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Perspective: Refolding the Mystery of Onconeural Antigens: KLHL11, ELAV4, and CDR2L as Keys to Paraneoplastic Neurological Disorders

Eshiobomhe Sigmus Aimofumhe[1], Winner Igbogobo Armstrong[2]

[1]Department of Life and Physical Sciences, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA, 37208
[1]Chan Zuckerberg Biohub, San Francisco, CA, USA, 94158
[2]Department of Agricultural, Life and Natural Sciences, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, Huntsville, Alabama, USA, 35801

A B S T R A C T

Paraneoplastic neurological disorders (PNDs) are rare but devastating autoimmune syndromes that blur the line between cancer and autoimmunity. Despite growing clinical awareness, the mechanistic understanding of the proteins targeted in PNDs remains fragmented. KLHL11, ELAV4, and CDR2L are key onconeural antigens implicated in PNDs, yet their biochemical characterization has been stymied by poor expression and insolubility in conventional systems. In this article, the authors reflect on investigative efforts at the CZ Biohub that confronted these challenges directly. By exploring protein denaturation-renaturation techniques and domain-specific expression strategies, we propose a new workflow for unlocking soluble and functional versions of these antigens. The implications extend beyond technical success; they invite a rethinking of how we approach rare autoimmune conditions, and how solubility might be the first step toward therapeutic clarity.

Keywords: Paraneoplastic Neurological Disorders, Onconeural Antigens, KLHL11, ELAV4, CDR2L, Protein Solubility, Autoimmunity

1.Introduction: When Cancer and Immunity Collide

Paraneoplastic neurological disorders (PNDs) challenge the conventional boundaries between cancer biology and neurology. In these conditions, the immune system recognizes tumor-expressed neural proteins and, in its misguided attempt to eliminate the cancer, attacks the nervous system. The result: severe, sometimes irreversible, neurological decline. The rarity of PNDs belies their significance, not only for affected patients but for what they reveal about immune tolerance, surveillance, and self-recognition.

Three proteins stand at the center of recent PND discoveries: KLHL11 (Kelch-like 11), ELAV4 (HuD), and CDR2L (Yo protein). Their antigenic properties make them valuable diagnostic biomarkers, but their structures and immune interactions remain poorly understood. The challenge? Solubility. These proteins resist easy expression and purification in standard bacterial systems.

1.1 The Solubility Bottleneck: Why These Proteins Matter

KLHL11 has emerged as a signature antigen in testicular cancer-associated brainstem encephalitis. ELAV4 is linked to small cell lung cancer, and CDR2L is frequently targeted in ovarian cancer-related paraneoplastic cerebellar degeneration. Despite their diagnostic relevance, these proteins are difficult to study structurally. Full-length constructs often aggregate. Truncated domains are unstable. Even when expression is achieved, solubility remains elusive.

This technical difficulty isn't just an experimental nuisance; it represents a barrier to understanding how these antigens stimulate pathogenic immune responses. Without soluble protein, there can be no crystallography, no epitope mapping, no drug screening, and no antibody validation. If PND research is to progress, solubility must be solved.

1.2 Denaturation-Renaturation: A Practical Breakthrough

At CZ Biohub, we adopted a denaturation-renaturation strategy for ELAV4 and CDR2L after multiple rounds of failed expression in BL21(DE3) and ArcticExpress E. coli strains. While these proteins aggregated initially, we denatured them in 6M urea and slowly renatured them through dialysis. The result: soluble, purifiable protein for both ELAV4 and CDR2L. Though KLHL11 remained problematic in full-length form, the C-terminal domain (residues 67-340) showed promising solubility.

The lesson here is twofold. First, denaturation is not defeat. When refolding is done carefully, even highly disordered or complex eukaryotic proteins can return to functional form. Second, expression strategies must align with the biology of the target. RNA-binding proteins like ELAV4 and CDR2L are unlikely to fold properly in bacterial cytoplasm without tailored refolding workflows.

1.3 Toward Therapeutic and Diagnostic Clarity

Soluble antigen opens the door to a cascade of possibilities:

- Diagnostic assays: Improved antigen presentation in immunoblots or ELISA assays to detect autoantibodies in patient CSF or serum.
- Therapeutic screening: Testing monoclonal antibodies or peptide blockers to prevent T-cell activation.
- Structural biology: Mapping conformational epitopes and understanding immunogenic domains.

Perhaps the most exciting is the translational leap: building in vivo models that reflect human pathology. Soluble protein could be used to generate tolerizing or activating immune responses in animal systems, testing both pathogenesis and prevention strategies.

Conclusion: Solubility as a Scientific and Symbolic Barrier

In the study of rare diseases like PNDs, the path to insight often begins with protein. Solubility, far from being a trivial property, becomes the key that unlocks deeper questions. KLHL11, ELAV4, and CDR2L are more than biomarkers; they are windows into the immune system's most dangerous miscommunications.

What we express, what we purify, and what we can fold into functional form ultimately determines what we can discover. By solving the solubility problem for PND antigens, we make these proteins available not just to biochemistry, but to immunology, neurology, and the patients who stand to benefit from therapeutic innovation.

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