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Dorsalizing and neuralizing properties of *Xdsh*, a maternally expressed *Xenopus* homolog of *dishevelled*

Sergei Y. Sokol¹, John Klingensmith^{2,*}, Norbert Perrimon² and Keiji Itoh¹

¹Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics, Harvard Medical School, and Molecular Medicine Unit, Beth Israel Hospital, 330 Brookline Ave., Boston, MA 02215, USA

²Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Department of Genetics, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA

*Present address: Mount Sinai Hospital Research Institute, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1X5, Canada

SUMMARY

Signaling factors of the Wnt proto-oncogene family are implicated in dorsal axis formation during vertebrate development, but the molecular mechanism of this process is not known. Studies in *Drosophila* have indicated that the *dishevelled* gene product is required for *wingless* (Wnt1 homolog) signal transduction. We demonstrate that injection of mRNA encoding a *Xenopus* homolog of *dishevelled* (*Xdsh*) into prospective ventral mesodermal cells triggers a complete dorsal axis formation in *Xenopus* embryos. Lineage tracing experiments show that cells derived from the injected blastomere contribute to anterior

and dorsal structures of the induced axis. In contrast to its effect on mesoderm, overexpression of *Xdsh* mRNA in prospective ectodermal cells triggers anterior neural tissue differentiation. These studies suggest that Wnt signal transduction pathway is conserved between *Drosophila* and vertebrates and point to a role for maternal *Xdsh* product in dorsal axis formation and in neural induction.

Key words: *Xenopus*, Wnt, *dishevelled*, dorsal axis formation, neuralizing activity

INTRODUCTION

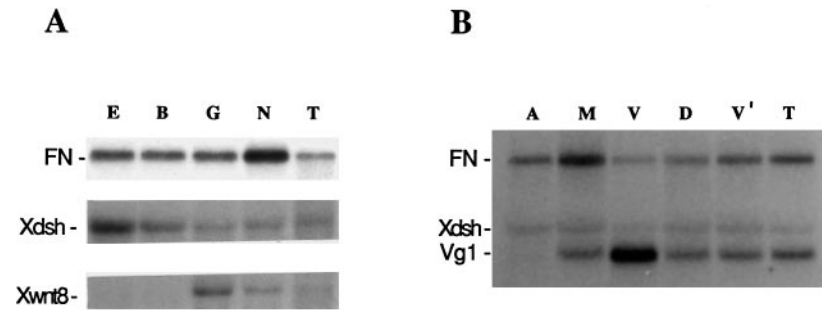
An amphibian egg is laid with a clear animal-vegetal polarity, but its dorsoventral axis is not specified. Dorsoventral differences are specified quite early in *Xenopus* development as a result of a cortico-cytoplasmic rotation that occurs soon after fertilization. During this microtubule-mediated displacement of internal egg cytoplasm relative to the cell cortex (Gerhart et al., 1989; Elinson and Rowning, 1988), dorsal cytoplasm acquires an ability to trigger dorsal development upon microinjection into a ventral blastomere (Fujisue et al., 1993; Holowacz and Elinson, 1993). Two models may be proposed to explain dorsoventral patterning of mesoderm. According to the 'permissive' model of dorsoventral patterning, the axis-inducing activity is mediated by maternally encoded factor(s), called dorsal determinants or modifiers, which cause a local change in marginal zone cell competence to mesoderm-inducing signals produced by vegetal pole cells (Sokol and Melton, 1991; Moon and Christian, 1992). As a result of this change, not only mesoderm is induced, but it becomes polarized (or regionalized) into future dorsal (notochord, muscle) and ventral (mesenchyme, kidney, blood) tissues. According to the 'instructive' model, multiple inducers or different levels of a single inducer directly specify formation of mesoderm with different dorsal or ventral character (Nieuwkoop, 1973; Dale and Slack, 1987b).

Whereas soluble peptide growth factors from the TGF β and FGF families are thought to play a role in mesoderm induction

(see Smith, 1993; Dawid, 1991, for reviews), two other classes of secreted polypeptides, Wnts, related to the int-1 (Wnt1) proto-oncogene product (Sokol et al., 1991; Smith and Harland, 1991), and noggin (Smith and Harland, 1992) have been shown to affect dorsoventral patterning of embryonic mesoderm. Although low levels of noggin mRNA are detected maternally (Smith and Harland, 1992), it is mainly expressed in the Spemann organizer region after the midblastula transition and the onset of zygotic transcription (Newport and Kirschner, 1982). Noggin has been shown to possess both neuralizing and dorsalizing activities (Smith et al., 1993; Lamb et al., 1993), suggesting that it mediates some of the Spemann organizer activities.

Different members of the Wnt family are expressed in specific regions of the embryos of various species and have been implicated in *Drosophila* segmentation, murine central nervous system development and in MMTV-induced mammary gland carcinogenesis (see Dickinson and McMahon, 1992; Nusse and Varmus, 1992, for reviews). Several Wnt products have been shown to induce dorsal axis formation in *Xenopus* embryos (Moon et al., 1993; Klein and Melton, 1994). Since these Wnts are not expressed at the right time to perform this function during normal development (Moon et al., 1993), they were proposed to mimic yet unknown Wnt product(s) and to affect the same signal transduction pathway that operates in the embryo. Interestingly, a maternal Wnt, *Xwnt11*, has been identified which is capable of induction of a partial dorsal axis (Ku and Melton, 1993).

Fig. 2. *Xdsh* transcripts are present maternally and are equally distributed in different regions of the early blastula. Total RNA isolated from embryos at different developmental stages or from embryonic explants was analyzed by Northern blotting with specific antisense RNA probes. (A) Expression of *Xdsh* during embryogenesis: E, fertilized eggs; B, stage 7 blastulae; G, stage 11 gastrulae; N, stage 15 neurulae and T, tailbud embryos. (B) Spatial distribution of the *Xdsh* transcripts in stage 7 blastulae. Explants were isolated from A, animal; M, marginal; V, vegetal; D, dorsal; V', ventral regions; T, RNA prepared from whole embryos. Two embryo equivalents of total RNA were loaded per each lane. FN, *Xwnt8* and *Vg1*-specific probes were used as controls. Fibronectin RNA (FN) is a control for loading. *Xwnt8* transcripts are known to appear only after the midblastula transition (Christian et al., 1991). *Vg1* RNA is a vegetally localized maternal mRNA (Rebagliati et al., 1985).



under low stringency conditions as described (Sambrook et al., 1989). A 3.3 kb insert, containing full length *Xdsh* cDNA, was subcloned into the *EcoRI* site of the pBluescript-SK vector (Stratagene), and both DNA strands were sequenced. Alignment of the deduced *Xdsh* amino acid sequence with the sequences of the *Drosophila* and mouse *dsh* proteins was carried out using the PILEUP program of the Computer Genetics Group (Madison, WI).

