Original Full Length Article

Wnt inhibitory factor 1 (*WIF1*) is a marker of osteoblastic differentiation stage and is not silenced by DNA methylation in osteosarcoma

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Wnt pathway targeting is of high clinical interest for treating bone loss disorders such as osteoporosis. These therapies inhibit the action of negative regulators of osteoblastic Wnt signaling. The report that Wnt inhibitory factor 1 (*WIF1*) was epigenetically silenced via promoter DNA methylation in osteosarcoma (OS) raised potential concerns for such treatment approaches. Here we confirm that *Wif1* expression is frequently reduced in OS. However, we demonstrate that silencing is not driven by DNA methylation. Treatment of mouse and human OS cells showed that *Wif1* expression was robustly induced by HDAC inhibition but not by methylation inhibition. Consistent with HDAC dependent silencing, the *Wif1* locus in OS was characterized by low acetylation levels and a bivalent H3K4/H3K27-trimethylation state. *Wif1* expression marked late stages of normal osteoblast maturation and stratified OS tumors based on differentiation stage across species. Culture of OS cells under differentiation inductive conditions increased expression of *Wif1*. Together these results demonstrate that Wif1 is not targeted for silencing by DNA methylation in OS. Instead, the reduced expression of *Wif1* in OS cells is in context with their stage in differentiation.

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Introduction

Osteosarcoma (OS) is the most common primary tumor of the bone, and fifth most common malignancy in children. Through the use of intensive chemotherapy and improvements in surgical resection, the 5-year survival rate for patients with localized disease has reached 70% [1]. However, survival rates have failed to substantively improve over the past three decades and patients continue to be at high risk of therapy-related complications, most notably cardiac toxicity and deafness induced by the chemotherapeutic regimens [2]. Metastatic dissemination is also frequent in patients; almost 20% of patients present at diagnosis with metastatic disease and almost all patients with recurrent disease will develop metastatic lesions [3]. Despite progress in our knowledge of OS biology and genetics, 5 year survival rates remain at ~30% for patients with metastatic disease [1]. New treatment strategies are needed to improve long-term patient survival and improve their post-treatment quality of life.

OS originates from a disruption in the osteoblastic lineage differentiation process. Histologically, OS tumors can resemble different stages of osteoblast maturation. Conventional OS, the most common diagnosis, can present as one of three subtypes; osteoblastic (~60%), fibroblastic (~10%) and chondroblastic (~10%) [4]. Normal cell lineage commitment is intricately linked with epigenetic processes, and gene specific epigenetic signatures and chromatin landscapes can define stages of development [5–7]. Understanding the epigenetic landscapes of normal cell counterparts will play a role in deciphering the epigenomes of cancer cells.

The mechanisms that underlie the disrupted differentiation process in OS are still being elucidated. OS tumors are characterized by multiple somatic chromosomal lesions, including localized regions with high levels of mutations (kataegis) and a type of clustered chromosomal rearrangement involving one or few chromosomes that occurs in a single event (chromothripsis) [8,9]. Key genetic events in the genesis of OS are disruption of the *TP53* and *RB1* pathways [10,11]. Whole genome DNA sequencing also recently identified that recurrent somatic structural variations in the *ATRX* and *DLG2* genes are common in OS [8].

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Loss or mutation of *PRKAR1A*, *WWOX*, *TWIST*, *WRN*, *RECQL4* and amplification of *c-FOS*, and *c-MYC* has also been linked with OS [12]. It is becoming evident that epigenetic mechanisms also likely play a significant role in the initiation and maintenance of OS. Several genes have been reported to be silenced epigenetically in human OS, including *WIF1*, an antagonist of Wnt signaling [13,14].

Active Wnt signaling is integral to normal osteoblast maturation, driving proliferation and differentiation [15]. Inhibition of the Wnt antagonist SOST to stimulate anabolic osteoblastic Wnt signaling is being developed for the treatment of the low bone mass of osteoporosis [16]. Of note, humans with sclerosteosis or the related van Buchem disease, both of which result from mutations reducing SOST expression or function, do not appear to be at increased risk of developing OS [17–22]. The report that *WIF1* was epigenetically silenced in OS, and that its absence could augment OS in murine models, has potentially significant clinical implications for the treatment of osteoporosis with agents that activate or enhance Wnt signaling in the bone [13].

To date, all OS epigenetic marker exploratory studies have been conducted in established human OS cell lines [13,23,24]. No studies have profiled primary OS tissue or very early passage cultures derived from OS tumor material. Embryonic stem cells (ESCs) and tumor cells derived from primary xenograft models have been shown to undergo transcriptional and genetic drift with long-term culture [25,26]. Culture driven changes in DNA methylation have also been demonstrated in ESCs, as well as divergence of methylation patterning in cancer cell lines and clinical specimens [6,27,28]. Genetically engineered mouse models of human OS that recapitulate the features of human OS subtypes enable the study of primary and metastatic disease in low passage primary cell cultures [29,30]. Studying OS epigenetic signatures in these primary cultures may provide a closer representation of OS than has previously been possible.

We have made use of primary OS cell cultures derived from mouse OS models and normal osteoblasts to understand the regulation of *Wif1*. We have coupled this with human OS cell lines and transcriptional profiles of human OS. Our results demonstrate that *Wif1* expression is not epigenetically inactivated by DNA methylation in mouse or human OS cells as previously reported. We propose that *Wif1* expression levels mark tumors that are less differentiated and more fibroblastic/pre-osteoblastic without consequences for their tumorigenicity.

Materials and methods

Cells

All cells, unless otherwise specified, were grown in α-Modified Eagle's Minimal (αMEM) medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 2 mM GlutaMAX, and penicillin–streptomycin (normal growth media) at 37 °C in a humidified atmosphere with 5% CO_2.

