Molecular-Guided Endoscopy Targeting Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor A for Improved Colorectal Polyp Detection

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Both contributed equally

Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Clinical Pharmacy and Pharmacology, Clinical Pharmacy, Surgery University Medical Center Groningen, the Netherlands; Chair for Biological Imaging & Institute for Biological and Medical Imaging, Technical University of Munich and Helmholtz Center Munich, Munich, Germany; Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Pathology, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, the Netherlands
**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction** Small and flat adenomas are known to carry a high miss-rate during standard white-light endoscopy. Increased detection rate may be achieved by molecular-guided endoscopy with targeted near-infrared (NIR) fluorescent tracers. The aim of this study was to validate vascular endothelial growth factor A (VEGFA) and epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) targeted fluorescent tracers during ex vivo colonoscopy with a NIR endoscopy platform.

**Methods** VEGFA and EGFR expression was determined by immunohistochemistry on a large subset of human colorectal tissue samples: 48 sessile serrated adenomas/polyps (SSA/P), 70 sporadic high-grade dysplastic (HGD) adenomas, 19 hyperplastic polyps (HP) and tissue derived from patients with Lynch syndrome (LS): 78 low-grade dysplastic (LGD) adenomas, 57 HGD adenomas and 31 colon cancer samples. To perform an ex vivo colonoscopy procedure, 14 mice with small intraperitoneal EGFR-positive HCT116Luc tumors received intravenously bevacizumab-800CW (anti-VEGFA), cetuximab-800CW (anti-EGFR), control tracer IgG-800CW or sodium chloride. Three days later, 8 resected HCT116Luc tumors (2-5 mm) were stitched into one freshly resected human colon specimen and followed by an ex vivo molecular-guided colonoscopy procedure.

**Results** Immunohistochemistry showed high VEGFA expression in 79-96% and high EGFR expression in 51-69% of the colorectal lesions. Both targets were significantly overexpressed in the colorectal lesions compared to the adjacent normal colon crypts. During ex vivo molecular-guided endoscopy all tumors could clearly be delineated for both bevacizumab-800CW and cetuximab-800CW tracers. Specific tumor uptake was confirmed with fluorescent microscopy showing respectively stromal and cell membrane fluorescence.

**Conclusion** VEGFA is a promising target for molecular-guided fluorescence endoscopy as it showed a high protein expression, especially in SSA/P and LS. We demonstrate the feasibility to visualize small tumors real-time during colonoscopy using a NIR fluorescence endoscopy platform, providing the endoscopist a wide-field ‘red-flag’ technique for adenoma detection. Clinical studies are currently being performed in order to provide in-human evaluation of our approach.
INTRODUCTION

White-light endoscopy is the gold standard for detection of premalignant and malignant colorectal lesions. Despite the efficacy of current colonoscopy, small and especially right-sided flat or serrated adenomas are notoriously difficult to detect, resulting in substantial polyp detection miss-rates of 20-26%. Missed lesions are a main risk factor for the occurrence of interval cancers, particularly in high-risk patients such as patients with Lynch syndrome (LS). Advanced endoscopic imaging modalities, like narrow-band imaging, autofluorescence imaging and chromoendoscopy have been extensively investigated, but did not show significant improvement in adenoma detection rates. Ideally, white-light endoscopy is combined with a sensitive, wide field of view, ‘red-flag’ technique to assist the endoscopist in the immediate identification of aberrant lesions. Molecular optical imaging, i.e. visualizing the molecular signature of cells in vivo, would be highly suitable for this aim. It enables real-time anatomical and functional imaging and it is safe, fast and relatively inexpensive. With the use of selective optical agents functioning in the near-infrared (NIR) light spectrum, contrast between normal mucosa and dysplastic tissue could potentially be greatly enhanced, thereby reducing miss-rates. These agents should target biomarkers known to be overexpressed in colorectal cancer like epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) or shown to be overexpressed early in the adenoma-carcinoma sequence, as described for vascular endothelial growth factor A (VEGFA), due to the angiogenic switch. The aim of the current study was to validate VEGFA and EGFR-targeting fluorescent antibodies in visualizing small colorectal lesions real-time with our novel NIR endoscopy platform. Therefore, we first determined the expression of potential targets VEGFA and EGFR in archival human colorectal samples, including sessile serrated adenomas/polyps (SSA/P) and adenomatous and carcinomatous tissue of patients with LS. Secondly, we performed a simulated endoscopy procedure to validate our VEGFA and EGFR targeting NIR fluorescent tracers.
MATERIALS AND METHODS

