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Identifying *STRN3-RARA* as a new fusion gene for acute promyelocytic leukemia

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Abstract:
Here we report a new fusion gene, *STRN3-RARA*, in acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL). It cooperates with *UTX* deficiency to drive full-blown APL in mice. While *STRN3-RARA* leukemia quickly relapses after ATRA treatment, they can be restrained by cepharanthine.

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Agreement to Share Publication-Related Data and Data Sharing Statement: Emails to the corresponding author and the RNA-seq and CUT&TAG data in this study are deposited in NCBI GEO: GSE224816.

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Data Sharing: Emails to the corresponding author and the RNA-seq and CUT&TAG data in this study are deposited in NCBI GEO: GSE224816.

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Abstract

Here we report a new fusion gene, *STRN3-RARA*, in acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL). It cooperates with *UTX* deficiency to drive full-blown APL in mice. While *STRN3-RARA* leukemia quickly relapses after ATRA treatment, they can be restrained by cepharanthine.

TO THE EDITOR:

Acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL) is a distinct subtype of acute myeloid leukemia, that is generally driven by *PML-RARA*, resulting from a balanced chromosomal translocation t(15;17) (q24.1;q21.2)[1,2]. However, approximately 2% of APL patients carry other variants of *RARA*-fusions, which pose challenges for diagnosis and treatment[3,4]. Here, we report a novel t(14;17) translocation in an APL patient that gave rise to a new fusion gene, *STRN3-RARA*. STRN3 forms a complex called the striatin-interacting phosphatase and kinase (STRIPAK), which couples kinases to protein phosphatase 2A and regulates their activities[5]. Like other APL patients with *RARA*-variants, this patient quickly relapsed after the initial response to all-trans retinoic acid (ATRA) treatment[6,7]. Mechanistically, we demonstrated that *STRN3-RARA,* in cooperating with *UTX* deficiency, which was mutated in the patient, drove APL formation in mice. Additionally, we found that *STRN3-RARA* cells were specifically susceptible to the TNFα pathway. Inhibition of this pathway by cepharanthine, an FDA-approved drug, effectively suppressed the growth of U937 cells with *STRN3-RARA* expression, as well as relapsed APL cells from the patient. Taken together, our study identified a new APL fusion gene, *STRN3-RARA*, and validated it as a functional APL driver, providing insight into the diagnosis and treatment of non-classic APL patients.

A 50-year-old male patient (WCH01) was admitted to the hospital with leukopenia and coagulopathy. In the bone marrow (BM), 91.5% of cells were hypergranular promyelocytes (Figure 1A), combined with immunophenotype and other clinicopathological features, this WCH01 patient was diagnosed with APL (Figure 1B and Supplemental Table 1). Further transcriptomic analysis of WCH01 showed enrichment of gene signatures of APL_PML_RARA[8] (Figure 1C). However, the classic chromosome translocation t(15;17) was not detected using the fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) test with *PML* and *RARA* probes (Supplemental Figure 1A). Instead, a new translocation between chromosomes 14 and 17 was found in the karyotyping result, which was further confirmed by RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) and Sanger sequencing (Figure 1D-F). This fusion happened between *STRN3* exon 3 and *RARA* exon 3, resulting in a new *STRN3-RARA* fusion. Additionally, several gene mutations, including *UTX* frameshift mutation, were detected by the RNA-seq of WCH01 APL cells (Figure 1G and Supplemental Figure 1B).

Initially, the WCH01 patient achieved complete remission with standard ATRA and arsenic trioxide (ATO) combination treatment, followed by consolidation with anthracycline-based therapy and maintenance with ATRA and arsenic trioxide. But after 10 months, he quickly relapsed and became resistant to ATRA and ATO treatment (Figure 1H and Supplemental Figure 1C-E). A novel RARA missense mutation (S232F) was detected in the relapse sample (Supplemental Figure 1F). The WCH01 patient then received a combination of ATRA and venetoclax. But unfortunately, no response was found either. He quickly developed severe pneumonia and eventually died from respiratory failure after 14 days of treatment with ATRA and venetoclax (Figure 1H).