Low passage mouse OS cell cultures and tumors were derived from *Osx*-Cre *p53*$^{fl/fl}$ *pRb*$^{fl/fl}$ mice on a C57Bl/6 background (Cre:Lox) as previously described [30]. The Kusa4b10 cell line was used in the undifferentiated basal state as a source of pre-osteoblast cells [31]. Mature osteoblasts were derived by placing Kusa4b10 cells under in vitro osteoblast differentiation conditions for 21 days [31] by exposing cells to normal growth media supplemented with 1 μM ascorbate. Cells were maintained for the times indicated with twice weekly media changes. Cells were exposed to normal growth media supplemented with 1 μM ascorbate and 0.1 μM β-glycerophosphate disodium salt hydrate for Alizarin red staining assays [31]. Primary pre-osteoblast and osteoblast cells were derived from crushed femur/tibia/iliac crest bones from 5 or 8 week old C57Bl/6 mice as previously described [32, 33]. Lineage − ve/low CD31-ve Sca-1 + ve CD51 + ve pre-osteoblast cells and Lineage − ve/low CD31-ve Sca-1-ve CD51 + ve osteoblast cells were purified by flow cytometry (FACSAria, BD Biosciences). WT calvaria cells were derived from 2 day old C57Bl/6 pups as previously described [34]. The human OS cell line MG63 was acquired from ATCC.

The human OS cell lines SAOS-2, G-292 and SJSA-1, were a kind gift from Assoc/Prof Damian Myers (Department of Surgery, St. Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy, Australia), who purchased them from ATCC.

Bisulfite clonal sequencing

Bisulfite clonal sequencing was performed as previously described [35,36] with some modifications. Genomic DNA was extracted using a DNeasy Blood and Tissue kit (Qiagen) as per the manufacturer's instructions. Genomic DNA was bisulfite converted using an EZ DNA Methylation-Gold kit™ (ZYMO Research) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Wif1 nested bisulfite clonal sequencing primers were designed using MethPrimer publicly available online software. Wif1 and Line-1 primer sequences recognizing bisulfite converted DNA are listed in Supplementary Table 1. PCR reactions were conducted in triplicate each time and combined to reduce potential amplification bias. PCR fragments were cloned into a pGEM®-T vector (Promega) and propagated in TOP10 chemically competent *Escherichia coli*. Three to six clones from each sample were randomly chosen and sequenced.

Drug treatments

5-Aza-2′-deoxycytidine (5Aza) (Sigma Aldrich) was applied at 100 nM in mouse cells or 5 μM in human cells every 24 h for 3 consecutive days. Trichostatin A (TSA) (Upstate, Millipore) was applied (100 ng/ml) for 24 h either alone or in combination with 5Aza in the final 24 h of a 3-day assay.

RNA extraction, cDNA synthesis, QPCR

Total RNA used for microarray analyses was extracted using TRIzol reagent (Ambion). The aqueous RNA phase was isolated by chloroform separation and further purified by an RNeasy mini column kit (Qiagen) as per the manufacturer's instructions. Total RNA used for QPCR analyses was extracted using an RNeasy mini or micro column kit (Qiagen) as per the manufacturer's instructions. cDNA was synthesized using an AffinityScript QPCR cDNA synthesis kit (Agilent) as per the manufacturer's instructions. Gene expression was quantified by realtime PCR (QPCR) using SYBR Green (Brilliant II SYBR® Green, Agilent) and oligonucleotide primers with a Mx3000P thermocycler (Stratagene) with MxPro software (Stratagene). Oligonucleotide primer sequences are listed in Supplementary Table 1. Gene relative expression quantitation was calculated using the 2-Δ^{CT} method, normalized to *Hprt* expression. Primer specificity was verified by genome primer sequence Blast analysis, product sequencing and dissociation melt curve analysis.

Microarray analyses

RNA from mouse Cre:Lox fibroblastic OS cell cultures, pre-osteoblastic cells (undifferentiated Kusa4b10 cells) and osteoblast cells (derived by in vitro differentiation of Kusa4b10 cells) cells were hybridized to Affymetrix Mouse Gene 1.0ST microarrays at the Ramaciotti Centre for Gene Function Analysis, University of New South Wales, Australia. The raw data has been uploaded to the Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO). Publicly available gene expression data from human OS samples and mouse Cre:Lox (fibroblastic) and shRNA (osteoblastic) OS subtype tumors were retrieved from GEO (accession numbers GSE30699 [37] and GSE38742 [29]). Raw data were normalized using RMA in GenePattern [38]. Probes were considered detected if expression was greater than the median of the control probes. Differentially expressed genes were analyzed using the LIMMA algorithm [39].

Chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP)

ChIP assays were performed as previously described [36,40,41]. ChIP assays were performed on three different mouse OS cell cultures and

were compared to three independently derived samples each of pre-osteoblast and osteoblast cells derived from Kusa4b10 cells. Antibodies directed against H3K4trimethylation (Active Motif, No.39159), H3K27trimethylation (Millipore, No.07-449), diacetylated H3 (K9/K14) (Millipore, No.06-599) and normal rabbit IgG (Millipore, No.12-370) were used. Enrichment was quantified by QPCR. ChIP relative enrichment was determined by the $2\text{-}\Delta^{CT(bound-input)}$ method and normalized to a control region in the Gapdh gene. Mean relative enrichment was determined from 3 independent osteoblast and pre-osteoblast samples, compared to 3 different mouse OS cell cultures.

Statistical analyses

Experiments are represented as mean ± SEM (error bars) calculated from a minimum of two biological replicates unless otherwise stated. Student's *t* test was used to compare two groups and one-way ANOVA was used to compare a response over multiple time points. In all analyses, statistical significance was $p < 0.05$. Prism 6.0e software was used for analyses.

Results

Wif1 is downregulated in mouse OS

To identify OS targets that are epigenetically deregulated we performed gene expression profiling of three independent early passage primary mouse OS cell cultures (494H, 493H, 716H) and mouse osteoblasts. The OS cell cultures were established from a mouse model of fibroblastic OS generated by osteoblast restricted deletion of *Trp53* and *Rb1* [30] and were less than 8 passages from isolation from the primary tumor. Comparison of significantly differentially expressed genes (absolute log fold change > 1.5 and $p < 0.05$) identified 789 transcripts that are deregulated in OS compared to osteoblasts that were derived by differentiation of pre-osteoblastic Kusa4b10 cells (Fig. 1A). Of interest, we noted that *Wif1* was one of the targets significantly downregulated in the murine OS cells (Fig. 1A), consistent with that reported in human OS [13,14]. Independent profiling of primary mouse OS cell cultures and primary whole mouse OS tumors confirmed that *Wif1* was repressed in OS cells (Figs. 1B–C). *Wif1* expression was reduced in OS cells when compared to in vitro differentiated osteoblasts and FACS-isolated mature osteoblasts from wildtype (WT) mouse long bones (Figs. 1B–C). Taken together, the mouse OS cells exhibit a deregulated transcriptome, and *Wif1* is downregulated in murine OS cells consistent with findings in human OS [13,14].