To overexpress the *Xdsh* product in embryos, the 3.3 kb *Xdsh* cDNA fragment was subcloned into the *EcoRI* site of the pSP64R1 vector, a modified version of pSP64T (Vize et al., 1991), which contains several convenient cloning sites and allows in vitro synthesis of efficiently translated mRNAs. A control out-of-frame $\Delta Xdsh$ construct was made by digesting the plasmid containing *Xdsh* cDNA with *ApaI*, followed by filling-in protruding ends with Klenow

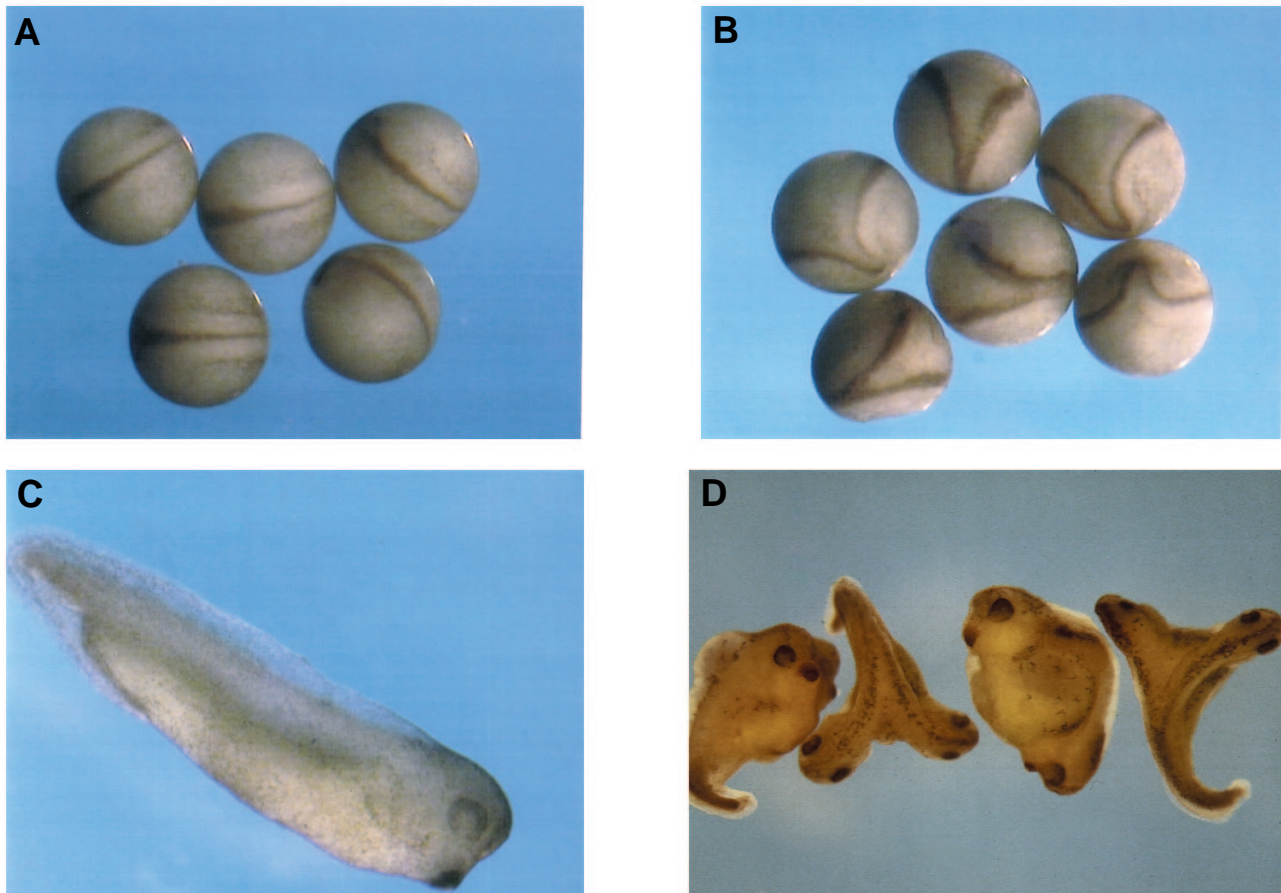


Fig. 3. The effect of *Xdsh* mRNA depends on the site of injection. A single prospective dorsal (A) or ventral (B,D) vegetal blastomere of cleavage-stage embryos (8-16 cells) was injected with 0.4 ng of *Xdsh* mRNA. Phenotypes of the injected neurulae (A,B) and of tadpoles at stages 40-42 (C,D) are presented. Axis duplications are clearly visible in embryos injected with *Xdsh* RNA in a ventral blastomere (B,D). Embryos, injected ventrally with 0.4 ng of a control $\Delta Xdsh$ mRNA (C), are indistinguishable from normal tadpoles or from the tadpoles, injected dorsally with *Xdsh* mRNA (as in A). Note that three embryos in D have completely duplicated body axes including most anterior and posterior structures, whereas in one embryo both dorsal axes oppose each other and posterior development is inhibited.

Table 1. Injected *Xdsh* mRNA triggers a second dorsal axis formation

mRNA injected	Total number of injected embryos	Partial axis duplications	Complete axis duplications	Other defects	No effect
<i>Xdsh</i>	78	28 (36%)	42 (54%)	6 (8%)	2 (2.8%)
$\Delta Xdsh$	62	0	0	7 (11%)	55 (89%)

Embryos were injected at the 4- to 8-cell stage into a single ventrovegetal blastomere with 1 ng of a mRNA and left to develop to stage 40. Partial axis duplication was scored positive when a second neural tube was visible. Complete axis duplication was scored positive when both cement glands and eyes were duplicated. Other defects included incomplete closure of the blastopore and anterior/posterior deficiencies in the primary axis. Data from three independent experiments are presented. Death rate was less than 5%.

enzyme and re-ligating the construct. A plasmid encoding β -galactosidase was a gift of R. Harland.

