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Review

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Mechanisms of ribosomopathy and phase separation-related ribosomopathy

Zhiyuan PAN[1*], Guofen LIN[2*], Hao LIU[1,3], Guozhi LI[1], Xiaoyi ZHANG[4✉], Jiewen DAI[1✉]

[1]*Department of Oral and Cranio-Maxillofacial Surgery, Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital, Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine; College of Stomatology, Shanghai Jiao Tong University; National Center for Stomatology; National Clinical Research Center for Oral Diseases; Shanghai Key Laboratory of Stomatology; Shanghai Research Institute of Stomatology, Shanghai 200011, China*
[2]*Stomatology Hospital, School of Stomatology, Zhejiang University School of Medicine, Zhejiang Provincial Clinical Research Center for Oral Diseases, Key Laboratory of Oral Biomedical Research of Zhejiang Province, Cancer Center of Zhejiang University, Engineering Research Center of Oral Biomaterials and Devices of Zhejiang Province, Hangzhou 310000, China*
[3]*School of Stomatology, Shandong Second Medical University, Weifang 261000, China*
[4]*Orthopedic and Reconstructive Medicine Center, The First Affiliated Hospital of Ningbo University, Ningbo 315211, China*

Abstract: Ribosome is an intracellular ribonucleoprotein particle that serves as the site of protein biosynthesis. Ribosomal dysfunction caused by mutations in genes encoding ribosomal proteins (RPs) and ribosome biogenesis factors (RBFs) can lead to a spectrum of diseases, collectively known as ribosomopathy. Phase separation is a thermodynamic process that produces multiple phases from a homogeneous mixture. The formation of membraneless organelles and intracellular structures, including ribosomes and nucleoli, cannot occur without the involvement of phase separation. Here, ribosome structure, biogenesis, and their relationship with ribosomopathy are systematically reviewed. The tissue specificity of ribosomopathy and the role of phase separation in ribosomopathy are particularly discussed, which may offer some clues for understanding the mechanisms of ribosomopathy. Then, some new ideas for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of ribosomopathy are provided.

Key words: Ribosome; Phase separation; Ribosomopathy; Tissue specificity

1 Introduction

The ribosome is an important cellular organelle responsible for the translation of RNA sequences into proteins. In eukaryotes and prokaryotes, ribosomes have similar structures and functions (Filbeck et al., 2022). For example, ribosomes in eukaryotes and prokaryotes both contain two subunits, catalyze protein synthesis, follow codon and anticodon binding rules, and require complex modifications to perform their functions. Ribosomopathy refers to a group of highly heterogeneous genetic disorders that affect the structure and function of the ribosome. Ribosomopathy can affect different aspects of ribosome function, including ribosome assembly, subunit stability, and the accuracy of protein synthesis (Paolini et al., 2017). These disorders can lead to a variety of developmental and growth abnormalities, including skeletal malformations (Robertson et al., 2022), craniofacial deformities (Smallwood et al., 2023), neurological disorders (Bourque et al., 2018), and anemia (da Costa et al., 2020). Ribosomopathy can be caused by mutations in gene encoding ribosomal proteins (RPs), which are involved in ribosome biogenesis. Phase separation (PS) is a newly prospering field in biological research that is closely related to biological processes such as chromatin organization (Gibson et al., 2019), gene expression (Cai et al., 2019), ribosome biogenesis (Banani et al., 2017), cell signaling (Su et al., 2021), and synaptic formation (Zeng et al., 2016), as well as cellular life activities such as cell division (Ong and Torres, 2020) and autophagy (Noda et al., 2020).

✉ Jiewen DAI, daijiewen@163.com
Xiaoyi ZHANG, fyyzhangxiaoyi@nbu.edu.cn
* The two authors contributed equally to this work
Jiewen DAI, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7807-3582
Xiaoyi ZHANG, https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0905-5573
Zhiyuan PAN, https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2278-7886
Guofen LIN, https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7095-1116

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In this review, ribosome structure and biogenesis and their relationships with ribosomopathy are systematically reviewed. Moreover, starting from pathogenesis, several ribosomopathies are classified as having an explicitly linked etiology and clinical features. Simultaneously, some putative ribosomal diseases are described, with the expectation of finding commonalities in these diseases with known ribosomopathies. Finally, the tissue specificity of ribosomopathy and the role of PS in ribosomopathy are discussed. This would provide insights into the underlying mechanisms of ribosomopathy, potentially leading to novel approaches for its prevention, diagnosis, and treatment.

2 Ribosome structure and biogenesis

The eukaryotic ribosome consists of a 40S small subunit (SSU) and a 60S large subunit (LSU). The SSU, comprising an 18S ribosomal RNA (rRNA) and 33 RPs, is assembled into regions encompassing the head, beak, shoulder, platform, body, and foot (Rabl et al., 2011; Jobe et al., 2019). The LSU contains 5S, 5.8S, and 28S rRNAs and 47 RPs (Klinge et al., 2011; Khatter et al., 2015). Compared with prokaryotic ribosomes, eukaryotic ribosomes are more complex in structure, with a large number of eukaryote-specific proteins in the LSU and SSU (de la Cruz et al., 2015). These eukaryote-specific proteins are generally localized at the solute contact surface of the ribosome (Pilla and Bahadur, 2019). The 5' extended sequences (ESs) and 5' variable regions (VRs) in the SSU, together with 16 ESs and 2 VRs in the LSU, are associated with the presence of eukaryote-specific proteins (Wilson and Doudna Cate, 2012). Generally, this spatial organization pattern of eukaryote-specific proteins, while maintaining the relative conservation of the subunits' contact interfaces, gives rise to different physicochemical properties between ribosomes of different species.

Ribosome biogenesis is an overarching description of the process from synthesizing rRNAs and RPs to assembling ribosomal subunits (Baßler and Hurt, 2019). To date, over 200 assembly factors required for ribosome biogenesis, alongside a large number of functionally complex small nucleolar RNAs (snoRNAs), have been characterized (Nerurkar et al., 2015; Peña et al., 2017; Sloan et al., 2017; Ojha et al., 2020). These assembly factors and non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs) are found primarily in the nucleolus (Nerurkar et al., 2015). The nucleolus, one of the most important membraneless intracellular structures, is the starting point and center of ribosome biogenesis (Pederson, 2011). The nucleolus can be divided into three layers from inside to outside based on structural differences: fibrillar center (FC), dense fibrillar component (DFC), and granular component (GC) (Hernandez-Verdun et al., 2010). The FC deposits ribosomal DNA (rDNA) and RNA polymerase I (RNA Pol I), which lack transcriptional activity, whereas active rDNA is transcribed into pre-rRNA via a process catalyzed by RNA Pol I at the FC/DFC site (Wu et al., 2021). Pre-rRNA undergoes post-transcriptional processing, including splicing, base modification, and folding, to become rRNA in the DFC (Smirnov et al., 2016). In the GC, immature subunits assembled from rRNAs and RPs are eventually transported to the cytoplasm for function (Boisvert et al., 2007).

The nucleolus plays multiple roles in ribosome biogenesis and the generation of ribosomopathy. Abnormalities in the structural organization of the nucleolus, including alterations in the quantity or quality of trans-acting factors and snoRNAs that play a regulatory role, could affect the normal synthesis of the ribosome and contribute to the development of ribosomopathy (Lafontaine et al., 2021). In addition, abnormalities in RPs and rRNAs, while affecting ribosome structure or function, may also be accompanied by nucleolus malformation. Therefore, the nucleolus and ribosome are inseparable when ribosome biogenesis and disease generation are explored.

3 Abnormal ribosome biogenesis and diseases

Ribosomopathies, caused by abnormal ribosome biogenesis, are highly complex in terms of clinical manifestation and pathogenesis. Ribosome biogenesis factors (RBFs), rRNA, and RPs are the key elements for proper ribosome formation. Currently, there is no consensus on the classification of ribosomopathies. The main challenges in classification are as follows: (1) the concurrence of congenital and acquired ribosomopathies, which presents a challenge in understanding their pathogenesis; and (2) the intertwining of ribosomopathies caused by abnormal ribosome biogenesis and multi-factorial mechanisms, which

is controversial to define in clinical manifestations (Venturi and Montanaro, 2020). For these reasons, starting from pathogenesis, several ribosomopathies are classified with explicitly linked etiology and clinical features (Table 1). Simultaneously, some putative ribosomal diseases are described, with the expectation of finding commonalities in these diseases with known ribosomopathies.

3.1 rDNA: auxiliary mechanism in ribosomopathy

rDNA forms tandem repeat sequences in the nucleolar organizing region (NOR) in a multi-copy pattern (van Sluis and McStay, 2017). Multi-copy of rDNA is a reliable way to meet the high cellular demand for ribosomes, hence avoiding the burden of excessive rDNA transcription rates or high rRNA stability in proliferating cells (Tsekrekou et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2019). Approximately 50% of the rDNAs in the genome are functional enough to meet the cellular demand, and this functional redundancy increases tolerance to rDNA mutations (Tsekrekou et al., 2017).