Low expression of Wif1 in OS cells is controlled independently of DNA methylation

WIF1 has been reported to be epigenetically silenced by DNA methylation in human OS [13,14]. As the transcriptional regulation of *Wif1* in OS was conserved across species, we sought to establish if it was also epigenetically conserved. Surprisingly, however, bisulfite clonal sequencing of the *Wif1* CpG island promoter region showed the locus is hypomethylated in mouse OS cells, similar to profiles in osteoblast cells and pre-osteoblast cells derived from Kusa4b10 cells (Fig. 2A). In contrast to the hypomethylated *Wif1* locus, the *Line-1* element in the OS cells was heavily methylated as expected [42], demonstrating the
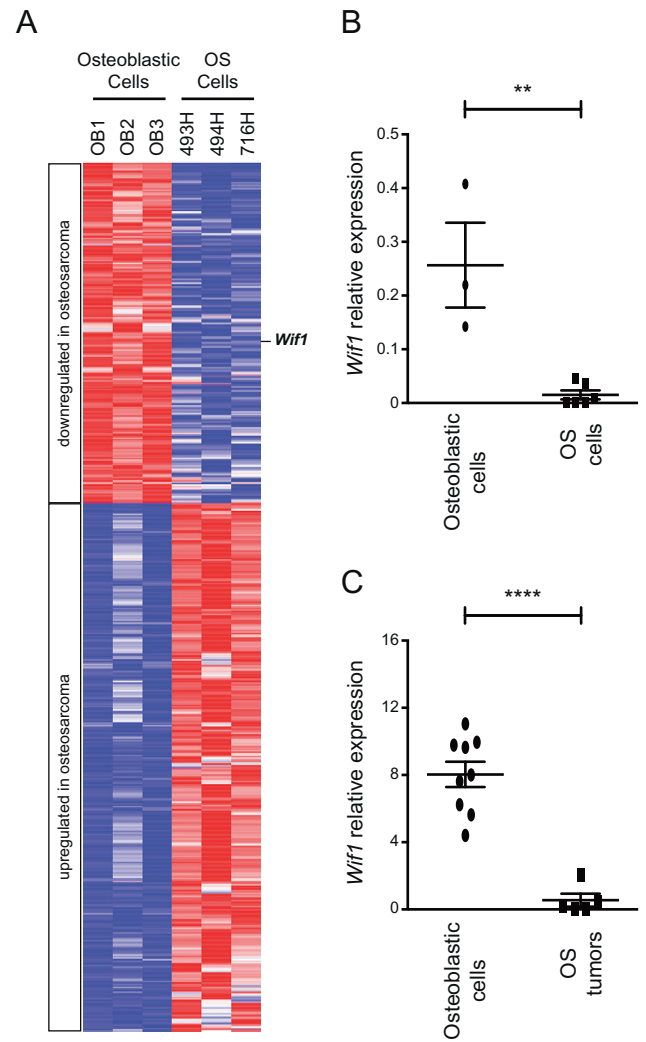

Fig. 1. *Wif1* expression is downregulated in mouse OS cells compared to mature osteoblasts. (A) Heatmap representation of 789 transcripts differentially expressed (absolute log fold change > 1.5 and $p < 0.05$) in mouse OS cell cultures compared to three independently derived mature osteoblast samples (OB1,2,3) (in vitro differentiated pre-osteoblastic Kusa4b10 cells). The heatmap is colored based on relative values using the row minimum and row maximum. *Wif1* is highlighted and is downregulated in mouse OS cells. (B) QPCR analysis of *Wif1* expression levels in mature osteoblast samples (in vitro differentiated Kusa4b10 pre-osteoblastic cells) and mouse OS cell cultures. Mean relative expression ± SEM (n = 3–6). Asterisk denotes statistical significance determined by Student's *t* test, **$p < 0.01$. (C) QPCR analysis of *Wif1* expression levels in primary osteoblastic cells (derived from WT mouse long bones) and whole mouse OS tumors. Mean relative expression ± SEM (n = 5–9). Asterisk denotes statistical significance determined by Student's *t* test, ****$p < 0.0001$.

sensitivity of the assay (Supplementary Fig. 1). The *Wif1* hypomethylated status in mouse osteoblasts and primary OS cell cultures also contrasted with that previously reported in human OS. Consistent with the hypomethylated status of the *Wif1* locus in murine OS, treatment with the demethylating agent 5-aza-2′-deoxycytidine (5Aza) failed to induce *Wif1* expression (Fig. 2B). Treatment with the

