

WORMS, LIFE AND DEATH

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by

H. ROBERT HORVITZ

Howard Hughes Medical Institute, McGovern Institute for Brain Research, Department of Biology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139, U.S.A.

I never expected to spend most of my life studying worms. However, when it came time for me to choose an area for my postdoctoral research, I was intrigued both with the problems of neurobiology and with the approaches of genetics. Having heard that a new “genetic organism” with a remarkably simple nervous system was being explored by Sydney Brenner – the microscopic soil nematode *Caenorhabditis elegans* – I decided to join Sydney in his efforts.

THE CELL LINEAGE

After arriving at the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology (the “LMB”) in Cambridge, England, in November, 1974, I began my studies of *C. elegans* (Figure 1) as a collaboration with John Sulston. John,

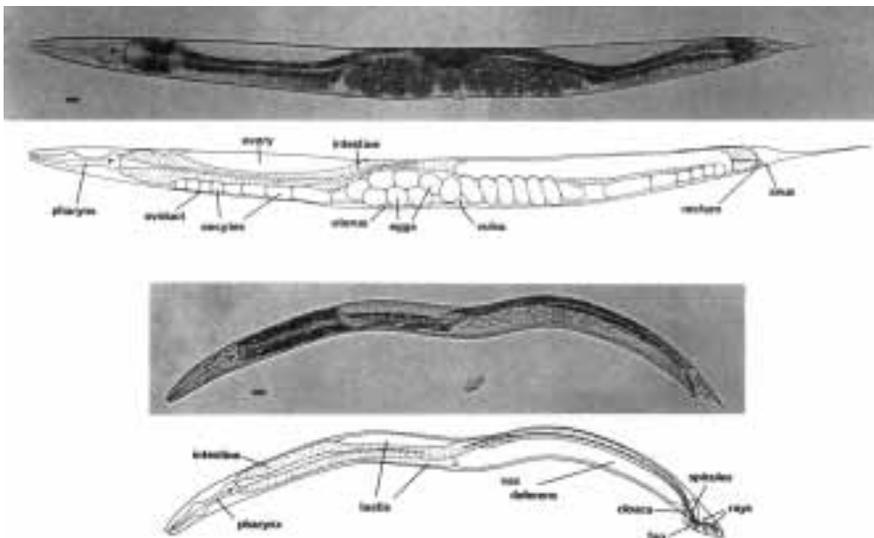


Figure 1. *Caenorhabditis elegans* adults. Hermaphrodite above, male below. John Sulston took these photographs, and I drew the diagrams. Bar, 20 microns. From (2).



Figur 2. John White.

trained as an organic chemist, had become a Staff Scientist in Sydney's group five years earlier. John's aim was to use his chemistry background to analyze the neurochemistry of the nematode. By the time I arrived, John had turned his attention to the problem of cell lineage, the pattern of cell divisions and cell fates that occurs as a fertilized egg generates a complex multicellular organism. John could place a newly hatched *C. elegans* larva on a glass microscope slide dabbed with a sample of the bacterium *Escherichia coli* (nematode food) and, using Nomarski differential interference contrast optics, observe individual cells within the living animal. In this way, he could follow cells as they migrated, divided and, in certain cases, died. That cells died as a normal aspect of animal development had been known by developmental biologists and neurobiologists for many years, and in 1964 Richard Lockshin and Carroll Williams had published a paper (1) in which they referred to such naturally-occurring cell death as "programmed cell death." The study of this phenomenon was later to engage a substantial proportion of my scientific efforts.

John's initial analyses of the *C. elegans* cell lineage were focused on the developing larval ventral nervous system. I found his discoveries about the relationship between cell lineage and nerve cell fate very exciting: 12 neuronal precursor cells underwent the same pattern of cell division, and descendant cells with equivalent cell lineage histories in general differentiated into the same nerve cell type. For example, the anterior daughter of the posterior daughter of each of 12 neuroblasts became motor neurons of a class called "AS" by John White (Figure 2), who with Sydney was then defining the complete anatomy and connectivity of the *C. elegans* nervous system. I asked John Sulston if I could join him in the examination of other aspects of the *C. elegans* cell lineage, and to my delight, he said "Yes."

John and I decided that it should be possible to track every cell division that occurred during larval development. With the added efforts of Judith Kimble, who as a graduate student with David Hirsh at the University of Colorado in Boulder was interested in the development of the *C. elegans* gonad, we did just that. John and I published a description of the complete non-gonadal larval cell lineages in 1977 (2). The authorship of that paper was a topic of debate between John and me: we each insisted on being second author. John was rather unassuming and wanted to be second author to give me more credit and visibility. I, knowing that John had done the vast majority of the work, believed strongly that he should be first author. We were at a standstill until I had an idea. I knew that John hated writing manuscripts. I told him that I would write the paper on the condition that he would be first author. We had a deal.

Two years later, Judith Kimble and David Hirsh described the larval cell lineages of the gonad (3). John then completed the picture by tracking the pattern of cell divisions between the single-celled fertilized egg and the newly hatched larva. This achievement was far more difficult than what John, Judith and I had done previously, in part because the process of embryonic morphogenesis involves a major cellular rearrangement to generate a worm-shaped larva from what was previously a ball of cells. A simple analogy is to imagine that you are watching a bowl with hundreds of grapes, trying to keep your eye on each grape as it and many others move. John succeeded in following all 558 nuclei, and this effort (with input from Einhard Schierenberg, John White and Nichol Thomson) led to the description of the embryonic cell lineage of *C. elegans* (4). Together, these studies defined the first, and to date only, completely known cell lineage of an animal (Figure 3).

The *C. elegans* cell lineage, which is essentially invariant among individuals, presents many of the problems of developmental biology at the level of resolution of single cells. The issue now was how to proceed from description to mechanism. We discussed two general approaches. The first was based upon

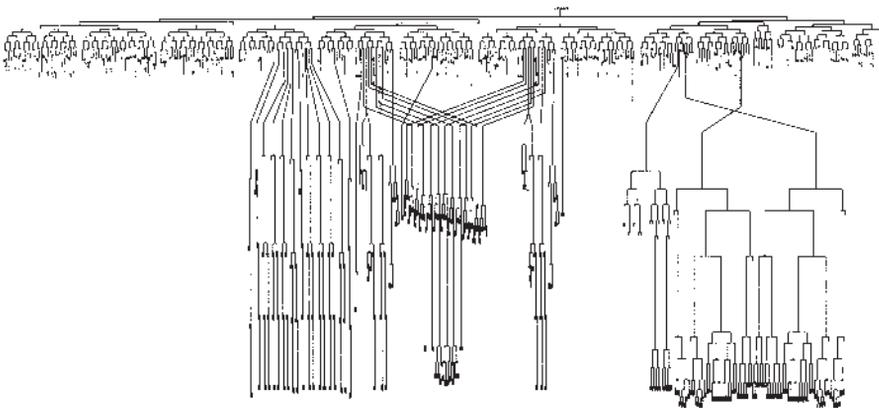


Figure 3. The complete cell lineage of *C. elegans*.

the classical methods of experimental embryology, involving the removal and/or transplantation of particular bits of developing animals. With this direction in mind, John White began pursuing a modern approach to cell removal: laser microsurgery. By focusing a laser beam through a microscope equipped for Nomarski optics, he could visualize and kill single cells. In this way, it would be possible to determine the functions of individual cells. Killing a cell in the developing embryo or larva should reveal if that cell influenced the developmental fate of another cell. The two Johns and Judith Kimble applied this technology to eliminate specific cells and analyze development (5, 6). They discovered that cell interactions play a substantial role in *C. elegans* development and that the invariance of the *C. elegans* cell lineage reflects in part the invariance of cell interactions.