Capped synthetic RNAs were generated as described (Krieg and Melton, 1984) by *in vitro* transcription of different plasmids using SP6 RNA polymerase. Embryos, incubated in 3% Ficoll, 0.5 \times MMR were injected with 10 nl of RNA solution in distilled water at 8- to 16-cell stage into a single blastomere. After 1-2 hours of incubation, the medium was changed to 0.1 \times MMR with 50 μ g/ml of gentamicin for long-term culture. Death rate for the injected embryos was usually below 5%. The prospective dorsal and ventral sides were determined by pigmentation differences in the early embryo (Nieuwkoop and Faber, 1967). Prospective ventral blastomeres are more heavily pigmented than their dorsal counterparts. The accuracy of this determination was tested in each experiment by allowing a group of control embryos to develop to determine whether the pigmentation differences correctly predicted the position of dorsal blastopore lip. The usual error of such determinations was 5-7%.

Lineage tracing and histology

Cleavage-stage embryos (8- to 32-cell stages) were injected with 10 nl of a solution containing 0.2-0.4 ng of *Xdsh* mRNA and 0.2 ng of β -gal RNA in water. After two days of culturing in 0.1 \times MMR, embryos were fixed in MEMFA (0.1 M MOPS, pH 7.4, 2 mM EGTA, 1 mM MgSO₄ and 3.7% formaldehyde; Hemmati-Brivanlou and Harland, 1989) for 30 minutes. To detect β -gal activity, embryos were rinsed in PBS and incubated with 1 mg/ml X-Gal, 5 mM K₃Fe(CN)₆, 5 mM K₄Fe(CN)₆ \times 3H₂O, 2 mM MgCl₂ in PBS. The time of staining varied from 20 minutes to several hours at room temperature depending on the desired intensity.

For histology, embryos were fixed for an additional 2 hours with MEMFA, dehydrated through ethanol-xylene series, embedded in Paraplast, and 7 μ m sections were cut on a rotary microtome. Sections were stained with hematoxylin/eosin (Sigma) according to the manufacturer's protocol.

Explant culture, RNA isolation and northern blotting

Different regions of the blastula were isolated by manual dissection. Animal, marginal and vegetal explants were about one third of the size of the embryo, while dorsal and ventral explants were half of the size of the embryo. Animal-vegetal dissections were controlled by Vg1 RNA-specific probe. Dorsal-ventral dissections were controlled by culturing five to ten explants until the gastrula stages. During gastrulation, dorsal explants underwent vigorous convergent extension movements, whereas ventral explants healed into a ball of cells and did not elongate, confirming that the dissections were done properly (data not shown).

Animal caps (approximately 1/5 of the size of the embryo) were isolated from the injected embryos at the midblastula stage (stage 8) as previously described (Sokol et al., 1990) and were cultured in 0.5 \times MMR until the equivalent of stage 11 and stage 31 at room temperature. At that time, explants were homogenized in a buffer containing 50 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.5), 100 mM NaCl, 10 mM EDTA, 0.5% SDS and 200 μ g/ml proteinase K, and incubated for 1 hour at 37°C.

Homogenates were extracted twice with phenol/chloroform (1:1) and once with chloroform, and RNA was precipitated by ethanol.

RNA samples isolated by this protocol were electrophoresed in 1% denaturing formaldehyde agarose gels and transferred to GeneScreen nylon membrane with 20 \times SSPE (Sambrook et al., 1989). Antisense RNA probes were generated by *in vitro* transcription of plasmids containing *Xenopus* fibronectin (Krieg and Melton, 1985), Vg1 (Rebagliati et al., 1985), Xwnt8 (Christian et al., 1991), XA-1 (Sive et al., 1989), Otx2 (Lamb et al., 1993; Boncinelli, personal communication), NCAM (Kintner and Melton, 1987), muscle-specific actin (Dworkin-Rastl et al., 1986), Xbra, Gsc (see Smith, 1993) and EF1 α (Krieg et al., 1989) with SP6, T7 and T3 RNA polymerases.

Hybridization with different ³²P-labeled antisense RNA probes was carried out for 8-18 hours at 65°C in HB buffer, containing 50% formamide, 5 \times SSPE, 5% SDS and 125 μ g/ml of denatured salmon sperm DNA. After hybridization, membranes were washed at 65°C in 0.1 \times SSPE, 0.1% SDS until background counts dropped significantly and were exposed to Kodak X-OMAT AR film with an intensifying screen at -70°C. When necessary, membranes were stripped by boiling for 5 minutes in distilled water followed by hybridization with a different set of probes.

RESULTS

Identification of a *Xenopus* homolog of *dishevelled*

To isolate a *Xenopus* homolog of *dsh*, a 0.7 kb *Pst*I-*Xho*I fragment of the *Drosophila dsh* cDNA (Klingensmith et al., 1994) was used to probe a *Xenopus* oocyte cDNA λ gt10 library at low stringency conditions. This screen resulted in isolation of a phage containing a 2.5 kb insert, strongly hybridizing to the *Drosophila dsh* probe. Partial sequencing of the clone revealed significant similarity of its primary structure with the sequence of the deduced *Drosophila dsh* protein.

The 5'-terminal 0.6 kb fragment of the cloned partial length cDNA was used to rescreen the same cDNA library. As a result of this screen, a 3.3 kb *Xdsh* cDNA was isolated. The cDNA has been sequenced revealing an open reading frame of 2208 base pairs and encoding a protein of 736 amino acids (Fig. 1). The predicted overall amino acid sequence of the *Xdsh* protein is 46% identical to the sequence of the *Drosophila dsh* protein (Klingensmith et al., 1994; Theisen et al., 1994) and 60% identical to the product of the recently isolated mouse *dishevelled* cDNA (Sussman et al., 1994). The structural elements of *Xdsh* include two proline-rich stretches and the *discs large* homology region (DHR), a motif found in the product of the *Drosophila* tumor suppressor gene *discs large* and, in several proteins, associated with cytoskeleton and with tight junctions (Bryant et al., 1993; Anderson et al., 1993) (Fig. 1).

The first 20 amino acids of the deduced N terminus of the

Xdsh protein, starting with the first available methionine, are virtually identical (with two conservative amino acid changes) to the N terminus of mouse *dishevelled* product (Sussman et

al., 1994), suggesting that the first AUG codon is the true translation start. The A--AUGG sequence surrounding the AUG codon is a good match to Kozak consensus sequences for translation initiation. According to Northern analysis, the endogenous *Xdsh* mRNA is approximately 3.5 kb. Together, these data indicate that the cloned 3.3 kb *Xdsh* cDNA is likely to encode the full-length *Xdsh* protein.

