

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Neurog1 can partially substitute for *Atoh1* function in hair cell differentiation and maintenance during organ of Corti development

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ABSTRACT

Atoh1, a basic helix-loop-helix (bHLH) transcription factor (TF), is essential for the differentiation of hair cells (HCs), mechanotransducers that convert sound into auditory signals in the mammalian organ of Corti (OC). Previous work demonstrated that replacing mouse *Atoh1* with the fly ortholog *atonal* rescues HC differentiation, indicating functional replacement by other bHLH genes. However, replacing *Atoh1* with *Neurog1* resulted in reduced HC differentiation compared with transient *Atoh1* expression in a 'self-terminating' *Atoh1* conditional null mouse (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}*). We now show that combining *Neurog1* in one allele with removal of floxed *Atoh1* in a self-terminating conditional mutant (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}*) mouse results in significantly more differentiated inner HCs and outer HCs that have a prolonged longevity of 9 months compared with *Atoh1* self-terminating littermates. Stereocilia bundles are partially disorganized, disoriented and not HC type specific. Replacement of *Atoh1* with *Neurog1* maintains limited expression of *Pou4f3* and *Barhl1* and rescues HCs quantitatively, but not qualitatively. OC patterning and supporting cell differentiation are also partially disrupted. Diffusible factors involved in patterning are reduced (*Fgf8*) and factors involved in cell-cell interactions are affected (*Jag1*, *Hes5*). Despite the presence of many HCs with stereocilia these mice are deaf, possibly owing to HC and OC patterning defects. This study provides a novel approach to disrupt OC development through modulating the HC-specific intracellular TF network. The resulting disorganized OC indicates that normally differentiated HCs act as 'self-organizers' for OC development and that *Atoh1* plays a crucial role to initiate HC stereocilia differentiation independently of HC viability.

KEY WORDS: Hair cells, Survival, Basic helix-loop-helix, Transcription factors, Misexpression, Knock-in

INTRODUCTION

Neurosensory development requires the sequential, coordinated activation and cross-regulation of numerous transcription factors (TFs) to define precursors and initiate differentiation of the various cell types of the nervous and sensory system (Fritzscht et al., 2015; Imayoshi and Kageyama, 2014; Reiprich and Wegner, 2015). Molecularly dissecting these interactions requires model systems with limited cellular diversity and stereotyped cellular patterning. The organ of Corti (OC) is such a model system, with hair cells (HCs) and supporting cells (SCs) organized into the most stereotyped cell assembly of vertebrates (Slepecky, 1996), and is

suited to detect minute aberrations (Jahan et al., 2013). The stereotyped cellular pattern may allow the molecular dissection of the intricate interaction of multiple basic helix-loop-helix (bHLH) proteins (Benito-Gonzalez and Doetzlhofer, 2014; Fritzscht et al., 2010b) to define HCs/SCs.

Targeted deletion studies in mice have demonstrated that three bHLH TFs (*Neurog1*, *Neurod1*, *Atoh1*) are essential to differentiate neurons and HCs of the inner ear (Bermingham et al., 1999; Fritzscht et al., 2006, 2010b). These loss-of-function analyses also revealed cross-regulation among these bHLH TFs. For example, *Neurog1* null mice showed loss of HCs (Ma et al., 2000; Matei et al., 2005), apparently through alteration of *Atoh1* expression (Raft et al., 2007). Absence of *Neurog1* reduced HCs, whereas absence of *Neurod1* resulted in ectopic HCs in ganglia (Jahan et al., 2013). Changes in *Atoh1* expression may be mediated through cross-regulation of *Neurod1* downstream of *Neurog1* (Jahan et al., 2010). *Neurod1*, in turn, may suppress *Atoh1* in the ear (Jahan et al., 2013), comparable to its role in the cerebellum (Pan et al., 2009).

Other loss-of-function studies showed that *Atoh1* drives HC differentiation (Bermingham et al., 1999; Fritzscht et al., 2005; Pan et al., 2011), and overexpression of *Atoh1* transformed non-sensory cells into HCs (Kelly et al., 2012; Zheng and Gao, 2000). *Atoh1* differentiates HCs in the ear, and the level and duration of *Atoh1* expression regulate different types of HCs and their viability (Jahan et al., 2013; Sheykhleslami et al., 2013). Consistent with these data, self-terminating *Atoh1* (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}*) mice initiated near normal HC differentiation but rapidly lost most HCs by 3 weeks (Pan et al., 2012a), a loss also reported in inducible Cre lines (Cai et al., 2013; Chonko et al., 2013). Replacing both alleles of *Atoh1* with another bHLH TF, *Neurog1* (*Atoh1^{kiNeurog1/kiNeurog1}*), resulted in very few immature HCs bearing microvilli with a central kinocilium (Jahan et al., 2012). This inability of *Neurog1* to maintain and differentiate HCs beyond that achieved with even transient *Atoh1* expression (Pan et al., 2012a) contrasts with work on retinal ganglion cells (RGCs), in which the *Atoh1* paralog, *Atoh7*, was replaced by *Neurod1* (Mao et al., 2008). *Neurod1* can replace *Atoh7*, possibly because RGC precursors are pre-programmed to differentiate as RGCs independently of the type of bHLH TF (Mao et al., 2013). In molecular terms, the pairing of *Atoh1/Neurog1* is as different as that of *Atoh7/Neurod1* (52% versus 60% sequence similarity), suggesting that overall binding differences might not fully explain these very different results in eyes and ears. We reasoned that failure of functional replacement of *Atoh1* by *Neurog1* in the ear (Jahan et al., 2012), compared with *Atoh7* by *Neurod1* in the retina (Mao et al., 2008), or *Atoh1* by fly *atonal* (Wang et al., 2002), could relate either to 'self-regulation' of *Atoh1* via its enhancer (Helms et al., 2000) or to a unique functional requirement of *Atoh1/Atonal* protein to initiate HC differentiation.

To test these possibilities, we generated a new mouse model (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}*) with insertion of *Neurog1* in one allele of *Atoh1* (Jahan et al., 2012) and removal of the second floxed

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Received 10 February 2015; Accepted 13 July 2015

Atoh1 allele by self-termination with *Atoh1-Cre* (Pan et al., 2012a). This novel composite mouse mutant can differentiate most HCs and can rescue many HCs for up to 9 months. However, HCs stereocilia are variably disorganized, OC patterning is disrupted, and mice are deaf despite near normal numbers of rather well differentiated HCs.

RESULTS

Neurog1 expression in HCs with transient expression of *Atoh1*

We previously demonstrated that *Neurog1* replacement in both alleles of *Atoh1* resulted in expression of *Neurog1* in HC precursors that differentiate multiple microvilli (Jahan et al., 2012). Like *Atoh1* null mutant mice (Birmingham et al., 1999), homozygous *Neurog1* knock-in mice die after birth, precluding postnatal analysis. *Atoh1* autoregulates its own expression by activating an *Atoh1*-specific enhancer (Helms et al., 2000). We speculated that replacement of *Atoh1* by *Neurog1* in both alleles might have failed to activate the enhancer for adequate *Neurog1* expression under *Atoh1* promoter control (Jahan et al., 2012). To overcome this problem, we generated a novel mouse model that combined *Neurog1* knock-in in one *Atoh1* allele with a floxed second *Atoh1* allele, the latter to be excised by *Atoh1-Cre* (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1*; Fig. 1A). This newly developed *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* model resulted in viable mice, overcoming the neonatal lethality of the homozygous *Neurog1* knock-in (Jahan et al., 2012). *Atoh1^{flox}* or *Atoh1^{flox}* mice without *Atoh1-Cre* were used as a control in this study except for the RT-qPCR analysis, where *Atoh1^{flox}* mice were used as control for comparison of *Neurog1* expression with *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* mice.

In situ hybridization (ISH) showed that *Neurog1* knock-in into the *Atoh1* locus (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1*) resulted in expression of *Neurog1* in OC HCs not detected in control

littermates (Fig. 1B,B'). At P0, *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* mice showed very little *Atoh1* expression in the apex (Fig. 1C,C'). By contrast, a downstream target of *Atoh1*, *Pou4f3*, was strongly expressed in the HCs of P0 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* OC (Fig. 1D,D'), whereas expression of *Barhl1* was delayed compared with the vestibular epithelia at P0 (Fig. 1E,E'). At P7, qPCR showed that relative mRNA expression for *Neurog1*, *Pou4f3* and *Barhl1* in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* cochlea was reduced compared with *Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* cochlea, but the reduction was not statistically significant (*Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* expression was normalized to 1, Fig. 1F). In self-terminating *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}* mice, ISH of both *Pou4f3* and *Barhl1* showed patchy loss at P0 (Pan et al., 2012a). By contrast, *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice revealed expression of both *Pou4f3* and *Barhl1* until P7 (Fig. 1F). Partial expression of *Pou4f3* and *Barhl1* might improve HC viability, as HCs are rapidly lost in either *Pou4f3* (Hertzano et al., 2004; Xiang et al., 2003) or *Barhl1* (Li et al., 2002) null mutants.