Immunohistochemistry of Human Colorectal Lesions
The archival formalin-fixed and paraffin-embedded human colorectal tissue set consisted of: sessile serrated adenomas/polyps (SSA/P) (n=48; 42 different individuals), Lynch low-grade dysplasia (LGD) adenomas (n=78; 62 individuals), Lynch high-grade dysplasia (HGD) adenomas (n=57; 40 individuals), Lynch colon cancer tissue (n=32; 31 individuals), sporadic adenomas with HGD (n=70; 70 individuals) and hyperplastic polyps (HP) (n=19; 18 individuals). The tissue was handled according to Dutch Code of Conduct for proper use of Human Tissue (www.federa.org) and the study was conducted according to the guidelines of the medical ethical committee of our hospital (www.ccmo.nl). To evaluate the clinical relevance of an anti-VEGF and anti-EGFR fluorescent tracer for colorectal surveillance, the protein expression of VEGFA and EGFR was determined by immunohistochemistry (IHC). Slides were rehydrated via graded alcohols. Antigen retrieval was retrieved with 0.100M Tris/HCl (pH 9.0, 15 minutes) for VEGF and 0.1% Proteinase K (30 minutes) for EGFR. Endogenous peroxidase blocking was performed during 30 minutes with 0.42% hydrogen peroxide, followed by avidin-biotin blocking. For VEGF, sections were incubated for one hour with polyclonal rabbit anti-human VEGFA (Santacruz) (1:50) and consecutive for 30 minutes with swine anti-rabbit biotin (1:300 in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) with 1% bovine serum albumin (BSA)) and Streptavidin (1:300 in PBS/1% BSA). For EGFR, sections were incubated for one hour with monoclonal mouse anti-EGFR (clone 31G7, Invitrogen) (1:50 in PBS/1% BSA) and consecutive for 30 minutes with rabbit anti-mouse peroxidase (1:100) and goat anti-rabbit peroxidase (1:100). Color development was achieved by applying a 3-3’-diaminobenzine-tetrahydrochloride (DAB) reagent (Sigma) for 10 minutes. PBS was used throughout for washing and all steps occurred at room temperature. Finally, sections were counterstained with Mayer’s hematoxylin, dehydrated in alcohol and coverslipped. Staining intensities were independently evaluated by two individuals; consensus was achieved in discrepant cases by consulting an experienced pathologist. Dysplasia, cancer and adjacent normal epithelium, if present, were separately scored and compared. Staining intensities were graded using a 0-3 scale (0 = completely negative, 1 = weak, 2 = moderate, 3 = strong staining).

Cell Culture
The HCT116<sup>luc</sup> human colon cancer cell line, stably transfected with the firefly gene luciferase, was obtained from Caliper Life Sciences. The cells were grown in a monolayer culture using McCoy’s 5A Medium (Gibco®, Life Technologies) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, in a humidified atmosphere containing 5% CO<sub>2</sub> at 37°C. EGFR cell surface expression
was confirmed for HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} (data not shown) with the use of fluorescence activated cell sorting (FACS; BD FACS Calibur, BD Biosciences).