Fig. 2. Wif1 is hypomethylated in OS cells and is upregulated by HDAC inhibition. (A) Schematic of the *Wif1* locus analyzed by bisulfite sequencing. The spatial positioning of the CpG dinucleotides assessed is represented as lollipops. The hypomethylation status of Wif1 in each culture is represented by the colored grids. Each row of boxes represents a single cloned allele. Each box represents a single CpG dinucleotide that is methylated (dark grey) or unmethylated (white). Each group of 3–6 cloned alleles represents an independent DNA sample derived from pre-osteoblastic cells (undifferentiated Kusa4b10 cells), osteoblast cells (in vitro differentiated Kusa4b10 cells) or 3 independent mouse OS cell cultures (494H, 493H, 202V). (B–E) Treatment of OS and osteoblastic cells with inhibitors of HDACs and DNA methylation. Untreated cells (U) were compared to cells treated with the HDAC inhibitor TSA (T), the DNA methylation inhibitor 5-aza-2′-deoxycytidine (A), or a combination of both compounds (A + T). Values represent mean *Wif1* relative expression ± SEM (n = 2–3). Asterisk denotes statistical significance determined by Student's *t* test, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. (B) *Wif1* expression levels in mouse OS cell cultures. (C) *Wif1* expression levels in Kusab410 pre-osteoblastic (Pre-OB) cells. (D) *Wif1* expression levels in primary mouse calvarial osteoblastic (OB) cells. (E) *WIF1* expression in human OS cells.
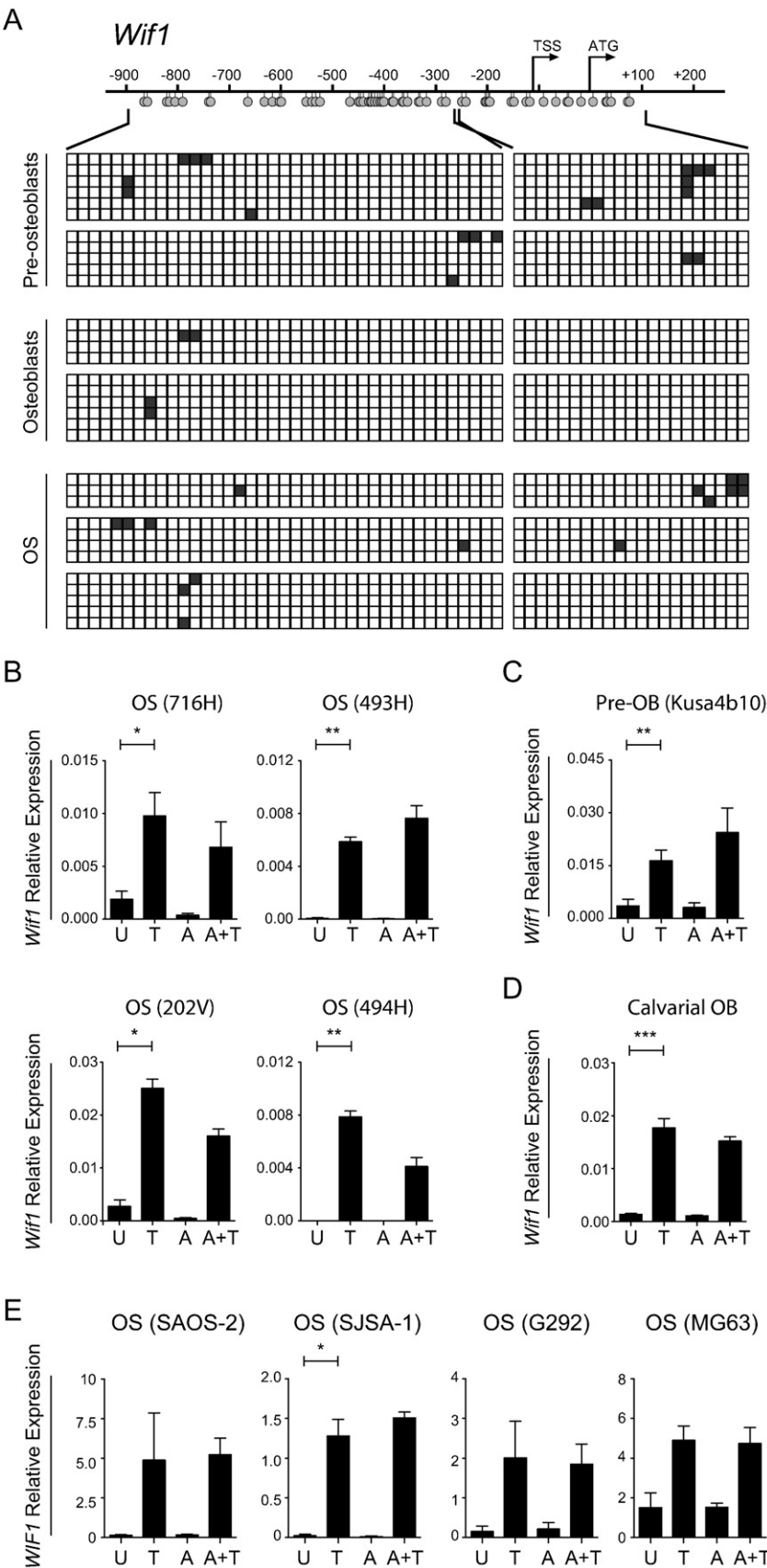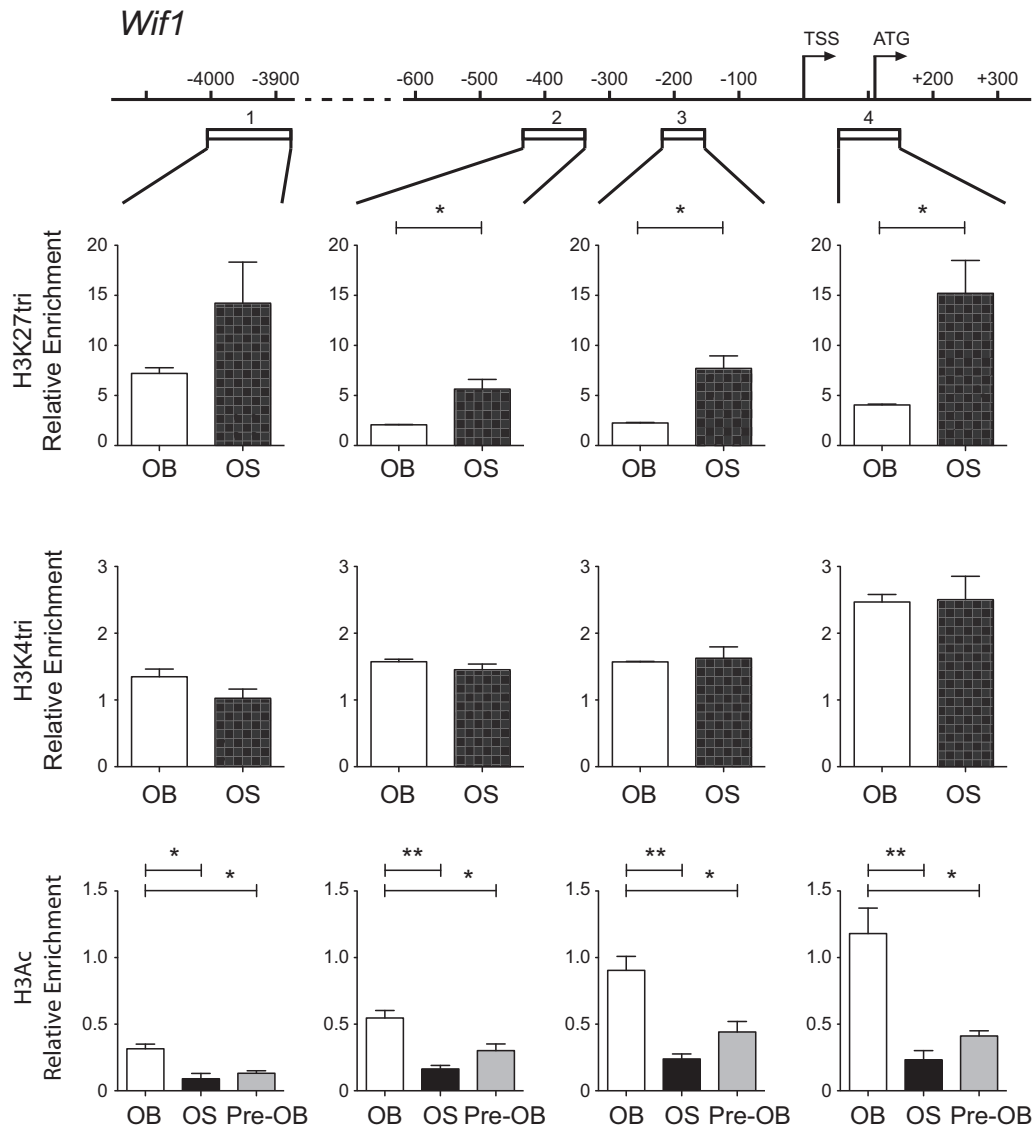
Fig. 3. The Wif1 promoter in OS cells is associated with a bivalent H3K27tri/H3K4tri and reduced H3Ac histone modification state. Schematic of the mouse Wif1 locus with transcription start site (TSS) and translation start site (ATG) positioning shown based on the mouse mm8 genome build. H3K27tri, H3K4tri and H3Ac modifications were mapped across four regions (numbered 1–4, positions relative to ATG). Relative enrichment at the Wif1 locus was normalized to levels detected at a control locus region (*Gapdh* coding region). Values are mean relative enrichment ± SEM for three osteoblast cell samples (OB) (in vitro differentiated Kusa4b10 cells), 3 pre-osteoblast cell samples (Pre-OB) (undifferentiated Kusa4b10 cells), and 3 different mouse OS cell cultures (OS); *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ derived by Student's *t* test.