CELL LINEAGE GENETICS

The second approach we considered for the analysis of the mechanisms responsible for the *C. elegans* cell lineage was genetics. Sydney had established *C. elegans* as a genetic system (7). However, we had no idea if there existed genes that had specific roles in controlling cell lineage or that controlled specific cell lineages. It was possible that mutating any gene that affected one cell division would also affect so many other divisions as to lead to an uninterpretable lethality. Even mutations that affected a single cell division could well prove to be leaky alleles of genes that act more broadly, e.g., a weak mutation in any gene involved in cell division presumably would cause a defect in the divisions of those cells most sensitive to decreases in the activity of that gene. I expressed this concern more optimistically on March 19, 1976, in my first presentation of the idea of using genetics to study the worm cell lineage, at a combined worm-fly group meeting (“Tea Talk”) at the LMB (Figure 4). I

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FOR MARCH 1976
TEA TALK...

CELL LINEAGE MUTANTS

I. Introduction

A. For the past 1 1/2 years, you've heard about ^{the} post-embryonic cell lineages of *C. elegans*

B. Want to talk today about attempts to isolate and characterize mutants with abn. lineages

Useful:

1. Way to eliminate specific cells/sets of cells
 - ⇒ a. function
 - b. regulation
2. Logic of development, perhaps

Complements laser system

Figure 4. My notes for the beginning of a “Tea Talk” I presented on March 19, 1976, to an informal weekly gathering of the *C. elegans* and *Drosophila* researchers at the Cell Biology Division of the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, England.

suggested that mutants with abnormal lineages could prove useful in two ways: first, they would provide a means of eliminating specific cells or sets of cells, thus “complement[ing the] laser system”; second, they could reveal aspects of the logic of development, “perhaps.”

My studies of worm cell-lineage genetics began as another collaboration with John Sulston. We looked for mutant animals abnormal in specific aspects of behavior and/or morphology and then examined those mutant animals at the single-cell level for defects in cellular anatomy. If the number of cells was abnormal, we reasoned, an abnormality in the cell lineage might well be responsible. We then directly examined cell lineages in such mutants, using the same techniques we had used to define the cell lineage of the wild-type animal. Because John and I first determined larval as opposed to embryonic cell lineages, we began by seeking mutants defective in the larval cell lineages. To do so, we considered what biological features the larval cell lineages add to the newly hatched animal. A young worm and an adult worm are in general very similar. Most of the larval cell lineages are involved in sexual maturation, i.e., with the development of the gonad and of the neurons, muscles and vulval cells used for egg laying. For this reason, one approach we took was to seek mutants defective in egg laying and ask if these mutants were defective in cell lineage.

In our initial study (8, 9), John and I characterized a set of 24 cell-lineage mutants. Five of these mutants had been isolated some years earlier by Sydney Brenner in his pioneering screens for mutant worms of any sort. Over the years, my laboratory has isolated over 4,000 mutants, many of which are cell lineage mutants. In many cases the genes defined by such mutants have proved to have specific and interesting effects on the worm cell lineage.

Heterochronic mutants and the control of developmental timing

Some *C. elegans* cell lineage mutants perturb the developmental timing of specific aspects of the cell lineage. We called such mutants “heterochronic” and regard them as temporal counterparts of spatial homeotic mutants, since they transform cell fates in time rather than in space (10). The first heterochronic mutant, which defined the gene *lin-4* (*lin*, cell lineage abnormal), was isolated in Sydney Brenner’s laboratory as a morphologically abnormal animal by P. Babu (personal communication). *lin-4* was characterized collaboratively by Marty Chalfie, John Sulston and me (11). (I knew Marty in high school, and after a chance encounter in which I told him about *C. elegans*, he, too, joined Sydney’s laboratory as a postdoctoral researcher. Marty has focused his continuing studies of *C. elegans* on the animal’s nervous system and introduced the jellyfish green fluorescent protein (GFP) as a reporter for gene expression and protein localization; GFP is now widely used in many fields of biology (12).) More detailed analyses of heterochronic genes have been performed by Victor Ambros and Gary Ruvkun, first as postdoctoral fellows in my laboratory (10, 13, 14) and later as independent researchers. Heterochronic mutations are generally of two classes, as exemplified by their effects on cell lineage: retarded mutations cause early developmental events

to occur at late developmental times, and precocious mutations cause late developmental events to occur at early developmental times (Figure 5). The heterochronic genes are major regulators of developmental timing.

The Ambros and Ruvkun laboratories discovered that two of the heterochronic genes, *lin-4* and *let-7*, do not encode protein products but rather encode small (21–22 nt) RNAs (15, 16). These RNAs are the founding members of a family of RNAs, now called microRNAs, which have proved to be widespread in biology, with large families not only in *C. elegans* but also in insects, plants and mammals (17–21). MicroRNAs are currently the subject of intensive study in a rapidly growing and very exciting field.

Genes that control the generation of cell diversity

Other cell lineage mutants blocked the generation of cell diversity at specific cell divisions. For example, although the cell lineage diagram (Figure 6) looks very complicated, the logical decisions that occur in this lineage can be depicted much more simply (Figure 6A). In short, we can regard every cell in the cell lineage as having a fate. That fate may be to differentiate into a specific cell type or to divide in a specific pattern to generate a specific complement of descendant cells. At each cell division, a cell with one fate A can be said to divide to produce two daughter cells with fates B and C, where in general B and C differ both from each other and also from A. Some of the cell lineage mutants we found cause sister cells to be identical instead of different or daughter cells to be like their mothers instead of acquiring new fates (Figure 6B). If the mutation involved eliminated the activity of a gene, we could conclude that the gene is necessary to make sister cells different from each other or to make daughter cells different from mother cells, i.e., that the gene functions to generate cell diversity during development.

We have characterized a variety of such cell lineage genes genetically, developmentally and molecularly (reviewed in (22, 23)). One of the most inter-

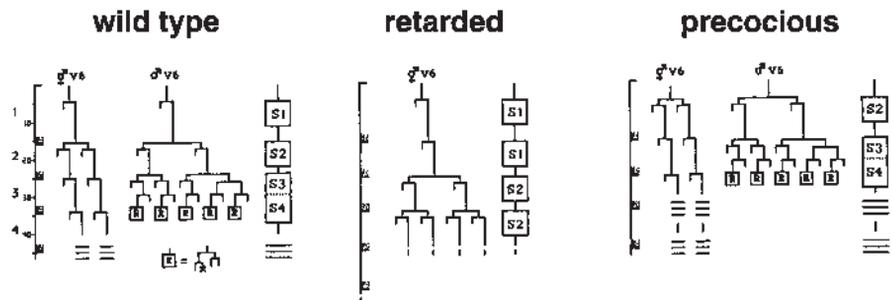


Figure 5. Heterochronic mutations cause perturbations in the timing of specific developmental events. 1, 2, 3, and 4 at the left indicate the first through fourth larval stages (L1–L4) of *C. elegans* development, respectively. S1, S2, S3 and S4 indicate stage-specific lineage patterns normally expressed at the L1–L4 stages, respectively. In retarded mutants, early events occur late, e.g., an S1 pattern can be seen at the L2 stage. Conversely, in precocious mutants, late events occur early, e.g., an S2 pattern can be seen at the L1 stage. From (13).

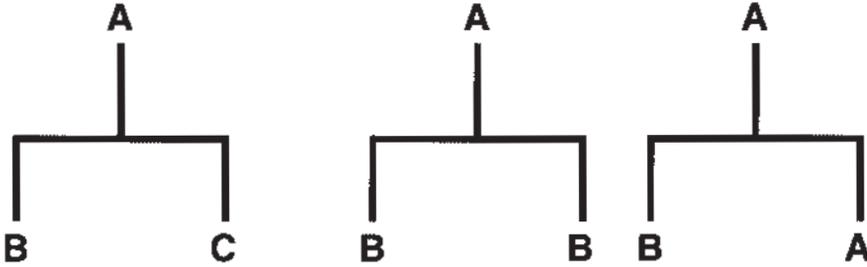
(A) wild type**(B) mutants**

Figure 6. Every cell can be considered to have a fate, where that fate is either to express a particular differentiated state (programmed cell death can be regarded as one such fate) or to divide in a particular pattern and generate a particular complement of descendant cells. (A) Every cell that divides can be said to have a fate, A, which is to divide to generate two daughter cells that have fates B and C, which in general differ from each other and from A. (B) In certain cell lineage mutants, mother cells of fate A instead of generating daughters with fates B and C generate daughters with fates B and B or fates B and A. Such mutants can define genes that function in the generation of cell diversity.

esting and, I think, most significant findings to emerge from these and our other studies of the genetics of the *C. elegans* cell lineage is that most of these genes have counterparts in other organisms, including humans. For example, among the worm cell lineage genes we identified to be involved in the generation of cell diversity are founding members of the now well known and well studied POU (24) and LIM (25) families of transcription factors.