Under normal conditions, rDNA arranged in a tandem repeat pattern in the eukaryotic genome is prone to rearrangements, whereas subtle mechanisms ensure a relatively constant rDNA copy number (Iida and Kobayashi, 2019). However, large-scale rearrangements of rDNA have been found in several diseases with high oncogenic risk, such as Bloom syndrome and ataxia capillaris (Killen et al., 2009). Moreover, rDNA copy number variants or rearrangements have also been found in osteosarcoma, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)-associated lymphoma, esophageal adenocarcinoma, lung cancer, and colorectal cancer (Xu et al., 2017). Studies have further demonstrated that the aforementioned rDNA abnormalities do not directly disrupt cell proliferation, rRNA or protein synthesis (Xu et al., 2017). In contrast, they are linked to alterations in the single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP), the copy number of protein-coding genes, cellular hypersensitivity to injury, and the functional status of TP53 (Wang and Lemos, 2017; Feng et al., 2020). Although these studies do not provide a clear elucidation of the molecular mechanisms, the available data suggest that rDNA abnormality is frequently not a direct factor but rather plays a complementary role in ribosomopathies. Consistent with this idea, no

Table 1 Mechanisms of ribosomopathies

Classification	Disease	Gene	Function in ribosome biogenesis
rDNA transcriptional-associated ribosomopathy	Treacher-Collins syndrome	*TCOF1*	rDNA transcription, 18S pre-rRNA methylation, SSU maturation and modification
		POLR1B, *POLR1C*, *POLR1D*	Encoding RNA Pol subunit, rDNA transcription
	AFDCIN	*POLR1A*	Encoding RNA Pol subunit, rDNA transcription
rRNA post-transcriptional processing-associated ribosomopathy	CHH-AD	*POP1*, *RMRP*	Constituting RNase MRP, pre-5.8S rRNA splicing
	NAIC	*CIRH1A*, *NOL11*	Pre-18S rRNA splicing
	Dyskeratosis congenita	*DKC1*, *NOP10*, *NHP2*	rRNA pseudouridylation
		NPM1	rRNA methylation
Ribosome assembly-associated ribosomopathy	Shwachman-Diamond syndrome	*SBDS*, *SRP54*, *EFL1*	Assembly and maturation of LSU
		DNAJC2	Stabilization of assembled 80S ribosome
	Bowen-Conradi syndrome	*EMG1*	Binding RPS19, SSU assembly, 18S rRNA pseudouridylation
Ribosomal protein-associated ribosomopathy	Diamond-Blackfan anemia	*RPS19*, *RPS17*, *RPS26–29*, *RPL5*, *RPL11*, *RPL15*, *RPL18*, *RPL35*, etc.	Ribosomal proteins
	5q-Syndrome	*RPS14*	Ribosomal proteins

AFDCIN: acrofacial dysostosis-Cincinnati type; CHH-AD: cartilage hair hypoplasia-anauxetic dysplasia; NAIC: North American Indian childhood cirrhosis; rDNA: ribosomal DNA; rRNA: ribosomal RNA; SSU: 40S small subunit; MRP: mitochondrial RNA processing; LSU: 60S large subunit.

ribosomopathy caused solely by rDNA abnormalities has been identified. However, considering the relevance of ribosomopathies to tumorigenesis, the status of rDNA in tumor patients may be tested to improve patients' prognosis and provide new therapeutic directions.

3.2 Multimechanistic contribution of RBFs to ribosomopathies

The RBFs are biomolecules that regulate ribosome biogenesis, which are mainly localized in the nucleolus and function in multifarious aspects of ribosome maturation, including synthesis, processing, and folding of rRNAs and RPs, along with ribosome assembly (Kovacevic et al., 2019). RBFs have become a focus and a challenge in the study of ribosomopathies owing to their functional complexity. Based on the functional diversity of RBFs, ribosomopathies with relatively similar main pathogenesis are categorized in this section.

3.2.1 rDNA transcription and ribosomopathy

Treacher-Collins syndrome (TCS) is an autosomal dominant craniofacial developmental malformation (Dixon, 1995), characterized by lid fissures, ear malformations, and craniofacial skeletal dysplasia (Plomp et al., 2016; Tse, 2016). Treacle ribosome biogenesis factor 1 (*TCOF1*), RNA polymerase I subunit B (*POLR1B*), *POLR1C*, and *POLR1D* have been identified as predominant pathogenic genes in TCS (Sanchez et al., 2020). Mutations in these genes affect rDNA transcription, interfering with ribosome synthesis in cranial neural crest cells (CNCCs) and neuroepithelial cells (Levasseur et al., 2018; Sanchez et al., 2020).

The vast majority of TCS cases are caused by pathogenic mutations in *TCOF1*. *TCOF1* encodes Treacle protein, a nucleolus phosphorylation protein with nucleolus localization signals at the C-terminus and a nuclear export signal at the N-terminus, indicating that Treacle protein functions in different subcellular regions (Grzanka and Piekiełko-Witkowska, 2021). Treacle protein co-localizes in the nucleolus with upstream binding factor (UBF), RNA Pol I, and nucleolar phosphoprotein NOPP140 in the transcription initiation complex at the rDNA promoter, where Treacle regulates 47S pre-rRNA synthesis (Marszałek-Kruk et al., 2021). Abnormal Treacle caused by pathogenic mutations in *TCOF1* can interfere with rDNA transcription and reduce rRNA levels in cells, resulting in increased neuroepithelial cell-specific apoptosis and decreased neural crest cell proliferation (Dixon et al., 2006). Additionally, Treacle can bind to nucleolar protein 56 (NOP56), a core component of box C/D small nucleolar ribonucleoprotein (snoRNP) particles. Reduced methylation at specific sites of 18S pre-rRNA in *TCOF1* heterozygous mutant mice suggests that Treacle can regulate rRNA post-transcriptional processing through the Treacle–NOP56 interaction (Gonzales et al., 2005). *POLR1B*, *POLR1C*, and *POLR1D* are genes that encode RNA Pol subunits (Noack Watt et al., 2016; Sanchez et al., 2020). Pathogenic mutations in these genes could also affect RNA Pol I functions, contributing to low levels of rRNA and ultimately leading to characteristic malformations of craniofacial tissue (Dauwerse et al., 2011; Kwong et al., 2018). To summarize, TCS is triggered mainly by reduced rDNA transcription rather than by significant structural changes in ribosomal components. Thus, low intracellular rRNA levels result in hypoplasia of the first and second branchial arches and congenital craniofacial abnormalities (Levasseur et al., 2018) (Fig. 1).

Abnormal rDNA transcription has likewise been found in other ribosomopathies. For instance, pathogenic mutations of *POLR1A* in acrofacial dysostosis-Cincinnati type (AFDCIN), which encodes for the RNA Pol I component, generate craniofacial deformities through a similar mechanism to that of TCS (Terrazas et al., 2017; Watt et al., 2018) (Fig. 1). In addition, the reduced rDNA transcription detected in Diamond-Blackfan anemia (DBA) and 5q-syndrome (le Goff et al., 2021) exacerbates erythrocyte dysplasia. However, the primary cause of both disorders is the alteration of ribosomal protein genes (RPGs), and rDNA transcription may occur only as a cofactor in these diseases or as a side effect of nucleolar stress due to decreased RPs synthesis.

Several putative ribosomopathies are potentially associated with rDNA transcription. The Cockayne syndrome A (CSA) protein, a transcription factor for RNA Pol I, enhances rDNA transcription and may lead to premature aging and death in children (Koch et al., 2014). Repression or upregulation of rDNA transcription has also been detected in patients with aplasia cutis congenita (ACC) (Zhu et al., 2022) and some lung adenocarcinomas (Ohashi et al., 2020). Unfortunately, studies of these diseases have not yet developed a valid model to explain the connection between rDNA transcription and clinical manifestations.

