Neoplasma 2026; 73(2): 103–109

doi:10.4149/neo_2026_250623N278

Cell surface topography differs in the human "glia-like" and glioma cultures

Ivana SIVAKOVA[1], Maria LORENCOVA[2], Anna PERZELOVA[1], Paulina GALFIOVA[2], Stefan POLAK[1,2]

[1]*Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Medicine, Comenius University in Bratislava, Bratislava, Slovakia;* [2]*Center of Electron-microscopic Laboratory Methods, Institute of Histology and Embryology, Faculty of Medicine, Comenius University in Bratislava, Bratislava, Slovakia*

**Correspondence: galfiova1@uniba.sk*

Received June 23, 2025 / Accepted January 19, 2026

Glioblastoma multiforme is the most malignant and incurable primary brain tumor. Infiltrative growth of gliomas into surrounding brain tissue may cause the presence of normal cells in glioma cultures. The aim of this study is to develop a simple, rapid method for detecting normal cells in short-term glioma cultures, to be applied primarily to personalized glioma treatment. Cell lines with permanent cell growth consist solely of cancer cells. Here, we examined two glioblastoma cell lines (8-MG-BA and 170-MG-BA), one brain metastatic carcinoma cell line (135-BCA), five short-term glioblastomas, and five human "glia-like" cultures using scanning electron microscopy (SEM), standard phase contrast microscopy, and GFAP immunofluorescence. All cells in glioblastoma and carcinoma cell lines were covered with microvilli of varying density, 4/5 of short-term glioblastoma cultures contained 1-3% cells with sparse microvilli, and one culture (139-GBM) showed microvilli in 15-20% of the cells and a higher percentage of GFAP-positive cells. A rare occurrence (less than 1%) of cells bearing microvilli was observed in all "glia-like" cultures. Using SEM, we observed similar cells with microvilli in both glioblastoma cell lines, but in the 135-BCA line, the microvilli were significantly shorter. Microvilli rarely occurred on normal "glia-like" cells. Based on this observation, we conclude that our 4/5 of short-term glioblastoma cultures contain predominantly normal "glia-like" cells. SEM could be a valuable method for distinguishing normal and tumor cells in short-term glioblastoma cultures, which have similar morphologies at light microscopy and immunophenotypes. We conclude that microvilli are characteristic of a specific tumor cell surface topography compared to "glia-like" cells.

Key words: glioblastoma; "glia-like" cells; SEM; microvilli

Gliomas are primary CNS tumors arising from glial cells. Glioblastoma multiforme is the most malignant and invasive glioma with a lethal prognosis. Glioma resistance to treatment is attributed to inter- and intra-tumoral heterogeneity [1, 2]. The heterogeneity of gliomas in the expression of intermediate filaments, which are cell-type-specific cytoskeletal proteins, is notable. Glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) is considered to be a specific marker for cells of astroglial origin [3]. Most permanent glioblastoma cell lines are negatively stained for GFAP or lose GFAP expression after serial passages [4, 5]. Human cultured "glia-like" cells do not express GFAP [6–8]. Cytokeratins (CK), specific for normal and neoplastic epithelial cells, were found in glioma tissue [9]. Recently, we described a subpopulation of CK-positive cells in glioma cell lines as well as in human "glia-like" cells [5, 10, 11]. Nestin is a protein of intermediate filament originally identified as a marker for neuroepithelial precursor cells [12]. However, nestin is also expressed in a variety of neoplasms, including brain tumors [13]. Previously, we detected nestin-positive subpopulations in "glia-like" cultures as well as in glioblastoma cell lines [5, 14]. Initially, vimentin intermediate filament was described as specific to mesenchymal cells. However, vimentin was also present in GFAP-positive astrocytes, in all "glia-like" cells and glioblastoma cell lines [5, 8, 14]. Although intermediate filaments are often used as markers, they have limited use in identifying cell types under culture conditions.