Xdsh RNA is a ubiquitous maternal message

If *Xdsh* protein is necessary for Wnt signal transduction, it should be expressed in the blastomeres that can respond to Wnts and at the time when cells are competent to respond. Injected *Xwnt8* mRNA has an effect as early as at the 32- to 64-cell stage (Olson et al., 1991), and it seems to affect any ventral or lateral blastomere within the marginal zone (Sokol et al., 1991). Thus, *Xdsh* is expected to be present maternally.

Northern analysis was used to study the expression pattern of *Xdsh* mRNA during *Xenopus* embryonic development (Fig. 2). A single mRNA species (approximately 3.5 kb) was detected throughout different developmental stages, being most abundant in eggs.

To determine which regions of the embryo express *Xdsh* mRNA, blastulae (stage 7-7.5) were dissected manually into animal, marginal and vegetal or into dorsal and ventral parts. It is fairly easy to distinguish different embryonic regions based on the difference in pigmentation (Nieuwkoop and Faber, 1967). A probe specific to the vegetally localized *Vg1* RNA was used to control dissections along the animal-vegetal axis, while dissections along the dorsal-ventral axis were controlled by culturing five explants until the gastrula stages (see Materials and Methods). Total RNA from the dissected pieces was analyzed on Northern blots with different antisense RNA probes. While a control probe detected *Vg1* mRNA mainly in the vegetal explants, *Xdsh* mRNA seems equally distributed in both animal-vegetal and dorsal-ventral directions (Fig. 2B).

Microinjection of *Xdsh* mRNA leads to induction of a complete dorsal axis

To determine whether the *Xdsh* product is sufficient to mimic the ability of *Wnt1* mRNA to cause duplication of the body axis (McMahon and Moon, 1989), the full length *Xdsh* cDNA was subcloned into the pSP64R1 vector. In vitro synthesized *Xdsh* mRNA was microinjected into single ventral blastomeres of 8- to 16-cell *Xenopus* embryos. In several independent

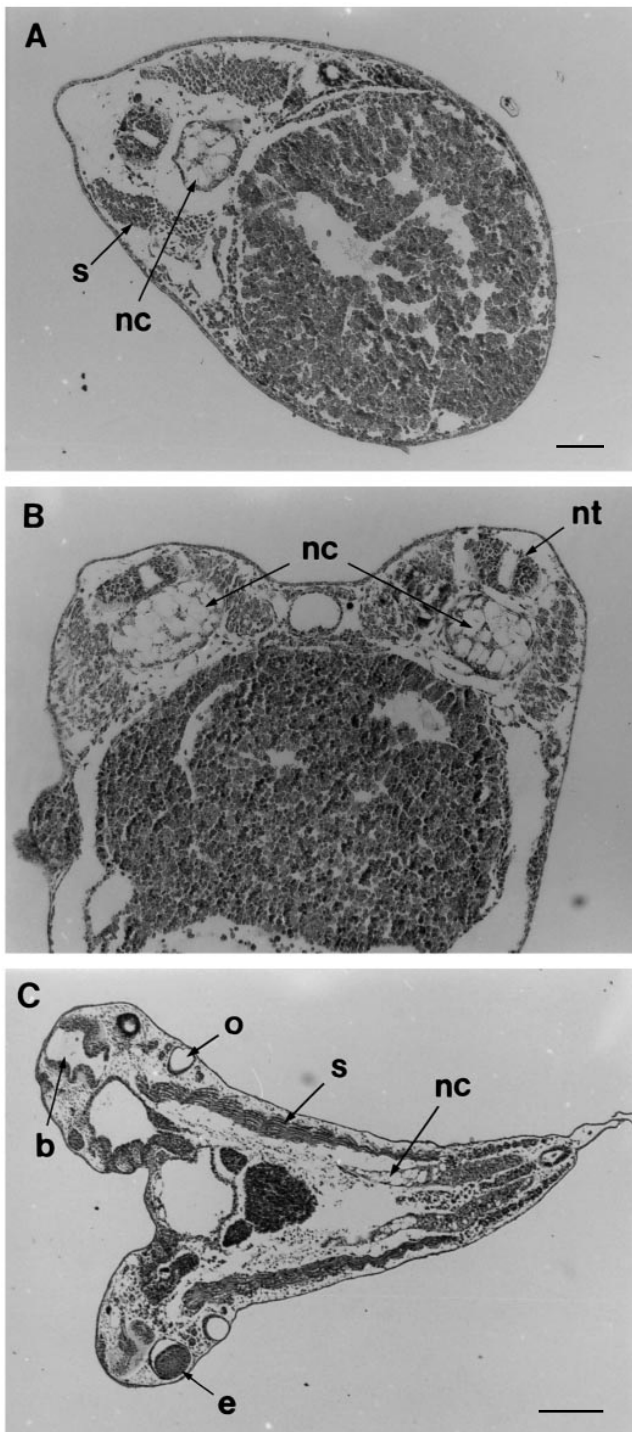


Fig. 4. Histological analysis of embryos injected with *Xdsh* mRNA. (A) Transverse section of an embryo injected ventrally with a control RNA encoding β -gal; (B,C) Embryos injected with *Xdsh* RNA; (B) transverse section and (C) horizontal section. Abbreviations are as follows: nt, neural tube; nc, notochord; s, somite; e, eye; o, otic vesicle, b, brain. The scale bar in A is 150 μ m (also applies to B). The scale bar in C represents 300 μ m.

Table 2. Injection of *Xdsh* mRNA induces dorsal axes in UV-treated embryos

RNA injected	Total number of injected embryos	Ventralized phenotype	Partial rescue of dorsal axis	Complete rescue
<i>Xdsh</i>	57	6 (11%)	23 (40%)	28 (49%)
β -gal	53	45 (90%)	7 (13%)	1 (2%)

Embryos were treated with UV light and injected at the 4- to 8-cell stage into a single blastomere with 0.4 ng of mRNA and left to develop to the equivalent of stages 40-45. Embryonic phenotypes were scored morphologically into three categories according to the DAI scale of Kao and Elinson (1988): ventralized phenotype (DAI 0-1), partial rescue (DAI 2-3) and complete rescue (DAI 4-5). Data from two independent experiments are presented.

experiments, *Xdsh* mRNA triggered the formation of a secondary dorsal axis (Fig. 3B,D) similar to the effects of Wnt1 or *Xwnt8* mRNAs (Sokol et al., 1991). *Xdsh* mRNA injections into dorsal blastomeres at the same stage did not alter normal development (Fig. 3A). Embryos injected with a control *Xdsh* mRNA containing a short deletion that disrupts the open reading frame, developed normally (Fig. 3C), suggesting that the intact *Xdsh* protein is necessary for the observed effect.

