SCIREA Journal of Biology

http://www.scirea.org/journal/Biology

August 15, 2021

Volume 6, Issue 4, August 2021

Genesis of Epithelial Polarity in Early Mammalian Embryos

Xu XX, Smith ER, Salas PJ

Department of Radiation Oncology, Department of Cell Biology, University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, Miami, FL 33136, USA

ABSTRACT

Epithelial cells comprise the surface layers that cover tissues and organs, and by definition, exhibit an asymmetric surface domain and hence apical-basal polarity. The development of early mammalian embryos, from a fertilized oocyte to a blastocyst and implanted embryo, provides an excellent system to observe the formation and morphogenesis of several epithelia. From our studies of early mouse embryonic development and morphogenesis, we propose that there are at the least three distinct types of mechanisms for polarization of epithelial cells: the classical tight junction and Par complexes; cell autonomous polarity established by endocytosis; and the subtle polarization caused by the formation of an apical actin cap of adjacent cells. Here, we describe the understanding of the genesis of four embryonic epithelial structures, the trophectoderm, inner cell mass, primitive endoderm, and epiblast, and the genes that are critical for their epithelial polarity and associated morphogenesis.

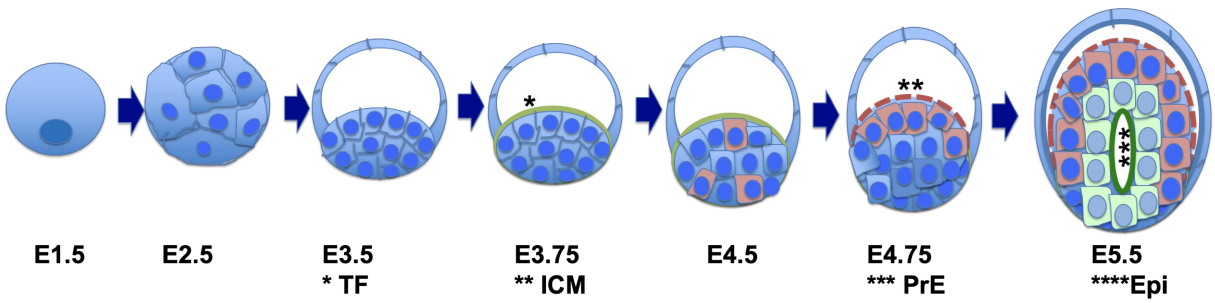
Keywords: blastocysts, early embryos, morphogenesis, cell sorting, embryonic stem cells, epithelial polarity.

Introduction

Early mammalian embryos, especially mouse blastocysts, provide a relatively simple, excellent model to study developmental lineage differentiation and morphogenesis (Rossant, 2004; Lu et al., 2001; Stephenson et al., 2012; Zhang and Hiiragi, 2018). Cell proliferation within a fertilized oocyte, and subsequent spontaneous assembly of cells in blastocysts and pre-implanting embryos lead to the development of four simple epithelial structures: the trophectoderm, the inner cell mass, and subsequent formation of the primitive endoderm and epiblast (**Figure 1**). Particularly, the embryonic system allows us to observe the emergence of the polarized epithelial structures from the aggregates of precursor cells (Eckert and Fleming, 2008; Zhang and Hiiragi, 2018). Such analyses of the formation of cell polarity may bring the most profound understanding of the simplest and essential features in cell organization into epithelial structure.

Figure 1. Illustration of the progressive morphogenesis and structure formation in early mouse embryos.

One cell embryo (fertilized oocyte) divides to a multiple cell aggregate. At around 38 cell stage, the dividing embryo undergoes compaction to form blastocoel cavity and inner cell mass (ICM), a stage known as the blastocysts. A polarized trophectoderm layer is formed (*). The surface of ICM polarizes, signified by a layer of apical actin (**). Subsequently, primitive endoderm differentiation occurs in cells randomly distributed in ICM. The primitive endoderm cells sort to the surface, forming a polarized epithelium (***). A lumen is then developed, enveloped by a polarized ectoderm epithelium (****).