We established and characterized four glioblastoma cell lines: 8-MG-BA, 42-MG-BA, 170-MG-BA, and 538-MG-BA [5, 15], and one metastatic brain cell line from a large lung carcinoma – 135-BCA [16]. Glioblastoma cell lines showed intertumoral and intratumoral heterogeneity. Subpopulation of GFAP-positive cells was present in 8-MG-BA and 42-MG-BA, while in 170-MG-BA and 538-MG-BA, it was not observed [5, 15]. However, the 135-BCA carcinoma cell line maintained specific CK expression throughout the entire period of culturing.

Noteworthy is the 170-MG-BA cell line, which shows amplification of the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) gene, the most common genetic alteration in gliomas, which is the target of current therapeutic strategies [17, 18]. EGFR amplification is unstable in common glioma cell lines. However, 170-MG-BA is apparently the first conventional glioma cell line with a stable high level of EGFR expression. This was confirmed by combined cytogenetic, genomic, and transcriptional analyses [5].

Poor treatment outcomes in glioblastoma require a deeper understanding of glioma biology. New therapeutic approaches are often investigated in glioma cell lines that have critical disadvantages: 1) cell lines cross-contamination (CLCC) [19–22]; 2) cryptic contamination with mycoplasma with the influence on cell growth [23]; 3) glioblastoma short-term cultures which may contain normal human "glia-like" cells [24]; 4) poor knowledge of glioma cells growing under different cultures conditions.

Optimization of the available cell models requires more comparative studies on glial and glioma cells. Surface morphology obtained from scanning electron microscopy (SEM) often exceeds the structural outcome of the light microscope, which is standardly used for cell culture evaluation. The identification of cell surface structures opens up several morphological options: microvilli, lamellipodia, filopodia, microspikes, plasma membrane blebs, or ruffles [25, 26]. Cancer cells may exhibit increased numbers of all of the above cellular structures that play a key role in cancer cell migration, invasion, and metastasis [27–29]. "Microvillus" is a unique term for the cytoplasmic protrusion on the apical surface of most epithelial cells. Microvilli are supported by actin filaments that are arranged into bundles. The average microvillus is about 1 μm long and 0.1 μm wide [30]. The small intestine is the primary site of microvilli. They could also be found in the respiratory, reproductive, and other systems. In the brain, they are found on ependymal cells and on the dendrites of sensory neurons. Microvilli appear on the surface of various tumor cells [31], including human glioma cell lines [32, 33].

The surface structures of glioma cells can be targeted for innovative therapeutic approaches. In this study, we observed detailed imaging of cell surface structures in the glioblastoma cell lines (8-MG-BA and 170-MG-BA), short-term cultures from glioblastoma and normal adult brain tissue.

Table 1. Clinical data of patients with diagnosed glioblastoma multiforme (GBM).

Cultures	Age	Sex	DB
126-GBM	35	M	1994
139-GBM	68	M	1994
159-GBM	59	F	1995
388-GBM	47	F	1999
503-GBM	49	F	2001

Abbreviation: DB-date of biopsy

Table 2. Clinical data of patients with non-tumoral diagnoses.

Cultures	Age	Sex	Diagnosis	DB
124-NB	45	M	Contusio	1994
130-NB	64	F	Stroke	1994
208-NB	60	M	Contusio	1996
242-NB	48	M	Aneurysm	1996
444-NB	48	M	A-V malf	2000

Abbreviations: DB-date of biopsy, NB-normal brain, A-V malf- arterial-venous malformation