**Fluorescent Labeling of Monoclonal Antibodies**

As described previously, the monoclonal antibodies bevacizumab (Roche), cetuximab (Merck) and human IgG (Nanogram, Sanquin) were labeled with IRDye800CW-NHS (LI-COR Biosciences).\textsuperscript{14,15} This NIR fluorescent dye underwent extensive toxicity testing and is a GMP compliant compound, registered at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.\textsuperscript{16,17}

**HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} Human Xenograft Tumors**

All experiments were approved by the animal welfare committee of the University of Groningen and carried out in accordance with the Dutch Animal Welfare Act of 1997. To obtain multiple small tumor lesions, fourteen male athymic nude mice (Harlan, Horst, the Netherlands) received an intraperitoneal (IP) injection with 200µL of 2×10\textsuperscript{6} HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} cells suspended in PBS. Tumor growth was monitored with the use of IP injections with D-luciferin reconstituted in PBS (1.5 mg in 100 µl; PerkinElmer), followed by bioluminescence imaging with an \textit{in vivo} imaging system (IVIS Spectrum; Caliper Life Sciences). At day 14 all mice reached bioluminescent signals indicating sufficient tumor growth, where after 100 µg bevacizumab-800CW (n=5), 100 µg cetuximab-800CW (n=5), 100 µg human IgG-800CW (n=2) or sodium chloride (n=2) was injected in a total volume of 200 µl. Intravenous injection was performed via the penile vein under general anesthesia. The mice receiving IgG-800CW or sodium chloride served as negative controls. At day 3 post injection mice were euthanized by cervical dislocation and eight small IP tumors (2-5 mm) were harvested for \textit{ex vivo} colonoscopy purposes (2 per tracer). The remaining IP tumors (varying in size between 2 and 5 mm) and mouse organs (liver, colon and muscle) were harvested for \textit{ex vivo} analyses.

**NIR Fluorescence Endoscopy Platform**

The NIR fluorescence endoscopy platform consists of a custom-made Micrendo\textsuperscript{®} fiber-bundle containing 30,000 coherently-arranged individual fibers (Schöllly Fiberoptic GmbH). The imaging bundle conducts the images to the sensor module of a previously developed clinical prototype NIR camera system.\textsuperscript{18,19} This camera system comprises of a color camera and a monochrome one, which operate in parallel for white-light and NIR fluorescence acquisition respectively. A beam splitter (T760lpxr, Chroma Technology) separates the color and NIR image components. Appropriate filtering is provided by a white light shortpass filter with a cut-off wavelength of 750 nm and a fluorescence emission bandpass filter with a central wavelength of 819 nm (bandwidth 44 nm) (THORLABS). Connection of the fiber-bundle
to the camera system is made feasible via a mechanical and focusing adapter, while a multi-branched fiber optic bundle (SEDI-ATI Fibres Optiques) realizes simultaneous white-light illumination and fluorescence excitation (laser at 750 nm) coupling. The performance of the clinical endoscopy platform, namely the characterization of the optical resolution and the sensitivity, was determined as for the preclinical platform.\textsuperscript{20}

**Simulation of a Molecular-Guided NIR Fluorescence Endoscopy Procedure**

To simulate a clinical colonoscopy procedure, an 11 cm long human colon specimen was derived from a right hemicolecotomy of a patient with colon cancer (requirement to obtain informed consent was waived by the Medical Ethical Committee Groningen, METC nr. 2013.446). Immediately after the surgical resection, the healthy part of the colon specimen was transported to the endoscopy suite. Two freshly resected HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} IP tumors (2-5 mm in diameter) per tracer (bevacizumab-800CW, cetuximab-800CW, IgG-800CW or sodium chloride) were stitched onto the luminal side of the colon wall (Fig. 1). Molecular-guided fluorescence endoscopy was performed using a clinical video endoscope (Olympus Exera II GIF-180 series, Olympus), with the fiber-bundle of the NIR fluorescence endoscopy platform inserted through the working channel. The images were displayed on two separate screens, one for the video endoscope derived images and the other for the composite images of the fiber-bundle, combining color and fluorescence. A qualitative assessment of tumor visualization was made during endoscopy and video footage and photo material was collected.