IDCGs, lin-12 and lin-14

As we were beginning our studies of genes that affect cell lineage, one issue that we faced was how to distinguish genes with direct as opposed to indirect roles in controlling a specific cell division or cell fate. In other words, our goal was to analyze “important developmental control genes,” which we referred to (with amusement) as “IDCGs.” How might we identify genes that directly control specific cell fates? We knew that in certain cases these cell fates were regulated by cell interactions, i.e. whether a particular cell expressed fate A or fate B was determined by the presence or absence, respectively, of a signal from another cell. In such cases, any gene needed for the generation, differentiation or functioning of the signaling cell would be required for the expression of fate A, but could be controlling that cell fate only indirectly.

To address this issue, we decided (e.g., see a subsequent discussion by graduate student Paul Sternberg and me (26)) that one appropriate focus would be genes for which opposite classes of mutations – those that eliminate gene activity and those that elevate gene activity – have opposite developmental effects. The paradigm indicating that genes with such characteristics are *bona fide* developmental genes had been established by Ed Lewis in his pioneering studies of the *Drosophila* Bithorax gene complex (27, 28). Thus, for the case

noted above, we would be particularly interested in genes for which too little gene activity caused a cell that normally expresses fate A instead to express fate B, while too much gene activity caused a cell that normally expresses fate B instead to express fate A. Such genes could not simply be needed for some aspect of a process upstream of the cell-fate decision of interest. Rather, such genes could be considered to be not only necessary but also sufficient (in certain cellular contexts) for the expression of a particular cell fate.

The first two genes we studied that satisfied this IDCG criterion and, in fact, led us to this way of thinking were *lin-12* and *lin-14*. The *lin-12* gene was analyzed by graduate students Iva Greenwald, Paul Sternberg and Chip Ferguson (29–31). Opposite classes of *lin-12* mutations result in opposite homeotic transformations in cell fates precisely as outlined above. *lin-12* indeed proved to be an important developmental control gene. Molecularly characterized by Iva Greenwald after she left my laboratory (32), *lin-12* was a founding member of the LIN-12/Notch family, since shown to control intercellular signaling in many organisms and to be involved in human cancer (33–35). The LIN-12 protein showed regions of sequence similarity to the then recently characterized mammalian EGF protein. This finding was one of the first indicating that developmental genes from simple animals were strikingly conserved with human genes. In addition, continuing studies from Iva's laboratory established general principles of LIN-12/Notch signaling (36–38) and revealed that this family of proteins interacts with presenilins, making the LIN-12/Notch family of substantial interest to investigators studying Alzheimer's Disease (39).

lin-14, which was the second heterochronic gene we identified and which was characterized at about the same time as *lin-12*, also fulfilled our IDCG criterion of having opposite classes of mutations cause opposite biological consequences: mutations that reduce *lin-14* activity lead to precocious development, whereas mutations that elevate *lin-14* activity lead to retarded development (10). *lin-14* proved to play a pivotal role in the control of developmental timing (13). All of the other genes we have studied that fulfill our IDCG criterion also have proved to be interesting. For example, *let-60* encodes a Ras protein and acts as a binary switch in a signal transduction pathway of vulval development (40, 41) (see below); *egl-10* was a founding member of a key class of G protein regulators known as RGS proteins (42); and *ced-9* plays a crucial regulatory role in programmed cell death (43) (see below).

With hindsight, I think our rationale for choosing candidate IDCGs was perfectly reasonable. However, we know now (and suspected then) that many genes that do not fulfill this particular IDCG criterion also are of interest and importance. It may well be that the detailed and analytic study of most genes that affect development in specific ways will be instructive.

A genetic pathway for organ development

By studying groups of genes with related effects on the same aspect of the worm cell lineage, we have been able to define not only single genes involved in specific developmental steps but also extensive gene pathways. For exam-

ple, we have studied a set of genes involved in organ development – specifically in the development of the vulva of the *C. elegans* hermaphrodite. The vulva defines the opening between the uterus and the external environment and is needed for egg laying and for mating with males. Mutants abnormal in vulval development were first isolated by Sydney Brenner, and the genes defined by these and similar mutants were initially characterized collaboratively by John Sulston and me. Vulval developmental mutants are of two basic classes (Figure 7) (8, 9). Some mutants lack a vulva, and are called “vulvaless.” Because *C. elegans* is an internally self-fertilizing hermaphrodite, a vulvaless mutant generates fertilized eggs but these eggs develop and hatch *in utero*, after which the progeny devour the animal that was both mother and father to them. The young larvae are released into the environment, so vulvaless mutations are not lethal, at least in the genetic sense of causing the inviability of a strain. Animals in the second class of vulval developmental mutants have multiple ectopic vulva-like structures. Such mutants are called “multivulva.”

Many of the genes defined by vulvaless and multivulva mutants proved to be involved in the cell interactions that specify worm vulval development (e.g., (29, 44)). Studies of these genes by our laboratory and by other laboratories, particularly that of my ex-graduate student Paul Sternberg, not only established the molecular genetic basis of vulva development but also helped elucidate the Ras pathway for signal transduction (40, 41, 45) (reviewed in

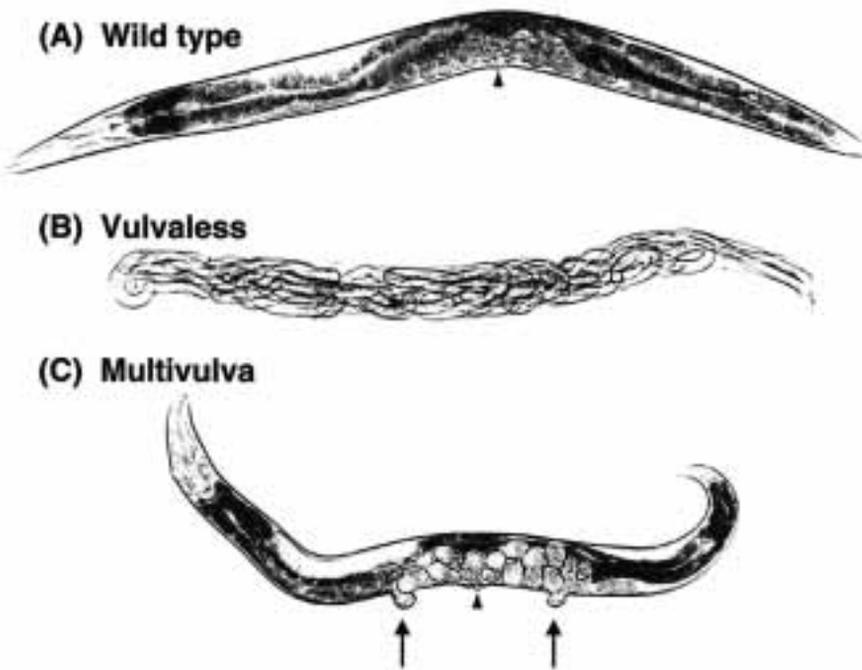


Figure 7. Mutants abnormal in vulva development define two basic classes. (A) Wild type. (B) A vulvaless mutant. (C) A multivulva mutant. Arrowhead indicates position of the vulva. Arrows indicate extra vulva-like structures.

(46)). Ras had been discovered as a human proto-oncogene (47), and an understanding of the normal function of Ras genes as well as of the pathway in which Ras genes act has proved fundamental to the fields of developmental biology and oncology. Our more recent studies of genes involved in vulval development (48, 49) are revealing how a Retinoblastoma (Rb) tumor suppressor gene (50) pathway acts to antagonize this Ras oncogene pathway.