To investigate the role of the *STRN3-RARA* (*SR*) fusion, we cloned Flag-tagged *SR* cDNA into a GFP-expressing retrovirus-based construct (*pMSCV-Flag-SR-IRES-GFP*) and transduced it into cell lines. Like PML-RARA and other reported RARA variant fusion proteins, the SR protein was predominantly located in the nucleus and was sensitive to ATRA treatment[9,10] (Figure 2A-B and Supplemental Figure 2A). Transcriptomics analysis of U937 cells with *SR* showed that APL_PML_RARA-upregulated genes were significantly positively enriched in *SR* cells (Figure 2C), which was consistent with the significant overlap of the differentially expressed genes in *PML-RARA* and those in *STRN3-RARA* (Supplemental Figure 2B-C). We further conducted CUT&Tag sequencing of *Flag-SR* U937 cells to discover the SR-binding sites (Figure 2D) and found that these SR-binding sites significantly overlapped with PML-RARA-binding genes[11] (Figure 2E). Combined with RNA-seq data, we found that SR protein directly bound to genes and upregulated many APL-related genes or downregulated multiple differentiation-related genes (Supplemental Figure 2B-E). These results suggest that, like PML-RARA, the STRN3-RARA oncogenic protein exerts both repressive and activating functions through direct binding[11].

To investigate the role of *SR* in APL genesis, we transduced the hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells (HSPCs) with *SR* and followed by transplantation into sub-lethal irradiated recipient mice. We found that *SR* alone was insufficient to induce a full-blown APL in mice over a 5-month period, which is consistent with the previous observations in the *PML-RARA* mouse model[12] (Supplemental Figure 3). Considering that the frameshift mutation of a known tumor suppressor gene *UTX* was detected[13,14,15,16] (Figure 1G), we investigated the role of *SR* in murine APL formation with *Utx* sgRNA (sg*Utx*). The results showed that all sg*Utx*;*SR* cohort mice had developed leukemia 175 days after transplantation while none of the sg*Utx*;Vector control mice were sick (Figure 2F and Supplementary Figure 4A-H). The peripheral blood smear results displayed blast cells with abnormal promyelocytic morphology (Figure 2G). Pathological examinations of the BM, spleen, and liver also revealed the infiltration of leukemic cells (Supplemental Figure 4I-K). Besides, recipient mice transplanted with sg*Utx;SR* APL cells received ATRA or vehicle treatment, resulting in a reduction of GFP+mCherry+ APL cells in the peripheral blood. The induction of

differentiation was observed through blood smear and RNA-seq analysis (Figure 2H-I and Supplementary Figure 5). Furthermore, the treatment significantly extended the survival of the recipient mice (Figure 2J). These results indicate that *SR* fusion with *Utx* deficiency drives APL.

To elucidate the molecular mechanisms underlying the cooperation between *SR* fusion and *UTX* loss, we compared the gene expression upregulated or downregulated in the WCH01 compared to normal human bone marrow cells or in U937 cells with *sgUTX;SR* compared to that with empty vector and found that 454 upregulated genes (common_up_454) and 587 downregulated genes (common_down_587) were significantly overlapped[17,18] (Supplemental Figure 6A-C). According to these gene expression patterns, we divided the common_up_454 genes (or common_down_587) into three groups and labeled them with different colors. Genes in the green group were likely regulated mainly by *SR*, Genes in the orange group were regulated mainly by *UTX*, and genes in the blue group seem to be under the control of both *UTX* and *SR* (Supplemental Figure 6D-E).

To find a new inhibitor for sg*UTX;SR*, we searched for candidate drug targetable genes that specifically upregulated by *sgUTX;SR* but not *PML-RARA*, *TNF* gene and pathway were at the top of the list (Figure 2K-L). Therefore, we examined the impact of TNFα inhibitor cepharanthine, an FDA-approved drug, on the growth of U937 cells with vector, sg*UTX*, *SR,* or sg*UTX*;*SR*[19]. Our results demonstrated that U937 cells with *SR* or sg*UTX*;*SR* was more sensitive to cepharanthine than control cells (Figure 2M). Furthermore, while clinical *SR* APL cells collected from relapsed WCH01 patient showed no response to ATRA treatment, their viability was reduced by cepharanthine treatment (Figure 2N). These results suggest that cepharanthine could serve as a potential therapeutic method for APL patients with *STRN3-RARA* fusion.

In conclusion, we have identified a novel fusion gene, *STRN3-RARA*, in a patient with APL. This *SR* APL displayed similar clinical and pathological characteristics as classical APL patients carrying *PML-RARA*. Additionally, we have demonstrated that *SR*, with the *Utx* loss, drove APL genesis in mice, revealing the oncogenic role of this fusion gene in leukemogenesis. Furthermore, we found that *SR* APL cells collected from relapsed WCH01 patient were sensitive to the inhibitor of TNFα signaling pathway. Taken together, our findings not only advance the understanding of APL disease but also provide valuable insights for the diagnosis and treatment of patients with APL variants.