**Figure 1.** HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} tumor cells were inoculated intraperitoneally (IP) in athymic nude mice After tumor establishment, the targeted NIR fluorescent tracer (bevacizumab-800CW or cetuximab-800CW), non-targeted NIR fluorescent tracer (IgG-800CW) or sodium chloride was administered intravenously (IV). Three days after administration, IP tumor lesions (diameter of 2-5 mm) were harvested and stitched in a freshly resected human colon. The ex vivo molecular-guided colonoscopy procedure was performed using a standard video endoscope with the fiber-bundle of the NIR fluorescence endoscopy platform passed through the working channel.
Ex Vivo Analyses
To further validate the findings of the simulated endoscopy procedure, the remaining harvested HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} human xenograft tumors, mouse organs and a part of the human colon tissue were formalin-fixed and paraffin-embedded for microscopic analysis. To detect if 800 nm fluorescence signals were present, 4 \textmu m slides were obtained, deparaffinized (10 minutes xylene), scanned on an Odyssey Infrared Imaging System (intensity 5; LI-COR Biosciences) and subsequently hematoxylin&eosin (H&E) stained. Hoechst staining (33258; Invitrogen) was used to visualize nuclei for fluorescence microscopy. Analysis was performed using a Leica DM6000B inverted wide-field microscope (63x magnification, immersion oil), with a mercury short-arc reflector lamp (HXP-R120W/45C VIS), Leica DFC365FX camera and the filter set 49037ET of Chroma Technology. Images were processed with LAS-AF2 software (Leica Microsystems).

Statistical Analysis
Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20. Per tissue type, the difference in staining intensity between aberrant tissue and adjacent normal tissue was determined via non-parametric Mann-Whitney U testing. The correlation between histological stage of Lynch tissue (LGD adenomas, HGD adenomas and cancer tissue) and staining intensity (0-3) was tested using a Kruskal Wallis test, corrected for multiple testing. Data are presented using Prism (version 5; GraphPad Software) and Adobe Illustrator CS6.

RESULTS
High VEGFA Expression in Human Colorectal Lesions
IHC for VEGFA showed a homogeneous staining pattern within dysplastic and carcinomatous areas (Fig. 2 and Suppl. Fig. 1A). From normal colon crypts towards dysplastic and cancerous areas, a gradually increasing staining intensity was observed (Suppl. Fig. 1B). Moderate to strong VEGFA expression was observed in 96% of Lynch LGD adenomas, 79% of Lynch HGD adenomas, 94% of Lynch colon cancer tissue and 94% of SSA/P. No significant differences in staining intensities could be observed between the different histological stages (LGD, HGD, carcinoma) of the LS samples. In addition, VEGFA demonstrated to be a relevant target for other polyps as well, showing a 94% VEGFA expression in HGD sporadic adenomas and 95% in HP lesions (Fig. 3). For all adenomas, the VEGFA expression was significantly higher compared to the adjacent normal colonic crypts ($P < 0.001$), signifying the potential of this target for adenoma detection.
The percentage of EGFR positive samples was lower for all tissue types: 52% of Lynch LGD adenomas, 51% of Lynch HGD adenomas, 68% of Lynch cancer samples, 52% of SSA/P lesions, 51% of sporadic HGD adenomas and 58% of HP lesions showed a positive receptor staining (Fig. 3). In contrast to VEGFA, EGFR IHC results showed a heterogeneous expression pattern throughout the neoplastic lesions, resulting in EGFR both negative and positive crypts within one adenoma (Fig. 2 and Suppl. Fig. 1A). The EGFR expression was significantly higher when compared to the adjacent normal colon crypts ($P < 0.001$). A gradient of increased EGFR expression from normal towards dysplastic crypts was not observed.

![Figure 2](image.png)

**Figure 2.** Representative IHC stainings of VEGFA and EGFR in one hyperplastic polyp and one sessile serrated adenoma/polyp (SSA/P). Both lesions were scored 3 (strong) for VEGFA and 2 (moderate) for EGFR.