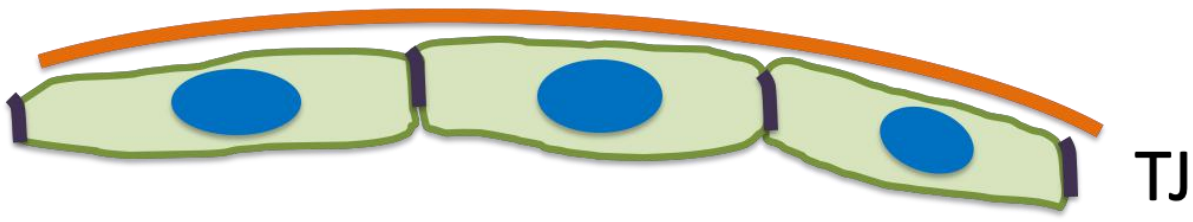
Here, we discuss the studies supporting our proposal for three distinct types of mechanisms for generating apical-basal polarity. Particularly, we describe the development of subtle polarization by the formation of an apical actin cap on the surface of the inner cell mass, the cell autonomous polarity established by Dab2-dependent directional endocytosis in the primitive endoderm, and the epithelial polarity that occurs due to the classical tight junction and Par complexes of the trophectoderm and epiblast. Our discussion is limited as several excellent reviews on early embryogenesis and morphogenesis will provide more

comprehensive reviews of the topics (Leung et al., 2016; Lim and Plachta, 2021; Martin et al., 2021; Zhang and Hiiragi, 2018; Zhu et al., 2020). Several significant and informative recent studies also provide additional advance beyond the scope of the current concise review (Kim et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2019; Shahbazi et al., 2016, 2017; Zenker et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2017).

Trophectoderm epithelium

The trophectoderm is the first epithelium established in the early mammalian embryos/blastocysts. Extensive studies have mapped the development of the trophectoderm lineage and the generation of a polarized epithelium (Stephenson et al., 2010). Prior to the blastocyst stage, cells of the outer layer of the early mouse embryos (blastomeres) differentiate into trophectoderm, which exhibits apical-basal polarity and envelops the apolar cells of the inner cell mass (Stephenson et al., 2010). After cavitation occurs to form blastocysts, the trophectoderm develops into a single layer of polarized epithelium (Stephenson et al., 2010) (**Figure 2**), where F-actin, PKCzeta, and P-ERM are found at the apical domain, and Na^+/K^+-ATPase, Jam-1, and FGFR2 segregate to the basal bilateral domain (Salas-Vidal and Lomelí, 2004; Stephenson et al., 2010; Anani et al., 2014). E-cadherin is critical for the formation of tight junction in the generation of polarity and organization of the epithelium; however, trophectoderm apical-basal polarity and surface positioning of the epithelial cells are independent of differentiation into the trophectoderm and inner cell mass lineages (Stephenson et al., 2010).

Figure 2. Formation of trophectoderm. An E-cadherin dependent process of cell compaction leads to the progression of the embryo to blastocyst stage. A polarized trophectoderm consisting of single cell layer jointed with tight junction is formed (*).