HDAC inhibitor Trichostatin A (TSA), however, elicited a strong induction of Wif1 expression in the mouse OS cultures. The level of induction of Wif1 was not further enhanced by the combined treatment of 5Aza with TSA (Fig. 2B), supporting the conclusion that Wif1 silencing in mouse OS cells is not driven by DNA methylation. TSA and 5Aza treatment of pre-osteoblastic Kusa4b10 cells and primary calvarial osteoblastic cells elicited similar Wif1 expression responses to the mouse OS cells (Figs. 2C–D). The observed equivalent induction in Wif1 expression suggested similar epigenetic mechanisms may control Wif1 in OS cells and normal osteoblastic cells.

WIF1 has been shown to be responsive to 5Aza in several human OS cell lines [13,14], although its responsiveness to HDAC inhibition was not tested. The differential methylation of 4 CpG dinucleotides located 200 bp to 500 bp upstream from the transcription start site was proposed to mediate WIF1 silencing in human OS cells [13]. We treated four different human OS cell lines (SAOS-2, G292, MG63, SJSA-1) with TSA and found WIF1 expression was rapidly induced, similar to results

obtained from mouse OS cultures (Fig. 2E). Surprisingly, we failed to reproduce the robust induction in WIF1 expression in response to 5Aza treatment that has been previously reported, despite using comparable treatment conditions (5 μM over 3 days) [13,14]. Furthermore, combined treatment with 5Aza together with TSA failed to induce expression of WIF1 significantly beyond levels achieved by TSA treatment alone (Fig. 2E). Collectively the results from murine and human OS cells indicated that methylation may not be involved in regulating WIF1 expression in human OS cells.

A hypoacetylated bivalent chromatin state controls Wif1 expression

Robust induction of Wif1 expression in mouse and human OS cell lines with TSA treatment suggested a repressive histone chromatin state was mechanistically involved in Wif1 silencing. To examine the histone modification status of Wif1 in OS we mapped the relative enrichment of the repressive histone mark H3K27trimethylation
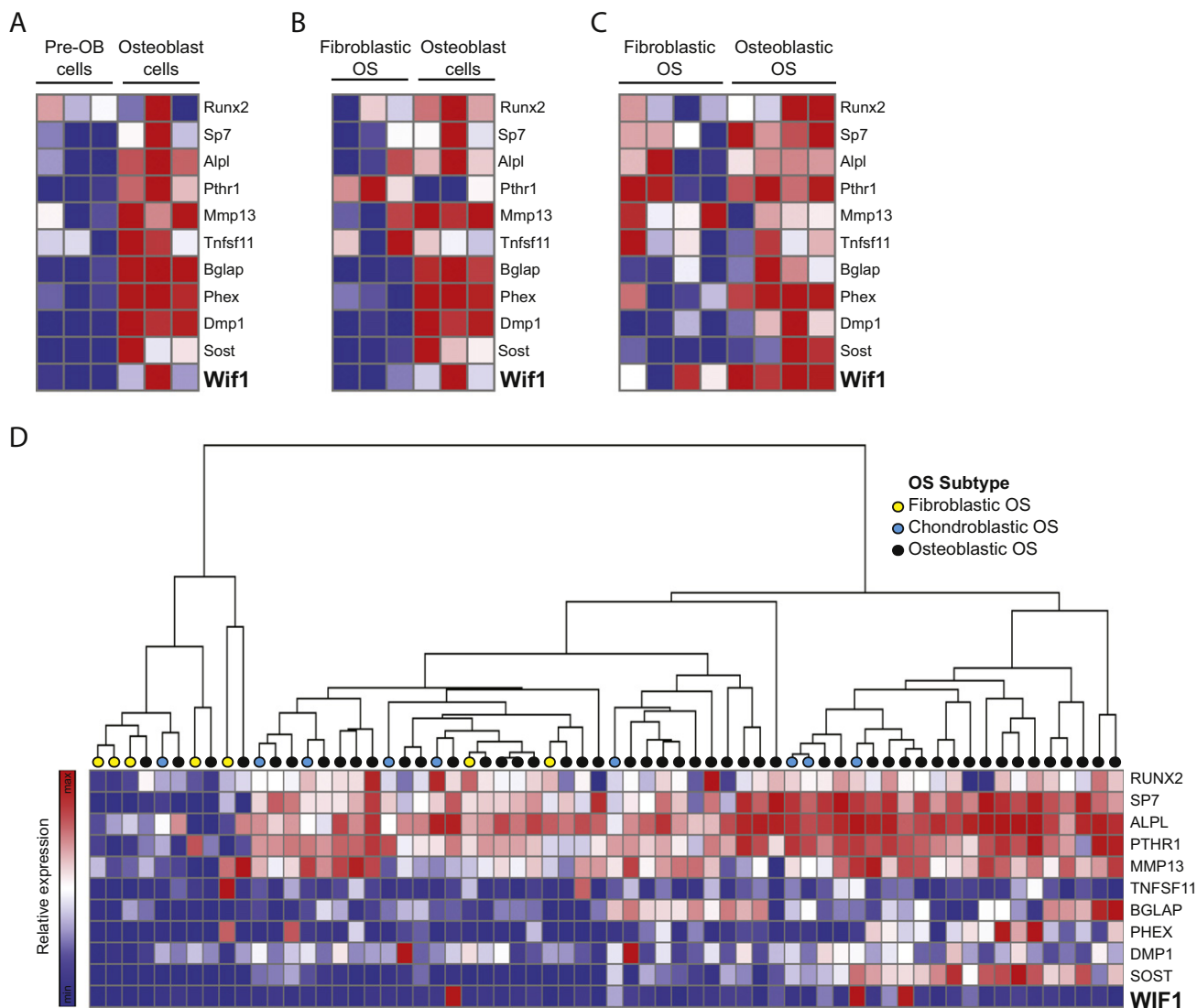
Fig. 4. *Wif1* expression correlates with OS tumor subtype and maturity status. (A) Heatmap representation of osteoblastic marker gene set expression in mouse pre-osteoblastic cells (undifferentiated Kusa4b10 cells) and mature osteoblast cells (derived by in vitro differentiation of Kusa4b10 pre-osteoblastic cells). The heatmap is colored based on relative values using the row minimum and row maximum. (B) Heatmap representation of osteoblastic marker gene set expression in mouse fibroblastic (Cre:Lox) OS cell cultures and mature osteoblast cells (derived by in vitro differentiation of Kusa4b10 pre-osteoblastic cells). The heatmap is colored based on relative values using the row minimum and row maximum. (C) Heatmap representation of osteoblastic marker gene set expression in OS tumors derived from mouse osteoblastic (shRNA) and mouse fibroblastic (Cre:Lox) OS models. The heatmap is colored based on relative values using the row minimum and row maximum. (D) *WIF1* expression segregates mature osteoblastic phenotypes from immature/fibroblastic OS phenotypes. Heatmap representation of osteoblastic marker gene set expression in a panel of primary human fibroblastic (yellow circle), chondroblastic (blue circle) and osteoblastic (black circle) OS tumors. Samples were clustered by Euclidian distance and colored based on relative values using the row minimum and row maximum.