PROGRAMMED CELL DEATH

As I and members of my new laboratory at MIT were beginning genetic studies of the *C. elegans* cell lineage, one aspect of the cell lineage particularly caught my attention: in addition to the 959 cells generated during worm development and found in the adult, another 131 cells are generated but are not present in the adult (2, 4). These cells are absent because they undergo programmed cell death. This phenomenon of naturally-occurring cell death had long been observed as a feature of animal development (e.g., (1, 51, 52)) and seemed a fundamental but essentially unexplored area of developmental biology. Furthermore, programmed cell death is a striking feature of nervous system development (e.g., 105 of the 131 programmed cell deaths in *C. elegans* are in the nervous system), and it was neurobiology that had first attracted me to *C. elegans*. In addition, Kerr, Wyllie and Curie in 1972 (53) had suggested, based upon ultrastructural studies of dying cells, that the mechanisms responsible for naturally-occurring developmental cell death might also be involved in the cell deaths seen during tissue homeostasis as well as in untreated malignant neoplasms and in some cases of therapeutically-induced tumor regression. They noted that the process of cell death in all of these cases is characterized by a series of specific structural changes, and they named this process “apoptosis,” a term that has become widely used and is often considered to be synonymous with programmed cell death.

It seemed likely that we could apply the approaches we were taking to study the *C. elegans* cell lineage to analyze programmed cell death. In particular, from the cell lineage we knew that specific cells with diverse developmental origins undergo programmed cell death at specific times during development and that programmed cell death is characterized by a series of specific morphological changes. Thus, we could think of programmed cell death as a cell fate, much like other cell fates, such as differentiating into a muscle cell or a serotonergic neuron. If so, we reasoned, there should be genes that control both the decision to express that fate and the execution (so to speak) of the fate itself.

*The first cell-death gene, *nuc-1**

The first gene to be identified that affects *C. elegans* programmed cell death was discovered by John Sulston in his initial search for mutants defective in the cell lineages of the ventral nervous system, the first cell lineages he studied (54). John was screening for animals abnormal in the number of cells in the ventral nervous system. To visualize these cells, he used Feulgen DNA

staining. John observed that in one mutant individual DNA-positive pycnotic bodies were located precisely in positions where there should have been prior programmed cell deaths. He showed that this mutant is defective in the degradation of DNA in cells undergoing programmed cell death and named the gene defined by this mutant *nuc-1* (nuclease abnormal), because it controls the activity of a DNA endonuclease.

ced-1 and ced-2, two genes needed for the engulfment of cell corpses during programmed cell death

Next, Ed Hedgecock, then a postdoctoral researcher at the LMB, identified two genes important for the engulfment of cell corpses by neighboring cells during programmed cell death (55). This process of engulfment, or phagocytosis, normally removes dying cells from the body of the animal. Ed named these two genes *ced-1* and *ced-2*, for cell death abnormal.

The killer gene ced-3

In my laboratory, we were interested in identifying genes responsible either for causing cells to die during programmed cell death or for deciding which cells are to live and which are to die by programmed cell death. As an approach, we decided to seek mutants abnormal either in the presence or in the pattern of programmed cell deaths. However, using Nomarski optics to visualize programmed cell deaths was problematic – dying cells are rapidly engulfed, so that at any given developmental stage very few if any cell deaths can be seen. Following by direct observation the process of cell death in living larvae or embryos is too slow to allow for an efficient mutant hunt. Instead, beginning soon after my 1978 arrival at MIT, we performed mutant hunts using the *nuc-1* mutant to allow the visualization of cell deaths. We obtained a variety of mutants with abnormalities in patterns of cells deaths, but in each case the abnormalities proved to reflect more general defects in cell lineage. For example, in *lin-22* mutants five rather than one programmed cell death occur along each side of the second stage larva; the sources of these extra cell deaths proved to be the lateral blast cells V1, V2, V3 and V4, which normally do not generate dying cells but in *lin-22* mutants are all transformed to express the fate of V5, which normally generates one cell that undergoes programmed cell death (56). Thus, the fundamental role of *lin-22* seemed to be in specifying the fates of V1-4, not in determining which cells live and which die. It is worth noting that this understanding of *lin-22* would have been difficult to attain in the absence of the ability to study at single-cell resolution the *C. elegans* cell lineage. No mutants specific for defects in programmed cell death were isolated from our *nuc-1* screens.

The *ced-1* and *ced-2* mutants of Hedgecock *et al.* (55) offered us a more powerful approach. In *ced-1* and *ced-2* mutants, dying cells initiate the process of programmed cell death but are not engulfed, so that cell corpses persist in an intermediate stage that is easily visualized in living individuals using Nomarski optics. Visualizing programmed cell deaths in living individuals is far more efficient for a genetic screen than examining fixed and DNA-stained

specimens, as we were doing in our screens with *nuc-1* mutants. Specifically, our *nuc-1* screens required establishing lines of animals, so that if a fixed and stained mutant animal of interest was identified the mutation responsible could be recovered in a living sibling of the mutant animal. By contrast, if a mutation were identified in a *ced-1* mutant background using Nomarski optics to visualize programmed cell deaths, the individual carrying that mutation could be picked and used to establish a mutant strain. We could screen many more *ced-1* animals than *nuc-1* clones of animals. Thus, our idea was to mutagenize *ced-1* animals and look for mutants with abnormalities in the presence or in the pattern of programmed cell deaths as seen with Nomarski optics. In this way, we hoped to be able to identify mutants in which the process of programmed cell death had not been initiated or in which the pattern of programmed cell deaths was altered. We were encouraged to suspect that such mutants would exist based upon our prior success in isolating cell-lineage mutants with highly specific defects.

Hilary Ellis (Figure 8), a graduate student in the laboratory, undertook this mutant hunt. Although *ced-1* and *ced-2* had not yet been described in any publication, Ed Hedgecock generously sent Hilary a *ced-1* mutant to use in her screen. Such an open sharing of both information (we knew all about Ed's results prior to publication) and resources (he sent us his unpublished mutant) has been a characteristic of the *C. elegans* field since its beginning and has, I believe, allowed the field to blossom in a highly efficient, rapid and enjoyable fashion. Hilary mutagenized *ced-1* animals and found a mutant in which no cell corpses could be seen (Figure 9). We named the gene defined by this mutant *ced-3*. In a series of experiments, Hilary demonstrated that if *ced-3* activity is reduced or eliminated by mutation, essentially all 131 cells that normally die instead survive (57, 58). Leon Avery, a postdoctoral researcher in my laboratory, later introduced the term "undead" to refer to such surviving cells



Figure 8. Hilary Ellis and her daughter Alina.

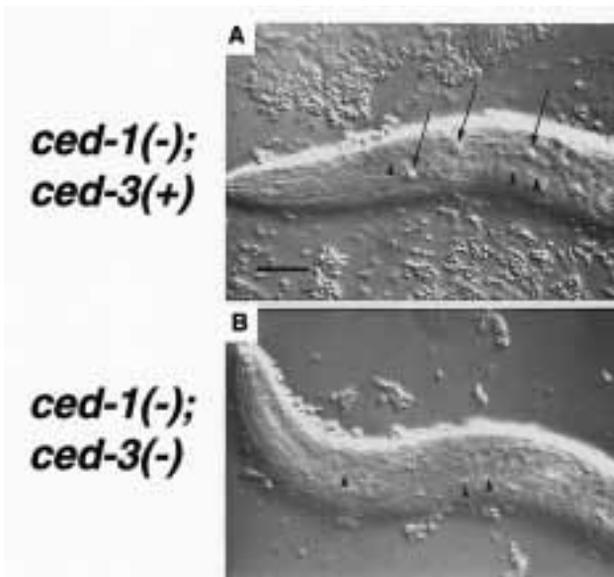


Figure 9. Programmed cell death does not occur in a *ced-3* mutant. (A). A *ced-1* mutant, defective in the engulfment of dying cells, contains persisting cell corpses (arrows). (B) A *ced-1* and *ced-3* double mutant, in which there is no programmed cell death, does not contain cell corpses. The triangles indicate marker cells present in both animals. Bar, 10 microns. From (58).

and showed that at least one undead cell is sufficiently normal to be able to function as a motor neuron and act in feeding behavior (59).