The induced secondary axes frequently (in more than half of the injected embryos) contained a full set of dorsal structures including the most anterior structures (eyes and cement glands) (Table 1). Histological examination of the injected embryos revealed two properly organized axes with notochords, neural tubes and somites (Fig. 4). Consistent with our morphological observations, *Xdsh* mRNA injections activated the expression of *goosecoid* mRNA, a dorsal region-specific marker (Cho et al., 1991), and reduced the level of *Xwnt8* mRNA, a ventrolateral marker (Christian et al., 1991), in stage 10.5 gastrulae (data not shown).

The effect of *Xdsh* mRNA was dose dependent: 0.5-1 ng of the mRNA was the optimal dose, 50-100 pg induced partial secondary axes, and injection of more than 2 ng resulted in a shortened tail and spinal cord with the head being almost normal in size. Thus, phenotypes of embryos injected with the high dose (2-4 ng) of *Xdsh* mRNA were somewhat different from the radially symmetric embryos, dorsalized by the high doses of *Xwnt8* mRNA (Christian et al., 1991) or by lithium chloride (Kao and Elinson, 1988). This result may be related to the inability of the *Xdsh* mRNA and protein to spread from one cell to another, in contrast to diffusion of lithium chloride or transmission of Wnt proteins.

These observations show that over-expression of *Xdsh* mRNA alone is sufficient to trigger dorsal axis formation, and that *Xdsh* may, thus, transduce an endogenous signal responsible for determination of dorsal mesoderm.

Injection of *Xdsh* mRNA rescues embryos ventralized by UV light

Although ventral injections of *Xdsh* mRNA suggest that its effect does not depend on the dorsally located endogenous Spemann organizer, these observations do not exclude the possibility that the organizer syner-

gizes with the injected mRNA. Since embryos treated with ultraviolet light (UV) are deficient in the Spemann organizer activity and fail to develop dorsal and anterior structures (Gerhart et al., 1989), they represent a useful system to study potential dorsal determinants. Several gene products including noggin, a chimeric BMP-Vg1 protein (Thomsen and Melton, 1993; Dale et al., 1993) and certain Wnt products (Moon et al., 1993) are known to restore normal development in embryos ventralized by UV light.

To test whether *Xdsh* is able to trigger dorsal development in the absence of the Spemann organizer, embryos were irradiated with UV light after fertilization and injected with in-

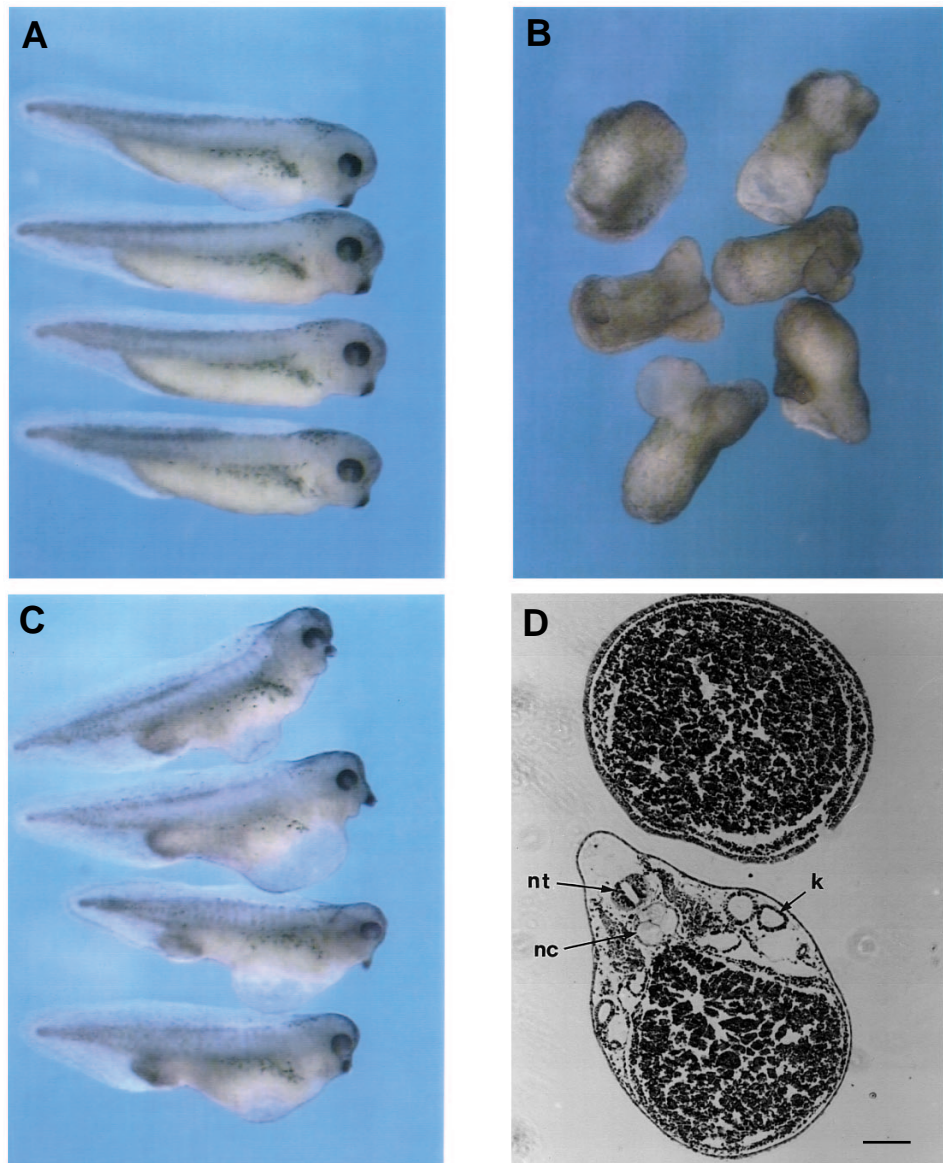


Fig. 5. *Xdsh* mRNA rescues dorsal development in axis-deficient UV-treated embryos. (A) Normal control embryos. (B) Embryos ventralized by UV treatment. (C) UV-treated embryos that were injected at the 8-cell stage in a vegetal blastomere with 0.4 ng of *Xdsh* mRNA. (D) Histological analysis of ventralized embryos (top) and embryos rescued by *Xdsh* mRNA injection (bottom). The scale bar in D represents 200 μ m. Abbreviations are the same as in Fig. 4, except k, kidney tubules. Note that, in C, the most anterior morphological structures including eyes and cement glands are rescued by *Xdsh* RNA.

