AKAP9 is a Genetic Modifier of Congenital Long-QT Syndrome Type 1

Running title: de Villiers et al.; AKAP9: a LQTS modifier

Carin P de Villiers, PhD1; Lize van der Merwe, PhD1,2; Lia Crotti, MD, PhD3,5;
Althea Goosen, RHN6; Alfred L. George, Jr., MD7,9; Peter J. Schwartz, MD3;
Paul A. Brink, MD6; Johanna C. Moolman-Smook, PhD1; Valerie A. Corfield, PhD1

1Medical Research Council (MRC) Centre for Molecular and Cellular Biology, Division of Molecular Biology and Human Genetics, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, 2Department of Internal Medicine, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch; 3Department of Statistics, University of Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa; 4IRCCS Istituto Auxologico Italiano, Center for Cardiac Arrhythmias of Genetic Origin and Laboratory of Cardiovascular Genetics, Milan; 5Department of Molecular Medicine, University of Pavia, Pavia, Italy; 6Institute of Human Genetics, Helmholtz Zentrum München, Neuherberg, Germany; 7Department of Medicine, 8Department of Pharmacology, 9Institute for Integrative Genomics, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

Correspondence:
Carin de Villiers, PhD
Medical Research Council (MRC) Centre for Molecular and Cellular Biology
Division of Molecular Biology and Human Genetics
Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences
Room 4036, Teaching Block, University of Stellenbosch
Tygerberg campus, Francie van Zyl Drive
PO Box 19063, Tygerberg 7505, South Africa
Tel: +27 72 456 7369
Fax: +27 21 938 9863
E-mail: cpgreen@sun.ac.za

Abstract:

**Background** – Long-QT syndrome (LQTS), a cardiac arrhythmia disorder with variable phenotype, often results in devastating outcomes including sudden cardiac death. Variable expression, independently from the primary disease-causing mutation, can partly be explained by genetic modifiers. This study investigates variants in a known LQTS-causative gene, AKAP9, for potential LQTS-type 1 (LQT1) modifying effects.

**Methods and Results** – Members of a South African LQT1 founder population (181 non-carriers and 168 mutation carriers) carrying the identical-by-descent KCNQ1 p.Ala341Val (A341V) mutation were evaluated for modifying effects of AKAP9 variants on heart rate-corrected QT interval (QTc), cardiac events and disease severity. Tag single nucleotide polymorphisms in AKAP9 rs11772585, rs7808587, rs2282972 and rs2961024 (order: 5’-3’positive strand) were genotyped. Associations between phenotypic traits and alleles, genotypes and haplotypes were statistically assessed, adjusting for the degree of relatedness and confounding variables. The rs2961024 GG genotype, always represented by CGCG haplotype homozygotes, revealed an age-dependent QTc increase (1% per additional 10 years) irrespective of A341V mutation status (P=0.006). The rs11772585 T allele, found uniquely in the TACT haplotype, more than doubled (218%) the risk of cardiac events (P=0.002), in the presence of A341V; additionally, it increased disease severity (P=0.025). The rs7808587 GG genotype was associated with a 74% increase in cardiac event risk (P=0.046), while the rs2282972 T allele, predominantly represented by the CATT haplotype, decreased risk by 53% (P=0.001).

**Conclusions** – AKAP9 has been identified as a LQT1-modifying gene. Variants investigated altered QTc irrespective of mutation status, as well as cardiac event risk, and disease severity, in mutation carriers.

**Key words:** arrhythmia, long QT syndrome, AKAP9, KCNQ1
The long-QT syndrome (LQTS), a hereditary cardiac arrhythmia disorder resulting from abnormal ventricular repolarization, is characterized by a prolonged QT interval on the surface electrocardiogram (ECG) and the occurrence of cardiac events including syncope, cardiac arrest and sudden death.\(^1\) This syndrome is genetically heterogeneous and hundreds of mutations have been identified in different LQTS-susceptibility genes.\(^2,3\) The particular gene harboring the disease-causing mutation influences the clinical course of the syndrome and may affect specific triggers of cardiac events.\(^4,5\)

