

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements..... iv

Abstract ..... vi

Zusammenfassung..... viii

1 Introduction ..... 1

1.1 Melanoma classification, development, and clinical management..... 1

1.1.1 Epidemiology..... 1

1.1.2 Classification..... 1

1.1.2.1 Histopathological classification .....2

1.1.2.2 Integrated classification.....2

1.1.2.3 Genomic classification.....3

1.1.2.4 Concluding remarks.....5

1.1.3 The Clark model of melanoma development ..... 5

1.1.3.1 Benign nevi and oncogene-induced senescence.....6

1.1.3.2 Dysplastic nevi .....7

1.1.3.3 From radial growth phase to metastasis .....8

1.1.4 Clinical management of metastatic melanoma ..... 9

1.1.4.1 Chemotherapy .....9

1.1.4.2 Traditional immunotherapy ..... 10

1.1.4.3 Immune-checkpoint based therapy ..... 10

1.1.4.4 Small molecule-based therapy ..... 11

1.2 MAPK pathway in health and sickness ..... 13

1.2.1 The RAS-RAF-MEK-ERK pathway architecture ..... 14

1.2.1.1 Signal transmission to RAS..... 15

1.2.1.2 RAF proteins and their activation ..... 15

1.2.1.3 ERK1/2-dependent signaling and feedback mechanisms ..... 18

1.2.2 BRAF-driven MAPK signaling in melanoma ..... 20

1.2.2.1 Oncogenic BRAF mutations ..... 20

1.2.2.2 Paradoxical ERK activation..... 22

1.3 Resistance mechanisms to MAPKi in the treatment of metastatic melanoma..... 23

1.3.1 Acquired resistance..... 24

1.3.1.1 RAF dimer-dependent acquired resistance..... 24

1.3.1.2 RAF dimer-independent acquired resistance ..... 24

1.3.1.3 PI3K-dependent acquired resistance ..... 25

1.3.1.4 Clonal evolution and intra-patient heterogeneity ..... 25

1.3.2	Adaptive resistance .....	26
1.3.2.1	MAPK-dependent adaptive resistance.....	26
1.3.2.2	PI3K-dependent adaptive resistance.....	27
1.3.3	Intrinsic resistance .....	28
1.3.3.1	Concluding remarks.....	28
2	Aims of the study .....	30
3	Results.....	31
3.1	Discovery approach: RNA-Seq to identify the acute transcriptional response to inhibition of oncogenic BRAF signaling.....	31
3.1.1	Setup of PLX4720 treatment conditions for RNA-Seq .....	31
3.1.1.1	Profiling of changes in phospho-signals of MEK1/2 and ERK1/2 upon treatment with PLX4720 .....	31
3.1.1.2	Profiling of changes in expression of ERK1/2 target genes upon treatment with PLX4720 .....	32
3.1.1.3	Validation of established treatment conditions in a panel of BRAF <sup>V600E</sup> -mutated human melanoma cell lines.....	34
3.1.2	Transcriptome analysis upon short-term inhibition of oncogenic BRAF signaling.....	34
3.1.2.1	RNA-Seq.....	34
3.1.2.2	Comparison of transcriptional changes of selected ERK1/2 target genes as detected by qPCR and RNA-Seq.....	35
3.1.2.3	Bioinformatic analysis of RNA-Seq results .....	35
3.2	Validation of a stemness and EMT signature upon acute inhibition of oncogenic BRAF signaling.....	37
3.2.1	Validation of a stemness and EMT signature in A375-P melanoma cells.....	37
3.2.1.1	Assessment of temporal dynamics of the stemness and EMT signature.....	37
3.2.1.2	Assessment of drug specificity of the adaptive response to oncogenic BRAF inhibition.....	38
3.2.2	Validation of a stemness and EMT signature in a panel of human melanoma cell lines ..	39
3.2.3	Validation of a stemness and EMT signature in primary human short-term melanoma cultures .....	41
3.3	Single-cell resolved characterization of the functional relation of PLX4720-dependent SOX2 and CD24 induction.....	42
3.3.1	Single-cell resolved validation of SOX2 and CD24 induction upon acute inhibition of oncogenic BRAF signaling .....	42
3.3.1.1	Flow cytometric analysis of SOX2 and CD24 induction .....	42
3.3.1.2	SOX2 distribution in sorted CD24(+) and CD24(-) subpopulations.....	44
3.3.2	Assessment of the necessity of SOX2 for the emergence of a CD24(+) subpopulation upon inhibition of oncogenic BRAF signaling .....	46
3.3.2.1	Validation of siRNAs against SOX2 .....	46
3.3.2.2	Assessment of effect of siRNA-mediated SOX2 knockdown on PLX4720-dependent CD24 induction .....	46
3.3.3	Assessment of the sufficiency of SOX2 for the generation of CD24(+) cells .....	48