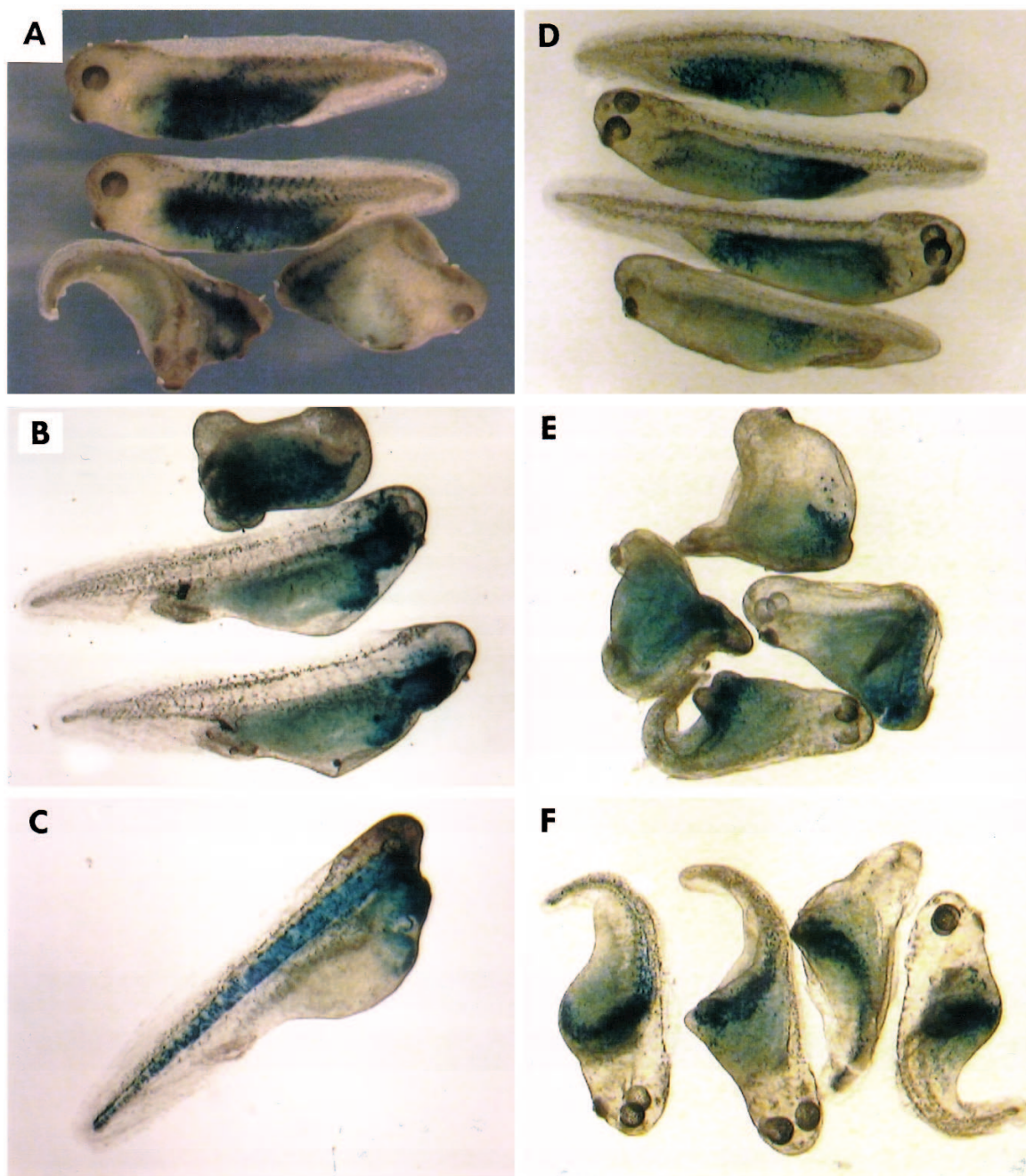


Fig. 6. Lineage tracing reveals the formation of dorsal and anterior structures by the progeny of a single blastomere injected with *Xdsh* mRNA. Cleavage-stage (8-32 cells) embryos were coinjected with 0.4 ng of *Xdsh* mRNA and 0.2 ng of β -gal RNA or with β -gal RNA alone. After 2 days of development embryos were fixed, and stained for β -gal activity. (A) Normal embryos were injected at the 8- to 16-cell stage into a ventrovegetal blastomere with β -gal RNA (two embryos on the top) or with β -gal and *Xdsh* mRNAs (bottom). (B,C) UV-treated embryos rescued by *Xdsh* RNA and coinjected with β -gal RNA. (B) Staining is mainly in the pharyngeal endoderm and head mesenchyme of the fully rescued embryos. A control embryo injected with β -gal RNA only is shown at the top. (C) In the partially rescued embryos (0.05-0.1 ng of *Xdsh* RNA injected), the staining is in the notochord and pharyngeal endoderm. (D-F) Lineage tracing at the 32-cell stage. Embryos were injected into D4 (tier 4) vegetal blastomere with β -gal RNA (D) or with β -gal and *Xdsh* mRNAs (E). (F) *Xdsh* and β -gal RNAs were microinjected into C4 (tier 3) subequatorial blastomere. Staining is mainly in the notochord and anterior mesoderm.

vitro synthesized *Xdsh* mRNA in a single vegetal blastomere of the 8- to 16-cell-stage embryos. While UV-treated embryos injected with water or with an unrelated RNA (β -gal RNA) did not have visible dorsal structures, in embryos that received *Xdsh* mRNA, the dorsal axis was rescued (Fig. 5; Table 2). In

four independent experiments, we consistently observed a complete rescue of axial development of the ventralized embryos from dorsoanterior index (DAI) of less than 1 to DAI 5 (Kao and Elinson, 1988).