**Performance of the NIR Fluorescence Endoscopy Platform**

The resolution of the fluorescence endoscopy platform was characterized by imaging the USAF 1951 resolution test chart with the system’s color channel (Fig. 4A). Here we can distinctly identify the vertical and horizontal lines in Element 3 of Group 1, which translates to a spatial resolution of 198.42 µm at a distance of 2 cm. The signal-to-noise ratios (SNR) were determined for a dilution series of IRDye800CW with concentrations ranging between 26.05 µM and 1.55 pM (Fig. 4B). Each subsequent dilution was obtained of a halved concentration of IRDye800CW dissolved in PBS. The detection limit was defined as the concentration where the signal is three times higher than the noise, which corresponds to a SNR of 9.5 dB. The regression line is depicted in red. The detection limit, calculated from the regression line, lies at a concentration of 19.80 nM.
Ex Vivo Colonoscopy Procedure: Real-time Visualization of NIR Fluorescent Lesions

During the ex vivo colonoscopy procedure, the NIR fluorescence endoscopy platform exhibited sufficient sensitivity and resolution for the visualization of all small HCT116L5 tumor xenografts. The endoscopist was able to instantly detect the specifically targeted tumors (2–5 mm) and differentiate these from the control tumors. White-light, fluorescence and composite images were displayed real-time and with a wide field of view. Fluorescence was also clearly visible when the fiber was retracted to a larger distance (~5 cm) of the fluorescent tumors. Control tumors from mice that were given IgG-800CW or sodium chloride showed negligible fluorescence signals and there was no interference of autofluorescence of the human colon tissue.

Figure 3. VEGFA and EGFR expression for colorectal adenomas with low-grade dysplasia (LGD) of patients with Lynch syndrome (LS), adenomas with high-grade dysplasia (HGD) of patients with LS, carcinomas of patients with LS, sessile serrated adenomas/polyps (SSA/P), sporadic adenomas with HGD and hyperplastic polyps (HP).

Figure 4. (A) Detail of the USAF 1951 resolution target image, where the vertical and horizontal lines in Element 3 of Group 1 can be distinctly identified, which translates to a spatial resolution of 198.42 µm at a distance of 2 cm. (B) Signal-to-noise ratio over IRDye800CW concentration measured from the dilution series. The detection limit of 9.5 dB lies at a concentration of 19.80 nM.
IRDye800CW-Labeled Tracers: Ex Vivo Established Target Specificity

*Odyssey imaging system and fluorescence microscopy*

*Ex vivo* macroscopic NIR fluorescence imaging of the deparaffinized tissue slides revealed highly fluorescent tumors with clear tumor delineation (Fig. 6B and Suppl. Fig. 3B) for both bevacizumab-800CW and cetuximab-800CW. IgG-800CW and negative tumors showed low autofluorescence signals (Suppl. Fig. 3E). NIR fluorescence was low in the HE-confirmed necrotic areas of the tumors and healthy adjacent mouse tissue (Figs. 6A and Suppl. Fig. 3A and 3D, orange arrows). Fluorescence microscopy confirmed the localization of bevacizumab-800CW and cetuximab-800CW in the vital parts of the HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} tumors (Fig. 6C and Suppl. Fig. 3C). For bevacizumab-800CW, the fluorescent signal was mainly located in the tumor stroma and surrounding the tumor blood vessels, corresponding with our previous observations for \(^{89}\)Zr- and \(^{111}\)In-labeled bevacizumab.\textsuperscript{14,21} A more homogeneous distribution was seen for cetuximab-800CW in the tumor lesions, with membranous and cytoplasmic localization of the NIR fluorescence signals.\textsuperscript{22}

**Figure 6.** Haemotoxylin and eosin (HE) staining (A), corresponding fluorescence image obtained with Odyssey Scanner (B) and corresponding fluorescence microscopy image (C) of an HCT116\textsuperscript{Luc} tumor targeted with bevacizumab-800CW. The Odyssey scan shows clear fluorescence in all tumor tissue at 800nm, while uptake was negligible in the histologic normal tissue (colon and muscle of the mice, see orange arrows). Fluorescence microscopy demonstrated bevacizumab-800CW to be mainly localized in the stroma of the tumors.
DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates, in a simulation model, that it is feasible to visualize colorectal lesion in real-time, using a novel fluorescence endoscopy platform combined with VEGFA and EGFR targeting NIR fluorescent tracers. Given the observed overall VEGFA overexpression in colorectal lesions, this target appears to be the most relevant for molecular colorectal screening purposes. Especially in colorectal lesions that are easily missed during endoscopy, such as SSA/P lesions and Lynch adenomas, VEGFA was highly overexpressed. The ability to visualize colon lesions in the simulation model used in this study, in combination with the GMP production of 800CW-labelled antibodies, allows rapid translation of this technique towards the clinic.