(H3K27tri) and the active histone marks H3K4trimethylation (H3K4tri) and H3 diacetylation of K9/K14 (H3Ac) across the *Wif1* locus in three primary mouse OS cell cultures and normal osteoblast and pre-osteoblast cells using chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP). *Wif1* silencing in OS cells correlated with higher enrichment of the repressive H3K27tri mark and lower enrichment of the active H3Ac mark within 400 bp of the TSS in all three mouse OS tumors compared to normal osteoblasts (Fig. 3). Interestingly, both OS cells and normal osteoblasts showed a similar enrichment of the active H3K4tri mark across the *Wif1* locus, indicating the silenced *Wif1* locus is bivalently marked in OS cells. H3Ac mapping of pre-osteoblast cells demonstrated that normal osteoblast maturation is associated with a gain in H3Ac at the Wif1 locus (Fig. 3). The pre-osteoblasts had a similar

Fig. 5. *Wif1* expression is acquired late in normal osteoblast lineage commitment and is induced in mouse and human OS cells under osteoblastic maturation conditions. (A–B) QPCR analysis of *Wif1* expression and early (*Runx2, Sp7*), intermediate (*Pth1r, Alpl*) and late (*Bglap*) osteoblastic gene expression markers. Values are mean relative expression ± SEM. Asterisk denotes statistical significance determined by one-way ANOVA or Student's *t* test, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$, ****$p < 0.0001$. (A) *Wif1* and osteoblastic gene expression profiles in pre-osteoblastic Kusa4b10 cells undergoing in vitro osteoblast differentiation (n = 3). (B) *Wif1* and osteoblastic gene expression profiles in pre-osteoblast (Pre-OB) and osteoblast (OB) cells isolated from 8 week old wild type C57BL6 mouse long bones (n = 4–7). (C) Alizarin red staining of mineralized nodules in mouse (716H and 493H) and human (SAOS-2, SJSA-1) OS cell cultures grown under osteoblastic conditions over 21 days. (D) Quantitation of mineralization in mouse (716H and 493H) and human OS (SAOS-2, SJSA-1) cell culture over 21 days. Values are mean eluted Alizarin red concentration (μM) ± SEM. Data is from 5 separate assays from an individual experiment and is representative of 2 independent experiments. Asterisk denotes statistical significance determined by one-way ANOVA, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ****$p < 0.0001$. (E) Quantitation of *Wif1* expression in mouse (716H and 493H) and human OS (SAOS-2, SJSA-1) cell cultures grown under osteoblastic conditions over 21 days. Values are mean fold change in *Wif1* expression (compared to day 0) ± SEM (n = 2–3). Asterisk denotes statistical significance determined by one-way ANOVA, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ****$p < 0.0001$.
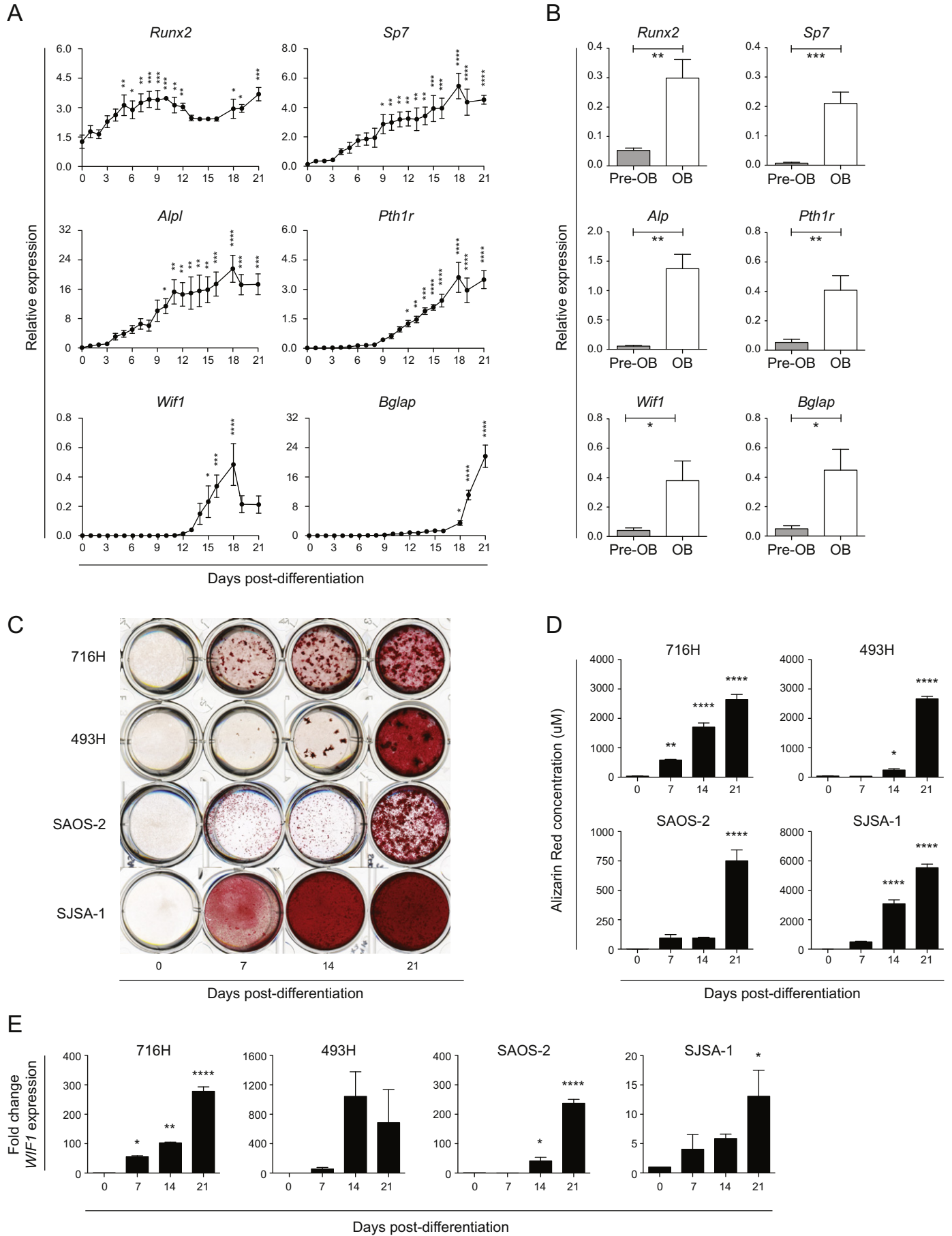
H3Ac landscape to OS cells, consistent with both cell types lacking *Wif1* expression (Figs. 3, 1 and 5A–B).