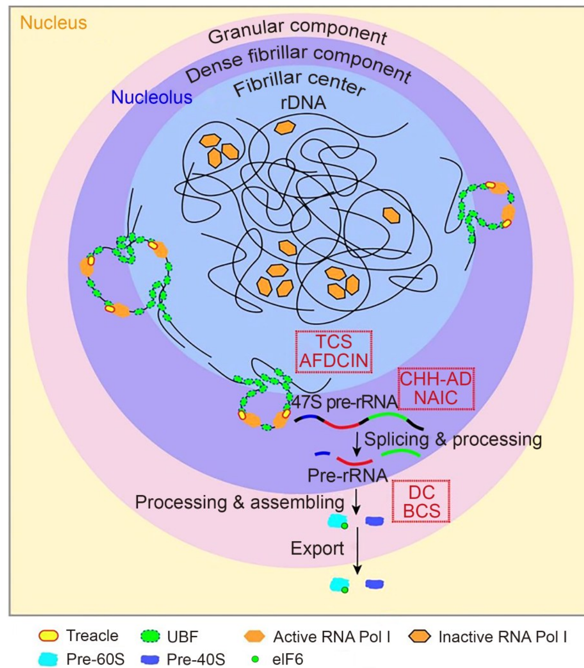

Fig. 1 Intra-nucleolar ribosome biogenesis process and associated ribosomopathies. The red dashed frames highlight the abnormal steps in ribosome biogenesis factors that give rise to several ribosomopathies: Treacher-Collins syndrome (TCS), acrofacial dysostosis-Cincinnati type (AFDCIN), cartilage hair hypoplasia-anauxetic dysplasia (CHH-AD), North American Indian childhood cirrhosis (NAIC), dyskeratosis congenita (DC/DKC), and Bowen-Conradi syndrome (BCS). The legend at the bottom identifies important ribosome biogenesis factors and other components. UBF: upstream-binding factor; Pol I: polymerase I; eIF6: eukaryotic initiation factor 6; rDNA: ribosomal DNA; rRNA: ribosomal RNA.

In summary, TCS stands out from other ribosomopathies caused by abnormal ribosome biogenesis because of its clear connection between the underlying cause and the observed clinical symptoms. The possibility that the clinical features of TCS may be worsened by additional non-ribosomal functions carried out by increased RPs during ribosome assembly raises interesting questions that warrant further exploration. Either way, the correlation between TCS and rDNA transcription leads to abnormalities in ribosome synthesis and function, which in turn affects cell growth and differentiation, ultimately leading to facial and craniofacial deformities. This correlation could play an important role in disease treatment and finding targets for new drugs. An in-depth study of the relationship between TCS and rDNA transcription can help reveal the molecular mechanism of the occurrence and development of the disease and provide a theoretical basis for the development of new therapies. Second, drugs or interventions that target abnormal rDNA transcription may become new targets for treating TCS. By regulating the activity or stability of rDNA transcription, it is possible to attempt to correct abnormalities in ribosome synthesis and function, thereby reducing or improving symptoms in patients with TCS. This correlation could be further explored in future studies, and therapeutic strategies targeting rDNA transcription could be attempted to lead to better outcomes for patients with TCS.

3.2.2 Post-transcriptional process of rRNA and ribosomopathy

Regulating the post-transcriptional process of rRNA is the main function of RBFs. Post-transcriptional processing is a fundamental regulation of ribosome topology and plays an essential role in the emergence of a variety of ribosomopathies (Taoka et al., 2018).

RBFs are involved in pre-rRNA splicing. The cartilage hair hypoplasia-anauxetic dysplasia (CHH-AD) spectrum includes a range of disorders with mild to severe symptoms, the most common of which are defects in skin, bone, blood, and immune system development (Matesic and Hagan, 2007; Elalaoui et al., 2016; Vakkilainen et al., 2020). Processing of precursor 1 (*POP1*) encodes the core protein of RNase mitochondrial RNA processing (MRP), and RNA component of mitochondrial RNA-processing endoribonuclease (*RMRP*) encodes the RNA component of RNase MRP (Mäkitie et al., 2001; Mattijssen et al., 2010). Mutations in *POP1* and *RMRP* can impair RNase MRP assembly and pre-5.8S rRNA splicing, interfering with ribosome biogenesis and resulting in CHH-AD (Barraza-García et al., 2017) (Fig. 1). Abdulhadi-Atwan et al. (2020) reported three patients with novel *POP1* mutations that, inconsistent with previous studies, do not have a significant accumulation of pre-5.8S rRNA despite reduced RNase MRP levels while exhibiting only mild skeletal dysplasia (Thiel et al., 2007; Barraza-García et al., 2017). This *POP1* mutation may compensate for the loss of RNase MRP through an unclear mechanism, rescuing the induction of skeletal developmental abnormalities caused by improper rRNA splicing, for which further studies are needed. In patients with North American Indian childhood cirrhosis (NAIC), a severe form of cholestasis, mutations in *CIRH1A* and its binding factor nucleolar protein 11

(*NOL11*) have been identified (Chagnon et al., 2002; Freed et al., 2012). Both RBFs are involved in pre-18S rRNA splicing (Drouin et al., 2000; Freed et al., 2012; Sondalle and Baserga, 2014) (Fig. 1). The precise mechanism by which improper rRNA splicing brings on NAIC is still unknown, and future resolution of this issue may facilitate insight into the mechanisms of ribosomopathies' tissue specificity. Until then, however, the question of why this global and fundamental process of ribosome biogenesis affects only hepatocytes in NAIC will always haunt us.

On the other hand, RBFs are involved in rRNA base modification. The clinical manifestations of dyskeratosis congenita (DC/DKC) are related mainly to telomerase function (Vulliamy and Dokal, 2008; Jyonouchi et al., 2011), but altered rRNA pseudouridylation caused by *DKC1*, nucleolar protein 10 (*NOP10*) (Balogh et al., 2020), and nucleolar protein family A member 2 (*NHP2*) (Vulliamy et al., 2008) mutations, as well as rRNA methylation caused by mutations in nucleophosmin 1 (*NPM1*) (Nachmani et al., 2019), contributes to the pathogenesis of DC (Fig. 1). In addition, abnormal expression of rRNA 2'-*O*-methyltransferase fibrillarin (*FBL*) can alter rRNA modifications in breast cancer and acute myeloid leukemia (AML) development (Belin et al., 2009; Hindley et al., 2021). rRNA base modifications affect its three-dimensional structure and control rRNA folding, ribonucleoprotein assembly, and even ribosomal activity (Decatur and Fournier, 2003). It is still unclear how such subtle structural changes induce disease generation, as accurate intracellular capture of ribosomal component structures remains a great challenge, hindering further studies.

One possible explanation for these diseases is the degradation of rRNAs that are not properly matured in the nucleolus, manifesting as a reduction of ribosomes, which in turn induces ribosomopathies through pathways like nucleolar stress. When there is insufficient quality control of rRNAs, structurally imperfect rRNAs can be incorporated into ribosome assembly to form a subpopulation of incompetent functioning ribosomes, triggering reduced translational fidelity and impaired protein synthesis, causing or exacerbating ribosomopathies. In terms of disease treatment, understanding the molecular pathways involved in ribosome biogenesis and quality control could provide insights into potential therapeutic targets. The development of drugs that enhance rRNA maturation and promote the formation of functional ribosomes may offer promising avenues for treating ribosomopathies. Furthermore, in the context of disease prevention, early detection of abnormalities in ribosome biogenesis and quality control mechanisms could be crucial. Screening strategies aimed at identifying individuals at risk for ribosomopathies based on genetic markers or biomarkers associated with ribosomal dysfunction could help in implementing preventive measures or interventions to mitigate the development of these diseases.

3.2.3 Ribosome assembly and ribosomopathy

Another important function of RBFs is regulating ribosome assembly. In line with this, a malfunctioning ribosome assembly process has the potential to cause multifarious ribosomopathies, amplifying the susceptibility to oncogenesis (Warren, 2018).

Shwachman-Diamond syndrome (SDS) is a rare autosomal recessive disorder characterized by hypoplasia of the pancreas, hematopoietic system, and skeleton (Burroughs et al., 2009), with a small proportion of patients also having myelodysplasia (MDS) and AML (Dror, 2005). Shwachman-Bodian-Diamond syndrome (*SBDS*), elongation factor-like GTPase 1 (*EFL1*), DnaJ homolog subfamily C member 2 (*DNAJC2*), and signal recognition particle 54 kDa subunit (*SRP54*), as the SDS pathogenic genes, are all involved in ribosome biogenesis (Bezzerri and Cipolli, 2019) (Fig. 2). Among them, *SBDS*, *SRP54*, and *EFL1* are responsible for removing eIF6 from the pre-60S large subunit, completing the maturation and assembly of the ribosomal large subunit, thus forming a substantial contribution to SDS (Weis et al., 2015). DnaJ heat shock protein family (Hsp40) member C21 (*DNAJC21*) stabilizes assembled 80S ribosome (Bezzerri and Cipolli, 2019). Hence, SDS is classified as a ribosome assembly-related ribosomopathy based on the importance of these genes in LSU assembly. Furthermore, *SBDS* is involved in regulating biological processes such as spindle stabilization, cellular stress, and apoptosis, which are more likely side effects of ribosome assembly disorders (Orelio et al., 2009; Ambekar et al., 2010). Intriguingly, unlike DBA, SDS patients tend to exhibit impaired granulopoiesis (Xia et al., 2018), while red blood cell lineage development is less affected. Tissue specificity is an important manifestation of ribosomopathies, and it is worth investigating how different abnormalities in ribosome biogenesis affect bone marrow hematopoiesis and result in inconsistent clinical phenotypes.