However, despite much progress having been made in identifying LQTS disease-causing genes and risk factors, the syndrome is associated with a high degree of unexplained phenotypic variability, often in families with the same primary disease-causing mutation.\(^6-8\) This is seen in the wide range of heart rate-corrected QT interval duration (QTc), the incidence of cardiac events (syncope, cardiac arrest and sudden death), age at which the first event occurs, as well as the number and severity of the events experienced, with the most feared being sudden cardiac death. Furthermore, reports of low penetrance in certain LQTS mutation carriers make it difficult to predict clinical outcomes.\(^7\) This variability suggests that additional genetic and/or environmental factors are at play. Consequently, recent focus has shifted towards identifying genes, or more specifically genetic variants, that, although not directly disease-causative, may contribute to the resulting phenotype.\(^9-12\)

The current study investigates potential modifying effects of the \textit{AKAP9} gene. This gene encodes, amongst other isoforms, the A-kinase anchor protein (AKAP), yotiao. Yotiao forms a macromolecular complex with voltage-gated potassium channel \(\alpha\)-subunits, Kv7.1 (also known as KCNQ1), and its associated \(\beta\)-subunits (KCNE1), that are responsible for the slowly activating delayed-rectifier \(K^+\) current, \(I_{ks}\).\(^13-15\) This AKAP isoform interacts with and enables
the phosphorylation of KCNQ1.\textsuperscript{13} However, not only does it directly bind with and assist the phosphorylation of KCNQ1, it is also phosphorylated itself and facilitates the conversion of phosphorylation-induced changes into altered channel activity.\textsuperscript{16,17} It is therefore clear that yotiao is crucial in the regulation of the KCNQ1-KCNE1 channel and it comes as no surprise that a mutation (S1579L) discovered in this AKAP isoform results in a LQTS phenotype (LQT11).\textsuperscript{18}

It is likely that \textit{AKAP9}, in addition to its identified role in disease causation, acts as a disease modifier. Here we test this hypothesis in members of a South African LQTS founder population of Western European origin.\textsuperscript{6,19} Mutation carriers in these families harbor an identical-by-descent \textit{KCNQ1} disease-causing mutation, p.Ala341Val (NM\_000218.2:c.1022C>T) hereafter referred to as A341V, yet their disease expression varies considerably, providing an ideal population in which to evaluate additional modifying factors.

\section*{Materials and Method}

\subsection*{Founder population subjects}

The study population consisted of 23 South African LQTS founder families analyzed in the present investigation, who carry the same \textit{KCNQ1} LQTS-causative mutation, A341V.\textsuperscript{6,19} All subjects in the study provided written informed consent and the Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Institutional Review Board approved this project (2000/C077). Participants provided demographic information and history of disease (personal and family). Further clinical data collected from clinical records included the timing and type of symptoms experienced, treatment and ECG recordings. LQTS A341V-mutation status was determined for all participants who provided blood. Exon screening of the \textit{KCNQ1}, \textit{KCNH2}, \textit{SCN5A}, \textit{KCNE1} and \textit{KCNE2} genes in the A341V founder family probands revealed a second mutation/variant in only three of the probands (\textit{KCNE1}: D91E and \textit{KCNH2}: R328C\textsuperscript{20} and
KCNE1:D85N unpublished data). No statistical correction for the presence of these variants was made, as a small number of individuals carried them and/or there is a lack of functional and clinical information on their effects in the study founder population and LQTS families in general. Genomic DNA was extracted from peripheral blood leucocytes using a previously described method. Clinical information available on the study subjects and the number of individuals genotyped per category is summarized in Table 1. The number of individuals included in different stages of the analyses is shown in Figure 1.

**ECG analysis**

Of the 349 participants for whom at least one single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) was successfully genotyped in this study, baseline resting ECGs recorded in the absence of beta-blocker therapy were available for 273 individuals, of whom 137 were mutation carriers (Figure 1). The 12-lead ECG was analyzed by an investigator experienced with LQTS to ascertain baseline heart rate (HR), RR intervals and QT interval duration. The QT interval, recorded in the absence of beta-blocker therapy, was corrected for heart rate using the Bazett formula and ranged between 397ms and 687ms for the mutation carrier group.

**Cardiac events**

Cardiac events recorded included syncope, aborted cardiac arrest (requiring resuscitation), or sudden cardiac death. Mutation carriers were considered symptomatic if they had experienced at least one of the above mentioned cardiac events irrespective of age. Mutation carriers were classified as asymptomatic if they were older than 20 years and had never experienced one of these events. This cut off value was chosen because a first cardiac event in this LQTS founder population almost invariably occurred before the age of 20 years and very rarely after age 20.