Together, these findings demonstrate that the *Xdsh* mRNA

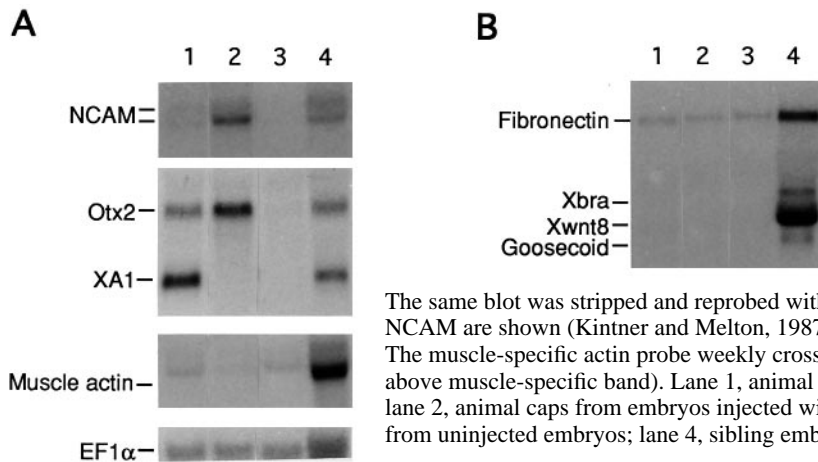


Fig. 7. Overexpression of *Xdsh* mRNA leads to neuralization of animal cap explants. Animal caps from embryos injected with 1 ng of *Xdsh* RNA were explanted from the injected embryos at stage 8 and cultured in isolation until the equivalent of stage 31 (A) or stage 11 (B). After culture, the explant RNA was extracted and analyzed by northern blotting using different ³²P-labeled antisense RNA probes. RNA from ten animal cap equivalents or from two embryos is loaded per lane.

The same blot was stripped and reprobbed with different probes. Two major specific transcripts of NCAM are shown (Kintner and Melton, 1987). EF1 α and fibronectin probes are controls for loading. The muscle-specific actin probe weakly cross-hybridizes with cytoskeletal actin RNAs (the two bands above muscle-specific band). Lane 1, animal caps from embryos injected with 1 ng of *Xdsh* mRNA; lane 2, animal caps from embryos injected with 0.12 ng of *noggin* mRNA; lane 3, control animal caps from uninjected embryos; lane 4, sibling embryos, stage 31 (A) or 11 (B).

can trigger dorsal axis formation both in normal embryos and in UV-treated embryos, deficient in the endogenous Spemann organizer.

Cells overexpressing *Xdsh* mRNA directly contribute to the most anterior and dorsal axial structures

To determine which tissues in the induced axes are formed by the progeny of blastomeres, injected with *Xdsh* mRNA, lineage tracing was carried out by coinjecting *Xdsh* mRNA and β -gal mRNA into a single ventrovegetal blastomere of 8- to 16-cell embryos (Dale and Slack, 1987a). When the injected embryos reached tadpole stages (stage 40-42), they were fixed and stained for β -gal activity. In embryos injected with β -gal RNA alone (total number of 28), staining was found in ventrolateral tissues (Fig. 6A), consistent with the normal fate of the injected cells (Moody, 1987; Dale and Slack, 1987a). In contrast, all embryos injected with β -gal and *Xdsh* mRNAs (32 out of 32) were stained in dorsal and anterior tissues, e. g. in notochord, head and branchial mesenchyme and in pharyngeal endoderm (Fig. 6A). Only one out of two axes in each embryo was stained. These findings suggest that *Xdsh* mRNA functions cell autonomously: cells that received *Xdsh* mRNA change their ventral fate and, instead, may form an ectopic organizing center.

Staining of anterior and dorsal structures was also observed in the rescue experiments, where β -gal RNA was coinjected with *Xdsh* RNA into embryos ventralized by UV irradiation (Fig. 6B,C). These results are similar to what was observed in studies with *Xwnt8* RNA injections (Sokol et al., 1991; Smith and Harland, 1991), in which the majority of injected blastomeres formed a Spemann organizer and only a small percentage of them contributed exclusively to endoderm, thus, mimicking the vegetal organizing center (Gimlich and Gerhart, 1984). Interestingly, there was a correlation between the degree of rescue and the fate of the injected cells. While in completely rescued embryos (0.4 ng *Xdsh* RNA per embryo; $n=37$), the injected cells were found exclusively in the head mesenchyme/pharyngeal endoderm region (Fig. 6B), in partially rescued embryos (0.05 ng of *Xdsh* mRNA per embryo; $n=28$), cells injected with *Xdsh* mRNA populated mostly notochord and anterior mesoderm (Fig. 6C).

To extend lineage tracing analysis to the 32-cell-stage embryos, *Xdsh* mRNA (0.5 ng) was injected into C4 or D4 blastomere (according to nomenclature of Dale and Slack,

1987a). Progeny of D4 ventral blastomere injected with the same dose of *Xdsh* mRNA contributed to head mesoderm and anterior endoderm (Fig. 6E), while injected C4-derived cells were found mainly in the axial mesoderm (Fig. 6F). Thus, fates of injected cells depend on the site of injection, which is consistent with the idea that *Xdsh* dorsalizes prospective ventral mesoderm creating a new Spemann organizer on the ventral side. Solely endodermal staining was not observed in any of the injected embryos ($n=35$), arguing that the effects of *Xdsh* mRNA on the organizer formation are cell autonomous. Although *Xdsh* mRNA clearly causes changes in cell fate and, therefore, affects cell behavior during gastrulation, we cannot exclude the possibility that *Xdsh* directly influences cell migration, as was proposed for goosecoid (Niehrs et al., 1993).

Neuralizing activity of *Xdsh* in presumptive ectodermal cells

Xdsh mRNA may influence dorsal axis formation either by inducing mesoderm de novo (similar to members of TGF β and FGF families) or by altering polarity of mesodermal cells, similar to the competence modifiers, such as some Wnts and *noggin*.

To discriminate between these two possibilities, differentiation of animal pole cells overexpressing *Xdsh* RNA was studied. At later stages, cultured animal caps formed prominent cement glands which are normally induced during neural induction (data not shown). Subsequent analysis revealed activation of XA-1, an anterior ectodermal marker (Sive et al., 1989), and Otx2, a forebrain-specific marker (E. Boncinelli, personal communication, also called OtxA, Lamb et al., 1993), but not muscle-specific actin transcripts (Mohun et al., 1984) (Fig. 7A). Whereas NCAM, a pan-neural marker (Kintner and Melton, 1987) is only marginally visible in Fig. 7, it was well induced in other experiments (data not shown). Northern analysis of mesoderm-specific gene expression at the mid-gastrula stage failed to detect significant amounts of mRNAs for *Xbra*, *Xwnt8* and *goosecoid*, early mesoderm-specific markers (Fig. 7B; Smith, 1993). These findings suggest that *Xdsh* mRNA can induce neural tissue formation directly, in the absence of mesoderm.