Neurog1 misexpression with transient expression of *Atoh1* results in HC maintenance

Immunohistochemistry of Myo7a (an HC-specific marker) at P7 revealed the formation of an almost continuous row of inner hair cells (IHCs) and two to three rows of outer hair cells (OHCs) in the *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice (Fig. 2). There were occasionally two rows of IHCs. Extra rows of IHCs coincide with absence of inner pillar (IP) cells, as shown by immunohistochemistry of acetylated tubulin (which is abundant in SCs), next to the extra row of IHCs (Fig. 2B-C''). There was no indication that the length of the cochlea was changed (supplementary material Table S1). The third row of OHCs disappeared toward the base of the cochlea, including the formation of some gaps in OHCs (Fig. 2C-D''). Tubulin immunohistochemistry labeled differentiated IP cells, outer pillar

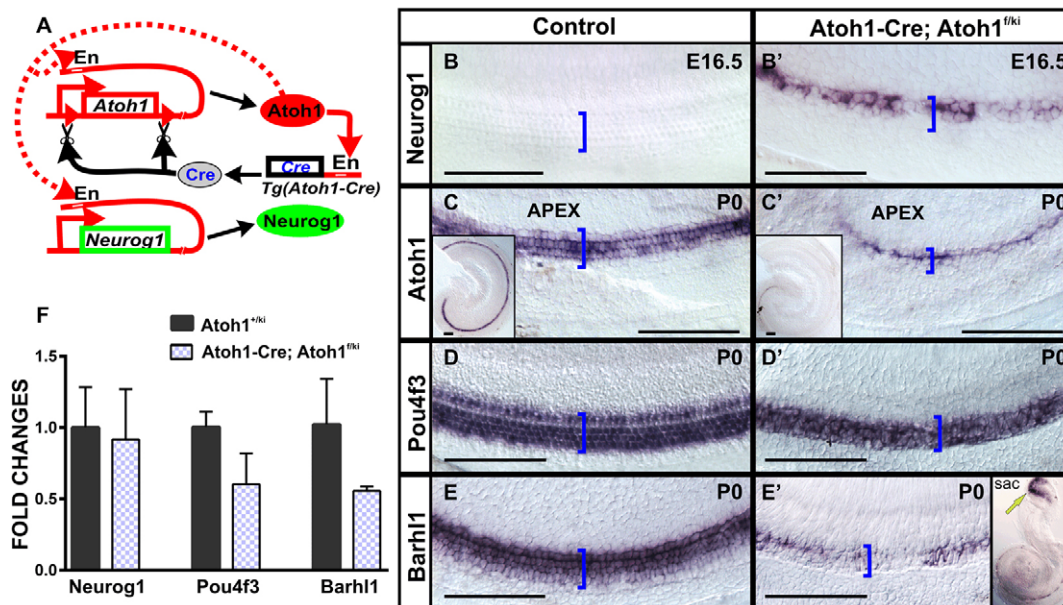


Fig. 1. Our mouse model combines *Atoh1-Cre*, a floxed *Atoh1* allele and an *Atoh1* allele replaced by *Neurog1*. (A) *Atoh1-Cre* uses an *Atoh1* enhancer (En) activated by *Atoh1* protein to generate Cre recombinase to excise the floxed *Atoh1* allele. (B-E') ISH shows misexpression of *Neurog1* in mutant HCs (B') and its absence in control littermate (B). By contrast, *Atoh1* shows weak expression in one row of cells in the apical tip of the cochlea in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* mice (C' and inset) compared with broad expression in control littermate (C and inset). *Pou4f3* shows near identical expression in mutant and control littermates (D,D'). By contrast, *Barhl1* is reduced in the cochlea compared with vestibular epithelia in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* mice (E', yellow arrow in inset) compared with the control littermate (E). Brackets mark the OC. (F) qPCR analysis in P7 cochlea indicates that relative expression of *Neurog1*, *Pou4f3* and *Barhl1* are reduced in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* cochlea compared with *Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* cochlea, but are not statistically significant ($P=0.8$, 0.07 and 0.2 , respectively). (*Atoh1^{flox}Neurog1* expression was normalized to 1). Each qPCR data represents the mean of two to three biological and three technical replicates. Error bars represent s.d. Scale bars: 100 μ m.

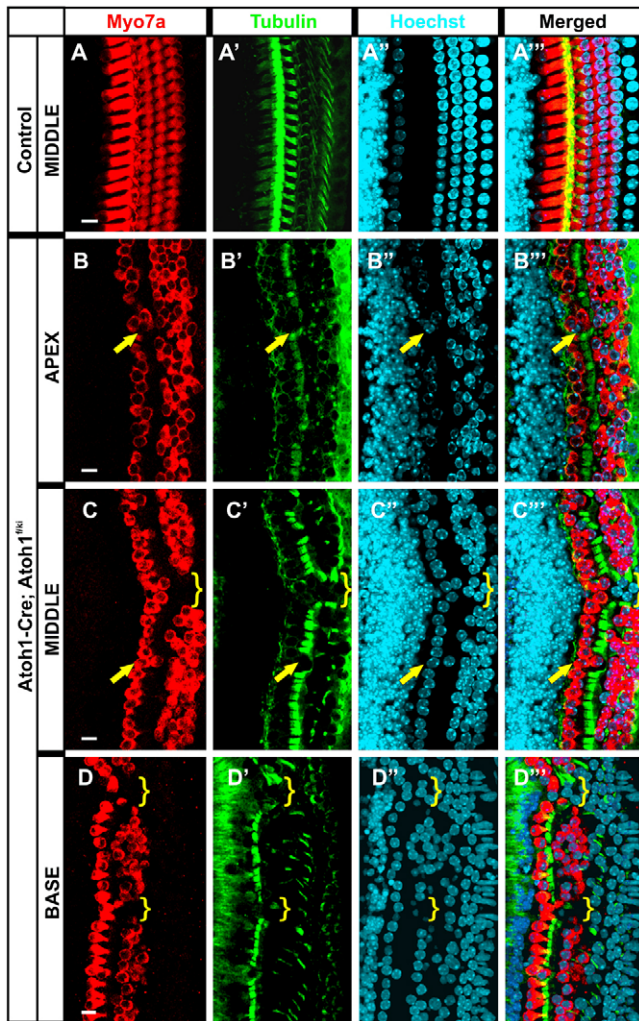


Fig. 2. Misexpression of *Neurog1* results in differentiation of HCs and SCs. Myo7a (HC) and tubulin (SC) immunohistochemistry in P7 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* mice shows one row of IHCs and two to three rows of OHCs with near normal SCs (A-D''). There is loss of the third row of OHCs (D-D'') and gaps in OHCs (brackets in C-D'') towards the base of the cochlea. Some additional IHCs are associated with a loss of IP cells (arrows in B-C''). Scale bars: 10 μ m.

(OP) cells and many Deiters' cells at P7 (Fig. 2). Overall, *Neurog1* misexpression resulted in a considerable increase in HC and SC formation as compared with *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice, which mostly had one row of OHCs and only a few IHCs at P7 (Fig. 3).

We conclude that *Neurog1* misexpression combined with transient *Atoh1* expression can partially substitute for *Atoh1* to differentiate and maintain HCs, as compared with the massive loss of nearly all HCs in self-terminating mice (Pan et al., 2012a). Diminished long-term viability of HCs correlates with reduced expression of TFs known to be essential for HC viability (*Pou4f3*, *Barhl1*).