To the best of our knowledge, no prior data are available on VEGFA expression in sessile serrated adenomas/polyps or neoplastic lesions from high-risk patients, like those with LS. We found a moderate to strong VEGFA expression in the majority of SSA/P and Lynch adenomas. The high VEGFA expression in sporadic adenomas was in concordance with literature.\textsuperscript{23,24} VEGFA expression was significantly higher in adenoma crypts compared to adjacent normal colon crypts, which is a key requirement for successful visualization of target lesions by molecular imaging. Moreover, we observed a gradually increased staining intensity from normal colon crypts towards dysplastic and cancerous areas in many of the samples, which can be explained by the fact that VEGFA expression is regulated by several growth factors present in the microenvironment of premalignant and malignant lesions.\textsuperscript{23}

In contrast, EGFR is overexpressed in only ~50\% of all adenoma lesions, including those of LS patients, and was expressed more heterogeneously throughout the lesions. The observed EGFR expression is in line with previous findings in sporadic adenomas.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, VEGFA seems the most suitable target for screening purposes. In contrast, cetuximab-800CW may still be valuable in evaluating the EGFR expression-status of an already identified lesion. In this setting, our approach could play an assisting role in molecular treatment decision-making processes, whereas EGFR-targeting therapeutics are currently being applied in colorectal carcinomas.

The use of a fiber-bundle based approach is relatively cheap and can easily be incorporated in standard clinical endoscopy procedures, as the fiber-bundle fits through the working channel of a routine clinical video endoscope. Although the fiber images have a significant lower resolution compared to high definition (HD) video endoscope images, the molecular-guided approach is very sensitive and provides strong contrast between the NIR fluorescent-targeted lesions and the surrounding normal tissue. Since the images are real-time and with a wide field of view, this approach can assist in the screening of large surfaces,
with the white-light HD endoscope providing morphological orientation while the fiber can support as a red-flag method.

The technique described in this study has several advantages when compared to other molecular-guided endoscopy approaches. First, confocal laser endomicroscopy, has shown both promising results preclinically and clinically, but has a limited field of view. Therefore, confocal laser endomicroscopy is not suitable for screening purposes, as our technique is, but rather a tool for lesion characterization. Secondly, other research groups have described topical spraying of tracer products to improve detection of dysplastic regions, but this is most attractive for relatively small areas and therefore not practical in the colon. An approach using intravenously injected tracers can circumvent these issues. Finally, the use of a fluorescent tracer emitting in the NIR light spectrum likely improves specificity and tumor-to-background signals when compared to fluorescent dyes of the visible spectrum, since autofluorescence is negligible in the NIR range (Suppl. Figs. 4 and 5).

Previously, in an HCT116 luc xenograft model, a TBR of 3.2±0.9 was seen for bevacizumab-800CW and 5.7±3.0 for cetuximab-800CW three days post injection (Suppl. Fig. 4). However, the commonly used tumor-to-background ratio cannot be reliably evaluated in mice, since the tracers are targeted towards human VEGFA and EGFR. As a consequence, the used artificial model, targeted IP xenograft tumors stitched in a human colon specimen, demonstrates the practical feasibility of the proposed technique, but no statements can be made regarding specific tumor or adenoma accumulation in comparison to uptake in healthy human colon tissue. However, clinical studies evaluating the use of 89Zr-labeled bevacizumab in breast- and kidney cancer patients did not show aspecific accumulation of the tracer in the colon. Also, the significant higher VEGFA expression in colorectal adenomas compared to adjacent normal tissue implies that bevacizumab-800CW could be a promising tracer from a diagnostic point of view. The initiated clinical studies (NCT01972373 and NCT02113202) should give insight into the in vivo sensitivity and specificity of bevacizumab-800CW towards VEGFA in different colorectal lesions, as well as the safety and optimal tracer dose to perform the molecular-guided endoscopy procedure.