The time to first event analysis was performed on 114 mutation carriers of whom 88 were
symptomatic and 26 were asymptomatic. Mutation carriers who had never experienced cardiac events but were on beta-blocker therapy prior to 20 years of age were excluded (n=17), as the treatment could have prevented cardiac events from occurring. Furthermore, symptomatic individuals who were on beta-blocker therapy prior to their first cardiac event were excluded (n=7), as the age for their first cardiac event may have been different in the absence of beta-blocker therapy. Finally, mutation carriers lacking required information for statistical modeling (e.g. ECG and cardiac event information) did not form part of the analysis (n=30).

The severity of the disorder was evaluated using the score given in Table 2. This analysis included 97 mutation carriers who had never been on beta-blocker therapy, or only started taking beta-blocker treatment after the age of 20 years. In this “off” beta-blocker therapy group, all individuals, except for two, were above the age of 20 years. One could already be classified in the most severe category by the age of 9 years and the other, last followed up at the age of 16 years, was already symptomatic (had experienced one syncopal episode). The number of individuals present in each severity category 0 to 3 was 27, 31, 25 and 14, respectively.

Individuals on beta-blocker therapy before the age of 20 years were separately investigated. That group consisted of 43 individuals, with 26 below the age of 20 years (individuals per category 0 to 3: 13, 9, 7 and 14).

**AKAP9 genotyping**

TaqMan Validated SNP Genotyping Assays (Applied Biosystems, Foster City CA, USA) were used to genotype all DNA samples for the intronic variants rs11772585, rs7808587, rs2282972 and rs2961024 (URL: [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/SNP](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/SNP)). These SNPs were selected to ensure entire gene coverage, including 2kb on either side, using Tagger analysis (URL: [http://www.broadinstitute.org/mpg/tagger](http://www.broadinstitute.org/mpg/tagger)), applying default settings with an r^2_ cut off value of
0.8 and a minor allele frequency (MAF) of 0.2 (common SNPs). The HapMap Genome Browser release#24 (Phase 1 & 2) full dataset was used and information pertaining to the CEU HapMap population (Utah residents with ancestry from northern and western Europe) was selected.

Polymerase chain reactions (PCR) were set up in 384-well plates, each reaction consisted of 20ng of genomic DNA, 2.5µl ABI TaqMan Universal PCR Master Mix, 0.25µl TaqMan primer and probe dye mix, as well as 1.25µl DNase-free sterile water. Amplifications took place using the following cycle: 2min at 50°C, 10min at 95°C, followed by 40 cycles of 15s at 92°C and 1min 30s at 60°C. Allele discrimination was achieved by analyzing PCR amplified products with the ABI Prism 7900HT Sequence Detection System SDS v. 2.3 software (autocaller confidence level=95%). All allelic and genotype data given for the chosen SNPs corresponded to the positive DNA strand relative to the reference sequence.

Statistical Analysis

SNP analysis

Pedstats v 6.11 (Wigginton and Abecasis, 2005) was used to check Mendelian inheritance, as well as to perform exact tests Hardy-Weinberg Equilibrium (HWE) amongst selected maximally informative but unrelated individuals from the founder population.24 Haploview v.4.2 (Barrett et al. 2005) was used to estimate the MAFs, as well as the linkage disequilibrium (LD) measure D’.25 As Haploview does not always select the same group of maximally informative but unrelated individuals for estimating LD, the analysis was repeated 100 times, and median values are reported. R, a language and environment for statistical computing, freely available from www.R-project.org and R packages Coxme (Terry Therneau, 2012. coxme: Mixed Effects Cox Models. R package version 2.2-3. http://CRAN.R-project.org/package=coxme) and kinship2
(Terry Therneau, Elizabeth Atkinson, Jason Sinnwell, Martha Matsumoto, Daniel Schaid and Shannon McDonnell, 2012. kinship2: Pedigree functions) were used for statistical analysis.