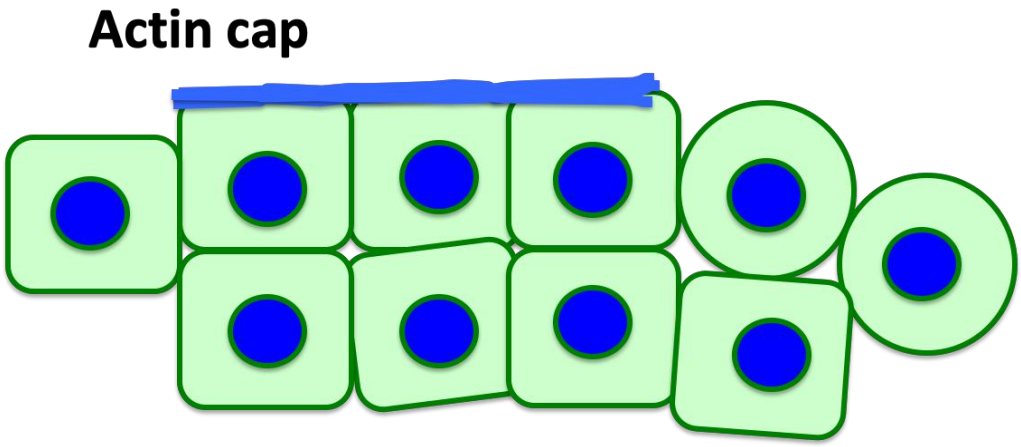


Prior to the formation of trophectoderm layer, the blastomere shows an outer/inner configuration of cells within the embryonic cell aggregate, in which an actin cap forms on the surface of the outer cell layer (Salas-Vidal and Lomelí, 2004; Stephenson et al., 2010; Anani et al., 2014). Thus, the polarization of the trophectoderm may be initiated by asymmetric distribution of apical actin cap (discussed further in a later section). However, the polarity of the mature trophectoderm epithelium appears to fit the criteria of the classical tight junction containing PKCzeta and ZO-1/ZO-2, components of the polarity complex. Several atypical PKC (aPKC) isoforms appear to participate in the formation of trophectoderm polarity, indicating possible redundancy of the PKC isoforms in early embryogenesis (Carracedo et al., 2014). Disturbing the activity of the aPKC/PAR6 complex using siRNA to down-regulate aPKClambda expression results in an absence of tight junctions. Although polarity of the trophectoderm is not abolished at the earlier (8-cell) stage, it is severely defective at the 16-cell stage (Dard et al., 2009). Thus, likely the actin cap formation with adherent junction accounts for the polarity of the earlier stage, though tight junction is critical for the maintenance of polarity of the more mature trophectoderm. The polarized surface cells generally take on a trophectoderm cell fate, and the nonpolar cells eventually internalize to become cells of the inner cell mass. Thus, polarity rather than cell position is important in cell fate commitment (Anani et al., 2014). Although E-cadherin and the components of the classical polarity complex are not essential for trophectoderm lineage differentiation (Stephenson et al., 2010), the apical domain of the surface cells that contains the actin cap serves as a cue that is required and sufficient to initiate the differentiation (Korotkevich et al., 2017). Therefore, the initial polarization marked by the asymmetric distribution of actin at the apical domain, due to inner/outer configuration, may be the initial cue in the initiation of trophectoderm differentiation. However, polarization by tight junction plays a critical role in maintaining surface positioning and epithelial organization of the trophectoderm.

Surface polarity of the cell of inner cell mass

Prior to differentiation, the cells of the inner cell mass (ICM) are pluripotent and resemble an aggregation of embryonic stem (ES) cells. Studies of ES cell aggregates in culture revealed that the outer layers of the ICM develop a subtle polarity, in which an actin cap involving several adjacent cells can be found upon maturation of the ES cell aggregates (Yano et al., 2017) (**Figure 3**). The presence and function of this polarity in the blastocysts are not understood.

Figure 3. Development of polarity on the surface of inner cell mass. Within the blastocyst covered by a layer of trophectoderm cells, an aggregate of . A subtle polarity is formed on the surface by adjacent cells of the inner cell mass, signified by apical actin cap spanning multiple adjacent cells (**). At this stage, no tight junction is established.



The significance of this subtle epithelial polarity was shown in studies of cell sorting between highly adhesive wild type and less adhesive E-cadherin null ES cells. The highly adhesive ES cells were able to sort and position on surface and envelop the E-cadherin deficient cells (Tse et al., 2021). The sorting pattern was opposite that of predicted by the differential adhesive affinity hypothesis (Steinberg, 2007). The force for the retention of the highly adhesive cells on surface can be attributed to the ability of the cells to develop a subtle apical polarity signified by an actin cap (Lim and Plachta, 2021; Yano et al., 2017). This type of epithelial polarity differs apparently from the classic epithelial polarity that is formed by tight junctions and involves Par6, PKC-alpha, and ZO-1/2. The subtle surface polarity may be transient and the surface layer will then be disrupted and replaced by primitive endoderm that subsequently develops.

The apical actin cap is also seen on the surface of blastomeres (Salas-Vidal and Lomelí, 2004; Stephenson et al., 2010; Anani et al., 2014), and may be the initiation signal that triggers the segregation of the outer trophectoderm from the cells of the inner cell mass lineages (Korotkevich et al., 2017).