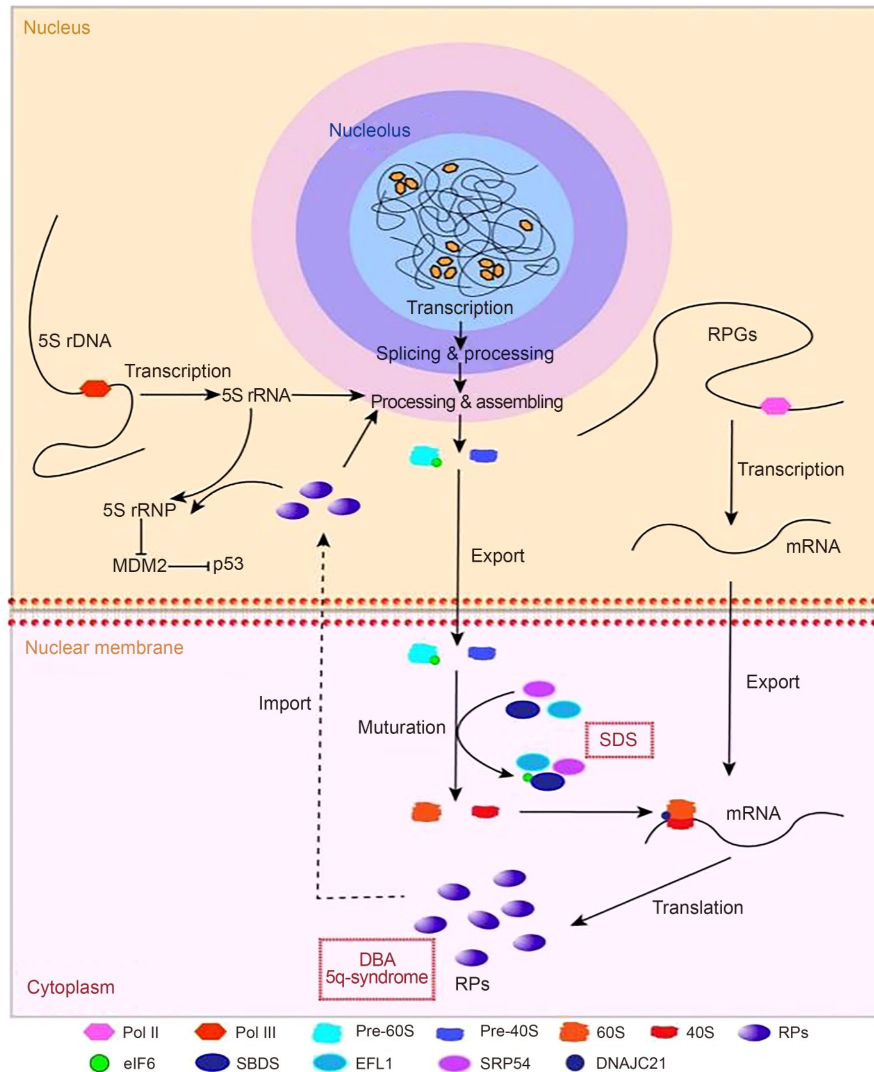

Fig. 2 Extra-nucleolar ribosome biogenesis process and associated ribosomopathies. This diagram simplifies ribosome biogenesis in the nucleolus. The red dashed frames highlight additional typical ribosomopathies: Shwachman-Diamond syndrome (SDS), Diamond-Blackfan anemia (DBA), and 5q-syndrome. The legend at the bottom identifies important ribosome biogenesis factors and other components. rDNA: ribosomal DNA; rRNA: ribosomal RNA; rRNP: ribosomal RNA protein; RPGs: ribosomal protein genes; MDM2: murine double minute 2; mRNA: messenger RNA; RPs: ribosomal proteins; Pol: polymerase; eIF6: eukaryotic initiation factor 6; SBDS: Shwachman-Bodian-Diamond syndrome; EFL1: elongation factor-like GTPase 1; SRP54: signal recognition particle 54 kDa subunit; DNAJC21: DnaJ heat shock protein family (Hsp40) member C21.

Bowen-Conradi syndrome (BCS) is caused by mutations of essential for mitotic growth 1 (*EMG1*), with the main clinical manifestations being developmental delay and facial and osteoarticular dysplasia (Hunter et al., 1979; Lowry et al., 2003; Wurm et al., 2010). EMG1 binds to RPS1, participates in ribosome assembly, and functions as a methyltransferase required for eukaryotic 18S rRNA site-specific N1 pseudouridine modification (Wurm et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2011) (Fig. 1). Mutations in *EMG1* disrupt its nucleolar localization, causing aggregation and degradation of abnormal EMG1 in the nucleus (Warda et al., 2016). Meyer et al. (2011) found that *EMG1* mutations had no effect on its methyltransferase activity, implying a more important role of defects in ribosomal small subunit assembly in BCS. Therefore, BCS is classified as a ribosome assembly-related ribosomopathy.

Although the current research has made significant strides in unraveling the complexities of ribosomopathies, further investigations are still needed to fully elucidate the underlying mechanisms and identify novel therapeutic strategies. Continued efforts in this field,

including more comprehensive studies and translational research, will be essential in advancing our understanding of ribosomopathies and developing effective treatments for these diseases. Incorporating these points into the manuscript would undoubtedly enhance its appeal and significance in the scientific community. Now, there are many controversies and gaps in the research on ribosome assembly-related diseases. Further research on pathogenic genes, such as *SBDS*, *EFL1*, *DNAJC2*, *SRP54*, and *EMG1*, will be conducive to the precise interpretation of the influence pathway of ribosome assembly abnormalities on ribosomal diseases and the development of possible therapeutic methods.

3.3 Ribosomal proteins and ribosomopathy

The eukaryotic ribosomes contain approximately 80 RPs, the most diverse components of the ribosomes, which are encoded by RPGs. Many RPGs exist in a single-copy pattern (Dharia et al., 2014), implying a more pronounced influence of these genes on ribosomal biogenesis processes than rDNA.

Bone marrow is one of the main affected tissues in ribosomopathies. Mutations and deletions of RPGs can change ribosomal physicochemical properties, resulting in DBA, 5q-syndrome (Ebert et al., 2008; Boultwood et al., 2010; Ear et al., 2016), T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (T-ALL) (de Keersmaecker et al., 2013), chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) (Ljungström et al., 2016), AML, and a variety of other hematologic disorders (Fig. 2). Among these diseases, DBA has received more attention, providing additional guidance in understanding this group of diseases. DBA was the first ribosomopathy to be described (Dorn et al., 2021), and the dominant manifestation of this disease is impaired red lineage development (Flygare and Karlsson, 2007).

A large number of RPG mutations have been detected in DBA patients. A subset of RPGs, including *RPS19* (Morimoto et al., 2007; Mirabello et al., 2017), *RPS17* (Farrar et al., 2011), *RPL5*, and *RPL11* (Li et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2021), is more clearly associated with DBA. Studies on RPS19 have revealed the role of RP structure in DBA development. Malformation of RPS19 can impact the hydrophobic core or helix structure and reduce protein structural stability. Malformation of RPS19 can also interfere with hydrogen bond generation, weaken the tightness of protein folding, increase spatial site resistance, or alter surface electrostatic properties to disrupt multivalent interactions with rRNA (An et al., 2021). In general, these mutations impede the assembly process of RPs into ribosomes and affect the formation of mature, fully functional ribosomal subunits. Additionally, RPL5 and RPL11 bind to murine double minute 2 (MDM2) to inhibit the ubiquitinated degradation of p53 (Tong et al., 2020) (Fig. 2). Mutations in RPGs may cause an imbalance in the numbers of RPs and rRNAs. The escalation of free RPs in the nucleus, followed by p53 enrichment, would result in cell cycle arrest and augmented cell apoptosis. Unfortunately, more pathogenic genes, particularly *RPS26*–*RPS29* (Gripp et al., 2014; Mirabello et al., 2014), *RPL15* (Wlodarski et al., 2018), *RPL18*, and *RPL35* (Mirabello et al., 2017), only have a few case reports and/or relevant studies, and the understanding of these genes is still stagnant in its infancy.

Mutations of RPGs have also been detected in isolated congenital asplenia (ICA) (Bolze et al., 2013), autism (Klauck et al., 2006), microcephaly (Brooks et al., 2014; Bourque et al., 2018), and a subset of familial colorectal cancer type X (FCCX) (Nieminen et al., 2014). Although it is unclear how these mutations affect the clinical manifestations of these diseases, several hypotheses have attempted to explain these phenomena. For example, the specialized ribosome and ribosome concentration hypotheses will be discussed in the following section concerning the tissue specificity of ribosomopathy.

4 Tissue specificity of ribosomopathy

Tissue specificity is the most attractive feature of ribosomopathy. Synthesis disorders of the ribosome, this fundamental organelle, often result in symptoms in specific tissues (Table 2). Commonly affected tissues and organs include the neural crest, bone marrow, and liver (Farley-Barnes et al., 2019). Similar defects in tissue development can arise from ribosomal disorders caused by different mechanisms. For example, craniofacial malformations are hallmark features of TCS (Marszałek-Kruk et al., 2021), AFDCIN (Watt et al., 2018), and DBA (Dorn et al., 2021), and bone marrow failure and anemia are characteristic manifestations observed in patients with SDS (Burroughs et al., 2009), DBA, and 5q-syndrome (Ganapathi and Shimamura, 2008), indicating a complex network of mechanisms underlying the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies.