**Traits**

The traits investigated in this study were QTc duration, a severity score (Table 2) and the time until the first cardiac event (age). As this founder population contains many affected individuals, the QTc duration data was not normally distributed; it was positively skewed due to some very large values. Because the mean and standard deviation are not appropriate statistical measures in this case, terms of the median and interquantile range (IQR) were described. Furthermore, linear statistical modeling required a log-transformation to approximate symmetry prior to analysis ensuring the validity of results and conclusions. Kaplan-Meier curves are used to illustrate the age at first cardiac event.

Linear mixed-effects models were used for QTc duration and the severity score, while mixed-effects Cox regression models were used for the analysis of time to first cardiac event. All models were adjusted for gender as a fixed effect, and for the degree of relationship between each pair of individuals in the study (using a per individual random effect with kinship coefficients), as well as a per family uncorrelated random effect. The linear models were further adjusted for age and the QTc model also for the presence or absence of the A341V mutation as a fixed effect. Therefore, significant QTc analysis associations were representative of the change in QTc irrespective of mutation status. The mixed-effects Cox regression models for the time to first cardiac event analysis were additionally adjusted for QTc. Effect estimates from the models are reported as percentage change (not milliseconds) for QTc, due to the back-transformation (exponentiation) of the logarithms, change in score for severity and hazard ratio (HR) for experiencing a cardiac event.
As an indication of precision, 95% confidence intervals (CI) are also provided.

**Genetic association**

For single SNPs, the genotype effect was tested by splitting it into an additive term (number of minor alleles) and a heterozygote flag (yes/no) in all models. This is equivalent to testing a genotype effect on two degrees of freedom. If either of the components was significant, the corresponding genetic model, additive, dominant or recessive on the minor allele, was tested. The result from the best fitting model is reported.

Simwalk v.2.91 (Sobel and Lange, 1996) was used to infer the most probable maternal and paternal haplotype configuration for individuals with the necessary genotype and/or phase information in the pedigree. Haplotypes with an estimated frequencies larger than 0.01 were analysed. An additive (without heterozygote flag) model of association was fitted for individual haplotypes, as described for SNP evaluations, thereby comparing each haplotype to all others in each model. Additionally, the interaction of each possible confounder (age, gender and presence or absence of A341V) was tested with all genetic variables (alleles and haplotypes) on QTc. Furthermore, the interaction of gender was tested with each genetic variable on the risk of first cardiac event.

In this study, no correction for multiple testing was performed. Correcting for multiple testing can be overly stringent in family-based association studies. Furthermore, a Bonferroni correction assumes independence between the different tests performed and is therefore not appropriate when analyzing different SNPs in LD.

Results corresponding to $P$-values lower than 5% are described as significant and reported. A flow diagram of the statistical methods applied is provided in the supplementary information.
Results

Of the 350 individuals, for whom DNA was available, only one individual was not successfully genotyped for at least one of the SNPs (Figure 1 and Table 1). Furthermore, all four SNPs analyzed were in HWE for the selected subset of unrelated individuals. Minor allele frequencies varied from 0.10 (T allele) for rs11772585 to 0.46 (G allele) for rs7808587. The number of individuals successfully genotyped for the different SNPs and allele and haplotype frequencies are given in Table 3. Due to strong linkage disequilibrium between the SNPs, and the fact that this study was conducted with related individuals, haplotype frequencies varied from the expected if assuming linkage equilibrium. The LD analysis, in the unrelated subgroups, revealed a D’ value of 1 for all SNP pairs investigated, for all 100 runs. A D’ value of 1 indicates that the two markers being tested are in complete (not perfect) linkage disequilibrium, with at least one two-marker haplotype having a frequency of 0, as was the case for all SNP pairs investigated in the current study.

Each SNP was evaluated for association with all traits and the significant results are tabulated in Table 4, as well as discussed briefly below.

QTc analysis

Initial investigation of the data revealed a highly significant correlation of gender (P<0.001) with QTc. Females had an estimated 5.6% longer QTc than males. Additionally, the presence of A341V was correlated with QTc (P<0.001). Mutation carriers had an estimated 21.4% longer QTc than non-carriers. QTc heritability was estimated at 31% (55% unadjusted for A341V).