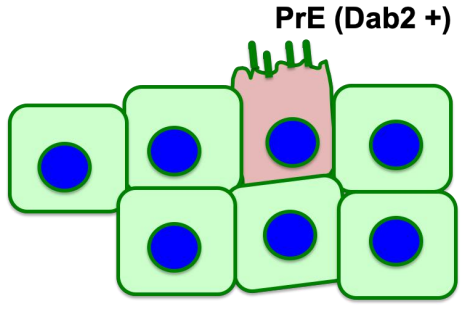
Cell sorting and the formation of primitive endoderm epithelium

Immediately prior to implantation at around E4.5, a primitive endoderm epithelial structure develops that covers the epiblast (**Figure 1**). The initial differentiation of the primitive endoderm lineage occurs randomly within the ICM (Rossant, 2004). Differentiation depends

on the transcription factor GATA6 (Cai et al., 2008; Bessonnard et al., 2014), and the Fgf/Ras/MAPK signaling pathway (Chazaud et al., 2006; Kang et al., 2013; Krawchuk et al., 2013; Kuijk et al., 2012; Lanner and Rossant, 2010). Erk1/2 phosphorylation of GATA6 enables the activation of the GATA6 self-promoter in a positive feed forward mechanism (Meng et al., 2018). Subsequently, the differentiated cells sort to the surface to form the primitive endoderm layer (Chazaud and Yamanaka, 2016; Rula et al., 2007). The progressive development of apical polarity has been well documented (Gerbe et al., 2008).

The embryonic phenotype of Dab2-deficient mice provides substantial clues to the mechanism for the cell sorting and formation of the primitive endoderm (Yang et al., 2002; 2007; Moore et al., 2013). Primitive endoderm differentiation occurs in the absence of Dab2. However, the differentiated cells fail to sort and form a surface layer; rather the primitive endoderm cells instead intermingle with the epiblast cells. Dab2 is an endocytosis adaptor, and links endocytic cargos to myosin VI, a motor that travels along actin bundles (Dance et al., 2004; Morris et al., 2002). Dab2 mediates unique directional trafficking of endocytic cargos that gives rise to apical polarity, and the Dab2-dependent polarity enables the sorting and positioning of the primitive endoderm layer (Yang et al. 2007; Moore et al., 2013). Thus, the initial polarity of the primitive endoderm cells is cell autonomous, and cell-cell adhesion of multiple primitive endoderm cells is not required initially (**Figure 4**). This property would allow the differentiated cells to reach surface gradually and independently, and form a continuous outer layer subsequently. The cell-cell adhesion independent polarity of the primitive may also allow the subsequent differentiation and migration of the cells to the parietal endoderm to cover the blastocoel.

Figure 4. Formation of Apical polarity of primitive endoderm. At around E4.5, primitive endoderm differentiation occurs, and Dab2 is a marker of primitive endoderm cells. The differentiated cells randomly distributed either superficially or internally. Subsequently, the cells sort to surface by a Dab2-dependent mechanism to form a primitive endoderm epithelial layer. The primitive endoderm epithelial cells are thought to position on surface by a cell autonomous mechanism for intrinsic ability to establish polarity once reaching cell surface. The polarization of the primitive endoderm cells is thought to rely on endocytosis by a Dab2-depedent directional endocytic trafficking of cargos along cytoskeletal network.



As this type of apical polarity is considered to depend on Dab2-mediated directional trafficking of endocytic cargos on actin filaments, it would be reasonable to assume that the described polarity depends on the actin cytoskeleton. It has not been tested if the primitive endoderm sorting to surface relies on the actin cytoskeleton.

At a later stage, the primitive endoderm matures into the visceral endoderm, and differentiation involves the classical tight junction dependent apical basal polarity. It is reported that ZO-1 and ZO-2 are required for extraembryonic endoderm in embryoid body models (Phua et al., 2014). Although aPKC and PKCZ gene knockouts present a much later embryonic lethality phenotype (Sengupta et al., 2011; Saiz et al., 2013), suggesting the classical tight junction dependent polarity mechanism is not essential for the formation of primitive endoderm epithelium and neither is required for the formation of a polarized epithelial layer. Likely, these genes participate in the proper function and fine regulation of the primitive endoderm epithelium, but their functions may be redundant and their absence does not stop the formation of the basic epithelial polarity.