Materials and methods

Biopsy samples. Different brain biopsy samples were kindly provided by the Department of Neurosurgery, Derer's Hospital, Bratislava. They were collected between 1993 to 2011. Experiments with human brain biopsies were conducted in accordance with Slovak laws 272/1994, 76/2004, and were approved by the Ethical Committee of UNB Bratislava. For this study, we selected brain biopsies from patients undergoing neurosurgical intervention for glioblastoma multiforme (n=5) and non-tumoral diagnoses (n=5). The samples were obtained from the frontal, temporal, or occipital lobes. Clinical data of patients are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Tissue cultures. Tissue cultures were prepared by an explant method**.** Biopsy brain samples were cut into small pieces and seeded in uncoated plastic dishes (25 cm^2). Culture medium consisted of MEM (M0643, Sigma) Minimum Essential Medium Eagle with Earle's salts, L-glutamine, non-essential amino acids, and 10% fetal calf serum (Sigma). Cells in early passages were cryopreserved in liquid nitrogen. For this study, we recultured glioblastoma 8-MG-BA and 170-MG-BA cell lines, metastatic brain carcinoma 135-BCA cell line, 5 glioblastoma tissue cultures, and 5 normal adult human brain cultures. Passaging was performed using 0.2% EDTA and 0.25% trypsin. All cell lines, as well as short-term cultures, were cultured and passaged under the same culture conditions.

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM). Cells used for SEM were grown under the same conditions on uncoated glass coverslips (diameter 12.5 mm). Cell cultures adhered to the coverslips in culture medium were gently washed with 3% glutaraldehyde buffered solution fixative for 30 min at room temperature. Afterwards, samples were rinsed three times in phosphate buffer solution and postfixed in osmium tetroxide 1% solution for 1 h at 4 °C. After the rinse in demineralized water, samples were dehydrated through a graded ethanol series to 100% ethanol, followed by critical point drying of liquid CO_2. Finally, they were mounted on aluminium specimen stubs with carbon adhesive tapes, sputter-coated with a 5 nm layer of gold/palladium, and evaluated with a scanning electron microscope ZEISS type EVO LS 15 in the Center of Electron-Microscopic Laboratory Methods, at

the Institute of Histology and Embryology, Medical Faculty, Comenius University in Bratislava.

Immunofluorescence staining. Cells grown on coverslips were rinsed with PBS, fixed in methanol-acetone (1:1) solution for 15 min at –15 °C, and used for indirect immunofluorescence staining. For GFAP examination, we used the following antibodies: against GFAP, clone GF-01, 1:100 (Exbio, Prague), and polyclonal sera to GFAP, 1:100 (Dako). Secondary fluorescein-conjugated antibodies were purchased from Sigma and Sevapharma (Prague, Czech Republic). Cells for indirect immunofluorescence were incubated for 1 h with primary and 30 min with secondary antibodies. Nuclei were stained with Hoechst 33258 fluorochrome (5 μg/ml in PBS, Sigma) for 1 min. To determine the percentage of immunoreactive cells, 30 fields were enumerated at 200× magnification, equally distributed over the coverslips fixed at different DIV and passage numbers. Fluorescence microscopy was performed using an Olympus BX51 microscope (Olympus, Germany).

Results

Morphology at the level of phase-contrast microscopy. Morphological features of living cells were examined with inverse phase-contrast microscopy (Olympus IMT-2). Glioblastoma 170-MG-BA cell line in 110 to 120 passages consisted mainly of flat and spindle-shaped cells (Figure 1A). Glioblastoma 8-MG-BA cell line in 330 to 335 passages was predominantly flat in shape (Figure 2A). Metastatic brain carcinoma 135-BCA cells in passages 50 to 53 were mostly epitheloid in shape and grew in clusters (Figure 3A). Short-term cultures obtained from glioblastoma multiforme (Figures 4A, 4B) and cultures from normal brain tissue (Figure 5A) contained similar cell morphologies between passages 4 to 8, when we did not observe astroglial cells with long and thin processes. All cultures consisted of flat, spindle-shaped, and intermediate cell morphologies. Cell surface protrusions could not be identified regarding the resolving power limits of the phase-contrast microscopes.