More HCs form in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* than in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice

We next quantified the Myo7a-positive HCs, identifying IHCs as being medial and OHCs lateral to the tubulin-immunopositive IP/OP cells. We counted all cells in a 300 μ m stretch near the apex (10%), near the middle (50%) or near the base of the cochlea (90%) in comparable segments from control, *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* and *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* littermates (Fig. 3D,E; supplementary

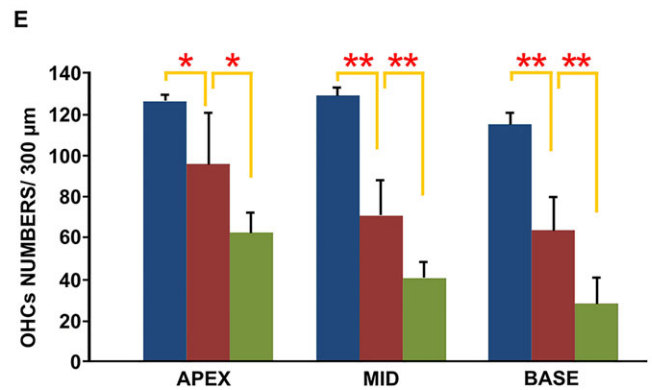
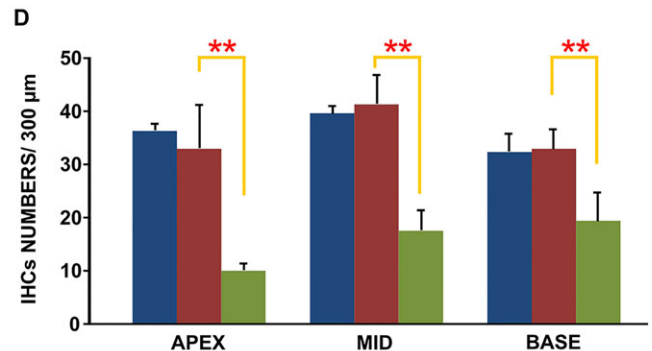
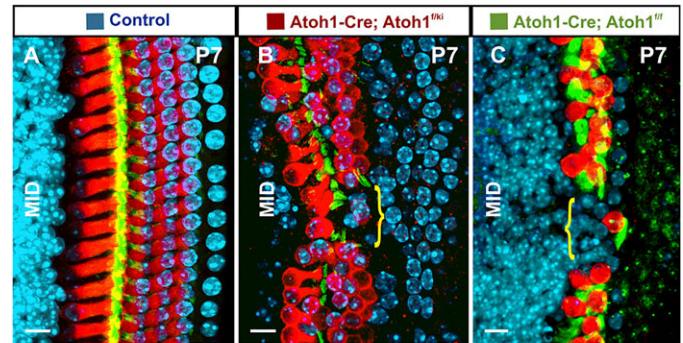


Fig. 3. Misexpression of *Neurog1* rescues IHC formation. (A-C) Myo7a-positive HCs in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* cochlea are compared with those in equivalent segments of *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* and control littermates at P7. The *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* cochlea has more HCs (B), in contrast to a few patchy IHCs and one row of OHCs in the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* cochlea (C). Brackets highlight gaps in HCs. (D) Quantification of HCs reveals that the numbers of IHCs in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* mice (red bar) are significantly higher than those in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice (green bar) but are comparable to those of control littermates (blue bar) in all three areas. (E) However, OHC numbers are reduced in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* mice compared with the control (blue bar), but are significantly above those in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice (green bar). Misexpression of *Neurog1* preferentially rescues IHC formation. Each bar represents the mean of six cochleae. Error bars represent s.d. * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$. Scale bars: 10 μ m.

material Table S2; $n=6$). The numbers of IHCs were significantly higher in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* than in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice (Fig. 3D; $P < 0.01$). IHC counts between *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* mice and control littermates showed no significant difference (Fig. 3D). In summary, replacement of one allele of *Atoh1* by *Neurog1* combined with a self-terminating second *Atoh1* allele rescued most IHCs as compared with the massive loss of IHCs in the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mouse.

The quantification of OHCs demonstrated that significantly more OHCs form in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1* compared with *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice (Fig. 3E; in the apex, $P < 0.05$; in the

middle and base of the cochlea, $P < 0.01$). In contrast to IHCs, OHCs in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice were significantly reduced compared with control littermates (Fig. 3E; in the apex, $P < 0.05$; in the middle and base of the cochlea, $P < 0.01$). Misexpression of *Neurog1* increased survival preferentially of IHCs, with the greatest reduction in the third row of OHCs (Fig. 2C–D'', Fig. 3B,E). Previous work on self-terminating *Atoh1* conditional null mice (Pan et al., 2012a) and *Atoh1* hypomorphs (Sheykholslami et al., 2013) showed a differential loss of OHCs, with the third row being most susceptible, whereas tamoxifen-induced *Atoh1-Cre* wiped out all HCs rapidly (Cai et al., 2013; Chonko et al., 2013).

HCs survive longer in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* than in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice

We next investigated the longevity of these HCs using Myo7a and tubulin immunohistochemistry (Fig. 4). At 9 months, many Myo7a-positive HCs remained in the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice. In particular, many IHCs (medial to the tubulin-positive IP cells) survived, but OHCs showed patchy loss (Fig. 4B–B''). This contrasted with severe HC loss in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice, where only a few HCs survived up to 9 months (Fig. 4C–C''), essentially being largely lost by 3 weeks (Pan et al., 2012a). In addition to HCs, SCs also persisted longer in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice and many more tubulin-positive pillar cells and Deiters' cells were observed compared with *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* mice (Fig. 4B',B'',C',C'').

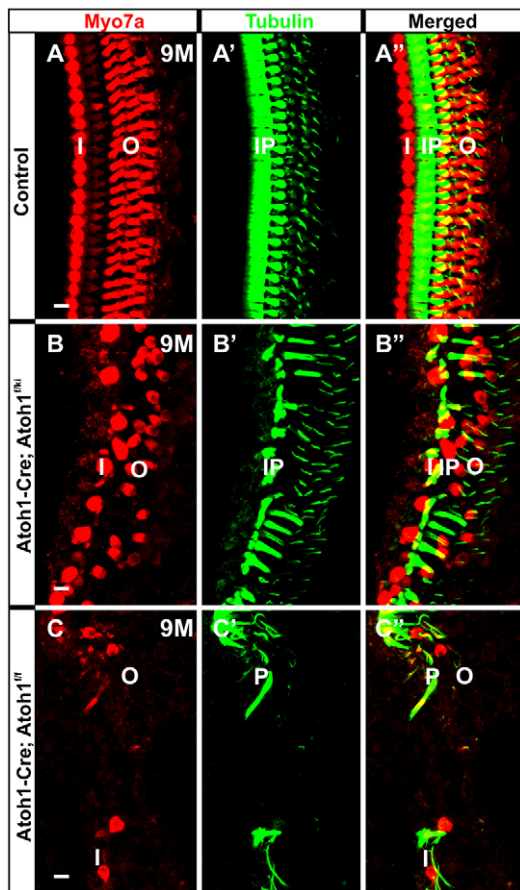


Fig. 4. *Neurog1* misexpression improves longevity of IHCs.

Immunohistochemistry of Myo7a and tubulin shows that, compared with the control (A–A''), both IHCs and OHCs and many SCs survive until 9 months in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice (B–B''). By contrast, only some rare OHCs and SCs survive in the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}* littermate (C–C''). IP, inner pillar cell; I, IHC; O, OHC; P, pillar cell (inner/outer). Scale bars: 10 μ m.

Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1} mice are deaf, despite the presence of most HCs

The proper arrangement of cells is essential for the function of the OC to enable sound perception (Cai et al., 2003; Jacobo and Hudspeth, 2014). To assess hearing function in *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice, we measured the auditory brainstem response (ABR) to click stimuli at P30 (Fig. 5). *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice showed no ABR, in contrast to control littermates (Fig. 5). We concluded that the expression of *Neurog1* facilitates the development and maintenance of many HCs in a non-functional OC. We next investigated possible reasons for this functional defect, focusing first on the stereocilia of HCs.

Replacing *Atoh1* by *Neurog1* results in aberrant stereocilia bundle formation

HC function depends on the normal development of the stereocilia bundles that mediate mechanotransduction (Hudspeth, 2014; Jacobo and Hudspeth, 2014; Sienknecht et al., 2014). Loss, alteration or reduction of *Atoh1* results in abnormal stereocilia bundle formation (Chonko et al., 2013; Pan et al., 2012a), if any bundle forms at all (Pan et al., 2011). *Atoh1* dosage and timing of expression are important for proper stereocilia development and maturation (Jahan et al., 2013). Several mutations that interfere with stereocilia bundle organization and homeostasis are known (Hertzano et al., 2008; Kitajiri et al., 2010; Mogensen et al., 2007; Sekerková et al., 2011) and many of these result not only in aberrant bundle morphology but also in the death of HCs (Kersigo and Fritzsche, 2015; Self et al., 1998; Ueyama et al., 2014). Consistent with a role of *Atoh1* in stereocilia differentiation, forced expression of *Atoh1* can restore hair bundles (Yang et al., 2012).