Taken together, these observations indicate that the *Xdsh* properties are very similar to the effects of *noggin*, a factor possessing both dorsalizing and neuralizing activities (Smith et al.,

1993; Lamb et al., 1993). Similar to the effects of Wnts and noggin (Sokol, 1993; Lamb et al., 1993), injection of high doses of *Xdsh* mRNA occasionally led to muscle actin activation, which may be a result of interaction with a small amount of mesoderm-inducing signals spreading into the animal pole region (Sokol, 1993). Taken together, our observations suggest that *Xdsh* may function during specification of dorsal-ventral polarity of mesoderm and during nervous system development.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we report cloning of a cDNA encoding *Xdsh*, a novel *Xenopus* gene product, homologous to *Drosophila dishevelled* (Klingensmith et al., 1994). It is shown that *Xdsh* mRNA is an abundant maternal transcript which is equally distributed in different regions of *Xenopus* blastulae. Small amounts of *Xdsh* mRNA are present throughout embryogenesis. We also demonstrate that *Xdsh* mRNA, encoding the full-length *Xdsh* product, induces a complete body axis when injected into normal or ventralized *Xenopus* embryos and causes neuralization when overexpressed in the prospective ectodermal cells.

Genetic analysis in *Drosophila* indicates that *dsh* is an essential component of the *wg* signal transduction system (Perrimon, 1994). Our results suggest that this signaling pathway is evolutionarily conserved and may be operating during vertebrate development. Since overexpression of *Xdsh* mRNA is sufficient to trigger dorsal axis formation in the apparent absence of an exogenous Wnt signal, *Xdsh* may be a limiting component of the signal transduction machinery. When *Xdsh* mRNA is supplied in excess to embryonic cells by microinjection, the mechanism controlling the *Xdsh* function in ventral blastomeres may be overloaded. Under these circumstances, *Xdsh* may be activated inappropriately, resulting in the conversion of ventral cells to dorsal fates.

How does *Xdsh* operate? The deduced *Xdsh* protein is similar to its *Drosophila* and mouse counterparts (Klingensmith et al., 1994; Sussman et al., 1994) and does not appear to contain a signal sequence for secretion or a transmembrane domain. A small region of amino acid similarity (DHR) has been found between all three *dsh* homologs and the *Drosophila* tumor suppressor *discs large* (Bryant et al., 1993). Interestingly, the same DHR motif is present in several other proteins, including the ZO1 and ZO2 proteins of tight junctions, the erythrocyte membrane protein p55, the phosphatase PTP-BAS and the protein from the brain synapses PSD95, which have little in common, except most of them may interact with tight junctions and/or with the cytoskeleton (Anderson et al., 1993; Maekawa et al., 1994). Moreover, some of these proteins have additional enzymatic activities (guanylate kinase, phosphatase). Thus, it is conceivable that DHR is involved in protein-protein interactions.

Since the *wingless* signaling pathway is thought to include *armadillo*, a fly homolog of β -catenin and plakoglobin (McCrea et al., 1991), and β -catenin is known to regulate cadherin function in cell adhesion, it is possible that Wnts and *Xdsh* act by regulating cell adhesion (Moon et al., 1993). Interestingly, both antibodies to β -catenin and β -catenin-specific antisense oligonucleotides were reported to affect *Xenopus* dorsal axis formation (McCrea et al., 1993; Heasman et al.,

1994), which is consistent with the idea that *Wg* signaling pathway described in *Drosophila* may be conserved in vertebrate development. Our data provide a reliable biological assay for *Xdsh* that should be useful in dissecting function of *Xdsh* at the molecular level.

Two classes of signaling factors influence formation of axial mesoderm. Mesoderm-inducing factors, such as TGF β - and FGF-related growth factors (Smith, 1993; Klein and Melton, 1994) directly induce dorsal mesoderm in animal caps. Dorsal modifiers, in contrast, such as several Wnts and noggin, do not induce mesoderm on their own, but synergize with the endogenous mesoderm inducers and change the character of mesoderm from ventral to dorsal (Christian et al., 1992; Sokol and Melton, 1992). Dorsal modifiers trigger mesoderm formation in the animal caps only when animal caps are isolated from the embryo after stage 9 (Sokol, 1993; Lamb et al., 1993). *Xdsh* does not induce mesoderm in blastula animal caps, but expression of muscle-specific actin is activated if animal caps injected with *Xdsh* are isolated at stage 10 (data not shown). Thus, axis-inducing activity of *Xdsh* is very similar to the modifying effects of Wnts or noggin. It is important to point out, that *Xdsh* transcripts are mostly maternal, whereas noggin expression peaks after mid-blastula transition in the Spemann organizer, and the known Wnts that are capable of inducing dorsal axis (Moon et al., 1993) are also expressed zygotically. Studies of interactions between different dorsal modifiers may lead to identification of molecular pathways of vertebrate dorsal axis determination.

Neuralization of ectodermal cells overexpressing *Xdsh* mRNA indicates that *Xdsh* may have a second important function connected with neural tissue formation. Dorsalizing and neuralizing activities of *Xdsh* are similar to those of noggin (Lamb et al., 1993). Experiments are in progress to establish potential connections between *Xdsh* and other neuralizing factors, including noggin, follistatin (Hemmati-Brivanlou et al., 1994), vertebrate hedgehog (Roelink et al., 1994; Echelard et al., 1993) and protein kinase C (Otte et al., 1988).

The requirement for *wingless* in *Drosophila* segmentation, in the imaginal discs and at the wing margin (Perrimon, 1994) suggests that both Wnt and *dsh* homologs may play multiple roles in vertebrate morphogenesis as well. Since several Wnts have been implicated in CNS development (Dickinson and McMahon, 1992; Nusse and Varmus, 1992), the neuralizing activity of *Xdsh* is consistent with *Xdsh* playing a role in the transmission of Wnt signals during CNS patterning. Alternatively, the maternal *Xdsh* protein could be directly activated by the cortical rotation on the prospective dorsal side of the embryo and may participate in modification of the cell responses both to mesoderm induction and to neural induction. Experiments aimed at inactivation of the *Xdsh* function should clarify its role in Wnt signal transduction and in embryogenesis.

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