A significant interaction between age and rs2961024 on QTc (P=0.006), after adjusting for gender and mutation status, was detected. Individuals with the TT genotype for this SNP showed a 1% (95% CI, 0.2 to 1.3%) shorter QTc with every additional 10 years of life, while, for
each minor G allele carried in genotypes GT and GG, this age effect increased by 1% (95% CI, 0.3 to 1.6%) over the same time period compared to the TT genotype. The net result was no significant effect for GT, and a 1% increase for the GG genotype. Figure 2 indicates this increase compounded over a number of years. The curves commenced at the highest QTc for a female mutation carrier (Figure 2A) but dropped for male mutation carrier (Figure 2B) and non-carrier estimates (Figure 2C and D) due to the difference in baseline QTc values. However, the relative position of the genotype curves to each other remained the same.

As an example, a 10 year old individual with the GG genotype and a QTc of 450ms would have an increase of 4.5ms over the next 10 years. The 1% increase over the following 10 years would then be calculated from a QTc of 454.5ms. Continuing this process, the effect of this risk genotype from 10 to 40 years of age would be an increase of 13.6ms (QTc 40 years=463.6ms). However, as the millisecond change depends on the QTc of the individual, and the QTc values for mutation carriers in this founder population ranged between 397ms and 687ms (mean age=34.9), the actual change in milliseconds, increase or decrease, between mutation carriers is expected to be extremely variable.

Interestingly, all individuals in the founder population who had the GG genotype at rs2961024 were also homozyotes for each of the other three SNPs investigated, that is they all had two copies of the CGCG (order: rs11772585, rs7808587, rs2282972 and rs2961024; frequency=0.282) haplotype. Consistent with this observation, and with the above results, individuals with two copies of the CGCG haplotype had an average QTc 1% (95% CI, 0.2 to 1.4%) longer per 10 year increase in age (P=0.012), while carrying one copy of CGCG showed no significant effect on QTc duration and in individuals without a copy of this haplotype there was an average 1% (95% CI, 0.2 to 1.3%) shorter QTc duration per 10 year increase in age.
However, given the small number of CATG observations it is impossible to discern whether the effect of rs2961024 is restricted to the CGCG haplotype.

Interestingly, after adjusting for A341V and gender, rs2961024 was also significantly associated with QTc ($P=0.014$) independent of age, with the GG genotype associated with longer QTc relative to the TT and GT genotypes. Furthermore, including an adjustment for age yielded the same result, with the presence of the GG genotype associated with a 5% longer QTc (95% CI, 1.0 to 9.1%) compared to TT and GT. However, no statistically significant additive allelic or haplotype associations with QTc were observed given these adjustments.

Therefore, after adjusting for age, gender and A341V, both rs2961024, and the interaction between age and rs2961024, are significant predictors of QTc. The QTc increases with age and this observation is progressively more pronounced with each additional G allele compared to the TT genotype; even ignoring age, the average QTc is higher. Therefore, the age-dependent effect can be considered the best description of the observed association between rs2961024 and QTc.

Cardiac events analysis

The risk of experiencing a cardiac event was significantly greater in subjects with a longer QTc duration for all models investigated ($P=0.000035$), consistent with previously reported associations in this founder population. The significant effects described below are independent of QTc.

The $AKAP9$ SNP, rs11772585, was associated with an increased risk of cardiac events ($P=0.002$). For this SNP, no TT genotypes were observed, yet having the T allele within the CT genotype more than doubled the risk of having a cardiac event (HR=2.18; 95% CI, 1.33 to 3.60). Figure 3A illustrates the 118% greater probability of a cardiac event. Haplotype analysis
supported this result (Table 4).

Another AKAP9 SNP, rs7808587, was associated with a recessive model ($P=0.046$), with the GG genotype increasing the cardiac event risk by 74% (HR=1.74, 95% CI, 1.01 to 3.01) relative to the AG and AA genotypes. Figure 3B illustrates this increased probability of a cardiac event.

Finally, rs2282972 was associated with a dominant model ($P=0.001$) with the CT and TT genotypes reducing the cardiac event risk by 53% (HR=0.47, 95% CI, 0.29 to 0.74) relative to the CC genotype. Figure 3C illustrates this reduced probability of a cardiac event.

Consistent with the above result, CATT, the predominant haplotype containing the rs2282972 T allele, was associated with a decrease of 35% (HR=0.65, 95% CI, 0.45 to 0.94) per haplotype copy ($P=0.022$).