To extend our findings beyond the obvious increase in HC survival (Figs 2–4) and to better understand the apparent deafness (Fig. 5), we next investigated how replacement of *Atoh1* with *Neurog1* influences stereocilia formation and thus the function of HCs. We examined at least three cochlea of the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mutant and littermate controls, each at three different stages (P1, P7 and P22), by scanning electron microscopy (SEM) (Figs 6 and 7). We found that the onset of stereocilia bundle differentiation in *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice was delayed (Fig. 6A–B''). The bundles were immature, with the formation of

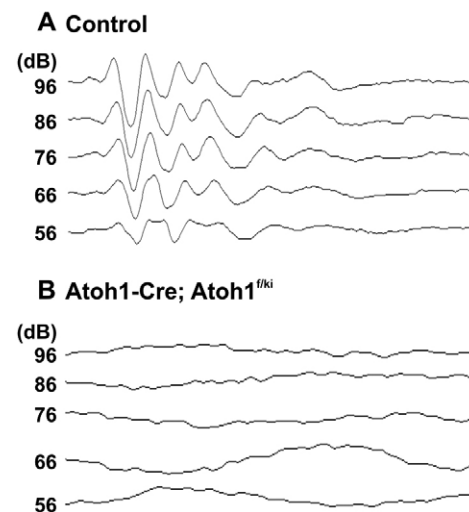


Fig. 5. *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice show no ABR response. P30 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice show no click response in ABR (B), in contrast to the control (A), indicating severe deafness over the intensity range tested.

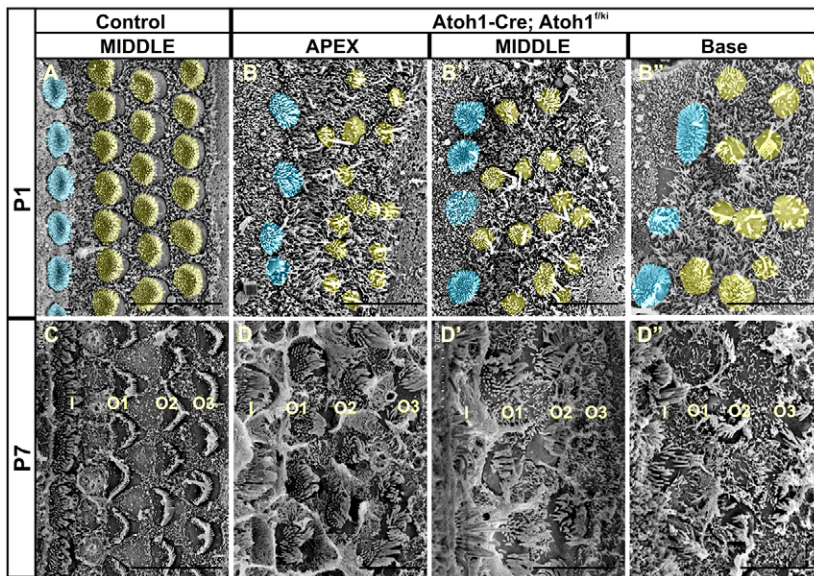


Fig. 6. Delayed onset of maturation of stereocilia bundles in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice. SEM shows that stereocilia bundles remain immature with central kinocilia at P1 in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice (B-B') and there is no staircase pattern, in contrast to control littermates (A). This delay is most evident in OHCs (B-B'). In P7 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* cochlea, the stereocilia bundles in the apical HCs form a near normal staircase pattern (D,D'), as compared with the control (C), whereas the third row of basal OHCs shows aberration (D'). A portion of HCs are color coded (A-B') for better visibility: IHCs in cyan and OHCs in yellow. I, IHC; O1-O3, 1-3 rows of OHCs. Scale bars: 5 μ m in A-B',D-D''; 10 μ m in C.

microvilli that were all similar in length surrounding a central kinocilium at P1 (Fig. 6B-B'). Control littermates already displayed the staircase pattern of progressively increasing length of stereocilia modiolar to an acentric kinocilium (Fig. 6A). This stunted stereocilia growth was more obvious in OHCs than IHCs, especially in the second and third rows of OHCs of *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice. In *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice at P7, the bundles formed a nearly normal staircase pattern in the apex of the cochlea, whereas the basal HCs displayed aberrations such as fusion or loss of stereocilia, predominantly in the third row of OHCs (Fig. 6C-D').

SEM revealed progressive deformations of the stereocilia bundles in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice (Fig. 7). Some HCs in the *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice had stereocilia bundles that lacked the staircase organization, and some stereocilia were fused with each other or showed stunted growth (cyan arrows in Fig. 7). SEM also revealed that the thickness of the stereocilia of some IHCs in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice was altered to resemble OHCs, indicating partial cell fate switching of some IHCs to OHCs (red arrows in Fig. 7). Beyond the fusion and ectopic stereocilia formation, SEM in the *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice also revealed disruption of the boundaries between adjacent HCs (Fig. 7). Some HCs touched each other without intervening SCs in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice (green arrows in Fig. 7). At P7 and P22, we found ectopic stereocilia bundles protruding from the apical surfaces of the IP cells (yellow arrows, Fig. 7). This altered pattern of HCs and SCs indicated disruptions of cell-cell interactions. We therefore further analyzed the molecular basis of OC pattern formation (Fritzsche et al., 2014b; Groves and Fekete, 2012), focusing on genes known to affect OC development.

We previously demonstrated conversion of OHCs into IHCs in *Neurod1* conditional deletion mice (Jahan et al., 2010). Absence of *Neurod1* resulted in premature and altered *Atoh1* and *Fgf8* expression and transformation of thin OHC stereocilia into thick IHC stereocilia (Jahan et al., 2010, 2013). Essentially, *Atoh1* and *Fgf8* expression failed to be suppressed by *Neurod1* in *Neurod1* conditional deletion mice (Jahan et al., 2010). We investigated the expression of *Neurod1* and *Fgf8* in the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice, as they showed the opposite effect, i.e. conversion of stereocilia of IHCs to OHCs. Misexpression of *Neurog1* resulted in stronger and earlier expression of *Neurod1* in E16.5 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* cochlea as compared with control littermates

(Fig. 8A-B'). *Fgf8* expression was patchy and much reduced in some IHCs of the E16.5 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice (Fig. 8D'; supplementary material Fig. S1B'). The alteration of HC stereocilia diameter in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice might relate to the locally altered level of *Atoh1/Neurog1* signaling that distorted the specificity of HC types. How alteration of *Atoh1* signal level mechanistically regulates the thickness of the stereocilia bundles, possibly through modulation of whirlin (Mogensen et al., 2007), requires further work.

Among microRNAs (miRNAs), miR-96 was specifically reported as being required for the proper maturation and organization of the stereocilia bundle (Kuhn et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2009). Single base mutation in the *MIR96* gene results in non-syndromic, progressive hearing loss in humans (Kuhn et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2009). miR-96 is expressed in the sensory epithelia of the mouse cochlea (Weston et al., 2011). We previously reported very limited miR-96 expression only in the apex of *Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1/kiNeurog1}* cochlea (Jahan et al., 2012) or its near absence in conditional *Atoh1* null mice (Pan et al., 2011). Both mutants showed no HC differentiation beyond precursors cells. In the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice, miR-96 expression was almost normal, except for the basal hook region where it showed some gaps (Fig. 8E-F'). How possible alterations in some miRNAs tie into stereocilia development through the repression of relevant genes remains speculative.