Informed consent was obtained from the patient's family. All mouse experiments were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of of West China Hospital of Sichuan University.

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Authorship Contributions

Y.L., H.M. designed and supervised this study; T.L. , C.C. and W.M. were involved in the study design; H.M., H.L., Y.W., and H.C. recruited and treated the patient; Q.Z., F.G., L.Z., and T.C. designed and performed experiments; X.C. and L.Z. performed the bioinformatic analyses; Q.C. provided human cells; Y.L., H.M., C.C., Q.Z. and X.C. analyzed the data and wrote the manuscript.

Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Identifying an APL with *STRN3-RARA* translocation.

(A) Bone marrow (BM) smear of the WCH01 patient before treatment. Scale bar, 10 μm.

(B) Flow cytometry analysis of the WCH01 patient's BM cells before treatment. The expression of CD13, CD33, CD117, CD34 and HLA-DR is shown. The numbers indicate the percentage of different cell populations.

(C) Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA) showing the positive enrichment of the APL_PML_RARA gene set in the WCH01 patient, comparing to normal ones (NES=2.47; *p*-value=0.00).

(D) Cytogenetics analysis of the WCH01 patient's BM cells before treatment. The karyotype analysis of the WCH01 patient reveals the following abnormalities: 45, XY, add(6)(q13), der(14)t(14,17)(q12;q21) dup(17)(q21q25), -16, -17, add(18)(p11), der(19)t(15;19)(q22;p13.3), add(21)(p11), +mar, inc[20]. Red arrows highlight the t(14,17) chromosome translocation.

(E) The circular plot showing an overview of the top 10 fusion events between locations in chromosomes.

(F) Schematic representation and Sanger sequencing of the *STRN3-RARA* fusion. The yellow blocks represent exons of the *STRN3* gene (NM_014574.3), and the green blocks represent exons of the *RARA* gene (NM_000964.3). Numbers in the blocks indicate the exon number. The Sanger sequencing at the breakpoint site is shown at the bottom.

(G) Sanger sequencing of the *UTX* locus obtained from the PCR product of the WCH01 patient.

(H) Percentage of blast cells in the WCH01 patient's bone marrow during treatment. The blocks indicate the drug treatments administered during the period. ATRA, all-trans retinoic acid; ATO, arsenic trioxide; DA, daunorubicin and cytarabine; HA, homoharringtonine and cytarabine; Ven, venetoclax.

Figure 2. The oncogenic role of *STRN3-RARA* fusion gene in leukemogenesis.

(A) Treatment curve of U937 cells with ATRA and ATO. Cells were transduced with vector or *STRN3-RARA*. Showing as means ± SD, n=3. **p*<0.05, ***p*<0.01, *****p*<0.0001 (Two-way ANOVO).

(B) Western blot analysis of ATRA-treated 293T cells harvested 2 days after treatment. 293T cells were transduced with *Flag-STRN3-RARA*.

(C) GSEA showing positive enrichment of the APL_PML_RARA gene set in U937 cell with *STRN3-RARA* overexpression, comparing to vector (NES=1.57; *p*-value=0.01).

(D) Levels of STRN3-RARA bound at the transcription start site (TSS) in U937 cells transduced with *STRN3-RARA*, measured by the CUT&Tag analysis.

(E) The Venn diagram showing the overlap of binding-genes in STRN3-RARA and PML-RARA (hypergeometric test).

(F) Kaplan-Meier tumor-free survival curves of recipient mice in vector and *STRN3-RARA* group with *Utx* knockout, n=6 (vector), n=8 (*STRN3-RARA*). ***p*<0.01 (Log-rank test).

(G) Blood smear of sg*Utx*;*SR* recipient mouse before sacrificed. Scale bar,10μm.

(H) The percentage of sg*Utx;SR* (GFP+mCherry+) cells along with vehicle and ATRA treatment. The X-axis indicates the number of days after treatment. Showing as means ± SD, vehicle, n=5,4,4,2; ATRA, n=5;4;4;4; *****p*<0.0001 (Two-way ANOVO).

(I) Blood smears from sg*Utx*;*SR* mice following a 25-day treatment with vehicle or ATRA. Scale bar,10μm.