Severity score

The effect of any of these SNPs on the severity of the disease was investigated using the score given in Table 2. In agreement with the other results, rs11772585 also affected disease severity for the “off” beta-blocker therapy group. The T allele was significantly associated ($P=0.025$) with a higher score by a value of 0.58 (95% CI, 0.07 to 1.08). Haplotype analysis supported this result (Table 4). The separately investigated smaller group consisting of individuals on treatment did not show any statistically significant results.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that yotiao, the protein encoded by the AKAP9 gene, is a modifier of the clinical phenotype of LQTS. This finding is important given that individuals with LQTS present with symptoms that can vary considerably, irrespective of their carrying the same disease-causal mutation, as demonstrated by the families in this study.6–8 In this founder
population, \( \textit{KCNQ1} \) A341V mutation carriers have a broad range of QT intervals and they may be symptomatic or asymptomatic, depending on the occurrence of cardiac events.\(^6\) Worldwide, the A341V mutation is associated with a very severe form of the disease, with the likelihood of cardiac events occurring more frequently and earlier in affected individuals relative to other \( \textit{KCNQ1} \) mutations.\(^{29}\) However, LQT1 individuals older than 20 years of age who, despite not having treatment, are asymptomatic, seldom become symptomatic afterwards.\(^{5,29}\) Accordingly, mutation carriers identified after this age rarely started treatment, explaining the low beta-blocker treatment percentage for the study population in Table 1.

Despite the severe phenotype of the A341V mutation, it has been shown that it only has a modest dominant negative effect on the wild-type channel.\(^6\) The channel subunits encoded by the mutated allele, due to their association with other subunits to form the complete ion channel complex, negatively influence the function of the wild-type subunits and thereby the performance of the channel. Heijman et al. showed that the severity conferred by this mutation can, in part, be explained by the reduced phosphorylation of \( \textit{KCNQ1} \).\(^{30}\) Yotiao plays an important role in this phosphorylation process, as well as in downstream changes in channel activity as a consequence of this phosphorylation.\(^{13,17}\) Therefore, it could be proposed that variants in the \( \textit{AKAP9} \) gene that result in altered yotiao expression, structure and/or function are likely to influence channel properties and could explain some of the severity and phenotypic differences observed. As a number of \( \textit{KCNQ1} \) mutations, including A341V, suppress cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP) or protein kinase A (PKA) mediated channel regulation\(^{30,31}\), it is possible that modifying effects by \( \textit{AKAP9} \) variants are acting on the wild-type channels.

This investigation strengthens the notion that yotiao is indeed involved in conferring some of the severity and phenotypic variability. \( \textit{AKAP9} \) variants in this study were shown to alter
the QTc interval, as well as the risk and severity of cardiac events, in the South African A341V founder population. As these findings were observed in a population with a very specific genetic background, further work is required to verify that the same effect is observed in other population groups, as well as for different types of LQTS. Furthermore, as these variants are located in the intronic regions of the gene, they themselves are unlikely to be the direct cause of the modifying effects and variants in LD with them require further investigation. However, this work clearly indicates involvement of the AKAP9 gene region as a LQTS modifier.

Most other genetic modifying effects reported have been associated with already known LQTS genes. Variants associated with QTc and/or sudden cardiac death have been described for KCNQ1, KCNH2, SCN5A, ANK2, KCNE1, KCNE2 and KCNJ2 (LQT1-7). Additionally, recent genome-wide association studies have revealed a few novel QTc-associated loci, including the nitric oxide synthase 1 adaptor protein gene (NOS1AP). NOS1AP has since been repeatedly associated with QTc interval, LQTS disease severity and sudden cardiac death risk, with significant modifying effects reported for the same founder family described in the current study.

**AKAP9 variant associated with QTc duration**

The heritability of the QT interval is reported to range between 25% and 55% (latter value from present study), with many common variants examined to date not explaining much more than 7% of the total QTc variation. Furthermore, 31% of the estimated heritability for the South African A341V founder population could not be explained by the A341V mutation, age or gender (this study).

The current study identified an age-dependent additive allelic association between the rs2961024 SNP and QTc (Table 4 and Figure 2). This SNP was identified as a modifier for QTc...
irrespective of mutation status in this specific founder population. Older individuals, with two copies of the minor allele (GG genotype), displayed a longer QTc. The opposite was true for individual carrying two copies of the major allele. Pfeufer et al. also report age-specific effects on QT interval when looking at the gene encoding the RING finger protein 207, RNF207, as well as that encoding the cardiac phospholamban protein, PLN. However, in their investigation, each minor allele of the particular SNP investigated contributed towards a larger QT-prolonging effect (rs846111) or a lower QT-shortening effect (rs12210810) in younger individuals.