***Neurog1* misexpression alters OC patterning and SC differentiation**

Given the formation of stereocilia bundles on IP cells (Fig. 7), we next investigated the distribution of an IP cell-specific marker, *p75* (*Ngfr*) (von Bartheld et al., 1991). ISH of *p75* confirmed its selective expression in IP cells in P0 control mice (Fig. 9A). In P0 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice, *p75* expression was patchy near the base (Fig. 9B',B'') but continuous in the apical half (Fig. 9B) of the cochlea. Consistent with stereocilia bundles on IP cells (Fig. 7A-C, E), immunohistochemistry for the HC-specific *Myo7a* subsequent to *p75* ISH showed that the gaps in the *p75*-positive IP cells were filled with *Myo7a*-positive HCs (Fig. 9B''). We also performed dual immunohistochemistry using *p75* and *Myo7a* antibodies with different fluorophore labeling of the secondary antibodies. This also showed that the gaps in *p75*-immunopositive IP cells were filled

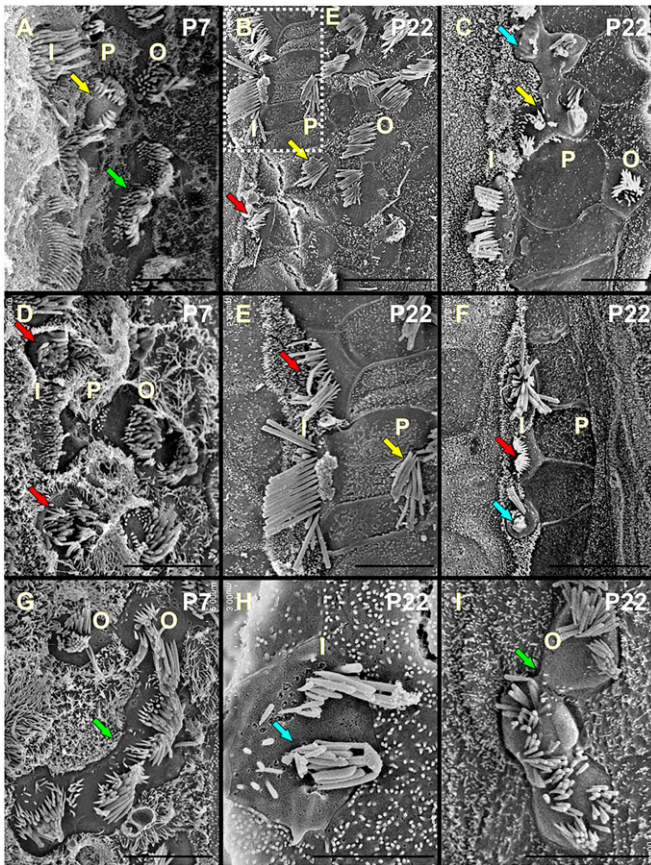


Fig. 7. *Neurog1* misexpression results in alteration in stereocilia bundle thickness, cell fate changes and disruption of cell-cell interactions.

Although *Neurog1* misexpression shows near normal HC formation (Figs 2-4), HC type and topology-specific stereocilia bundle formation at P7 (A, D, G) and P22 (B, C, E, F, H, I) are disorganized. Ectopic HCs form in the position of IP cells, as revealed by formation of stereocilia bundles from their apical surfaces (yellow arrows in A-C, E). In addition, *Neurog1* misexpression results in transdifferentiation of IHCs into OHCs, as demonstrated by the appearance of thin stereocilia of OHCs in the position of IHCs (red arrows in B, D-F). Some OHCs are in broad continuity with each other (green arrows in A, G, I) and some stereocilia bundles are fused or stunted in growth (cyan arrows in C, F, H). *Neurog1* misexpression results in irregular stereocilia formation in most HCs, that gradually deteriorate with age. I, IHC; O, OHC; P, pillar cell. Scale bars: 5 μ m in A, C, E, G, H; 10 μ m in B, F; 3 μ m in I.

with Myo7a-positive putative HCs (Fig. 9C-D''). Combined with stereocilia formation in the apical surfaces of the IP cells of *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice, our data suggested that expression of *Neurog1* transformed some IP cells into a hybrid of IP and HC.

To further assess this possibility, we quantified the tubulin-immunopositive IP cells in P7 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice (Fig. 9E). There was a reduction of tubulin-positive IP cells in the *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice relative to control littermates in the apex ($P < 0.05$) and middle ($P < 0.01$) turn of the cochlea. Despite this presumed transformation, overall IP cell formation was increased in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* relative to *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/f}* mice ($P < 0.01$). Although p75 is an excellent marker for IP cells, differentiation of IP cells remains normal in p75 null mice and its function in IP cells remains obscure (Tan et al., 2010).

Pillar cell formation is abnormal in *Fgf8* null mice (Jacques et al., 2007; Mueller et al., 2002). As previously reported (Jacques et al., 2007; Pirvola et al., 2000), *Fgf8* is expressed in all IHCs. In the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice, downregulation of *Fgf8*

expression might affect the strength of diffusible signal from IHCs to nearby SCs (Groves and Fekete, 2012). Given the defects in IP cells, we next performed double ISH for *Fgf8* and *p75* and revealed that the reduction of *Fgf8* expression correlated with that of *p75* in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice (supplementary material Fig. S1A-C'). Previous work also demonstrated that *Atoh1* is transiently expressed in IP cells (Driver et al., 2013; Matei et al., 2005). Signals that prevent IP cells from differentiating as HCs might be disrupted in the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice, resulting in partial transdifferentiation of some IP cells into HCs (Fig. 7).

We also investigated the *Fgf10* and *Bmp4* expression that flanks the medial and lateral borders of the OC, respectively (supplementary material Fig. S1D, D'). In P0 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice, *Fgf10* was drastically reduced and *Bmp4* showed expanded expression toward OC, with gaps where OC cells were replaced by simple epithelium (supplementary material Fig. S1D, D').

To obtain further molecular insight into SC differentiation, we studied *Prox1* expression by ISH in the *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice (Fritzsche et al., 2010a). *Prox1* was expressed in almost all SCs, except for some reduction in the IP cells in P0 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice (Fig. 10A-B''). These data suggested that several reliable markers of SC differentiation were altered, lost or even replaced by HC markers, indicating that expression of *Neurog1* in HCs affected other cells of the OC.

***Neurog1* expression alters Notch ligand and Notch effector gene expression**

Atoh1 expression in HCs regulates the expression of genes in the Delta/Notch signaling pathway that are necessary for the development of the surrounding SCs and maintains the proper patterning of the OC (Kobayashi and Kageyama, 2014; Sprinzak et al., 2011; Yamamoto et al., 2014). Lack of the Notch ligand *Jag1* results in extra rows of IHCs and the loss of OHCs (Brooker et al., 2006; Kiernan et al., 2006). The *Hes/Hey* factors, which are downstream target genes of Notch, play important roles in the proper specification of SCs by negatively regulating pro-neuronal bHLH TFs (Doetzlhofer et al., 2009; Zine and de Ribaupierre, 2002). Given the lack of proper patterning of HCs/SCs in the OC, we investigated the expression of *Jag1* and *Hes5* by ISH in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice (Fig. 10). In the P0 control mice, *Jag1* was widely expressed in the greater epithelial ridge (GER) and in SCs, particularly in the IP cells (Fig. 10C, C'). In *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice, the expression of *Jag1* was slightly reduced in both the GER and SCs, with some patchy loss toward the cochlear base (Fig. 10D, D').

At E14.5, *Hes5* was found in the mid-base of control cochlea (supplementary material Fig. S2A). E14.5 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice had delayed *Hes5* expression (supplementary material Fig. S2D); *Hes5* was upregulated at later stages (supplementary material Fig. S2E, F) and showed patchy expression in the GER and in SCs (Fig. 10E-F''); supplementary material Fig. S2E, F). We combined *Hes5* ISH with Myo7a immunohistochemistry to detect whether the downregulation of *Hes5* was associated with HC differentiation in the *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice (supplementary material Fig. S2G-H''), as previously reported after *Hes5* loss (Zine and de Ribaupierre, 2002). Myo7a-positive HCs showed no correlation with the patchy loss of *Hes5* expression in this mutant (supplementary material Fig. S2G-H').