Wif1 expression marks mature osteoblastic differentiated states

Wnt signaling plays an important role in normal osteoblast differentiation [15] and developmentally poised genes are characteristically bivalently marked [43,44]. We hypothesized that *Wif1* expression in OS may be reduced due to the differentiation stage of the tumor. Microarray profiling showed the osteoblast gene expression profile in the mouse OS cells mimicked the osteoblast patterning in normal pre-osteoblastic undifferentiated Kusa4b10 cells (Figs. 4A–B). Low expression of *Wif1* in pre-osteoblastic cells correlated with low expression of *Phex, Bglap, Dmp1* and *Sost*, genes that mark late stages of osteoblast maturation. As pre-osteoblastic cells were induced to maturation, a gain in *Wif1* expression coincided with increased expression of well-defined markers of osteoblast differentiation (Fig. 4A). A similarly repressed mature osteoblastic gene expression profile, with reduced *Wif1* expression, was evident when the fibroblastic OS cells were compared to the in vitro differentiated mature osteoblasts (Fig. 4B).

The mouse OS cell cultures used in our analyses were obtained from a model of OS (Cre:Lox) that most closely approximates the fibroblastic or undifferentiated form of OS in humans [29,30]. We recently developed a new mouse model of OS generated by shRNA driven knockdown of *Trp53* in the osteoblast lineage [29]. Histological, QPCR, and FACS cell surface profile analyses of tumors derived from the shRNA OS model were all characteristic of the osteoblastic OS subtype. The tumor cells in the Cre:lox model are enriched in pre-osteoblasts while those derived from the shRNA OS model are predominantly mature osteoblasts. Interestingly, microarray profiling identified expression of *Wif1* as one of the key genes to distinguish the osteoblastic and fibroblastic OS subtype models [29] (Fig. 4C). Reduced *Wif1* expression in the fibroblastic OS cells correlated with the repressed mature osteoblastic gene profile (*Sost, Dmp1, Phex, Bglap*) evident in these OS cells [29] (Fig. 4C).

To further examine the association of *WIF1* expression with osteoblast differentiation stage in OS we examined the relationship between *WIF1* expression and markers of osteoblastic differentiation in a previously published human OS microarray dataset [37]. *WIF1* expression was low in most tumors, however tumors that did express *WIF1* clustered in mature tumor phenotypes, coincident with other markers of the mature osteoblastic phenotype (Fig. 4D). The segregation of *WIF1* expression with osteoblastic markers of late stages of maturation was consistent with a previous report in human OS [13]. These data suggest that *WIF1* expression status may mark later stages of osteoblast differentiation and therefore distinguishes poorly differentiated OS tumors from more differentiated OS tumors.

Induction of Wif1 expression in OS cells under differentiation conditions

To further examine whether the heterogeneous *Wif1* expression pattern seen in OS tumors is driven by their osteoblastic differentiation status, we examined *Wif1* expression during normal osteoblast differentiation. Under in vitro osteoblastic differentiation conditions, *Wif1* expression in the Kusa4b10 pre-osteoblastic cell line was almost undetectable in the early stages of differentiation when these cells retain adipogenic potential (Fig. 5A). As lineage commitment and differentiation proceeded there was a robust increase in *Wif1* expression levels. The increase in *Wif1* expression paralleled the increased expression of classic markers of osteoblast maturation such as *Pthr1* and *Bglap* (Fig. 5A). Similarly, expression profiling of primary FACS isolated immature pre-osteoblast cells and mature osteoblast cells isolated from WT mouse long bones demonstrated *Wif1* expression levels could distinguish mature osteoblasts from immature pre-osteoblast cells, along with other late markers including *Pthr1* and *Bglap* (Fig. 5B). This demonstrates that *Wif1* expression is a

marker of mature osteoblast cells, consistent with findings in human osteoblast cells [13].