Table 2 Main affected areas of ribosomopathies

Classification	Disease	Affected tissues, organs, and systems							
		Neural crest	Bone marrow	Liver	Pancreas	Immune system	Central nervous system	Locomotor system	Reproductive system
rDNA transcriptional-associated ribosomopathy	TCS	√							
	AFDCIN	√						√	
rRNA post-transcriptional processing-associated ribosomopathy	CHH-AD		√			√		√	
	NAIC			√		√			
	DC	√	√			√			
Ribosome assembly-associated ribosomopathy	SDS		√		√	√		√	
	BCS	√					√	√	
Ribosomal protein-associated ribosomopathy	DBA	√	√					√	√
	5q-Syndrome		√						

rDNA: ribosomal DNA; rRNA: ribosomal RNA; TCS: Treacher-Collins syndrome; AFDCIN: acrofacial dysostosis-Cincinnati type; CHH-AD: cartilage hair hypoplasia-anauxetic dysplasia; NAIC: North American Indian childhood cirrhosis; DC: dyskeratosis congenita; SDS: Shwachman-Diamond syndrome; BCS: Bowen-Conradi syndrome; DBA: Diamond-Blackfan anemia.

4.1 Specialized ribosome and ribosome concentration: qualitative and quantitative hypotheses of tissue specificity

The notion of ribosomal heterogeneity has sparked widespread speculation since it was first proposed six decades ago. It is only in the last decade or so that technological advances have allowed us to approach this theory. This heterogeneity stems from RP homologous paralog substitutions (Gay et al., 2022), discordant expression levels of RPGS (Slavov et al., 2015), RPGs or rDNA mutations (Xue and Barna, 2012; Panda et al., 2020), and differences in modifications of ribosomal components, manifested as subtle differences in composition or structure between ribosome subpopulations. Hitherto, solid and credible evidence has confirmed the existence of ribosomal heterogeneity.

This heterogeneity lays the foundation for another relatively vague derived concept, the (functional) specialized ribosome. Although there is no consensus on the definition, researchers have generalized similarly to the conception of specialized ribosomes (Genuth and Barna, 2018; Ferretti and Karbstein, 2019; Norris et al., 2021), so we simplified this concept to a subgroup of ribosomes that participate in global protein synthesis, regulate translation processes, and output results. Several studies have provided more plausible evidence for the existence of specialized ribosomes. Shigeoka et al. (2019) reported in Xenopus embryonic neuronal cells that RPs synthesized in axons participate in ribosome assembly in a nucleolus-independent manner and that blocking this process interferes with axon formation, implying a more refined function acquired by these ribosomes. RPL38 is a eukaryote-specific RP located close to the extended fragment expansion segment 27 (ES27) (Kondrashov et al., 2011). Large-scale changes in gene expression occur in *RPL38*-deficient mouse embryos, showing a significant reduction of the *Hox* gene expression. These changes are associated with anomalies in axial skeletal and neural tube patterns, as evidenced by previous studies (Kondrashov et al., 2011; Gopanenko et al., 2021).

Similarly, enrichment or deletion of *RPS25*, *RPS26*, and *RPL10A* would confer ribosome high selectivity toward a subset of translated messenger RNAs (mRNAs), which are involved in cellular stress response, cell cycle, metabolism, and developmental regulation (Ferretti et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2019). All these pieces of evidence suggest that, beyond the transcriptional level, regulation at the translational level affecting the ribosome is also an important aspect of gene expression, which links ribosomal functional specialization to tissue-specific defects. When ribosomal affinity alters the expression of tissue-specific genes, it may cause developmental defects in the corresponding embryo tissues. However, related studies have been hampered by the following obstacles: (1) The manipulation of specific RPs through mutagenesis or knockdown

results in the alteration of ribosome concentration to varying extents, which in turn complicates the interpretation of various effects. *RPS19* haploinsufficiency can reduce translation of the hematopoietic transcription factor GATA1, but *RPS19* was not found to interact with clear *cis*-elements on mRNA (Xue et al., 2015), suggesting that GATA1 translation requires a high ribosome level. (2) The emphasis on RP stoichiometry overshadows ribosomal function tests. Hence, ribosomes involved in assembly or degradation may be identified as specialized ribosomes because of their ordered, stepwise assemblage or degradation (Baßler and Hurt, 2019; Ferretti and Karbstein, 2019). (3) Although translation viability assays are conducted, it is not assured that the origin, composition, and purity of the ribosomes used are reliable. Addressing these challenges may further refine ribosome function and explain the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies from a qualitative standpoint, but this is destined to require a great deal of effort.

Compared with the specialized ribosome hypothesis, the ribosome concentration hypothesis concerns quantitative factors of ribosomes. Multiple copies and high transcriptional levels of rDNA, according to this hypothesis, limit the extent of their influence (Xu et al., 2017), while RBFs and RPs appear to be the key factors in tissue specificity. Both RBFs and RPs can obstruct the formation of sufficient mature ribosomes through complex mechanisms, which are described above. Several reasons may explain why insufficient ribosomes, the ubiquitous and essential organelles for life activity, frequently affect specific tissues: (1) Affected tissues in ribosomopathies have high metabolic or proliferative rates and require large numbers of ribosomes to perform functions, such as the proliferation of neural crest, bone marrow, and germ cells, along with pancreas secretion (Dutt et al., 2011; Noack Watt et al., 2016; Levasseur et al., 2018). Inadequate ribosomes disrupt the normal function of these tissues, resulting in clinical manifestations. (2) High levels of ribosomes are required for the expression of a single gene or groups of genes, in contrast to the overall high demand for ribosomes in specific cell types. When ribosomes are in short supply, genes that are highly expressed for a long time or expressed explosively at specific developmental stages undergo reduced expression or silencing, resulting in tissue-specific developmental defects (Morimoto et al., 2007). Consistent with this idea, mice with *N*-ethyl-*N*-nitrosourea (ENU)-induced *Rpl5* intronic mutations exhibit impaired erythroid maturation at embryonic Day 12.5, with symptoms relieved by embryonic Day 14 (Yu et al., 2021). Moreover, this condition is associated with the ribosome sensitivity of specific mRNAs (Mills and Green, 2017). Genes with high ribosome sensitivity may be more vulnerable to abnormal ribosome concentrations; thus, the specialized ribosome and ribosome concentration hypotheses seem to be in tandem.

In conclusion, the specialized ribosome and ribosome concentration hypotheses both explain part of the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies. The effects that alter ribosome properties or quantity are not mutually exclusive and coexist in ribosomopathies. Hence, neither theory can fully elucidate the phenomenon of tissue specificity. For the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies, it may be necessary to move away from the limitations of a particular hypothesis. The way forward for research would involve changes in ribosome properties and numbers being assessed in an integrated manner, as well as connecting abnormalities in ribosome biogenesis to downstream effects that directly affect the phenotype (e.g., activation of p53).

4.2 Tissue-specific developmental defects mediated by p53-dependent and -independent pathways

The nucleolus is responsible for rDNA transcription, cell growth, and metabolism (Boulon et al., 2010). Nucleolar stress, also known as ribosomal stress, can be induced by perturbation of nucleolar structure or function (Pfister, 2019). Mutations of RPs, blocked rDNA transcription, abnormal rRNA processing, and other ribosomal pathogenic factors are triggers of the nucleolar stress response (Kang et al., 2021). Nucleolar stress has the potential to elicit downstream effects through p53-dependent and -independent pathways, contributing to tissue-specific clinical phenotypes.

4.2.1 p53 pathway activation by rRNA–RP imbalance

The evolutionarily conserved *TP53* gene encodes TP53, a protein that is extensively involved in cellular stress response (Levine, 2020; Hernández Borrero and El-Deiry, 2021). TP53 functions as a hub in the cellular life cycle, connecting stress signals to downstream target genes and effectors (Liebl and Hofmann, 2021) and subsequently initiating biological effects such as DNA repair, cell cycle arrest, cellular senescence,

apoptosis, and autophagy (Boisvert and Lamond, 2010; Engeland, 2018; Liu et al., 2019). This response to ribosome biogenesis defects occurs through various mechanisms, including altered p53 post-translational modifications, protein interactions, and increased p53 translation (Kang et al., 2021), which play a crucial role in a variety of ribosomopathies (Narla and Ebert, 2010).