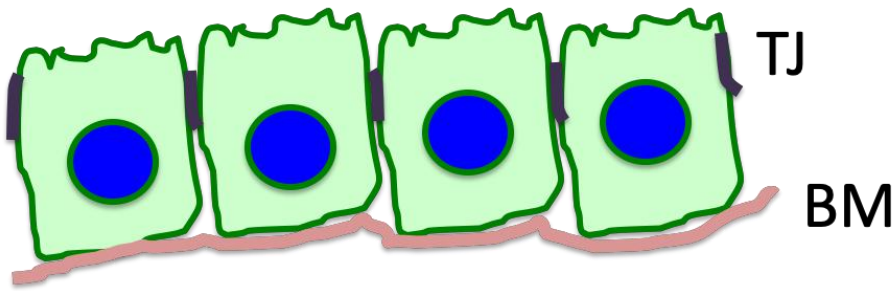
Integrin beta1 is essential for embryonic development at the primitive endoderm stages (Fässler and Meyer,1995; Stephens et al., 1995). Further analyses of integrin beta1 null embryos and embryoid bodies indicated that a polarized primitive endoderm layer forms initially; however, the differentiated endoderm cell layer rounds up and detaches because the cells fail to bind the basement membrane (Moore et al., 2014). Although integrin beta1 apparently is required for organization of the primitive endoderm, the cell adhesion molecule is not essential for polarity of the primitive endoderm cells (Moore et al., 2014).

Thus, so far only Dab2 has been clearly shown to be required for primitive endoderm polarization and organization (Yang et al. 2007; Moore et al., 2013). Another, similar-functioning endocytosis adaptor, Arh, is also expressed in the early embryos, but is not essential for primitive endoderm development (Maurer and Cooper, 2005; Tao et al., 2016). The Dab2 protein is found in many epithelia including the kidney, lactating mammary gland, ovary, and other tissues (Tao et al., 2017); however, Dab2 does not appear to be essential for the formation of other epithelium in the embryos, since deletion of Dab2 in the embryo proper but not in extraembryonic tissues using Sox2-Cre can bypass embryonic lethality (Moore et al., 2013).

Embryonic cavitation and the formation of the epiblast epithelium

In mouse embryos at around the E5.5 stage, the proamniotic cavity forms in the center of the epiblast, and the epiblast cells organize into a layer of polarized epithelium (**Figure 1**). Proamniotic cavitation has traditionally been thought to occur by apoptotic cell death (Coucouvanis and Martin, 1995; 1999). However, recent observations indicate that the cavity forms by the expansion of an adhesion rosette, rather than cell death (Bedzhov and Zernicka-Goetz, 2014; Christodoulou et al., 2018). Expansion of the rosette creates a luminal surface and thus establishes polarity of the epithelial cells. One idea is that the polarity is created by ligation of integrins to the basement membrane on the basal side (Bedzhov and Zernicka-Goetz, 2014).

Figure 5. Epithelial polarity of embryonic ectoderm and the formation of proamniotic lumen. At around E5.5 stage, E-cadherin mediated cell–cell adhesion intensifies in the epiblast and stimulates increased Pten focal expression that initiates the formation of a dominant rosette (multiple ZO-1 focal stainings and Pten positive). The epithelial tight junction and apical surface are matured at the rosette, which expands into the proamniotic lumen composed of polarized epithelial cells. Excessive cells located within the lumen may be removed by apoptosis. When Pten is absent, cell adherent junctions form at random cell–cell contact sites, but no concentrated localization of tight junctions are initiated to establish a dominant rosette. Thus, Pten is required for proamniotic cavitation of mouse embryos before gastrulation, by the mechanism of epiblast cell polarization and rosette formation rather than apoptosis. Pten activity initiates apical polarity and subsequent expansion of the rosette into the proamniotic lumen.



The analysis of Pten deficient embryos provides additional clues to the mechanism of cavitation and the origin of epiblast epithelial polarity (Meng et al., 2017) (**Figure 5**). Despite the presence of a well-developed visceral endoderm, a proamniotic lumen fails to form in Pten knockout embryos, suggesting an essential role of Pten in the creation of the lumen (Meng et al., 2017). Pten expression was found to concentrate at the site of a rosette in the pre-cavitation embryos and embryoid bodies, suggesting the localization of Pten there may be an initiating signal of polarity (Meng et al., 2017). PKCa and ZO-1 are also present at the site of the lumen opening, indicating the formation of tight junction is required for the initiation of epiblast lumen polarity (Christodoulou et al., 2018). The developing luminal

epithelium exhibits strong ZO-1 marked tight junctions (Meng et al., 2017), which indicates that the epiblast/ectoderm epithelial polarity is established via a classical tight junction mechanism. Additionally, cortical actin also presents along with tight junction markers as the rosette expands to form a lumen (Meng et al., 2017). The initiation of polarity from the rosette structure may be accounted for by strong lateral E-cadherin bonding of the adjacent cells. Consistently, it is reported that E-cadherin mediates the induction Pten expression (Lau et al., 2011). Besides Pten, we are not aware of rigorous studies of embryos of any additional gene deletions that exhibit a similar phenotype—a failure of cavitation and luminal formation of the epiblast.