If *Wif1* expression marks the maturation stage at which the OS cell is blocked, we reasoned that *Wif1* expression should be increased in OS cells if they could be forced into a more mature differentiation stage. We placed four primary mouse OS cell cultures and four human OS cell lines under in vitro osteoblastic differentiation conditions. As evidenced by increased Alizarin red staining of mineralized nodules, all of the human and mouse OS cell lines underwent maturation to some extent (Figs. 5C–D and Supplementary Fig. 2A–B). Correspondingly, we noted increased *Wif1* expression in all cultures and cell lines as they differentiated (Fig. 5E and Supplementary Fig. 2C), similar to pre-osteoblastic cells undergoing maturation. Collectively the results from mouse and human OS and normal osteoblasts demonstrates that *WIF1* marks late stages in osteoblast maturation and can stratify OS subtypes based on differentiation status.

Discussion

Changes in gene expression during tumorigenesis can be mediated by a number of mechanisms. Of these, DNA methylation is becoming increasingly associated with silencing of tumor suppressor genes. One attractive feature of DNA methylation is the possible reversal of this state using small molecule inhibitors. An understanding of the key targets for DNA-methylation in OS may provide a rationale for the application of demethylating agents in this tumor type. Additionally, a better understanding of the targets of DNA methylation may reveal important biology relevant to the initiation and maintenance of OS. *WIF1* and other Wnt antagonists are frequently targeted for epigenetic inactivation by DNA methylation in many human cancers [45–49]. It had been proposed that DNA methylation dependent silencing of *WIF1* in OS was biologically meaningful and its loss predisposed osteoblasts to transformation in experimental models [13]. The present work demonstrates *WIF1* is not silenced by DNA methylation in human and mouse OS. Instead, silencing is driven by a histone modification chromatin profile that is conducive to activation by HDAC inhibition and normal osteoblastic maturation cues. *WIF1* expression was shown to tightly couple with osteoblastic maturation. We propose that *WIF1* expression is low/reduced in OS cells because they are stalled in the normal osteoblastic differentiation program.

WIF1 was previously reported to be epigenetically silenced by DNA methylation in human OS cell lines and tumors [13,14]. The present study, and a separate genome-wide MeDIP-chip methylation profiling study of human OS cell lines [24], did not identify *WIF1* as a differentially methylated target in OS. We believe these opposing results may stem from the type of assays performed by others [13,14] and their interpretation of the results. Firstly, *WIF1* expression was not activated by 5Aza treatment in all cell lines with a methylation signature [13,14]. Secondly, 4 CpG sites located in a region spanning 200 bp to 500 bp upstream of the *WIF1* transcription start site were proposed to mediate the silencing. However, the methylation pattern did not appear to always correlate with the 5Aza mediated *WIF1* response OS cell lines examined [13]. It was not examined whether 5Aza induced activation of *WIF1* expression correlated with the demethylation of the 4 CpG sites. These experiments would have mechanistically linked differential methylation of the 4 CpG sites with transcriptional silencing.

5Aza has been shown to reactivate genes independent of DNA demethylation effects, including the Wnt antagonist *DKK1* in glioblastoma multiforme tumors [50]. The previous studies also did not examine the effects of HDAC inhibition [13,14]. We have demonstrated that *WIF1* can be activated by TSA and osteoblastic differentiation cues in OS cell lines previously examined (G292, SJSA-1, SAOS-2), two of which were reported to have *WIF1* activation following 5Aza treatment. Recent evidence from a large scale study of 19 human OS cell lines [23] would suggest *WIF1* methylation differences may not be functionally relevant. Despite being identified as a differentially methylated gene,

WIF1 was not identified to be differentially expressed between the 19 OS cell lines and the normal osteoblast controls [23]. Finally, Kansara and colleagues reported that 5Aza treatment of the human OS cell lines induced osteoblastic differentiation as measured by increased alkaline phosphatase staining and mineralization [13]. In light of our current findings that WIF1 expression is tightly coupled to osteoblastic differentiation, 5Aza treatment may have activated WIF1 expression indirectly by inducing maturation of the OS cell lines rather than having a direct effect on WIF1. Indeed, pretreatment of human bone marrow stromal cells with 5Aza has been shown to enhance osteogenic differentiation [51].

WIF1 silencing has been shown to be driven by HDAC dependent mechanisms in glioblastoma multiforme tumors [50]. We have demonstrated that the silenced Wif1 promoter is hypoacetylated in OS compared to normal Wif1 expressing osteoblasts. Consistent with a histone modification driven mechanism of silencing, robust increases in Wif1 expression were achieved in OS and normal pre-osteoblast cells by treatment with TSA. Interestingly, we also demonstrate Wif1 is bivalently marked in OS cells. Bivalent states have been shown to mark developmentally poised genes in embryonic stem cells and are progressively lost during cellular differentiation [44]. In Wilms kidney tumors, bivalent domains marked the stalled developmental gene program that is upregulated during normal kidney differentiation, but is maintained in a repressed state in Wilms tumors, reminiscent of kidney progenitor cells [43]. Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that the Wif1 locus was bivalently marked in OS cells that are stalled in an osteoblastic differentiation program. These results demonstrate the importance of assessing the status of genes across a differentiation cascade. Most tumors show an impairment of differentiation and the patterns of gene expression may be a consequence of this rather than a driver of the tumor process.

The initial report of WIF1 being epigenetically inactivated by DNA methylation in OS [13] raised concerns for the clinical use of Wnt agonists in bone loss disorders due to the possible increased risk of OS development. Herein we show these concerns, as far as they relate to WIF1, are perhaps less significant than originally proposed. WIF1 expression, although often low/reduced in OS due to coupling of its expression with osteoblast maturation, is not epigenetically inactivated in OS by DNA methylation, but shares a chromatin state similar to osteoblasts undergoing normal stages of maturation.

Author contributions

EB and CW conceived the study; EB, ST, AG, AC, SB, AG, TM, MR, DS, LP, CW performed experiments and analyzed data; EB, TM, MR, LP, CW provided intellectual input and conceptual advice; EB and CW wrote the manuscript; All authors reviewed the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

Acknowledgments

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bone.2014.12.063.

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