Tcof1$^{+/-}$ mice constitute the first TCS model (Dixon et al., 2006), in which the loss of p53 function reduces apoptosis in neuroepithelial and neural crest cells and rescues craniofacial deformities (Achilleos and Trainor, 2015). However, ribosomal biogenesis defects are not rescued (Jones et al., 2008), indicating a direct role for p53 in craniofacial tissue defects in the TCS. *Tcof1* mutations lead to deficient Treacle synthesis and consequently reduced rRNA levels in the nucleolus (Sakai and Trainor, 2009). First, the decline in rRNA transcription during ribosome assembly prevents the formation of sufficient mature ribosomes to meet the exuberant demand for ribosomes in neuroepithelial and neural crest cells (Jones et al., 2008). Second, the relative excess of RPs contributes to an increase in non-ribosomal RPs. MDM2 is an E3 ubiquitin ligase that promotes p53 ubiquitination-dependent proteasomal hydrolysis (Wu and Prives, 2018). RPs that are not involved in ribosome assembly, such as RPL5 and RPL11, can bind to MDM2 and inhibit p53 ubiquitination, resulting in downstream effects such as p53 accumulation and activation in response to nucleolar stress (Turi et al., 2018) (Fig. 1). In a recent study, Falcon et al. (2022) utilized a series of animal experiments to elucidate the possible mechanisms of craniofacial tissue-specific malformations.

AFDCIN, as previously described, has a similar pathogenesis and clinical presentation to TCS. Compared with *Tcof1*$^{+/-}$ mice, those that are double heterozygous for *Tcof1* and RNA Pol I subunit-encoding gene *Polr1a* have more severe defects in neural crest cell (NCC) formation. In addition, the loss of the RNA Pol I catalytic core POLR1A causes more severe symptoms in mouse embryos compared with other single-gene deletions, highlighting the susceptibility of NCC and its derivatives to RNA Pol I dysfunction, along with the possible connection between RNA Pol I and congenital defects. This may be attributed to the high activity of Pol I/II in neural progenitor cells and NCCs. When RNA Pol I malfunctions, RPG expression is not significantly affected, as RPGs are transcribed by the relatively normal functioning Pol II. To meet the high demand for ribosomes in the NCC, the rate of RP synthesis far exceeds that of rRNA synthesis, which ultimately induces NCC apoptosis through p53-dependent pathways.

Similarly, Chakraborty et al. (2009) found craniofacial and neurological defects, together with elevated expression of p53-related genes in *RPL11* knockout zebrafish. After excluding interference brought by the binding of other RPs to MDM2, *RPL11* knockdown could perform cellular surveillance functions by modulating the p53-related checkpoint response, which senses the biogenetic integrity of ribosomes, rather than altering p53 ubiquitination levels. In addition, following *RPL5* knockdown in *Xenopus laevis* embryos, p53 activates and represses the activity of the proto-oncogene B-cell lymphoma 2 (*BCL2*) (responsible for apoptosis inhibition), triggering a craniofacial and hematological phenotype similar to that of DBA (Schreiner et al., 2022). The sensitivity of p53 to bidirectional changes in RP concentration suggests a pivotal role in the regulation of RP content homeostasis, regardless of whether free *RPL5*/*RPL11* is increased or decreased. This homeostatic phenomenon may not directly monitor the expression levels of ribosomal components, but rather limit the relative content between rRNA and RPs. Consistent with this idea, Donati et al. (2011) proposed that downregulation of rRNA synthesis was able to activate p53, whereas simultaneous downregulation of rRNA and RPs did not cause p53 functional stabilization.

Furthermore, the tissue-specific enrichment of p53 and abnormal red lineage development caused by *RPS14* and *RPS19* deletions (Dutt et al., 2011), as well as the activation of p53 following mutations or insufficiency of more RPGs (e.g., *RPS6*, *RPS8*, *RPS18*, *RPS20*, *RPL22*, and *RPL35*) (Amsterdam et al., 2004; Panić et al., 2006; Anderson et al., 2007; McGowan et al., 2008), indicate that p53 operates as a more general mechanism in the generation of tissue-specific developmental defects.

We speculate that any disruption in RP content homeostasis could potentially act as a direct or indirect signal for p53 activation. Unfortunately, this necessitates time-consuming experiments for validation and is destined for an uncertain future. In addition, RPL26 can bind to *p53* mRNA and induce elevated p53 translation following DNA damage, resulting in

p53-mediated growth arrest and apoptosis (Chen et al., 2012, 2017). If more RPs that function via analogous mechanisms can be identified, it will undoubtedly be beneficial to construct a clearer web of relationships between p53 and ribosomopathy tissue specificity, thus deepening our understanding of this peculiar phenomenon.

4.2.2 Checkpoints for multiple mechanisms in the p53-dependent pathways

Abnormalities in some nucleolar proteins can disturb tissue-specific patterns in ways that are not yet fully understood. The nucleolar proteins FBL, nucleolin (NCL), and NOL11, which are all involved in the post-transcriptional processing of pre-rRNA, are all abundantly expressed in NCC and its derived craniofacial tissues (Freed et al., 2012; Jia et al., 2017; Guillen-Chable et al., 2020). Knockdown of these proteins stimulates ocular and/or craniofacial developmental defects (Griffin et al., 2015; Dash and Trainor, 2022; Delhermite et al., 2022). WD repeat-containing protein 43 (WDR43) determines the subcellular localization of nucleoproteins, including Treacle protein, M phase phosphoprotein 10 (MPP10), and NCL. In addition, the DNA helicase DEAD-box RNA helicase 21 (DDX21) is responsible for regulating RNA Pol I/II activity and coordinating the synthesis of rRNAs and RPs (Calo et al., 2018). Malfunction or dislocation of WDR43 and DDX21 disrupts branchial arch development, while *DDX21*-deficient embryos also exhibit red lineage deficiency (Zhao et al., 2014; Calo et al., 2018). Moreover, URB2, a nucleolar protein essential for LSU biogenesis, is required for hematopoietic stem cell maintenance and T cell development in the thymus; its deficiency significantly reduces both cell populations (Cai et al., 2018). Like in *Tcof1*$^{+/-}$ mice, blocking p53 rescues the phenotype of these mutants, but not ribosomal biogenesis defects, implying that these nucleolar protein abnormalities eventually converge on p53-dependent pathways and that the downstream effects caused by p53 activation play crucial roles in generating tissue-specific phenotypes.

It is still unclear how p53 is activated in these circumstances, and we speculate that there are several approaches: (1) These nucleolar proteins may be directly implicated in the p53 metabolic process and p53-dependent pathways. It has been reported that p53 can bind to FBL and inhibit its expression, but it is unknown whether there is a feedback mechanism from FBL to p53 (Marcel et al., 2013). (2) Malfunction of nucleolar proteins may interfere with ribosome biogenesis and indirectly activate a p53-dependent surveillance mechanism in the aforementioned manner.

4.2.3 p53-independent pathways as powerful complements to the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies

Although p53 plays a crucial role in the tissue specificity of ribosomopathy, this does not negate the importance of p53-independent pathways in the development of particular tissue abnormalities. Inhibiting p53 function prevents neuroepithelial cell apoptosis in *polr1a* knock-out zebrafish embryos, but defects in neural crest cell proliferation and craniofacial cartilage development persist (Watt et al., 2018). Similarly, *p53* knockdown restores the physiological function of the pancreas to some extent in a zebrafish model of SDS (Tourlakis et al., 2015), but the various phenotypes of SDS are not completely rescued (Provost et al., 2012). These two studies suggest the existence of potential p53-independent pathways in AFDCIN and SDS. However, the exact pathways responsible for the phenotype specific to the tissue remain unclear. Previously identified p53-independent nucleolar stress response modalities, such as *E2F1* downregulation and *p27kip1* upregulation, have not been correlated with recognized tissue-specific developmental defects (Holmberg Olausson et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2015a). Additionally, RPL5 and RPL11 also bind to p73 and compete for the binding site of MDM2 (Zhou et al., 2015b). Even in cells where p53 is silenced, increased ribosomal-free RPs promote p73-mediated apoptosis (Zhou et al., 2015b). The extent to which p73 contributes to the ribosomopathy phenotype has not been explored, but p73 could serve as a bypass for p53, eliminating cells with defects in ribosome biogenesis.

The investigation into the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies remains incomplete; however, it has been confirmed that both p53-dependent and -independent pathways coexist in such circumstances. More in-depth studies of the relationship between these two pathways and tissue-specific developmental defects will facilitate the selection of a more rational and accurate comprehensive treatment plan for patients, improving the outcome for patients with related ribosomopathies.

5 Phase separation and ribosomopathy

Biomolecular condensates arise from PS and constitute the basis for numerous intracellular membraneless structures (e.g., nucleoli, stress granules, transcription factories, and centrioles) (Tsang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Thermodynamically, the PS of biomolecules is dose-dependent. When the concentration of structural components in solution reaches a critical value, the whole system undergoes PS to reduce the free energy, resulting in the formation of two coexisting phases: a dilute solution phase and a biomolecule-rich condensate phase (Lyon et al., 2021). From a molecular biology perspective, the formation of biomolecular condensates is structure-dependent. PS is triggered by multivalent interactions, and these weak intermolecular interactions include electrostatic interactions, hydrogen bonding, hydrophobic bonding, and stacking of aromatic amino acid residues (Banani et al., 2017; Gabryelczyk et al., 2019). Therefore, biomolecules with structures prone to forming multivalent interactions are potential PS constituents. The physicochemical characteristics, subcellular placement, and biological roles of distinct intracellular membraneless structures are determined by the concentration and arrangement of their major components. Hence, the theory of biomolecular liquid–liquid PS offers a valuable addition to the conventional cellular structure hypothesis.