Alteration of *Jag1* and *Hes5* expression in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/k}Neurog1* mice indicated the potential effects of *Neurog1* on the expression of these genes, and thus on Delta/Notch signaling. This altered HC-SC communication might disrupt OC patterning

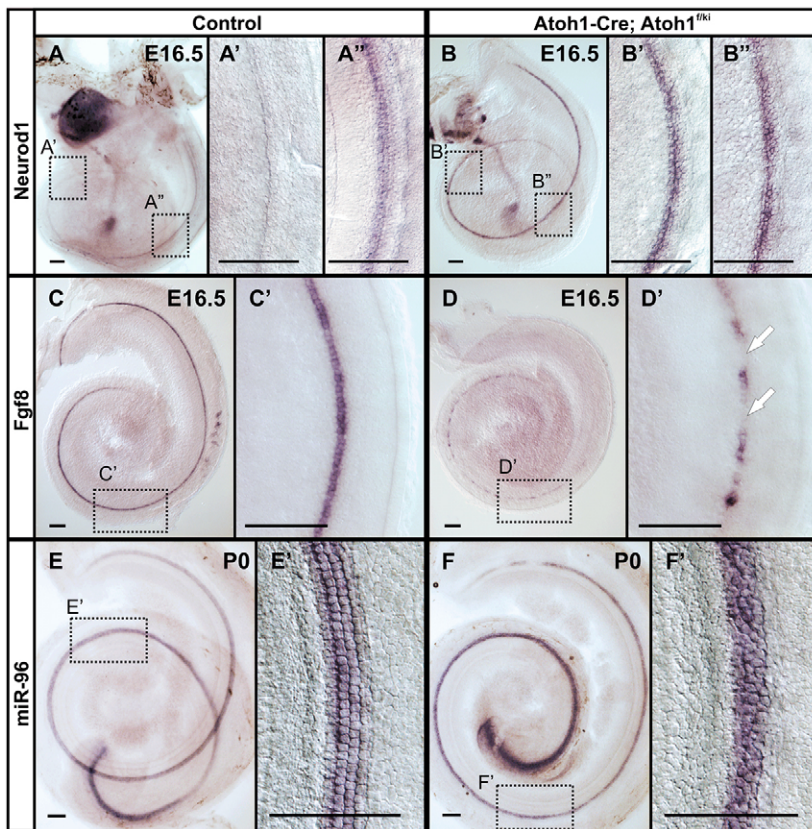


Fig. 8. *Neurod1* misexpression induces premature *Neurod1* upregulation and suppresses *Fgf8* but not miR-96 expression. ISH shows that expression of *Neurod1* expands both longitudinally and radially in the HCs of *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fki}Neurod1* cochlea as compared with the control littermate, in which expression is limited to IHCs (A-B'). *Fgf8* expression displays patchy downregulation (arrows) in the E16.5 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fki}Neurod1* cochlea (C-D'). This suppression of *Fgf8* might in part be regulated by *Neurod1* overexpression in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fki}Neurod1* mice (B,B',D,D'), as previously suggested (Jahan et al., 2010). miR-96, an essential miRNA for stereocilia differentiation, shows no expression changes in HCs (E-F'). Scale bars: 100 μ m.

(Fig. 7), but did not result in an overproduction of HCs (supplementary material Fig. S2H-H'), unlike in *Hes/Hey* mutants (Benito-Gonzalez and Doetzlhofer, 2014; Zine et al., 2001). How changes in intracellular HC gene expression through replacement of *Atoh1* by *Neurod1* alter intercellular signaling and disrupt the mosaic of the OC remains unclear.

In conclusion, near normal numbers of HCs can be generated by combining transient *Atoh1* expression with *Neurod1* misexpression, but these HCs have variably defective stereocilia bundles and the OC is disorganized. Despite long-term viable HCs, the abnormal OC organization causes deafness. OC disorganization may be a consequence of changes in *Fgf8* expression, which might lead to the formation of secondary signaling centers comparable to the midbrain hindbrain boundary (Fritzsche et al., 2014a; Lee et al., 1997), or may also be due to altered cellular interactions (Groves and Fekete, 2012).

DISCUSSION

A fundamental aim in the study of neurosensory development, and in the context of regeneration in particular, is understanding the molecular basis for the generation of topologically distinct cell fates from uniform progenitor populations (Fritzsche et al., 2014a; Imayoshi and Kageyama, 2014; Reiprich and Wegner, 2015). Precise spatial and temporal control of gene expression by different combinations of TFs establish the molecular code that determines cell fate (Guillemot, 2007). Molecular dissection of this complexity requires models of limited cellular diversity in a stereotyped arrangement to evaluate minute deviations from normal; for example, in the ommatidia of flies (Johnston and Desplan, 2014). The OC of the mammalian inner ear is another excellent model organ with stereotyped cellular patterning that allows the exploration of molecularly induced deviations of developmental processes mediated

by intracellular and extracellular patterning processes (Fritzsche et al., 2014b; Groves and Fekete, 2012). Our data suggest a profound effect of intracellular signals via cell-cell interactions and alterations in diffusible factors on the cellular and organ patterning process.

Neurod1 cooperates with transient *Atoh1* expression to develop and maintain HCs

One approach to probing the signal specificity of a given TF in developing gene regulation networks is to replace them by closely related TFs (Guillemot, 2007). Replacing *Atoh7* with *Neurod1* leads to normal differentiation of RGCs, whereas replacing *Neurod1* by *Atoh7* alters the cell fate of amacrine and photoreceptor cells into RGCs (Mao et al., 2013, 2008), indicating context dependency of gene actions. We knocked *Neurod1* into the *Atoh1* locus to test whether a bHLH TF that is exclusively associated with proliferative precursors in the ear and brain (Imayoshi and Kageyama, 2014; Ma et al., 2000) can function in differentiation to maintain or alter HC precursor differentiation. We previously showed that *Atoh1^{ki}Neurod1/kiNeurod1* can effectively drive *Neurod1* in HC precursors (Jahan et al., 2012) but can neither initiate normal HC development nor maintain the viability of HC precursors. We also showed that self-terminating *Atoh1* results in very limited viability of HCs, with incomplete stereocilia differentiation (Pan et al., 2012a). Our quantitative assessment of HC formation in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fki}Neurod1* mice in this study indicates that *Neurod1* misexpression partially rescues HCs and maintains HCs for a longer period, as compared with self-terminating *Atoh1* conditional null mice (Pan et al., 2012a). *Neurod1* cannot maintain the basal third row of OHCs that depends on *Fgf20* released from SCs (Huh et al., 2012), a factor that might be affected in our mice due to alteration in SC development.

Our data suggest that HC precursors behave like RGCs (Mao et al., 2008) and show limited flexibility to respond to the distantly

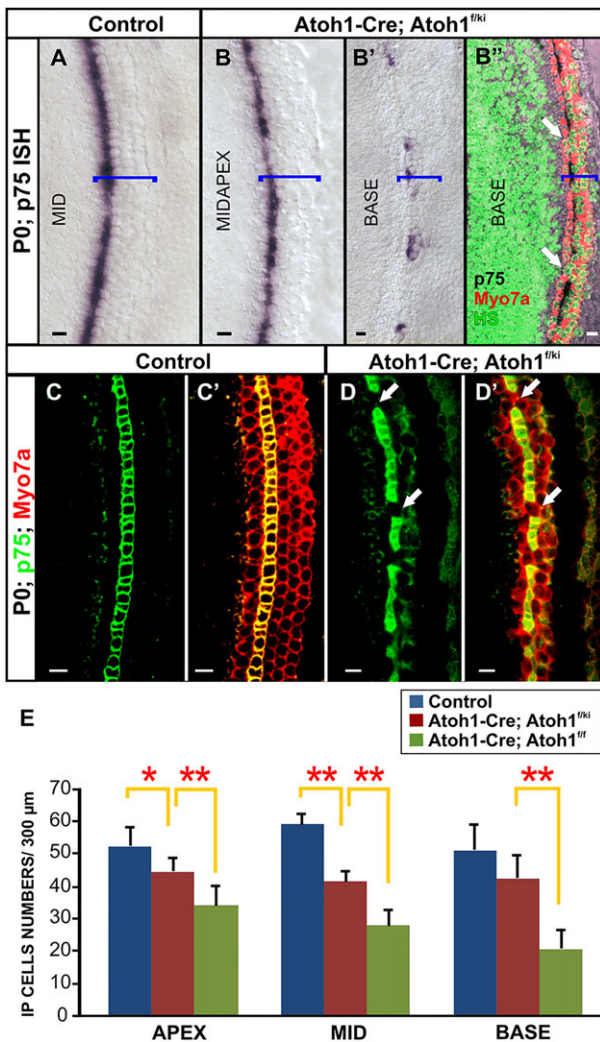


Fig. 9. Myo7a-positive 'HCs' fill gaps in p75-negative IP cells in Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl} mice. ISH of p75 shows continuous expression in IP cells in the apical half (mid), comparable to the control littermates, but the presence of gaps in the base (A-B'). Bracket specifies the OC. Combining Myo7a immunohistochemistry with the p75 ISH-positive cochlea shows that some Myo7a-positive 'HCs' form in the gaps between p75-positive IP cells (arrows in B'), as further confirmed (arrows in D,D') by double immunohistochemistry of p75 and Myo7a (C-D'). Quantification of IP cells (E) demonstrates decreased numbers in Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl} mice compared with control littermates, but significantly increased numbers compared with those in Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl} littermates. **P*<0.05, ***P*<0.01. Each bar represents the mean of six cochleae. Error bars represent s.d. Scale bars: 10 μm.

related bHLH TF *Neurog1* beyond enhanced HC differentiation relative to that of transient *Atoh1* expression. This differs from spiral ganglion neurons, which differentiate readily as HCs if suppression of *Atoh1* is removed by eliminating *Neurod1* (Jahan et al., 2010). *Atoh1* is required for an uncharacterized initial step of HC differentiation that neither *Neurog1* nor *Neurod1* can replace, and thus no HCs differentiate in homozygotic Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1/kiNeurog1 mice (Jahan et al., 2012). The fly *atonal* gene can replace *Atoh1* (Wang et al., 2002) and HCs can partially differentiate with the reduced (Sheykholsami et al., 2013) or transient (Pan et al., 2012a) expression of *Atoh1*, or even in the absence of *Atoh1* in chimeric mice (Du et al., 2007). Elucidating the molecular basis of this critical step of downstream gene activation (Cai et al., 2015; Pan et al., 2012b), in which *Atoh1* expression cannot be substituted by

Neurog1, could help to transform stem cells more effectively into HCs (Ronaghi et al., 2014; Zine et al., 2014).