SEM: **Glioblastoma 170-MG-BA cell line.** Morphological properties of the 170-MG-BA cell line are demonstrated at 200× magnification (Figure 1B). Cells displayed flat or spindle shape and formed a confluent monolayer. Detailed observation of the cellular surface is shown at higher magnifications, overcoming the limitations of light microscopy. Using a SEM, considering the output, only the topography, size, and density of surface protrusion could be evaluated. The majority of cells possessed

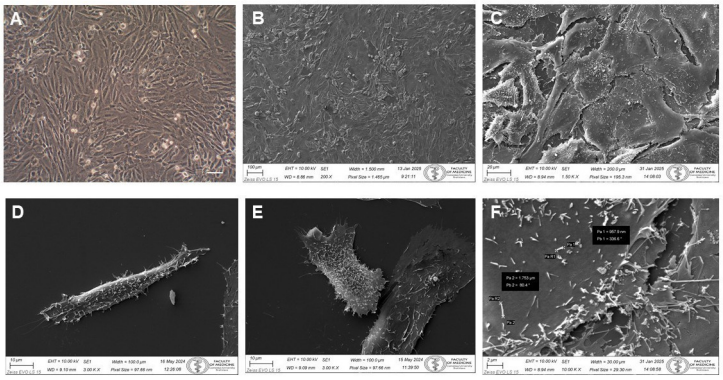

Figure 1. Morphological properties of 170-MG-BA glioblastoma cell line. Phase-contrast microscopy (A), and SEM topography (B-F). Living cells at magnification ×100, scale bar 100 μm (A), and morphology of cell line at magnification ×200 (B). Cells with microvilli: flat cells (C, magnification ×1,500), spindle-shaped cell (D, magnification ×3,000), different density of microvilli (E, magnification ×3,000), microvilli lengths (F, magnification ×10,000).

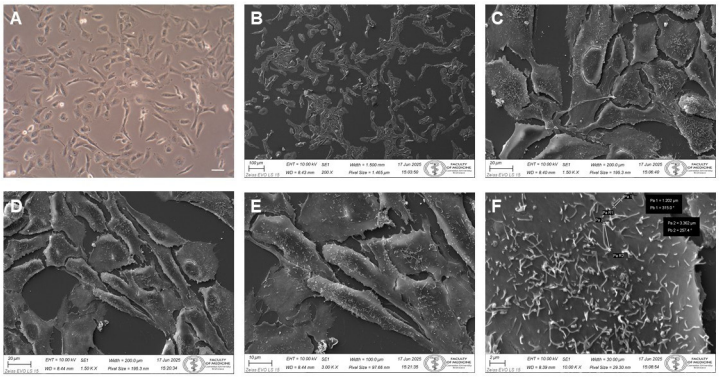

Figure 2. Morphological properties of 8-MG-BA glioblastoma cell line. Phase-contrast microscopy (A) and SEM topography (B-F). Living cells at magnification ×100, scale bar 100 μm (A). Morphology of cell line at magnification ×200 (B). Cells rich in microvilli, rare occurrence of cells with sparse microvilli (C, D, magnification ×1,500), cells with intensive microvilli density (E, magnification ×3,000), microvilli length (F, magnification ×10,000).

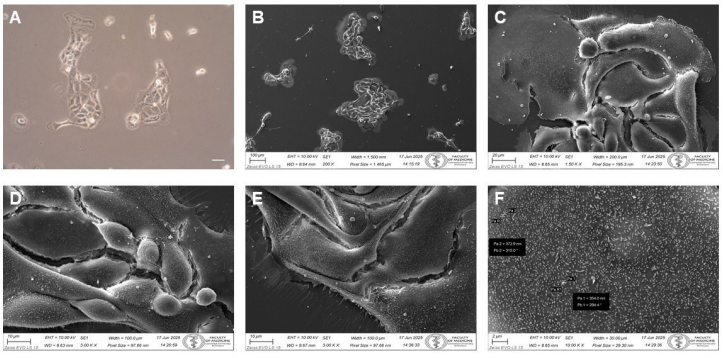

Figure 3. Morphological properties of 135-BCA metastatic brain carcinoma cell line. Phase-contrast microscopy (A) and SEM topography (B-F). Living cells, at magnification ×100, scale bar 100 μm (A). Morphology of cell line at magnification ×200 (B): clusters of variable-shaped cells (flat, spindle, round). Cells rich in very short microvilli (C magnification ×1,500), cells with intense microvilli density (D, E, magnification ×3,000), microvilli lengths (F, magnification ×10,000).