The components within the nucleolus play a non-negligible role in the formation of ribosomes and the generation of ribosomopathies. Previous findings have shown that a subset of disease-associated variants in disordered regions in high mobility group box-1 (HMGB1) alter PS, causing mispartitioning into the nucleolus and altering rRNA biogenesis, subsequently disrupting nucleolar function and causing brachyphalangy, polydactyly and tibial aplasia syndrome, a rare complex malformation syndrome. These data identify the cause of a rare complex syndrome and suggest that a large number of genetic variants may dysregulate nucleoli and other biomolecular condensates in humans (Mensah et al., 2023). In-depth studies of intracellular PS, particularly those associated with nucleolus and ribosome biogenesis, would be beneficial for exploring different aspects of ribosomopathy etiology and pathology.

5.1 Multifunctional condensates by phase separation

Biomolecular condensates participate in processes, including chromatin organization, gene expression, ribosome biogenesis, cell signaling, and synapse formation (Rieder et al., 2012; Banani et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2020; Hiraoka, 2020), as well as in cellular activities, including cell division (Spannl et al., 2019) and autophagy (Noda et al., 2020; Fujioka and Noda, 2021). The multiple functions of condensates are dependent on their properties: (1) Condensates enhance the velocity of biochemical reactions through multiple strategies. The enrichment of specific structural components through multivalent interactions provides suitable sites for biochemical reactions and increases the reaction rate (Shin and Brangwynne, 2017; Fujioka and Noda, 2021). This also enables a series of successive biochemical reactions to take place at adjacent sites, reducing the time and energy consumption of intracellular transportation. In addition, the orderly open structure of condensates allows efficient transport of substrates and products, controlling reaction homeostasis (Wang et al., 2021). (2) Condensates improve the specificity of biochemical reactions. High concentrations of specific components in condensates enhance reaction specificity by excluding extraneous factors and attenuating competitive inhibition (Shin and Brangwynne, 2017). Meanwhile, condensates can reinforce the site specificity of the reaction through combination with specific membrane components or assembly at specific sites (Spannl et al., 2019; Zhao and Zhang, 2020).

5.2 Interference with proper rDNA organization by abnormal phase separation

Gibson et al. (2019) discovered that recombinant chromatin forms droplets after spontaneous PS and hypothesized that chromatin also exhibits liquid-like properties in vivo. In contrast, a series of controlled experiments demonstrated that liquid-like chromatin condensates are produced only under specific conditions. Under physiological conditions, chromatin prefers to compress into solid or gel-like structures, while chromatin-binding proteins undergo liquid–liquid PS around such scaffolds (Strickfaden et al., 2020). The surface tension generated from condensates of chromatin-binding proteins can both pull distal chromatin fragments together and nudge the surrounding high-density chromatin background apart, creating space for membraneless compartments (Shin et al., 2018). This mechanical influence of droplets alters the spatial layout of chromatin and plays a role in the formation of intracellular membraneless structures (Welsh et al., 2018).

Through multivalent interactions, these condensates also function as molecular filters, further solubilizing needed DNA, RNA, and proteins while simultaneously excluding unnecessary components (Nott et al., 2016). With the concentration of these functionally interconnected biomolecules, precisely organized and functionally diverse membraneless structures are formed in the nucleus (Bhat et al., 2021).

This model may explain the formation of compartments in the nucleus (e.g., nucleoli) to some extent. The assembly of the nucleolus starts at the rDNA transcriptionally active site formed by liquid–liquid PS (Shin et al., 2018). UBF, which has low sequence specificity and extensively binds to rDNA, promotes transcription by repressing nucleosome reorganization in this scope (Moss et al., 2019). Inside the UBF condensates, transcriptionally active rDNA forms discrete chromatin loops that function as the core of nucleolus assembly and disassembly (Maiser et al., 2020). RNA Pol I catalyzes pre-47S rRNA synthesis. The cross-linking of nascent rRNA to rDNA promotes its intercalation with ribonucleoproteins and chromatin-binding proteins, contributing to the formation of mixed droplets (Lawrimore et al., 2021) (Fig. 3b). Several studies have been conducted to construct the link between PS and nucleolus assembly. When RNA–DNA cross-linked fragments are digested through the overexpression of endogenous nucleases, the mutual solubility between ribonucleoproteins and chromatin-binding proteins decreases, followed by disintegration of the hierarchically assembled nucleolus structure, suggesting that normal rRNA synthesis facilitates nucleolus assembly (Lawrimore et al., 2021).

In the transcriptionally active nucleolus, condensates of Pol I confine rDNA to the FC region. Nevertheless, in a patient with a Pol I mutation and craniofacial malformations, the mutated Pol I seizes the rDNA motif and binds tightly, causing normal Pol I to separate from rDNA and dissolve into the liquid structure derived from the FC region (Ide et al., 2020). This suggests that both Pol I and newly synthesized rRNA play a role in regulating PS during nucleolar assembly (Fig. 3a).

The evidence above reminds us of Pol I mutations in several ribosomal disorders, including TCS and AFDCIN. These mutations cause Pol I functional imbalance and abnormal PS of nucleolus components. Possible mechanisms in these circumstances include the following: (1) Self-association of components that should be miscible, such as rDNA, Pol I, and chromatin-binding proteins, leads to excessive condensation and nucleolus dissociation. For example, mutations of *POLR1A* lead to changes in the affinity of Pol I for rDNA (Falcon et al., 2022). Either reduced Pol I affinity, leading to rDNA compaction, or increased affinity, leading to the over-condensation of normal Pol I, may contribute to the pathogenesis of AFDCIN. In addition, Treacle recruits selectivity factor 1 (SL1), required for Pol I transcription, to the rDNA promoter and assists UBF in replacing nucleosomes (Grzanka and Piekiełko-Witkowska, 2021). Treacle insufficiency induced by *TCOF1* missense mutations reshapes rDNA condensation and accounts for nucleolus dissociation by allowing chromatin to exhibit more solid properties (Grzanka and Piekiełko-Witkowska, 2021). (2) The

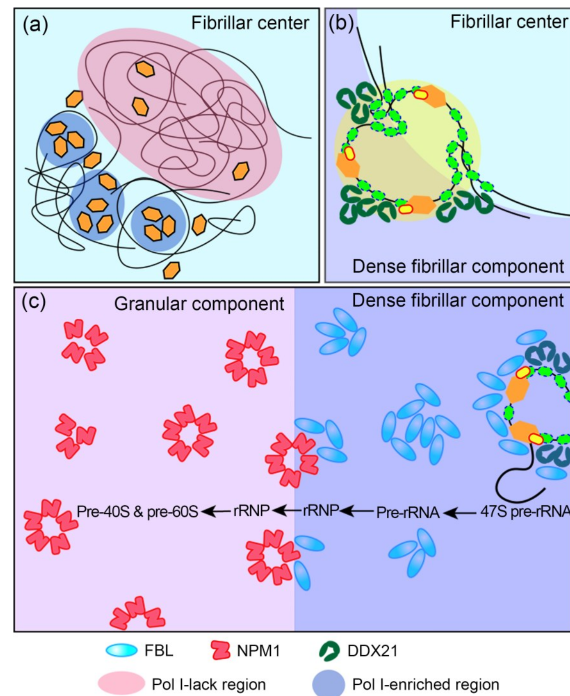

Fig. 3 Phase separation in the nucleolar organization and ribosome biogenesis. (a) Inactive Pol I in fibrillar center restricts transcriptionally inactive rDNA to specific regions. (b) The cross-linking of nascent rRNA to rDNA motifs promotes their intercalation with ribonucleoproteins and chromatin-binding proteins, contributing to the formation of mixed droplets. (c) Through multivalent interactions, dense fibrillar component (DFC) with higher surface tension is encapsulated by granular component (GC), functioning as a "production line" to enable efficient rRNA processing and modification. rDNA: ribosomal DNA; rRNA: ribosomal RNA; rRNP: ribosomal RNA protein; FBL: fibrillarin; NPM1: nucleophosmin 1; DDX21: DEAD-box RNA helicase 21; Pol I: polymerase I.

decreased inherent organization of the nucleolus triggers a weakening of the molecular filter, which could result in the intermingling of extraneous elements that disrupt the proper functioning of the nucleolus. Misfolded disordered proteins have been found to enter the GC under stress without affecting the rRNA processing capacity of the nucleolus (Frottin et al., 2019). However, there is a paucity of knowledge on the molecular filter function of the nucleolus. However, the existence of this phenomenon makes searching for unconventional components that mix into the nucleolus a direction to explore the mechanisms of ribosomopathy generation.