Consistently, the development of ectoderm fails in knockout mouse embryos lacking aPKC or PKC zeta (Saiz et al., 2013; Sengupta et al., 2011), key components of the tight junction polarity complex. In embryoid body models, the ectoderm does not organize when both ZO-1 and ZO-2 are absent (Phua et al., 2014). Thus, establishment of ectoderm epithelium requires the classical tight junction polarity complex.

Genes involved in embryonic epithelial polarity

The embryonic phenotypes of gene knockout mice may serve as an indication for the involvement of a gene in the genesis of epithelial polarity (**Table 1**). Only a few genes present an early lethality in knockout mice, and only a subset of these genes may act in morphogenesis rather than cell survival, proliferation, and differentiation. Presumably, genes affect morphogenesis and the assembly of cells, and act by affecting a few defined physical mechanisms, by affecting such as cell-cell adhesion, cell-matrix adhesion, and cell polarity.

TABLE 1. Gene knockout affecting early mouse embryonic morphogenesis

Gene(s)	Manipulation	Phenotype(s)	References
E-cadherin	Gene Knockout	E3.0: failed cell compaction to form blastocyst cavity, failed trophectoderm formation	Larue et al., 1994; Ohsugi et al., 1997; Stephenson et al., 2010
Intigrin beta1	Gene Knockout	E4.5-E5.5: primitive endoderm segregation from epiblast	Moore et al., 2019
Dab2	Gene Knockout	E5.0: extraembryonic endoderm disorganization	Yang et al., 2002; 2007;

			Moore et al., 2013
Pten	Gene Knockout	E5.5 to E6.5: Fail to undergo proamniotic cavitation	Meng et al., 2018
ZO-1 and ZO-2	Embryoid bodies of knockout ES cells	ZO-1 and ZO-2 are required for extra-embryonic endoderm integrity, primitive ectoderm survival and normal cavitation in embryoid bodies.	Phua et al., 2014
ZO-2	Gene knockout	E6.5, Fail to undergo proamniotic cavitation	Xu et al., 2008
PI3KC3	Gene knockout	Failed cavitation at E6.5-7.5	Zhou et al., 2011
Rho-Associated Kinase	Inhibitors, RNAi	Abnormal morphogenesis of ICM	Laeno et al., 2013
Par3	Gene knockout	Mid-gestation (E10.5-11.5)	Hirose et al., 2006
Par6	Gene knockout	Early (no detail)	
CDC42	Gene knockout	Failed cavitation at E6.5-7.5	Chen et al, 2000
aPKC	Inhibitors, RNAi	Deficient PrE maturation and organization	Saiz et al., 2013
aPKCλ: Protein kinase C-zeta (PKCZ)	Gene knockout	Very early embryonic lethality (no details)	Sengupta et al., 2011
PARD6B	siRNA	trophectoderm formation in preimplantation	Alarcon et al., 2010
Prkci	Gene knockout, embryoidbodies	cavitation	Mah et al., 2016

Notes: The knockout of the following genes has later (later than E7.5 stage) embryonic phenotypes, including N-cadherin (Radice et al., 1997), Arh (Tao et al., 2016), FAK (Furuta et al., 1995), collagens (Pöschl et al., 2004), laminins (Li et al., 2003), Rac1 (Sugihara et al., 1998), aPKCζ (Leitges et al., 2001), Crumbs3 (Whiteman et al., 2014), PKCι (Forteza et al., 2016).

The reasons for lack of an early embryonic phenotype may be redundant gene functions or the roles are not critical in morphogenesis.

Here, we do not include knockout of genes that do not primarily impact morphogenesis, but rather affect lineage differentiation and cell growth and survivals (such as GATA6, Grb2, Oct3/4, Nanog, etc.).