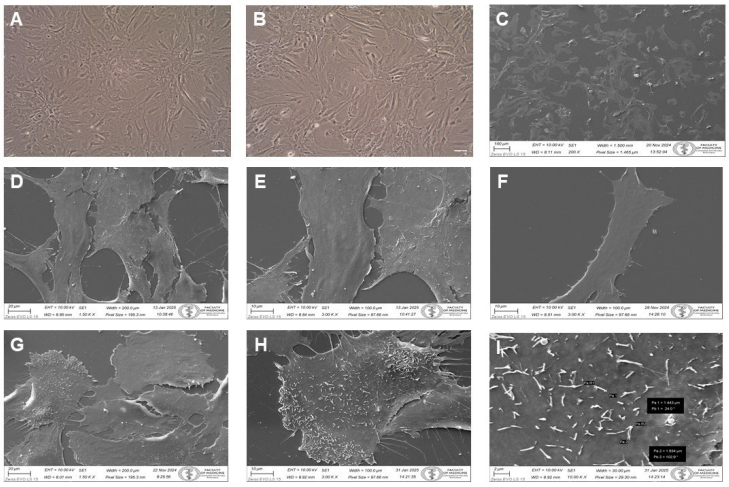

Figure 4. Morphological properties of short-term glioblastoma cultures. Phase-contrast microscopy (A, B) and SEM topography (C-I). Living cells in 126-GBM culture (A) and 139-GBM culture (B), at magnification ×100, scale bar 100 μm. Morphology of 139-GBM culture at magnification ×200 (C). 159-GBM culture: microvilli-free cells, rare appearance of cells with sparse microvilli (D magnification ×1,500) (E magnification ×3,000), 126-GBM culture: cell without microvilli (F, magnification ×3,000), 139-GBM culture: cells with and without microvilli (G, magnification ×1,500) (H, magnification ×3,000), microvilli lengths (I, magnification ×10,000).

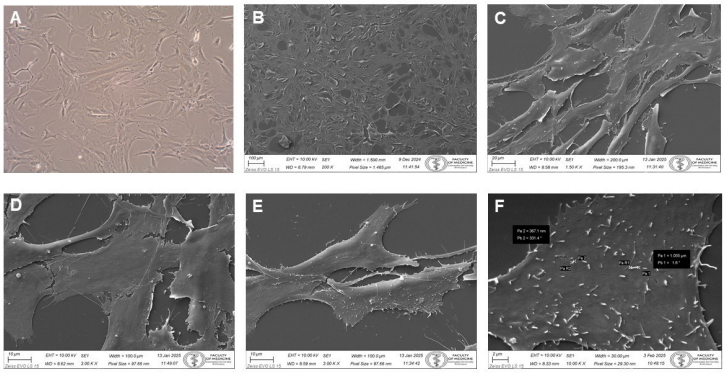

Figure 5. Morphological properties of short-term adult human brain cultures. Phase-contrast microscopy (A), and SEM topography (B-F). Living cells in 130-NB culture, at magnification ×100, scale bar 100 μm (A), cell morphology in 130-NB culture at magnification ×200 (B). 130-NB culture: microvilli-free cells (C, magnification ×1,500) (D, magnification ×3,000), rare appearance of cells with sparse microvilli (E, magnification ×3,000), and microvilli lengths (F, magnification ×10,000).

numerous microvilli, which were present on flat (Figure 1C) or spindle-shaped cells (Figure 1D). Microvilli occurred at different densities on cells regardless of the cell shape (Figure 1E). They were present on all cells; 10 to 15% of cells showed sparse microvilli. Microvilli in the 170 MG-BA cell line were 1–2 μm long in average and the thickness range was from 130–150 nm in diameter (Figure 1F). The size reduction had to be considered, due to the sample procedure including both the dehydration with ethanol series and critical point drying [34, 35].