These findings indicated that the activity of the gene *ced-3* is required for cells to die by programmed cell death. This discovery was key, as it demonstrated that programmed cell death requires the function of a specific gene and hence that programmed cell death is an active biological process, analogous to other fundamental biological processes, such as cell division, cell migration and cell differentiation. Based upon our discovery of *ced-3*, we proposed our first draft of a genetic pathway for programmed cell death: *ced-3* acts to trigger programmed cell death upstream of *ced-1* and *ced-2*, which control the engulfment of cell corpses and themselves act upstream of *nuc-1*, which degrades the DNA in dying cells (57).

The second killer gene, ced-4

In what I thought to be a completely unrelated line of study, graduate student Carol Trent (Figure 10A) in my laboratory was studying an aspect of *C. elegans* behavior, egg-laying. (Our studies of the behavior of egg-laying were begun as a consequence of my having isolated egg-laying defective mutants while seeking cell lineage mutants and finding that some of the mutants were abnormal in egg-laying despite being normal in cell lineage and having a normal complement of the cells used for egg-laying.) Carol and technician Nancy Tsung (Figure 10B) isolated and characterized a set of 145 mutants defective in egg-laying and found that one of these mutants is egg-laying defective because it lacks the HSN motor neurons, which innervate the vulval muscles and drive egg-laying (60). We named the gene defined by this mutant *egl-1*, for egg-laying abnormal.



Figure 10. (A) Carol Trend. (B) Nancy Tsung.

Why are the HSN neurons missing in *egl-1* mutants? We considered two possibilities. First, perhaps the HSN neurons are never generated. Second, perhaps they are generated but once generated they die. This latter alternative struck us as plausible, because in his studies of the *C. elegans* cell lineage John Sulston had found that in males the cells homologous to the HSN neurons undergo programmed cell death (4). We reasoned that if in fact HSN neurons were dying by programmed cell death in *egl-1* hermaphrodites, then a *ced-3* mutation, which blocks programmed cell death, should block this HSN death and restore both HSN neurons and egg laying to an *egl-1* mutant. Hilary tested this possibility by constructing a *ced-3; egl-1* double mutant. She found that indeed a mutation in *ced-3* suppresses the effects of the *egl-1* mutation (Table 1). Thus, the absence of HSN neurons in *egl-1* mutant animals seemed likely to reflect a defect in which the HSN neurons instead of surviving undergo programmed cell death. John Sulston directly confirmed that this was the case by examining the embryonic cell lineage of *egl-1* mutants.

Table 1. A *ced-3* mutation, which prevents programmed cell death, suppresses the effects of an *egl-1* (gain-of-function) mutation. Adapted from (58).

	HSN present?	Egg-laying defective?
wild type	yes	no
<i>egl-1</i>	no	yes
<i>ced-3; egl-1</i>	yes	no

This observation proved very useful, as it suggested a very efficient approach for the isolation of more *ced-3*-like mutants: look for mutations that suppress the egg-laying defect of *egl-1* mutants. At least some such mutations should act by preventing programmed cell death. Both Hilary Ellis and graduate student Chand Desai (Figure 11) sought *egl-1* suppressors. Chand's goal was different from Hilary's, as Chand wanted mutations that allowed egg laying in the absence of HSN neurons and thus could define genes responsible for aspects of neuronal wiring. Chand isolated a mutant that restored HSN neurons and proved to be defective in a new gene with properties that Hilary showed to be essentially identical to those of *ced-3*. We named this gene *ced-4* and added it to the genetic pathway for programmed cell death (58).

Programmed cell death involves a process of cellular suicide

Graduate student Junying Yuan (Figure 12A) then asked whether the *ced-3* and *ced-4* killer genes act within the cells that die or elsewhere in the body of the animal, for example to control humoral factors. To address this issue, she performed genetic mosaic analyses, in which in single animals some cells are mutant (e.g., lack *ced-3* function) while others are wild-type (e.g., have *ced-3* function), and asked whether the genetic identity of a cell that normally dies (*ced-3*(+) vs. *ced-3*(-)) determines its fate (programmed cell death vs. survival). Junying's observations suggested that both *ced-3* and *ced-4* act within the dying cells themselves (61). These findings indicated that, to this extent at least, programmed cell death is a process of cellular suicide.

Both CED-3 and CED-4 have human counterparts that function in programmed cell death

Junying Yuan cloned the *ced-4* gene and discovered that the CED-4 protein was novel, i.e. in its sequence unlike any other protein known at the time. We



Figure 11. Chand Desai.



Figure 12. (A) Junying Yuan. (B) Shai Shaham.

published a paper entitled “The *Caenorhabditis elegans* cell death gene *ced-4* encodes a novel protein and is expressed during the period of extensive programmed cell death” (62). Some years later, in 1997, a protein similar to CED-4 was identified. The laboratory of Xiaodong Wang had characterized biochemically an *in vitro* system for cell death and identified a factor, which they called Apaf-1 (apoptotic protease activating factor), with a domain with significant similarity to CED-4 (63). Thus, Apaf-1 is a pro-apoptotic human protein similar in both sequence and function to the *C. elegans* programmed cell death killer gene CED-4.

Just after cloning *ced-4* and five years before Apaf-1 was identified, Junying Yuan also cloned the *ced-3* gene and characterized it molecularly in collaboration with graduate student Shai Shaham (Figure 12B). *ced-3*, too, was novel, not matching any sequence in the databases at that time. However, we could not see publishing a paper with the title “Another *C. elegans* cell death gene encodes a novel protein.” So we did not. Instead, we waited. Each day or two for nearly two years, Shai searched the database, until finally there was a hit (Figure 13) (64). The CED-3 protein is similar in sequence to an enzyme that had been purified biochemically (65, 66) by two pharmaceutical companies interested in human inflammatory disease. This enzyme is the protease interleukin-1-beta converting enzyme, or ICE, which converts the pro-form of the cytokine interleukin-1-beta into the active molecule. CED-3 and ICE proved to be the founding members of a family of cysteine proteases now known as caspases (67).

Based upon this finding and upon additional observations (68) made by

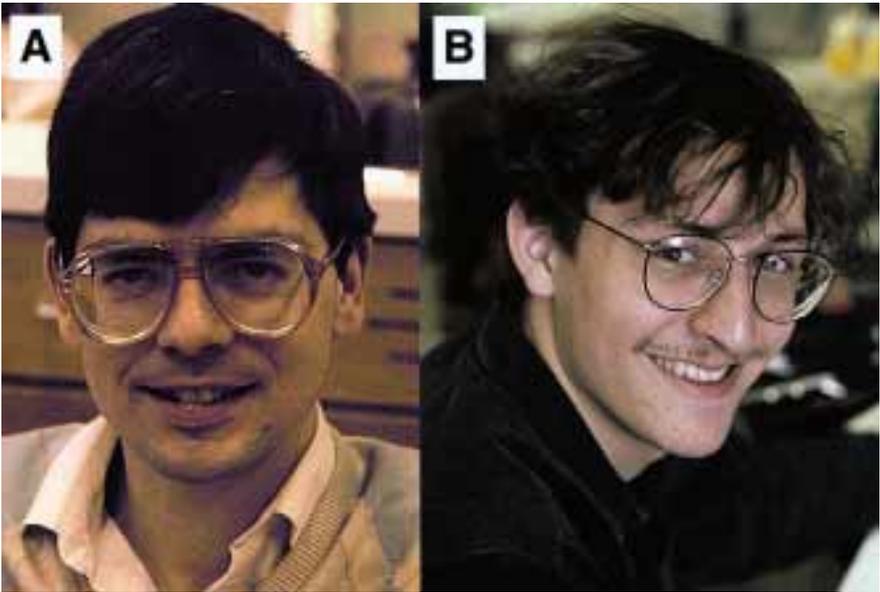


Figure 14. (A) Ron Ellis. (B) Michael Hengartner.

was no programmed cell death was different, and defined a new gene. We named this gene *ced-9* (43).