CONCLUSION

Molecular-guided NIR fluorescence endoscopy is a promising technique that allows real-time, wide-field visualization of both tissue morphology and molecular characteristics. In this study we demonstrated that our GMP-produced NIR tracers, targeting VEGF and EGFR, could be clearly visualized during a simulated molecular-guided NIR fluorescence endoscopy.
procedure. Based on the expression profiles observed in a large set of different colorectal samples, including those in high-risk patients with SSA/P and Lynch syndrome, VEGFA seems a suitable target for molecular-guided endoscopic screening purposes. Clinical studies have been initiated and are currently recruiting patients to validate the potential of this technology during colonoscopy (clinicaltrials.gov: NCT01972373 and NCT02113202).

DISCLOSURES

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REFERENCES


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SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

**Supplemental Figure 1.** (A) Representative IHC stainings (intensity 1-3) of VEGFA and EGFR in sporadic colorectal adenomas. (B) Notice a clear gradient in staining intensity of VEGFA from normal colon crypts towards the dysplastic area.

**Supplemental Figure 2.** Images acquired during the ex vivo molecular-guided colonoscopy of a cetuximab-800CW targeted tumor (2x4 mm). Endoscopy images were obtained with a video endoscope and the fiber-bundle. The fluorescence and composite images of the fiber-bundle were real-time projected.

**Supplemental Figure 3.** Haematoxylin and eosin (HE) staining (A, D) and corresponding fluorescence images obtained with Odyssey scanner (B, E) and fluorescence microscopy (C, F) of an HCT116 tumor positive mouse lymph node targeted with cetuximab-800CW (A-C) and an intraperitoneal HCT116 tumor targeted with IgG-800CW (D-F). Cetuximab-800CW showed clear fluorescence in all tumor tissue at 800nm with the Odyssey scanner, while uptake of IgG-800CW was negligible. Cetuximab-800CW was almost absent in the necrotic areas of the tumor and in the histologic normal tissue (orange arrows, colon and muscle of the mice). Fluorescence microscopy demonstrated tumor cell membrane binding and uptake in the tumor cytoplasm for cetuximab-800CW. White dashed line = tumor border.
Supplemental Figure 4. (A) Representative near-infrared (NIR) fluorescence images of an athymic nude mouse with a subcutaneous HCT116<sup>Luc</sup> tumor. Imaging performed with the IVIS spectrum (Caliper Life Sciences) (ex745/em800, binning small, f/2, exposure time 20 seconds); one, two and three days after intravenous (IV) injection with cetuximab-800CW. (B) The tumor-to-background ratio’s (TBR) of in total 6 athymic nude mice with a subcutaneous HCT116<sup>Luc</sup> tumor, measured with the IVIS spectrum 1, 2 and 3 days after IV injection of 100 µg bevacizumab-800CW (n=3) or cetuximab-800CW (n=3). The Living Image® software V4.3.1 (Caliper Life Sciences) was used for data acquisition and analysis. Two regions of interests (ROI) of equivalent areas were drawn; the first corresponding to the tumor and the second corresponding to an area of normal tissue in the abdominal region. The TBRs were calculated by dividing the mean fluorescence intensity of the tumor ROI by the mean fluorescence intensity from the background ROI. The TBR three days postinjection is for bevacizumab-800CW 3.2±0.9 and for cetuximab-800CW 5.7±3.0. In contrast to bevacizumab-800CW, the uptake of cetuximab-800CW increased in time in the HCT116<sup>Luc</sup> subcutaneous model.

Supplemental Figure 5. White-light, fluorescence and composite image of the opened abdomen of an athymic nude mouse with intraperitoneal (IP) HCT116<sup>Luc</sup> tumors, three days after intravenous (IV) injection with cetuximab-800CW. The NIR fluorescence matches all the intra-abdominal tumor masses present. Background fluorescence is negligible. Images are acquired with the preclinical platform, consisting of a fiberscope (GIF-XQ20, Olympus, Center Valley, US-PA), as described previously<sup>14,21</sup>. Detailed distribution of bevacizumab and cetuximab labeled with IRDye800CW and Zr<sup>89</sup> has been previously described.<sup>14,21</sup>