Although, in this study, an association between rs2961024 and QTc was observed both with and without considering the age-dependent effect, other investigations, not evaluating interactions with specific confounding variables, could be missing specific variable-dependent QTc associations. Additionally, studies using additive allelic models only could miss dominant and recessive effects. This highlights the importance of evaluating different genetic inheritance models, as well as interactions of genotypes with confounding variables on clinical outcomes. Many previously reported common variants associated with QT interval only alter the variability by small percentages, emphasizing the relevance of considering multiple models for detection.

**AKAP9 variants associated with modifying risk and severity of cardiac events**

The AKAP9 gene not only alters QTc duration but also influences the risk and severity of cardiac events, after controlling for QTc. However, different variants were associated with cardiac event risk and severity than the one shown to alter QTc interval duration (Table 4). The extent of the phenotypic variability in LQTS, as well as the existence of mutation carriers with normal QTc intervals that experience cardiac events, suggests that there are at least one or more different variants involved in modifying cardiac events and severity to QT interval duration. Furthermore, as yotiao-dependent regulation of the KCNQ1-KCNE1 channel is so versatile, in
targeting a number of proteins to the channel complex and in ensuring not only efficient KCNQ1 phosphorylation but also the subsequent channel response, it is not hard to imagine that different variants in its encoding gene could result in slightly different phenotypic expression.13,17,43,44 Interestingly, Kao et al. also report a few NOS1AP variants affecting the QT interval but not sudden cardiac death.45 Work dedicated to understanding the different mechanisms responsible for these observations requires further attention.

Three AKAP9 SNPs were significantly associated with cardiac event risk, and one of these was also associated with disease severity. The rs11772585 minor allele (T) was significantly associated with both the risk of having a cardiac event and increasing the severity of the disease. The presence of this allele more than doubled the risk of a cardiac event. These results were supported by the haplotype analysis (Table 4). The rs7808587 GG genotype was associated with a 74% increase in cardiac event risk, while the rs2282972 minor allele (T) revealed a protective effect, reducing the risk of an event by 53%. A protective effect associated with another LQTS-causative gene variant, KCNQ1 rs2074238, has also recently been reported, with the relevant allele (T allele) modifying both the risk of symptoms and QTc duration.46

Conclusions

Variants in a number of arrhythmia related genes have been reviewed and their contributions towards QTc interval and sudden cardiac death described in different populations.11,12,41 However, the LQTS gene, AKAP9, encoding a prominent protein in the regulation of the KCNQ1-KCNE1 channel, has not previously been described as a potential modifier. Results evaluated here clearly demonstrate that this gene contributes to LQTS phenotypic variability. However, as these SNPs are located in the intronic regions of this gene, it remains to be seen which functional and/or regulatory variants in LD with these SNPs are responsible for these
modifying effects. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see if similar effects can be replicated in other populations. Importantly, these findings provide insight into the role that AKAP9 plays, not only as an LQTS-causal gene, but also as a phenotypic modifier. The identification of the mutation-specific risk associated with a growing number of modifier genes epitomizes the evolution in the understanding of LQTS, a disease which increasingly represents the clearest example of how tightly connected the relationship between genotype and phenotype can be, and how this is progressively impacting on clinical management.²⁹,⁴⁷

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None.

References:


**Table 1.** LQTS founder population data summary for individuals in whom at least one SNP was genotyped

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At least one SNP genotyped *</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Non Carriers (n=181)</th>
<th>Mutation Carriers (n=168)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gender, male (%)</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>95 (52)</td>
<td>75 (45)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BB, yes/total (%)</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>5/68 (7)</td>
<td>97/166 (58)</td>
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<td>Age in years at which ECG was analyzed, mean (SD)</td>
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<td>34 (20.2)</td>
<td>34.9 (22.9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BB starting age in years, mean (SD)</td>
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<td>17.2 (17.7)</td>
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<td>QTc, median (IQR)</td>
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<td>401 (383-418)</td>
<td>483 (463-512)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiac events, yes (%)</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>122 (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age first cardiac event, median (range)</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6 (2-22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age last followed up about CE, median (IQR)</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>40 (20-57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BB indicates beta-blocker therapy; SD, standard deviation; IQR, interquantile range; CE, cardiac events