Atoh1 cooperates with unknown factors to fully express *Pou4f3* (Ahmed et al., 2012), which, in turn, cooperates with *Atoh1* to maintain HCs (Chen et al., 2015; Hertzano et al., 2004; Masuda et al., 2012; Xiang et al., 2003). In contrast to *Pou4f3*, *Barhl1* expression depends exclusively on *Atoh1* (Chellappa et al., 2008). *Barhl1* is required for HC survival even in the presence of *Atoh1* and *Pou4f3* (Li et al., 2002). Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1 mice have near normal expression of *Pou4f3*, but show a delay and progressive reduction of *Barhl1* (Fig. 1). We suggest that *Neurog1* might activate a second pathway for near normal *Pou4f3* expression (Ahmed et al., 2012; Masuda et al., 2012), but fails to fully activate *Barhl1* needed for HC maintenance (Fig. 11). Our mouse model will prove useful in testing the ability of putative regulators of downstream genes to enhance HC viability through the regulation of *Pou4f3* and *Barhl1* expression.

Replacement of *Atoh1* by *Neurog1* alters stereocilia differentiation

Closer investigation of the cochlea of *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice revealed various irregularities in stereocilia bundles and their distribution in the OC (Figs 6 and 7): the irregular length of individual stereocilia within the bundles; the uncoupling of stereocilia diameter from HC type; the appearance of ectopic stereocilia bundles on IP cells; and stereocilia bundles being abnormally fused with each other.

Stereocilia are necessary for hearing (Müller and Barr-Gillespie, 2015). Despite the rescue of overall HC formation, Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/fl}Neurog1 mice show no ABR and are deaf (Fig. 5). Whether this is due to some defect in the HCs or to the disorganization of the OC requires future single-cell recordings on isolated HCs. We presume that the irregularities in stereocilia bundles, which are essential for mechano-electric transduction (Hudspeth, 2014), preclude the normal function of many HCs. Loss of *Pou4f3*, but not of *Barhl1*, causes stereocilia bundle aberrations (Chellappa et al., 2008; Hertzano et al., 2004). A reduced level of *Pou4f3* transcripts at or after P7 might contribute to the bundle aberration that develops mostly in late postnatal stages in *Neurog1*-misexpressing mice (Fig. 7).

Actin is a major protein component of stereocilia (Müller and Barr-Gillespie, 2015) and stereocilia homeostasis is essential for HC function and viability (Kersigo and Fritzsche, 2015; Self et al., 1999; Ueyama et al., 2014). Dysregulation of actin bundling has been associated with HC dysfunction and loss (Mogensen et al., 2007; Perrin et al., 2010; Rzdzińska et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2015). Various myosins, actins and a rich variety of actin-bundling proteins are regulated downstream of *Atoh1* to transform microvilli into stereocilia during development (Kitajiri et al., 2010; Schwander et al., 2010). Loss of miRNAs is also associated with derailed stereocilia development (Weston et al., 2011). *Neurog1* misexpression results in near normal miR-96 expression, but other miRNAs could be altered that also affect stereocilia formation. Once causality between *Atoh1* and downstream signals associated with various bundle aberrations is clearer, our mouse model could help to eliminate spurious relationships as it has partially uncoupled stereocilia differentiation from HC topology.

Replacement of *Atoh1* by *Neurog1* alters the patterning of the OC

The OC is highly stereotyped in organization, with two distinctly patterned compartments separated by a single row of adjacent IP cells, which express *Atoh1* (Driver et al., 2013; Fritzsche et al., 2014b; Matei et al., 2005) without differentiating into HCs.

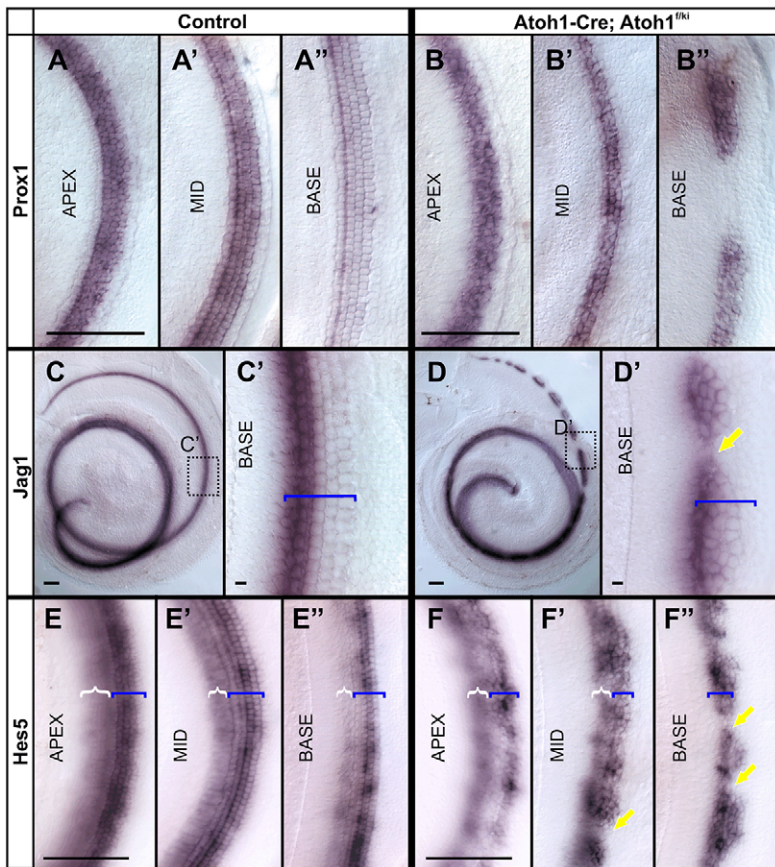


Fig. 10. *Neurog1* misexpression in HCs alters SC marker expression pattern. (A-B'') ISH reveals near normal expression of *Prox1* in SCs, except for some patchy loss in the base of *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice. (C-D') *Jag1* expression shows patchy loss (arrow in D') in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fl/kiNeurog1}* mice. (E-F'') *Neurog1* misexpression results in differential loss of *Hes5* expression (arrows in F', F''). Curved brackets demarcate expression in the GER and square brackets demarcate expression in the OC. Scale bars: 100 μm except 10 μm in C' and D'.

Expression of multiple *Hes/Hey* factors (Benito-Gonzalez and Doetzlhofer, 2014; Doetzlhofer et al., 2009; Petrovic et al., 2015) may block these cells from HC development. Notch inhibition (and thus reduced expression of *Hes/Hey*) may lead to HC differentiation of IP cells (Mizutari et al., 2013). *Neurog1* misexpression affects IP cells in multiple ways, including the formation of HC-like stereocilia bundles and replacement by the HC marker *Myo7a* in *p75*-positive IP cells. These instabilities in IP cells might relate to the alteration in Notch signaling, as observed (Figs 9 and 10).

In addition, the disruption of OC patterning is in part due to alterations in the *Delta/Notch* signaling pathway. For example, expression of *Jag1* and of the downstream target gene *Hes5* are altered. Previous work on *Jag1* loss showed a reduction in the total number of HCs (Kiernan et al., 2006). *Neurog1* misexpression results in discontinuity of *Jag1* and delayed upregulation and differential downregulation of *Hes5* in the cochlea. These

expression changes vary radially and longitudinally, providing additional modulations of the variable signals of diffusible factors such as *Fgf8*, *Fgf10* and *Bmp4*. Combined with altered SC response properties through changes in *p75* and *Prox1*, these local changes might relate to the random OC patterning defects.

