and F except that $^{33}$P was used to label cells in the absence of U0126 and $^{32}$P was used to label cells in the presence of U0126. Samples were mixed and run on a single 2D gel. G, no acetate sheets (both radioisotopes imaged). H, re-exposure with two intervening acetate sheets. Note the similarity between E and G on the one hand and F and H on the other hand. Intensities are quantified in Table II.
obviates the need to vary the amount of protein loaded per sample, which would evidently distort the results. This is especially important when low numbers of cells are involved as there is very little to spare. Initially TCA precipitation of a small sample from each labeling was used to confirm that all amounts of radioactivity were incorporated per sample. However, the spot test could be conducted once, and the amount of each radionuclide was adjusted thereafter according to their half-lives. Samples were mixed and run on a single 2D gel. We also analyzed two independent samples, both labeled with $^{32}$P, under the same regime to validate our approach.

The schematic in Fig. 2B shows the four possible phosphorylation sites in stathmin, two expected to be induced by CPTcAMP and two expected to be induced by NGF via ERK activation. The spots whose intensities are predicted to alter by U0126 (see Table II for quantitation). The ratio of the values collected in the presence or absence of U0126 for each spot was calculated and normalized to spot $\alpha_1$. Note the similarity between the values using the two different protocols and the marked reduction in spot intensity for spots $\alpha_{11}$, $\alpha_{12}$, $\alpha_{21}$, and $\alpha_{22}$.

### Table II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratios +U0126/−U0126</th>
<th>$\alpha_1$</th>
<th>$\alpha_2$</th>
<th>$\alpha_3$</th>
<th>$\alpha_{11}$</th>
<th>$\alpha_{12}$</th>
<th>$\alpha_{21}$</th>
<th>$\alpha_{22}$</th>
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<tr>
<td>$^{32}$P/$^{32}$P (F/E)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$^{33}$P/$^{32}$P (H/G)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.40</td>
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</table>

Altogether we propose that our method (which we have named DIPPL) is an excellent way to differentiate between, and sensitively compare, two rare samples of phosphoproteins while reducing the time and tediousness of having to run two 2D gels for each two-way comparison. Moreover with regard to the problem of identification of ERK substrates that inhibit p53-induced apoptosis, we newly demonstrated that phosphorus-labeled stathmin can be used to monitor and verify that ERK-dependent phosphorylation, and its successful inhibition by U0126, occurred in SCG neurons.

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