*All SNPs were genotyped in 176 non carriers and 162 mutation carriers
† There were two additional individuals for whom it was known that beta-blocker therapy was started after the age of 20 years. However, the age at which the treatment started was unknown.
Table 2. LQTS severity score used to evaluate effects on disease severity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score value</th>
<th>Satisfying condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No cardiac events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-3 syncope episodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>More than 3 syncope episodes; no cardiac arrest or sudden cardiac death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cardiac arrest and/or sudden cardiac death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Minor allele and haplotype frequencies in the South African LQTS founder population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>rs11772585</th>
<th>rs7808587</th>
<th>rs2282972</th>
<th>rs2961024</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number genotyped</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor Allele</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAF</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Haplotypes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HF=0.443</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HF=0.282</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HF=0.171</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HF=0.098</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MAF indicates minor allele frequency; LD, linkage disequilibrium; CI, confidence interval; HF, haplotype frequency
Table 4. LQTS modifying effects of *AKAP9* SNPs and haplotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modifying effect</th>
<th>SNP/Haplotype*</th>
<th><em>P</em> value</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Effect description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QTc % change per 10 years</td>
<td>rs2961024</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>per G ↑ vs. TT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CGCG</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>per CGCG ↑ vs. 0:CGCG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE % change in risk</td>
<td>rs11772585</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>118%</td>
<td>CT ↑ vs. CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rs7808587</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>GG ↑ vs. AA &amp; AG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rs2282972</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>CT &amp; IT ↓ vs. CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TACT</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1:TACT ↑ vs. 0:TACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CATT</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>per CATT ↓ vs. 0:CATT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severity change in score</td>
<td>rs11772585</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>CT ↑ vs. CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TACT</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1:TACT ↑ vs. 0:TACT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

↑ indicates an increase; ↓, decrease; 0:, haplotype absent; 1:, one copy of the haplotype present; CE, cardiac events

* Haplotype order: rs11772585, rs7808587, rs2282972, rs2961024

Figure Legends:

**Figure 1.** Number of individuals entered into analyses based on available information. NC=non-carriers; MC=mutation-carriers; CE=cardiac event; BB=beta-blocker treatment

**Figure 2.** Age-dependent change in QTc for rs2961024 genotypes by gender and A341V mutation status. Modelled curves indicating the 1% per 10 year increase with each G allele
relative to the TT genotype for a female mutation carrier (A), male mutation carrier (B), female
non-carrier (C) and male non-carrier (D). The net result was no significant effect for GT, and a
1% increase for the GG genotype. The curves were identical for the different categories;
however, they start at different baseline QTc values.

**Figure 3.** Genotype specific risk of cardiac events for *AKAP9*. Kaplan-Meier cumulative event-
free survival of rs11772585, rs7808587 and rs2282972 genotypes.
Total number of individuals
Included for relatedness information

Mutation status known
- Yes: 383
- No: 130

Available DNA: 350

Genotyping successful for at least 1 SNP
Included for haplotype inference and analysis such as Mendelian inheritance evaluation

349 (Table 1)
NC=181; MC=168

Association analysis
Included for association analysis based on available information for required categories
- QTC analysis (136 NC + 137 MC): 273
- CE analysis (only MC): 114
- Severity analysis (only MC):
  "off" BB group = 97
  "on" BB group = 43
AKAP9 is a Genetic Modifier of Congenital Long-QT Syndrome Type 1
Carin P. de Villiers, Lize van der Merwe, Lia Crotti, Althea Goosen, Alfred L. George, Jr., Peter J. Schwartz, Paul A. Brink, Johanna C. Moolman-Smook and Valerie A. Corfield

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Statistical analysis overview: Each outcome was modeled as a function of two genetic terms. The first was additive allelic (counting the number of minor alleles) and the second was a heterozygote flag. After detecting significant associations, we tested whether a dominant or recessive model provided a better fit. We also tested genetic interactions with each of A341V mutation, age and gender on QTc and with gender on cardiac events. Each model was adjusted for appropriate confounders.