The trophectoderm is the first epithelial structure that forms in mammalian embryos, and several of polarity genes are known to affect trophectoderm development, such as PARD6B (Alarcon et al., 2010). At the end, trophectoderm polarity appears to be the classic type that requires formation of tight junctions (Salas-Vidal and Lomelí, 2004; Stephenson et al., 2010; Anani et al., 2014). The trophectoderm epithelium progressively recruits proteins to the tight junction complexes, correlating with an increased loss in permeability (Wiley et al., 1990).

Polarity complex proteins such as ZO-1 and ZO-2, PI3KC3, Rho-Associated Kinase, Par3; Par6, CDC42, and aPKCλ, affect the epiblast (Phua et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2011; Laeno et al., 2013; Hirose et al., 2006; Chen et al, 2000; Saiz et al., 2013; Sengupta et al., 2011) (**Table 1**), suggesting that tight junction polarity is critical for the development of the ectoderm layer.

Pten is involved in the formation of epiblast epithelial structure; however, Pten deletion does not affect the trophectoderm layer (Meng et al., 2018). It is possible that Pten plays a critical role in the initiation of polarization in the interior of cell aggregates by providing the first cue, but in trophectoderm differentiation the initiation cue is given by the inner/outer cells configuration.

Dab2 is required for polarization and formation of the primitive endoderm. Surprisingly, however, deletion of Dab2 within the inner cell mass using Sox2-cre does not at all affect the development of embryo proper (Moore et al., 2013). Thus, it appears that Dab2-mediated endocytosis to achieve cell polarization is only required for the development and organization of primitive endoderm. The mechanism may be used again during development, but those are non-essential, likely because of redundant functions from other endocytic adaptor proteins or another redundant mechanism to achieve cell polarization.

Summary: Variations in types and mechanisms of epithelial polarity

Epithelial polarity is commonly recognized as a structural feature signified by the presence of tight junctions (Johnson and McConnell, 2004; Chen and Zhang, 2013; Nance, 2014; Campanale et al., 2017). Indeed, this classic type of polarity is probably present in the majority of epithelial structures, particularly in mature adult tissues (Joberty et al., 2000). Our investigation of polarity in embryonic epithelia recognizes additional distinct types, one of which depends upon Dab2 and the other formed by an apical actin cap. Studies in embryonic tissues have also allowed us to better understand the mechanisms responsible for initiation and formation of polarized epithelial structures.

Thus, we propose that epithelial polarity at the least can be classified into three different types, discussed below.

Epithelial polarity signified by the Par complex, which includes Par6, Par3, ZO-1/2, and aPKC (Joberty et al., 2000; Chen and Zhang, 2013), requires the adhesion of multiple cells to

form a layer. The epiblast/embryonic ectoderm epithelium is an example of this classic type of polarity in early mammalian embryos. A second type requires directional endocytic trafficking to establish an asymmetric distribution of cellular components, and is dependent upon Dab2 (or additional endocytic adaptors). This polarity can be cell autonomous, and may entail asymmetrically arranged actin or microtubule cytoskeletons. We also observe a type of subtle polarity presented by an actin cap spanning the apical surfaces of multiple adjacent cells (Tse et al., 2021). This third type of epithelial polarity often appears to first emerge from E-cadherin-mediated cell-cell adhesion on a tissue surface, but the polarized organization is then replaced by tight junction protein complex (Eckert and Fleming, 2008).

Furthermore, actual polarity in epithelial tissues may be a combination of two, or perhaps all three, of the discussed mechanisms. The uncoupling of these mechanisms in the presentation of epithelial polarity has been observed. For example, apical polarity is not eliminated when tight junctions are eliminated (Vega-Salas et al., 1987). Also, polarity is still retained with actin and microtubule cytoskeletons are disrupted (Salas et al., 1986). These studies indicate various mechanisms and multiple types of epithelial polarity are involved in achieving the asymmetric structure.

Epithelial polarity may be established initially with only minimal and essential features. The early epithelium may be highly dynamic and changeable to allow rapid expansion and development. However, many of the epithelial structures may undergo maturation with increasingly complex features and higher stability, to reach a homeostatic state. Thus, in more established epithelial structure, two or more mechanisms (an apical actin network, directional endocytic transport, and/or formation of tight junctions) may cooperate to facilitate epithelial polarity that is robust and exhibits redundant processes.

Likely, recognition of these mechanisms will allow us to approach understanding the principles in cell assembly and technical ability for application in regenerative medicine.

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