SEM: Glioblastoma 8-MG-BA cell line. Morphological properties of the 8-MG-BA cell line are demonstrated at 200× magnification (Figure 2B). Cells displayed mainly flat (epitheloid) shape (Figures 2C, 2D), grew in a monolayer. Detailed observation of the cellular surface is shown at higher magnifications, indicating that all cells possessed microvilli (Figures 2C–2E) with different sizes and densities. The measurement of microvilli is demonstrated at 10,000× (Figure 2F). Microvilli in the 8 MG-BA cell line were 1–3.5 μm long in average and the thickness range was from 130–150 nm in diameter.

SEM: Metastatic brain carcinoma 135-BCA cell line. Morphological properties of the 135-BCA cell line are demonstrated at 200× magnification (Figure 3B). Cells showed great variability in shape, being epitheloid, spindle-shaped, or round, growing in clusters (Figures 3B–3D). Detailed observation of the cell surface is shown at higher magnifications, referring to the fact that all cells had very short microvilli of varying density (Figures 3C–3E). The measurement of microvilli is demonstrated at 10,000× (Figure 3F). Microvilli in the 135-BCA cell line had an average length of 0.3–1 μm, and an average thickness range was from 130–150 nm in diameter.

SEM: Short-term cultures from glioblastoma multiforme. The basic morphological properties of short-term glioblastoma cultures are demonstrated at 200× magnification (Figure 4C). The cells were predominantly flat in shape. We examined 5 cultures, 4 of which showed a similar number of microvilli-bearing cells; scanty microvilli were present in 1 to 3% of all cells (Figure 4E). The remaining cells showed a morphology without microvilli (Figures 4D, 4F). One culture (139-GBM) contained a higher number of microvilli-bearing cells, approximately 15 to 20% of all cells (Figures 4G, 4H). The length of glioblastoma cell microvilli ranged from 1.5 to 4.5 μm in some places. However, the average length of microvilli was approximately 2 μm. Microvilli showed a similar thickness, 130–150 nm on average, compared to microvilli of the glioblastoma cell line (Figure 4I).

SEM: Short-term cultures from normal brain tissue. The basic morphological properties of short-term normal brain cultures are demonstrated at 200× magnification (Figure 5B). Flat cells predominated over spindle-shaped ones. Higher magnifications were used for the detection of microvilli. All cultures contained predominantly cells without microvilli (Figures 5C, 5D), rarely (less than 1%), cells with sparse microvilli were found (Figure 5E), ranging in length from 0.2–1.8 μm and about 120 nm in diameter in thickness (Figure 5F). Microvilli

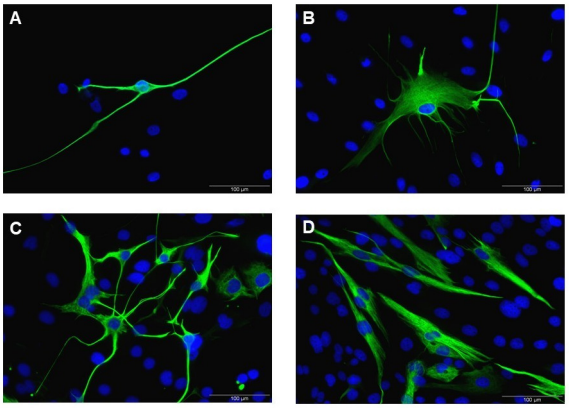

Figure 6. Indirect immunofluorescence for GFAP. Positively stained cells at passage number 2 in 130-NB cultures (A, B); all GFAP-positive cells disappeared after passage number 3. GFAP+ cells in 126-GBM short-term cultures at passage number 4 (C, D) disappear with passaging until passage number 15. Nuclei were stained with Hoechst.