Genetic studies of *ced-9* by Ron Ellis and subsequently by Michael Hengartner (Figure 14B), also a graduate student in my laboratory, revealed that our original *ced-9* mutation caused a gain rather than a loss of *ced-9* function and, furthermore, that a loss of *ced-9* function had the opposite effect (43). Specifically, whereas a mutation that results in a gain of *ced-9* function causes cells that should die by programmed cell death instead to live, a mutation that results in a loss of *ced-9* function causes cells that should live to die by programmed cell death. These studies indicated that *ced-9* controls the decision between cell survival and programmed cell death (Figure 15) and established that unlike *ced-3* and *ced-4*, which promote programmed cell death, the gene *ced-9* protects cells against programmed cell death.

Michael Hengartner cloned *ced-9* and discovered (72) that it encodes a

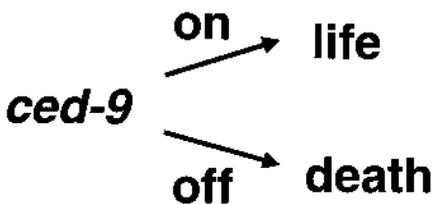


Figure 15. *ced-9* controls the life vs. death decisions of cells in *C. elegans*.

protein with similarities to the product of the human proto-oncogene Bcl-2 (B cell lymphoma), the misexpression of which had been shown to cause follicular lymphoma (73–75). Prior studies of Bcl-2 had indicated that Bcl-2 could protect cells in the mammalian immune system from undergoing apoptosis (e.g., (76, 77)). Thus, the molecularly similar genes *ced-9* and Bcl-2 can protect cells against programmed cell death and apoptosis, respectively, supporting the idea that the morphological changes of apoptosis are effected by the same mechanisms as those responsible for programmed cell death. Subsequent studies have revealed a family of CED-9/Bcl-2-like proteins involved in programmed cell death in mammals (e.g., (78, 79)).

The thrill of discovery and the path to scientific visibility

People sometimes ask, when does a scientist feel that “aha!” thrill of discovery? In the case of our studies of programmed cell death, my biggest thrill was probably on February 12, 1992 (Figure 16). That was the day that Michael Hengartner obtained the CED-9 sequence, searched the database and found Bcl-2 at the top of the similarity list. We immediately realized that the pathway of cell-death genes we were studying in *C. elegans* was very likely to be similar to the pathway that controls apoptosis/programmed cell death in humans.

DATE: 2/12/92

TO: DR. H. ROBERT HORVITZ FROM MIT, DEPT. BIOLOGY/
(805) 643-7137

FROM: MUR HENGARTNER

NUMBER OF PAGES (INCLUDING THIS): 2

MESSAGE:

Bob,

GUESS WHO CAME OUT ON TOP WHEN YOU SEARCH THE PROTEIN
DATABASES WITH THE *ced-9* DOWNSTREAM ORF USING THE FASTA
PROGRAM (WHICH ALLOWS FOR GAPS)? ANSWER IS ON NEXT PAGE.
GROUP MEETING WAS FINE. TURNS OUT BARBARA OSBORNE ALREADY HAS
THE CHICKEN *bcl-2* SEQUENCES. I'LL FAX YOU THE ALIGNMENT AS SOON
AS I GET IT.

MUR

Figure 16. Fax sent to me on February 12, 1992, by Michael Hengartner informing me that the sequence of CED-9 is similar to that of the human proto-oncogene Bcl-2. Barbara Osborne, a fellow cell-death researcher, was a visiting scientist in our laboratory on a sabbatical leave.

Publication dates can belie scientific history. We published the similarity between CED-3 and ICE before we published the similarity between CED-9 and Bcl-2. Yet our discovery of the similarity between CED-3 and ICE was the later discovery, made on April 27, 1992. After the discovery of the similarity between CED-9 and Bcl-2, I immediately and very broadly discussed this finding. Bcl-2 was already of great interest in the field of oncology. I believe that the fact that Bcl-2 proved to look like a worm protein that antagonized programmed cell death helped convince researchers that the function of Bcl-2 was to antagonize the cell death process. I also believe that this similarity made the worm cell-death pathway suddenly a topic of major interest in the biomedical community, as this pathway was no longer simply an abstract formalism derived from complicated genetic studies of a microscopic soil-dwelling roundworm but rather a framework for a process fundamental to human biology and human disease.

The back-to-back publication of the discoveries that CED-3 looks like a human protease (64) and that CED-3 expressed in mammalian cells could induce those cells to undergo programmed cell death (69) revealed for the first time a mechanistic basis of the process of programmed cell death. This work also strongly suggested that mammalian cells contain the machinery for cellular suicide. The day these two papers were published (November 19, 1993), I received telephone calls from scientists at five pharmaceutical companies wanting to know how these findings could best be used to help them develop novel drugs. There was no question that the biomedical community had become interested in *C. elegans* programmed cell death.

The core molecular genetic pathway for programmed cell death

At about the time that we found the similarity between CED-9 and Bcl-2, David Vaux, working at Stanford University with Irv Weissman and Stuart Kim, demonstrated that when expressed as a transgene in *C. elegans* human Bcl-2 can protect against programmed cell death in worms (80). Michael Hengartner in my laboratory confirmed this finding and further established that human Bcl-2 can substitute for worm *ced-9* in a *ced-9* mutant (72). These observations strongly indicated that *ced-9* and Bcl-2 act to prevent programmed cell death by similar mechanisms and, furthermore, since Bcl-2 can substitute for *ced-9* in worms, that *ced-9* and Bcl-2 act in similar molecular genetic pathways.

By analyzing the genetic interactions among *ced-9*, *ced-3* and *ced-4*, Michael Hengartner and Shai Shaham helped define the genetic pathway for the core, killing step of programmed cell death in *C. elegans*: *ced-3* kills; *ced-4* kills by promoting the killing activity of *ced-3*; and *ced-9* protects by preventing *ced-4* from promoting the killing activity of *ced-3* (43, 81). This pathway raised the question, what regulates *ced-9*? The answer proved to be the gene *egl-1*, which I discussed above as the gene that can mutate to cause the HSN motor neurons to undergo programmed cell death. In a series of genetic studies, post-doctoral fellow Barbara Conrath (Figure 17) discovered that the normal function of *egl-1* is not specific to the HSN neurons but rather is needed for



Figure 17. Barbara Conradt.

essentially all programmed cell deaths, like *ced-3* and *ced-4* (82). However, whereas *ced-3* and *ced-4* act downstream of *ced-9*, the *egl-1* gene acts upstream of *ced-9*. These findings suggest a pathway in which *egl-1* kills by preventing *ced-9* from preventing *ced-4* from promoting the killing activity of *ced-3*. Barbara cloned *egl-1*, found that it encodes a small protein of 91 amino acids with similarity to the so-called BH3-only members of the Bcl-2 family. She showed that the EGL-1 and CED-9 proteins interact physically. A variety of studies, mostly by others, indicated that the CED-9 and CED-4 proteins also interact physically, as do the CED-4 and CED-3 proteins. Taken together, these observations defined a molecular genetic pathway for programmed cell death involving a cascade of protein interactions and a predicted conservation with mammals (Figure 18).

The overall molecular genetic pathway for programmed cell death in C. elegans

In further studies using similar approaches, we and others have analyzed events both upstream and downstream of this core pathway. Our current picture of the overall molecular genetic pathway for programmed cell death in

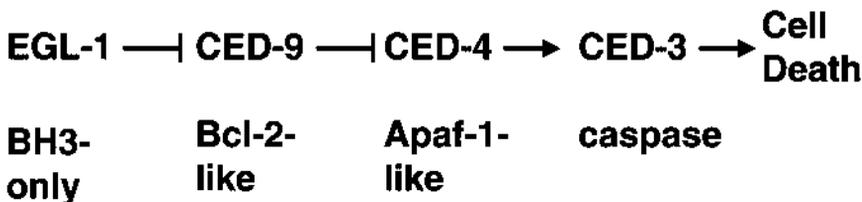


Figure 18. Core molecular genetic pathway for programmed cell death in *C. elegans* and the correspondence of the *C. elegans* gene products with mammalian counterparts. →, positive interaction; —|, negative interaction.