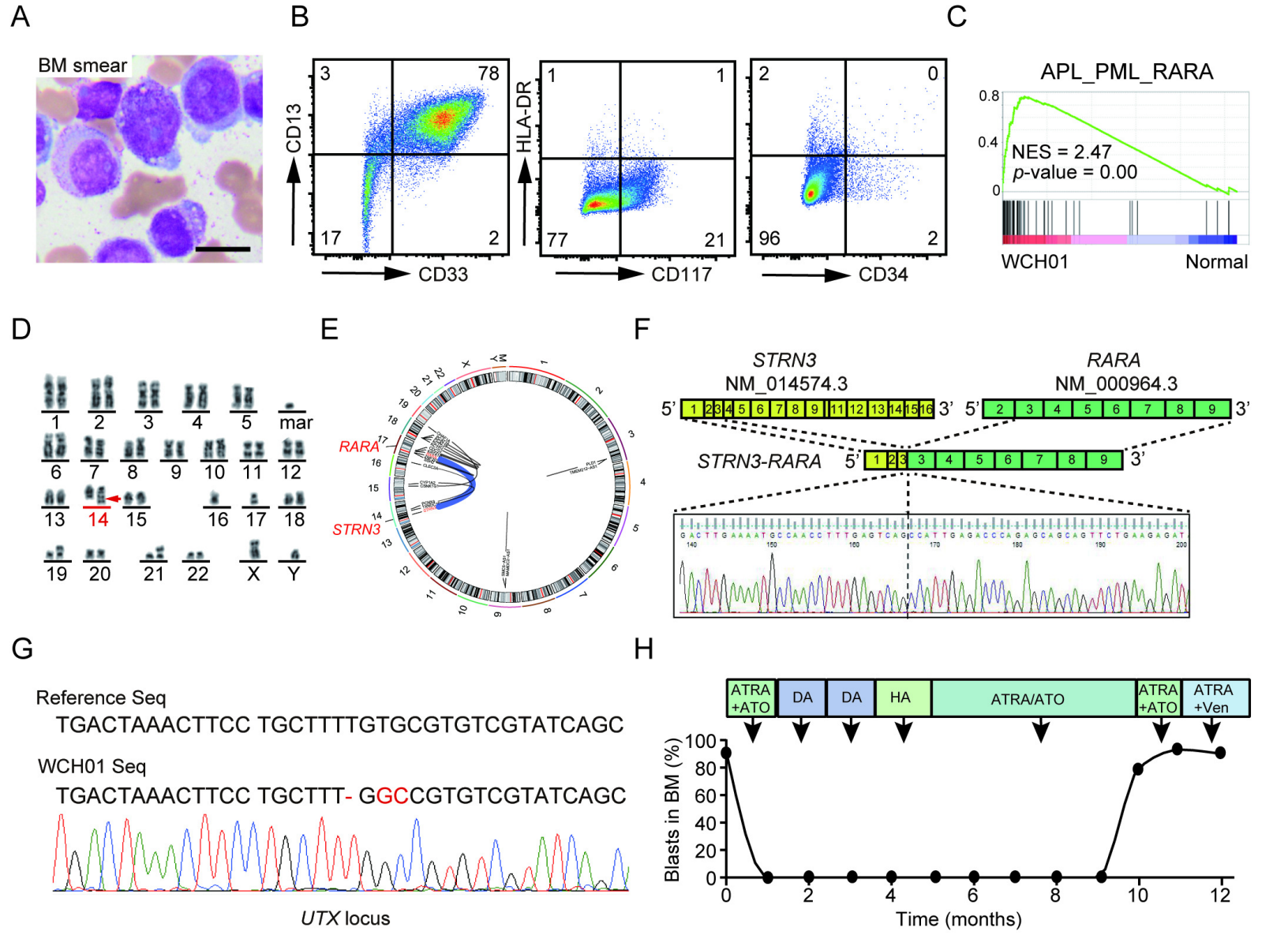
(J) Survival curve of sg*Utx;SR* mice following a 25-day ATRA or vehicle treatment. n=5; **p*<0.05 (Log-rank test).

(K) Heatmap showing the 140 drug targetable genes that were specifically upre gulated in U937 cells with *sgUTX;SR* compared to that with empty vectors, and not overlapped with the upregulated genes due to *PML-RARA*.

(L) GSEA showing the positive enrichment of the HALLMARK_TNFA_SIGNA LING_VIA_NFKB gene set in sg*UTX*;*SR* U937 cells, comparing to vector (NES=1.67; *p*-value=0.00).

(M) Relative viability of U937 cells treated with 1 μM cepharanthine. Vector, sg*UTX*，*SR*, and sg*UTX*;*SR* groups were shown. Showing as means ± SD, n=3, **p*<0.05, ***p*<0.01 (One-way ANOVA).