3.3.3.1	Generation of doxycycline-inducible SOX2 overexpression cell pools .....	48
3.3.3.2	Assessment of the effect of doxycycline-inducible SOX2 overexpression on CD24 induction .....	48
3.4	Functional characterization of the PLX4720-induced CD24(+) subpopulation.....	50
3.4.1	Assessment of stability and interconvertibility of the PLX4720-induced CD24(+) and CD24(-) subpopulations.....	50
3.4.1.1	Stability of PLX4720-induced CD24(+) cells in the absence and presence of oncogenic BRAF signaling .....	50
3.4.1.2	Assessment of the interconvertibility of CD24(+) and CD24(-) .....	51
3.4.2	<i>In vitro</i> assessment of the proliferative potential of PLX4720-induced CD24(+) cells ....	52
3.4.2.1	Cell cycle analysis by DNA quantitation of sorted cell populations.....	52
3.4.2.2	EdU incorporation assay .....	53
3.4.2.3	Colony formation assay of sorted cell populations .....	54
4	Discussion .....	56
4.1	Discovery approach: RNA-Seq to identify the acute transcriptional response to inhibition of oncogenic BRAF signaling.....	56
4.2	Validation of a stemness and EMT signature upon acute inhibition of oncogenic BRAF signaling.....	58
4.3	Single-cell resolved characterization of the functional relation of PLX4720-dependent SOX2 and CD24 induction .....	59
4.4	Functional characterization of the PLX4720-induced CD24(+) subpopulation.....	60
4.5	Concluding remarks .....	62
5	Materials and Methods .....	65
5.1	Materials.....	65
5.1.1	Cell culture .....	65
5.1.1.1	Reagents for standard cell culture .....	65
5.1.1.2	Reagents for cell transfections, virus production, and cell pool selection .....	65
5.1.1.3	Human melanoma cell lines (long-term cultures) .....	66
5.1.1.4	Primary human short-term melanoma cultures.....	66
5.1.1.5	Other cell lines .....	66
5.1.1.6	Small molecule inhibitors.....	66
5.1.2	Immunoblotting.....	67
5.1.2.1	Reagents.....	67
5.1.2.2	Buffers.....	68
5.1.2.3	Polyacrylamide gels.....	69
5.1.2.4	Primary antibodies .....	69
5.1.2.5	Secondary antibodies .....	69
5.1.3	RNA work and qRT-PCR.....	70
5.1.3.1	Kits .....	70

5.1.3.2	Other reagents and products .....	70
5.1.3.3	Primers.....	70
5.1.4	Flow cytometry.....	72
5.1.4.1	Reagents.....	72
5.1.4.2	Buffers .....	72
5.1.4.3	Antibodies .....	72
5.1.5	Proliferation assays .....	73
5.1.5.1	Reagents.....	73
5.1.5.2	Buffers .....	73
5.1.6	Cloning.....	73
5.1.6.1	Reagents.....	73
5.1.6.2	Buffers .....	74
5.1.6.3	Restriction enzymes .....	74
5.1.6.4	Other enzymes .....	74
5.1.6.5	Primers.....	74
5.1.6.6	Constructs .....	75
5.2	Methods .....	75
5.2.1	Cell culture .....	75
5.2.1.1	Maintenance cultures.....	75
5.2.1.2	Long-term storage .....	75
5.2.1.3	PLX4720 and AZD6244 treatment time courses .....	75
5.2.1.4	PLX4720 treatments for flow cytometry.....	76
5.2.1.5	Generation of stable pTRIPZ-SOX2 and pTRIPZ-empty cell pools .....	76
5.2.1.6	Doxycycline-dependent induction of SOX2 in pTRIPZ-SOX2 .....	76
5.2.2	Immunoblotting.....	76
5.2.2.1	Protein extraction .....	76
5.2.2.2	SDS-PAGE and immunoblotting .....	77
5.2.3	RNA-Seq.....	77
5.2.3.1	RNA preparation .....	77
5.2.3.2	RNA sequencing.....	77
5.2.3.3	Basic bioinformatic analysis of raw reads.....	78
5.2.3.4	Bioinformatic analysis to identify differentially expressed genes .....	78
5.2.3.5	Pathway enrichment analysis of DEGs .....	78
5.2.4	qRT-PCR.....	79
5.2.4.1	RNA isolation.....	79
5.2.4.2	Reverse transcription of RNA .....	79
5.2.4.3	qRT-PCR to assess gene expression .....	79
5.2.5	Flow cytometry.....	79
5.2.5.1	Direct staining of extracellular proteins .....	79
5.2.5.2	Direct staining of intracellular proteins.....	80
5.2.6	Proliferation assays .....	81
5.2.6.1	EdU incorporation assay .....	81
5.2.6.2	DNA profiles .....	81
5.2.6.3	Colony formation assay .....	81

5.2.7	Cloning .....	82
5.2.7.1	Restriction digests .....	82
5.2.7.2	Ligation reactions .....	82
5.2.7.3	Cloning of pTRIPZ-empty and pTRIPZ-SOX2 .....	82
5.2.7.4	Transformations .....	83
5.2.8	Statistical analysis .....	83
<b>6</b>	<b>References.....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>96</b>
7.1	Supplementary Figures.....	96
7.2	Curriculum Vitae .....	112