The pathway for programmed cell death in *C. elegans*

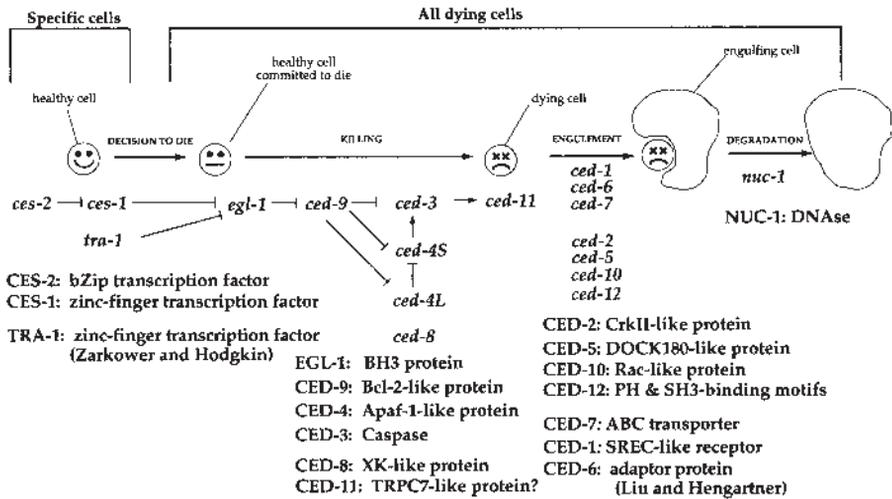


Figure 19. The overall molecular genetic pathway for programmed cell death in *C. elegans*.

C. elegans is shown in Figure 19. First, every cell in the animal must decide whether it is to live or die by programmed cell death. We identified two of the three genes known to be involved in this decision in a mutant hunt related to our studies of the behavior of egg laying. We knew that the neuromodulator serotonin was involved in egg laying (83), and graduate student Carol Trent and technician Nancy Tsung sought mutants abnormal in the only serotonergic neurons we knew about at that time, the NSM neurons in the pharynx. Carol and Nancy identified two mutants that appeared to have extra NSM neurons, and graduate student Ron Ellis found that the extra NSM neurons in these mutants were surviving NSM sister cells (71). These mutants defined the genes *ces-1* and *ces-2*. Ron Ellis found two additional *ces-1* mutants in the screen described above in which he looked directly for mutants defective in the deaths of the NSM sister cells (71). *ces-2* encodes a transcription factor similar to the product of the human proto-oncogene HLF (hepatic leukemia factor), which has been implicated in acute lymphoblastic leukemia (84). *ces-2* directly represses the transcription of *ces-1*, which encodes a transcription factor of the zinc finger family (85). Based on our studies of *ces-2* and *ces-1*, both the oncogenic form of HLF and the human CES-1 counterpart, SLUG, have been shown to regulate programmed cell death in mammalian cells, suggesting that these proteins act in acute lymphoblastic leukemia through effects on programmed cell death (86, 87).

The third gene we have shown to regulate cell-type specific programmed cell death in *C. elegans* is *tra-1* (88). The *tra-1* gene, like the *ces-1* gene, encodes a Zn finger transcription factor; the TRA-1 protein is similar to members of

the human GLI protein family (89), which has been implicated in glioblastoma (90) and also in the developmental disorder Grieg cephalopolysyndactyly syndrome (91). *tra-1* controls sexual identity in *C. elegans*; the activity of *tra-1* is regulated by the ratio of X chromosomes to autosomes, so that it is active in hermaphrodites (XX) and inactive in males (X0) (e.g., (92)). Barbara Conradt discovered that *tra-1* regulates the sexually dimorphic programmed cell deaths of the HSN neurons (which survive in hermaphrodites and die in males) by repressing the transcription of the *egl-1* BH3-only killer gene (88). Her findings suggest that if *egl-1* is expressed (as in males, which have low TRA-1 repressor activity), the resulting EGL-1 protein binds to the CED-9 protein, causing the activation of CED-4 and the subsequent activation of CED-3, resulting in cell death. By contrast, if *egl-1* is repressed by TRA-1 (as in hermaphrodites), HSN neurons survive. Our original *egl-1* mutations, which result in a gain rather than a loss of *egl-1* gene activity, disrupt the TRA-1 binding site of *egl-1*, causing *egl-1* to be inappropriately expressed and thus the HSN neurons to die in hermaphrodites.

Overall, our studies of the cell-type specific control of programmed cell death indicate that the decision about whether a given cell is to live or die is controlled by the actions of specific transcription factors. This finding is consistent with our hypothesis from many years ago that programmed cell death can be regarded as a cell fate, since the expression of many cell fates is specified by the actions of and interactions among particular transcription factors.

The engulfment step of programmed cell death has proved to involve at least seven genes that define two parallel and partially redundant signal transduction pathways responsible for communication between the cell that will die and the engulfing cell (Figure 20) (55, 93–99). These two pathways act not only in the recognition by engulfing cells of cells that are to die and in controlling the cytoarchitectural changes necessary for the process of phagocytosis but also in the killing process itself (100).

Finally, as shown by my graduate students Yi-Chun Wu and Gillian Stanfield (101), the DNA in cells undergoing programmed cell death is degraded (in part) by the direct protein product of the first cell-death gene ever identified, *nuc-1*.

As indicated in Figure 12, most and possibly all of the genes involved in programmed cell death in *C. elegans* have human counterparts, most of which have been implicated in programmed cell death in humans and some of which have been implicated in human disease. This pathway is clearly incomplete. Unpublished studies by us and by others have identified a number of additional genes with roles in programmed cell death, and there are many aspects of the pathway that have not been explored fully. There is still much to learn about both the genetic pathway and the molecular mechanisms of programmed cell death in *C. elegans*.

Programmed cell death and human disease

As the understanding of programmed cell death in *C. elegans* and in other organisms has progressed, more and more human disorders have been shown

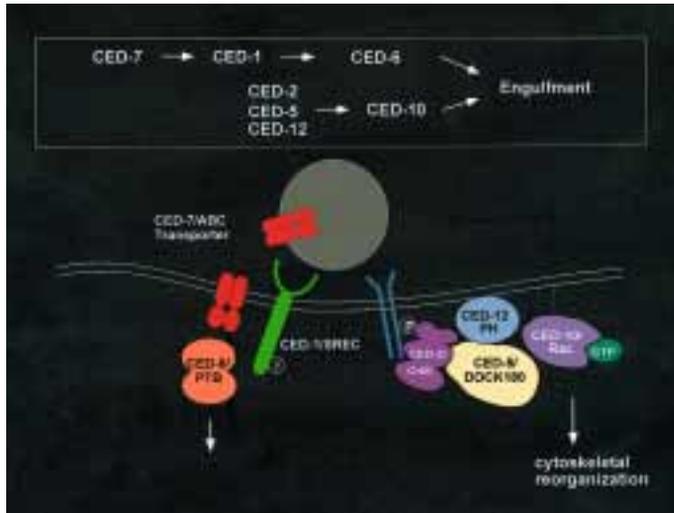


Figure 20. Model for the two signaling pathways that lead to cell-corpse engulfment. (A) Genetic pathways. (B) Diagram of proposed molecular pathways. See text for references.

to be, or at least strongly suspected to be, caused by abnormalities in programmed cell death. The relationship between programmed cell death and human disease has been reviewed numerous times (e.g., (102–105)), and here I will note only that either too much or too little cell death can cause disease. For example, the neurodegenerative diseases – such as Alzheimer’s Disease, Parkinson’s Disease, Huntington’s Disease and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS – all involve neuronal cell death. In each case, specific classes of nerve cells die, leading to the particular clinical features of each of these neurologic disorders. One major hypothesis today is that the nerve cell deaths in some of these disorders are essentially ectopic programmed cell deaths, i.e., deaths that use the same mechanisms as those that occur during normal development but that for some reason are caused to occur at the wrong time, in the wrong place or affecting the wrong cell type. The evidence supporting this hypothesis varies among the neurodegenerative disorders, and at present is probably strongest for certain retinal degenerations (e.g., (106)). Other disorders characterized by too much cell death and that may well involve ectopic programmed cell death include cerebral stroke, traumatic brain injury, AIDS, myocardial infarction, congestive heart failure, acute liver injury and aplastic anemia.