5.3 Disruption of ribosome synthesis orderliness by abnormal nucleolar phase separation

Components relevant to rDNA organization and transcription are clustered in the FC region at the center of the nucleolus and are encapsulated by the peripheral DFC and GC. These two layers are replete with RBFs with intrinsically disordered regions (IDRs), including NOPP140, NOP10, NHP2, NPM1, and FBL, all responsible for rRNA processing (Uversky, 2017).

Among the above RBFs, NPM1 and FBL have garnered the most attention. Feric et al. (2016) determined the physical properties of the nucleolus in vitro and in vivo and demonstrated that the nucleolus is an immiscible multiphase droplet composed of nucleic acids and proteins. The distinct structural features of the primary constituents in each stratum dictate the multiphase configuration. FBL, predominantly present in the DFC, harbors a methyltransferase domain (MD) and a low-complexity sequence glycine-arginine-rich (GAR) domain (Shubina et al., 2020). By self-conjugating PS, the GAR domain forms the DFC, whereas the MD binds nascent pre-47S rRNA and directs it from the FC/DFC interface, where transcription occurs, to the DFC and undergoes post-transcriptional processing (Yao et al., 2019). In addition, NPM1, localized in the GC, has an oligomeric domain (OD) at its N-terminus that promotes the formation of NPM1 pentamer, a disordered ribonuclease active domain in the middle, and a C-terminal domain responsible for RNA binding (Box et al., 2016; Mitrea et al., 2016). Through multivalent interactions, the disordered regions of NPM1 and FBL alone achieve complete miscibility (Lafontaine et al., 2021), whereas the presence of RNA-binding and ODs drives the separation of GC from DFC (Feric et al., 2016). Surface tension is responsible for the formation of such subcompartments within the nucleolus (Guillen-Chable et al., 2020). Structural domains that are not miscible increase the number of intermolecular free sites and thus the entropy of the system (Pyo et al., 2022). This discrepancy amplifies the difference in the multivalent interactions between homologous molecules, enabling GC with lower surface tension to encapsulate DFC (Feric et al., 2016). Consequently, the sequentially arranged nucleolar compartment functions as a "production line," ensuring that complicated rRNA processing and modification procedures are performed efficiently (Fig. 3c).

In summary, the cooperation of protein factors is necessary for rRNA synthesis within the nucleolus. The negative impact of components such as UBF, Pol I, SL1, and Treacle on PS is reflected by normal nucleolus structure disassembly and decreased rDNA transcription. Meanwhile, NPM1 and FBL affect rRNA post-transcriptional processing. In addition, some RPs (e.g., RPL5 and RPL27A) can interact multivalently with rDNA and NPM1 after transfer to the nucleolus, modulating nucleolar assembly and morphology, which may explain the downregulation of rDNA transcription in DBA (Matsumori et al., 2022).

These factors could cause downstream effects through pathways, as described previously. For example, the self-association of components that should be miscible can lead to excessive condensation and nucleolar dissociation. The decreased inherent organization of the nucleolus triggers a weakening of the molecular filter and may also result in the intermingling of extraneous elements that disrupt the proper functioning of the nucleolus. Thus, the phenomenon of aberrant PS disrupts multiple aspects of ribosomal genesis, leading to ribosomopathies. The investigation of the intricate network of PS structures within the nucleolus still faces numerous difficulties. For example, how the cell allows these components to maintain a certain degree of orderly condensation throughout time while avoiding the formation of irreversible cytotoxic condensates remains unclear (Hondele et al., 2020).

6 Conclusions

Ribosome is an intracellular ribonucleoprotein particle that serves as the site of protein biosynthesis.

Ribosomal dysfunction caused by mutations in genes encoding RPs and RBFs can lead to a spectrum of diseases collectively known as ribosomopathy. The definition of ribosomopathy covers highly heterogeneous disorders. Classification based on pathogenesis and screening for several categories of diseases related to rDNA transcription, rRNA post-transcriptional processing, ribosome assembly, and RPs would facilitate the exploration of common or distinct pathways in the development of different ribosomopathies. Unlike classification based on the site of disease initiation or inheritance pattern, this classification can better guide the prevention and early diagnosis of ribosomopathies, reducing the difficulty in treatment. However, classification by pathogenesis also has drawbacks. First, ribosomopathies are often caused by a combination of multiple ribosomal biogenesis-related mechanisms, and it is difficult to measure the extent of their contribution, for example, understanding the regulatory role of RPL5 in rDNA transcription and ribosome assembly. Second, this classification does not demarcate the boundary between abnormal ribosome biogenesis and multifactorial pathogenesis in diseases like DC. Thus, there is still a long way to go to achieve an exhaustive, consensus classification of ribosomopathies.

Tissue specificity is a typical feature of ribosomopathies, focussing on abnormal ribosome biogenesis in specific tissues. This may be because affected tissues in ribosomopathies tend to have high metabolic or proliferative rates and require large numbers of ribosomes to fulfill their functions, such as the neural crest, bone marrow, pancreas, and germ cells. Ribosome deficiency disrupts the normal physiological function of these tissues, leading to corresponding clinical manifestations. In the neural crest, bone marrow, pancreas, and germ cells, the high expression of functionally relevant individual genes or groups of genes requires abundant ribosomes. Insufficient ribosome availability can lead to decreased expression or silencing of genes that are consistently highly expressed or exhibit intense activity during particular developmental phases. This can result in tissue developmental abnormalities by triggering downstream effects, like apoptosis, autophagy, and cell cycle interruption, through checkpoint activation. Moreover, irregular ribosome quantities are linked to the sensitivity of certain mRNAs to ribosomes, with genes displaying high ribosome sensitivity being more vulnerable to deviations in ribosome levels. In contrast to ribosome quantity abnormalities, ribosome quality abnormalities also play a role in the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies. When the quality control of rRNAs and RPs is insufficient, structurally imperfect rRNAs and RPs may be incorporated into the ribosome assembly, forming a subpopulation of dysfunctional ribosomes and triggering reduced translational fidelity and impaired protein synthesis, leading to ribosomal disease or exacerbating pre-existing-symptoms. The tissue specificity of ribosomopathies reflects the special demand for ribosome quantity and quality in affected tissues. Thus, an in-depth study of the relationship between abnormalities in ribosome quantity and quality and tissue specificity in ribosomopathies is of great significance in unraveling the disease mechanism and finding therapeutic strategies.

PS is a thermodynamic process that produces multiple phases from a homogeneous mixture. The phenomenon of biomolecule PS sheds some light on the possible causes of several ribosomopathies. Abnormal proteins synthesized by mutations in ribosomal disease-causing genes can cause an imbalance in Pol I function and abnormal PS of the nucleolus, leading to self-coalescence of otherwise miscible nucleolar components (e.g., rDNA, Pol I, and chromatin-binding proteins) and triggering nucleolus segregation. This reduction in intrinsic nucleolus components leads to a weakening of the molecular filter effect, which may result in the admixture of extraneous elements that interfere with the normal function of the kernel, thereby disrupting the normal function of the nucleolus. For now, little is known about the molecular filtering function of the nucleolus; however, the existence of this phenomenon makes the search for unconventional components mixed into the nucleolus a direction for exploring the mechanism of ribosomal disease production. In addition, because different cells do not express the same genes, even mutations in genes that are widely expressed in most tissues may result in tissue-specific impairment of ribosomal function and corresponding pathological manifestations by binding to other tissue-specific proteins to form tissue-specific nucleolar three-dimensional structures or PS agglutinates. Studies of ribosomopathies need to delve into these phase-separating and tissue-specific effects to reveal deeper mechanisms of disease development. To explore the tissue specificity of ribosomopathies and the related PS phenomena, in the future, it may be necessary to analyze gene expression

using bulk RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) and single-cell RNA sequencing (scRNA-seq), determine intracellular protein abundance using label-free quantitative proteomics, monitor intracellular translation in real time using ribosome profiling, use co-inmunoprecipitation and chromatin immunoprecipitation–quantitative polymerase chain reaction (ChIP–qPCR) to study the differences in biomolecule interactions, and perform in vitro droplet formation and fluorescence bleaching recovery experiments to explore the phenomenon of in vivo and in vitro PS.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization, supervision, and project administration: Jiewen DAI. Writing – original draft: Zhiyuan PAN and Guofen LIN. Writing – review & editing: Guofen LIN (lead) and Xiaoyi ZHANG (lead), with all other authors. Visualization: Zhiyuan PAN. Funding acquisition: Jiewen DAI and Guofen LIN. All authors have approved the final manuscript.

Compliance with ethics guidelines

Zhiyuan PAN, Guofen LIN, Hao LIU, Guozhi LI, Xiaoyi ZHANG, and Jiewen DAI declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

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