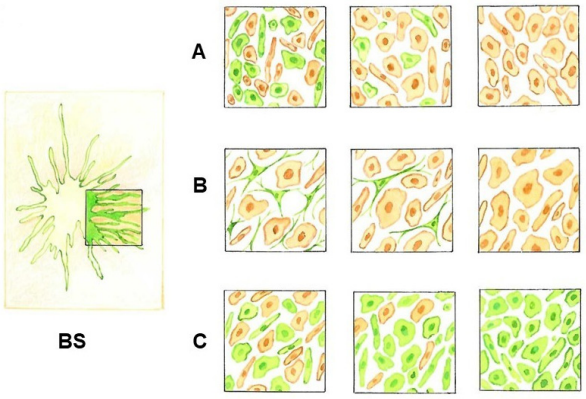

Figure 7. Schematic representation of infiltrative growth of glioblastoma. Biopsy sample (BS), glioblastoma cells are shown in green and "glia-like" cells in orange. A) Culture with a low number of glioblastoma cells, overgrowth of "glia-like" cells. B) Culture with GFAP-positive glioblastoma cells, overgrowth of "glia-like" cells. C) Culture with a higher number of glioblastoma cells, overgrowth of glioblastoma cells.

of normal cells from brain tissue cultures were less frequent and the shortest of all cell cultures.

Immunofluorescence. The results of indirect immunofluorescence staining for GFAP are shown in Figure 6. GFAP-positive cells in all five cultures of normal human brain were present in a low percentage (0.1%). They were mainly long and thin processes-bearing astrocytes or large flat cells (Figures 6A, 6B). All GFAP-positive cells disappeared after passage number 3. In glioblastoma short-term cultures, GFAP-positive cells occurred in 1/5 cultures. Positive cells in 139-GBM reached about 50% of cells at passage number 4. They showed mainly flat or spindle-shaped morphologies; only a small proportion of cells had thin and longer processes (Figures 6C, 6D). The percentage of GFAP-positive cells decreases markedly with passaging until they eventually disappear at passage number 15.

Infiltrative growth of gliomas. Biopsy samples may consist of varying amounts of normal brain tissue infiltrated with glioma cells. Under culture conditions, it is not possible to distinguish normal cells from glioma cells if they have similar morphology and immunophenotype. The different ratio of normal cells and glioma cells in culture may reflect subsequent passaging of the culture, in which we observed three modifications. A) Normal cells overgrew the glioma cells and stopped cell growth between passages 12–15. B) GFAP-positive glioma cells made up to 50% of the cells in the early stage. These cells disappeared during passaging, and the remaining flat cells stopped growing. C) A higher number of GFAP-negative glioma cells overgrew normal cells and gave rise to a glioblastoma cell line with continuous cell growth. The numbers of cells with microvilli in cell lines and short-term cultures are shown schematically in Figure 8, in the form of a graphic visualization of the cell counts.

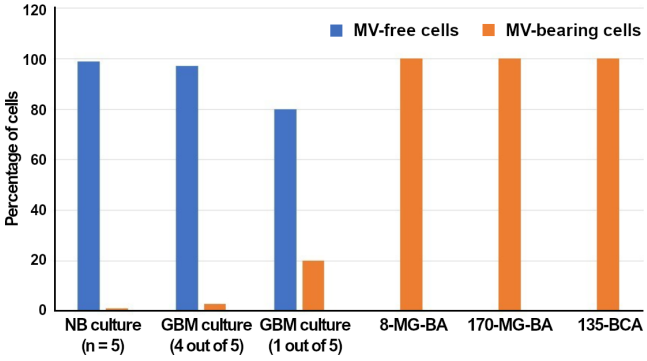

Figure 8. Graphic visualization of the percentage of microvilli-free cells and microvilli-bearing cells evaluated by SEM topography. Cells that do not extend microvilli on their surface, referred to as microvilli-free, are shown in the blue diagram, and cells that have microvilli on their surface, referred to as microvilli-bearing, are shown in the orange diagram. Short-term cultures of "glia-like" cells have the prevalence of microvilli-free cells; the short-term cultures from glioblastoma (GBM), too. Glioblastoma cell lines 170-MG-BA, 8-MG-BA, and the brain metastatic carcinoma 135-BCA cell line have microvilli-bearing cells only.