(N) Drug treatment survival curve of WCH01 relapsed cells. ATRA and cepharanthine were treated respectively. Showing as means ± SD, n=3, ***p*<0.01, ****p*<0.001 (Two-way ANOVA).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NES = 2.47
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Blasts in BM (%)
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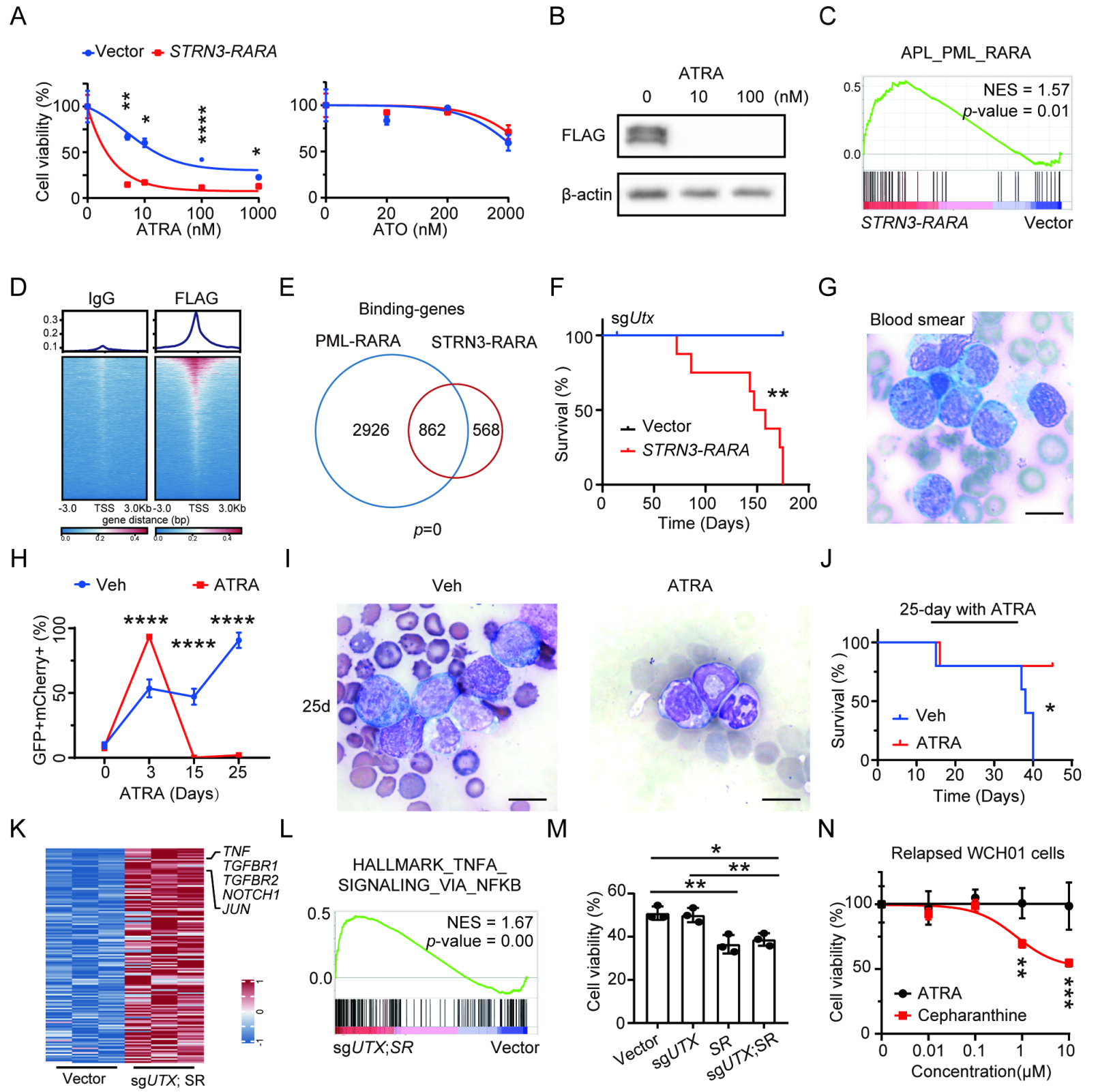
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Vector
STRN3-RARA
Cell viability (%)
ATRA (nM)
ATO (nM)
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ATRA
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APL_PML_RARA
NES = 1.57
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