Conversely, some human disorders involve too little cell death. The number of cells in our bodies is defined by an equilibrium of opposing forces: mitosis adds cells, while programmed cell death removes them. Just as too much cell division can lead to a pathological increase in cell number, so can too little cell death. Certain cancers, including follicular lymphoma, which can be caused by the misexpression in B cells of the CED-9-like proto-oncogene Bcl-2 (77, 107), are clearly a consequence of too little programmed cell death. It

may well be that most cancers involve a misregulation of programmed cell death. Similarly, the clinical features of certain autoimmune diseases and viral infections are consequences of too little programmed cell death.

Because of the relationship between programmed cell death and human disease, the identification of the genes and proteins that function in the process of programmed cell death has provided new targets for possible intervention in a broad diversity of disorders. My dream is that the pathway we have identified for programmed cell death in *C. elegans* will help lead to better diagnostics, treatments and cures for some of these diseases responsible for so much human suffering.

The principle of biological universality

One point that emerges from the studies of programmed cell death in *C. elegans* and other organisms is the striking similarity of genes and gene pathways among organisms that are as superficially distinct as worms and humans. Many studies over the past 10 or so years involving *C. elegans*, yeast, the fruit fly *Drosophila melanogaster* and other simple organisms have repeatedly led to analogous findings concerning evolutionary conservation and have established one of the most striking themes of modern molecular biology. I like to refer to this theme as “The principle of biological universality,” and it underlies my strong conviction that the rigorous, detailed and analytic study of the biology of any organism is likely to lead to findings of importance in the understanding of other organisms, including ourselves.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I thank Sydney Brenner and John Sulston, who are my ex-colleagues, my mentors and my good friends, and with whom I have had the enormous pleasure of sharing the 2002 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. I am grateful to Jim Watson, Wally Gilbert and Klaus Weber, in whose combined laboratory I worked as a graduate student and who taught me not only how but also why to do science. I thank my colleagues at MIT, who have provided a spectacularly supportive environment that fostered my growth as an independent scientist. In particular, my department chairs – Boris Magasanik, Gene Brown, Maury Fox, Richard Hynes, Phil Sharp, and Bob Sauer – all helped me in many ways over the years. Amongst my many wonderful colleagues, Salva Luria, David Baltimore and David Botstein particularly stimulated me to think, to grow and to appreciate that it is important as a scientist to fulfill a responsibility to a greater community.

I thank my family. My wife Martha Constantine Paton has given me love and support, while ensuring that I maintain a perspective on what is important. Martha’s two sons, Chris and Joe Paton, introduced me to the special pleasures of family life. My daughter Alexandra Constantine Horvitz constantly brings me amusement, wisdom and joy, as well as an appreciation for biology that goes well beyond what I have ever observed through a microscope looking at worms. My sister Carol Horvitz-Nutt and her husband Randy

Nutt have shared their love and support for many years. Most deeply, I thank my parents, Mary and Oscar Horvitz, who raised me to ask “Why?” and “How?” and who sustained a belief in me that gave me the confidence to do science and more generally to explore all that life has to offer.

I thank the members of and visitors to my laboratory at MIT, some of whom were directly responsible for the research described above and all of whom together generated the stimulating and enjoyable environment that made such work possible. It is very much their efforts, their insights, and their accomplishments that have been recognized. These researchers include Namiko Abe, Gwen Acton, Mark Alkema, Ezequiel Alvarez-Saavedra, Victor Ambros, Na An, Erik Andersen, Colleen Asbury, Leon Avery, Cori Bargmann, Michael Basson, Greg Beitel, Andrew Bellinger, Ala Berdichevsky, Barbara Biber, Kris Bieker-Brady, Laird Bloom, Ned Buttner, Scott Cameron, Gordon Campbell, Beth Castor, Craig Ceol, Wendy Champness, Fangli Chen, Andrew Chisholm, Chantal Christ, Scott Clark, Barbara Conradt, Brian Davies, Ewa Davison, Lisa Delissio, Chand Desai, Elizabeth DeStasio, John Doll, Bob Edgar, Mary Kaye Edwards, Hilary Ellis, Ron Ellis, Scott Federhen, Chip Ferguson, Mike Finney, Bill Fixsen, Brendan Galvin, Gian Garriga, Elad Gil, Dorit Ginsberg, Susie Glass, Iva Greenwald, Melissa Harrison, Erika Hartweg, Anna Heineman, Andrew Hellman, Michael Hengartner, Tory Herman, Michael Herman, Brad Hersh, Emma Jean Hess, George Hess, Megan Higginbotham, Dennis Hom, Michael Huang, Brigitte Huber, Melissa Hunter-Ensor, Mike Hurwitz, Ho-Yon Hwang, Yishi Jin, Carl Johnson, Erik Jorgensen, Josh Kaplan, Sam Katz, Saechin Kim, Stuart Kim, Michael Koelle, Kerry Kornfeld, Michel Labouesse, Eric Lander, Joshua Levin, Chris Li, Leslie Lobel, David Lombard, Xiaowei Lu, Andras Madi, Steve McIntire, Marianne McPherson, Mark Metzstein, Eric Miska, Mireya Nadal-Vicens, Dan Omura, Barbara Osborne, Andrea Page, Joan Park, Dianne Parry, Erica Pascal, Ignacio Perez de la Cruz, Rajesh Ranganathan, Peter Reddien, Niels Ringstad, Denise Roberts, Marsha Rosner, Richard Russell, Gary Ruvkun, Hitoshi Sawa, Beth Sawin, Hillel Schwartz, Shai Shaham, Liz Speliotes, Gillian Stanfield, Kristen Stephens, Michael Stern, Paul Sternberg, Jeff Thomas, Jim Thomas, Carol Trent, Nancy Tsung, Nadine Urann, Sander Van den Heuvel, Clem Wang, Eve Wolinsky, Yi-Chun Wu, Fang Xie, Ding Xue, Junying Yuan and Zheng Zhou.

I thank the members of the *C. elegans* research community for establishing and maintaining a field that has been friendly, supportive, interactive and open in the sharing of data, reagents, techniques and even ideas. In particular, Bob Edgar played a pivotal role by founding The Worm Breeder’s Gazette, in which unpublished observations and methods have been broadly distributed, sometimes long before publication.

I thank the funding agencies that have supported my research. The Muscular Dystrophy Association and the UK Medical Research Council funded my initial studies of *C. elegans* while I was a postdoctoral researcher in Sydney Brenner’s laboratory in Cambridge, England. After my move to MIT in 1978, my research was funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health

and, beginning in 1988, by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. I am very appreciative of this financial support, which I believe illustrates an important point. These agencies funded me to do very basic research at a time where neither the generality nor the application of our efforts was at all clear. *C. elegans* was an obscure organism. Genetic studies are often highly abstract, and there was no existing technology available to link genetic observations of *C. elegans* with the molecular and biochemical findings being made in studies of other organisms. My research did not target any disease, nor did I know if the biology we uncovered would be relevant to any organism not closely related to *C. elegans*. Nonetheless, our studies established mechanisms that appear to be universal among animals, and our findings may help provide the basis for new treatments for a broad variety of human diseases.

Some important points emerge from these considerations. First, basic research can lead in unexpected ways to insights of substantial practical importance. Time and time again, truly basic studies of simple experimental organisms have proved directly relevant to human biology and human disease. An investment in such basic studies is an effective investment indeed. However, this investment must be made outside of the private sector, by governments and foundations, because only such organizations can act based on the fact that discoveries from basic research have a high likelihood of benefiting humanity, but in ways that cannot be predicted and hence cannot constitute a robust “business plan.” I thank those responsible for my early support who, either for these reasons or perhaps more simply because they believed that the pursuit of knowledge is a vital aspect of human culture, saw fit to support our studies of the genetics of cell lineage and programmed cell death in a microscopic worm.

I dedicate this lecture to my mother, Mary Horvitz, and to the memory of my father, Oscar Horvitz.

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