In summary, we demonstrate that misexpression of *Neurog1* provides partial functional replacement of *Atoh1* in the developing HC and improves HC maintenance. *Neurog1* misexpression changes the signaling pattern of diffusible factors originating from HCs, as well as cell-cell interactions via *Delta/Notch*; both alterations contribute to the disorganization of the OC. Previous reports on the deletion of different combinations of *Hes1*, *Hes5* or *Hey2* show changes in sensory patterning in support of the lateral inhibition model, but mutants mostly maintain the HC and SC mosaic formation (Doetzlhofer et al., 2009; Zine et al., 2001). Changes of proneural bHLH genes in HCs alters the overall

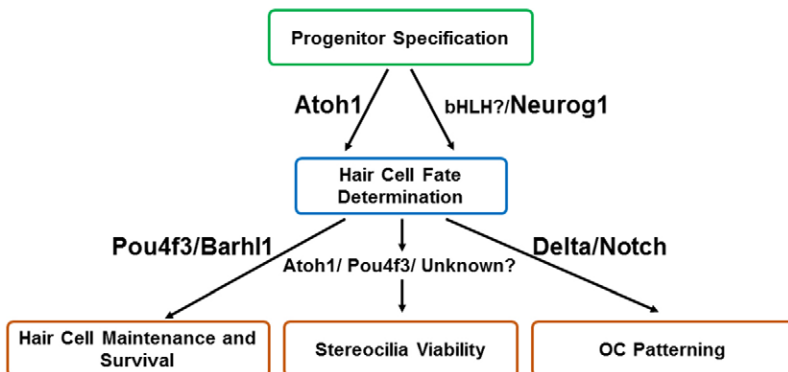


Fig. 11. Role of *Atoh1* and *Neurog1* in HC fate determination. Summary flowchart indicating that *Atoh1* is essential for HC fate determination, in part mediated by an unknown bHLH gene (Ahmed et al., 2012). *Neurog1* may in part mimic this unknown bHLH gene to cooperate with *Atoh1* and maintain the expression of some target genes. However, *Neurog1* cannot fully regulate downstream HC genes associated with stereocilia maturation and OC patterning, leading to disorganization of the OC in the absence of *Atoh1*.

patterning of the OC, presumably by altering intercellular interactions via diffusible factors (Fgf8) and cell-cell interactions.

Understanding the causalities of these alterations and translating such understanding into regeneration (Zine et al., 2014) could help to restore hearing in deaf patients, with deafness now constituting the fastest growing ailment of the elderly worldwide (Kersigo and Fritsch, 2015; Müller and Barr-Gillespie, 2015). Beyond the addition or deletion of entire rows of HCs obtained with previous mutations (Doetzlhofer et al., 2009; Zine et al., 2001), we provide here a new model of a dysfunctional OC that can help in OC restoration endeavors. Converting, through additional manipulation, the dysfunctional OC of our new mouse model into a functional OC that is able to restore hearing could provide proof of principle for fledgling attempts that aim to transform a partially defunct elderly OC into a fully functional OC.

Note added in proof

The pattern of the organ of Corti was recently summarized by Jahan et al. (2015).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ethics guidelines

All animal procedures were carried out according to the recommendations and guidelines of the University of Iowa Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) under approved protocol ACURF #1309175.

Combining *Neurog1* knock-in (*Atoh1^{kiNeurog1}*) with self-terminating *Atoh1* mice (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fkiNeurog1}*)

Construction of the *Neurog1* knock-in plasmid and generation of the *Atoh1^{kiNeurog1}* mouse model were described previously (Jahan et al., 2012). To generate the *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fkiNeurog1}* line, we bred heterozygous *Neurog1* knock-in mice (*Atoh1^{+kiNeurog1}*) (Jahan et al., 2012) with mice carrying the *Atoh1-Cre* transgene and one *Atoh1* floxed allele (*Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/+}*) as described previously (Pan et al., 2012a).

Genotyping

Mice were genotyped using tail DNA for standard PCR amplification as described previously (Jahan et al., 2012; Pan et al., 2012a). For further details, see the supplementary Materials and Methods.

In situ hybridization

ISH was performed as previously described (Jahan et al., 2012) using RNA probes labeled with digoxigenin. A detailed description is provided in the supplementary Materials and Methods.

RT-qPCR

For quantitative reverse transcription PCR (RT-qPCR), we used cochlea from P7 *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fkiNeurog1}* mice and their heterozygous *Atoh1^{+kiNeurog1}* littermates as control. After sedation with 2,2,2 tribromoethanol, the mice were hemisected and the cochleae were dissected out within 2-3 min in RNase-free conditions and stored in RNAlater (Ambion) at -80°C . Total RNA extraction was performed using the Direct-zol RNA Mini-Prep Kit (Zymo Research) and RNA concentration and 260/280 ratio were obtained with a Nanodrop spectrophotometer. On-column DNase I treatment was performed according to the Direct-zol Kit protocol. 1 μg total RNA was reverse transcribed and cDNA was synthesized with Anchored-oligo (dT)₁₈ primer using the Transcriptor First Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit (Roche). For qPCR, the primers and probes were designed using the Roche Universal ProbeLibrary Assay Design Center and primers were obtained from Integrated DNA Technologies. Primer sequences and priming conditions are listed in supplementary material Table S3. qPCR was performed in a 96-well plate using Roche LightCycler 480 Probes Master Mix and a Roche Light Cyclor 480 real-time PCR machine. For all target genes, qPCR was performed for at least three to four biological replicates and three technical replicates including no-template controls for each sample following MIQE

guidelines (Bustin et al., 2009). qPCR data were analyzed in Microsoft Excel and $\Delta\Delta\text{C}_T$ was calculated to determine the relative expression in *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fkiNeurog1}* cochlea compared with control normalized to *Actb* reference transcript. Statistical analysis was performed with Student's *t*-test in GraphPad Prism 6 software.

Immunohistochemistry and cell counts

Immunohistochemistry was performed as described previously (Jahan et al., 2012). IHCs, OHCs and IP cells were counted in the P7 control, *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fkiNeurog1}* and *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{f/+}* mice in 300 μm stretches in comparable regions in the apex, middle and base of the cochlea after performing immunohistochemistry for *Myo7a* and tubulin. Quantification was performed in six independent cochleae from each genotype. For further details, see the supplementary Materials and Methods. The data obtained from the quantification of IHCs, OHCs and IP cells were analyzed using Student's *t*-test. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Auditory brainstem response (ABR) recording

Following sedation, ABR recording was performed in 1-month-old control and *Atoh1-Cre; Atoh1^{fkiNeurog1}* littermate mice. A loudspeaker was placed 10 cm from the pinna of the test ear and computer-generated clicks were given in an open field environment in a soundproof chamber. Click responses were averaged and recorded signals were bandpass filtered (300 Hz-5 kHz) with a 60 Hz notch filter. The sound level was decreased in 10 dB steps from a 96 dB sound pressure level until there was no noticeable response. For further details, see the supplementary Materials and Methods.

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM)

SEM was performed as previously described (Jahan et al., 2012). A detailed description is provided in the supplementary Materials and Methods.

Acknowledgements

We thank Dr Fernando Giráldez for constructive and valuable comments on the manuscript; Qifu Ma (*Neurog1*), Huda Y. Zoghbi (*Atoh1*), Mengqing Xiang (*Barhl1* and *Pou4f3*), Jacqueline E. Lee (*Neurod1*), Ulla Pirvola (*Fgf8*), Thomas Gridley (*Jag1*), Brigid L. M. Hogan (*Fgf10*), Doris K. Wu (*Bmp4*), Andy Groves (*Hes5*) and Guillermo Oliver (*Prox1*) for providing plasmids for *in situ* hybridization; the Central Microscopy Research Facility for carrying out SEM; the Roy J. Carver Center for Imaging for use of the Leica TCS SP5 confocal microscope; the Roy J. Carver Center for Genomics for use of the Roche 480 LightCycler; and the Iowa Center for Molecular Auditory Neuroscience (P30; ICMAN) for the use of the ABR facility at the University of Iowa.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing or financial interests.

Author contributions

I.J., N.P. and B.F. conceived the work; N.P. and J.K. performed mouse breeding and genotyping; I.J. collected and analyzed the data; I.J. and B.F. wrote the paper.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) [R03 DC013655 to I.J.]; and the Hearing Health Foundation (Emerging Research Grant to I.J.). We thank the Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR), University of Iowa College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS), and the P30 core grant for support [DC 010362]. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript. Deposited in PMC for release after 12 months.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material available online at <http://dev.biologists.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1242/dev.123091/-/DC1>

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