Discussion

We have recently demonstrated a comparative analysis of adult human "glia-like" cells and glioblastoma short-term cultures. Immunostaining, growth, and morphological characteristics were similar in both cultures [24]. GFAP-positive cells are rare or absent in adult human cultures, often referred to as "glia-like" cells [6, 7]. These non-passaged primary cultures contain low numbers of morphologically and immunocytochemically distinct glial cell types: 2–5% microglial cells, 0.1% GFAP-positive astrocytes, less than 0.01% oligodendrocytes, and 95–98% flat or spindle-shaped "glia-like" cells positively stained for vimentin and fibronectin

[8, 14]. However, all of these glial cell types rapidly disappear with repeated passaging. Some authors consider flat GFAP-negative "glia-like" cells to be of non-glial origin [7, 36]. However, we have previously found that GFAP-negative cells at the beginning of culture become GFAP-positive during terminal passages. These findings provide evidence for a glial origin of "glia-like" cells [37, 38].

In this study, we attempted to distinguish between normal and tumor cells in short-term cultures using the SEM method. Cultures prepared from glioblastoma multiforme biopsy specimens and brain tissue biopsies from patients with a non-tumor diagnosis were examined over 4 to 8 passages. For comparative study, we used three cancer cell lines: two established from glioblastoma (8-MG-BA and 170-MG-BA) and one brain metastatic carcinoma – 135-BCA. Unexpectedly, our SEM observations revealed microvilli in all cells in all cancer cell lines. In contrast, a rare occurrence of microvilli-bearing cells was found in all normal "glia-like" and in 4/5 short-term glioblastoma cultures. Only one culture (139-GBM) showed a higher percentage of cells covered with microvilli.

Our immunofluorescence staining with anti-GFAP antibodies revealed a higher percentage of GFAP-positive cells in only one short-term glioblastoma culture (139-GBM). All other normal and glioblastoma cultures were negatively stained for GFAP. Remarkably, the short-term glioblastoma culture with a higher percentage of microvilli-bearing cells contained an even higher percentage of cells positively stained for GFAP. Similarly, we recently published that in the 170-MG-BA glioblastoma cell line, GFAP-positive cells comprised 50–70% in the early passages, but their number gradually decreased and completely disappeared after the 20th passage [5]. GFAP immunostaining only indicates the heterogeneity of gliomas. A high percentage of GFAP-positive cells in culture is only one sign of malignancy, but it is not useful to distinguish "glia-like" cells in glioblastoma cultures.

Other studies on the surface topography, investigated on human and rat glioma cell lines, showed numerous microvilli and filopodia. As long filopodia of glioma cells they consider microvilli at the periphery of the cells at the time of air drying. They concluded that microvilli are composed of microfilaments due to the depolymerisation of microfilaments using cytochalasin B. After this treatment, microvilli collapsed, and the surface of these cells smoothened out [33].

In conclusion, the presence of normal cells in glioblastoma cultures may be due to infiltrative growth of glioma into surrounding brain tissue; short-term cultures of glioblastoma may contain normal "glial-like" cells. In this study, we observed a predominant localization of microvilli on cancer cells, but normal "glia-like" cells were free of microvilli. Short-term cultures from gliomas are used to screen anticancer drugs for potential clinical efficacy. However, these cultures with a low percentage of microvilli-bearing cells can be considered as "glia-like" cells. These findings offer a simple method to distinguish normal and glioblastoma cells in short-term cultures based on the presence of different cell surface topographies.

Acknowledgments: The study was financed under the provisions of the institutional budget.

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