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## Myhre syndrome is caused by dominant-negative dysregulation of SMAD4 and other co-factors

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**Conflicts of interest:** None.

**Supplementary data:** The following are available online. Supplementary methods, case reports for patients 1 and 2, and supplementary figures. Fig S1: Pedigree (a), Sanger sequencing (b), X-ray of the cervical vertebra showing C2-C3 segmentations defects (c) of patient 1, and pedigree (d) and photograph indicating the facial dysmorphism (e) of patient 2, Fig S2: Expression of SMAD4-WT and SMAD4-I500V in nuclear and cytoplasmic cell compartments, Fig S3: Transfection controls for figures 2 and 4, Fig S4: Gene expression analysis of *SMAD4*, *ID3*, *COL1A1*, *CTGF*, *SMAD6* and *SMAD7* grouped by individual genes in all assessed conditions.

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## Abstract

Myhre syndrome is a connective tissue disorder characterized by congenital cardiovascular, craniofacial, respiratory, skeletal, and cutaneous anomalies as well as intellectual disability and progressive fibrosis. It is caused by germline variants in the transcriptional co-regulator *SMAD4* that localize at two positions within the SMAD4 protein, I500 and R496, with I500V/T/M variants more commonly identified in individuals with Myhre syndrome. Here we assess the functional impact of SMAD4-I500V variant, identified in two previously unpublished individuals with Myhre syndrome, and provide novel insights into the molecular mechanism of SMAD4-I500V dysfunction. We show that SMAD4-I500V can dimerize, but its transcriptional activity is severely compromised. Our data show that SMAD4-I500V acts dominant-negatively on SMAD4 and on receptor-regulated SMADs, affecting transcription of target genes. Furthermore, SMAD4-I500V impacts the transcription and function of crucial developmental transcription regulator, NKX2–5. Overall, our data reveal a dominant-negative model of disease for SMAD4-I500V where the function of SMAD4 encoded on the remaining allele, and of co-factors, are perturbed by the continued heterodimerization of the variant, leading to dysregulation of TGF and BMP signaling. Our findings not only provide novel insights into the mechanism of Myhre syndrome pathogenesis but also extend the current knowledge of how pathogenic variants in SMAD proteins cause disease.

## Keywords

Myhre syndrome; SMAD4; TGF/BMP signaling; transcriptional regulation; dominant-negative; NKX2–5

## 1. Introduction

Myhre syndrome (OMIM 139210) defines a rare, phenotypically variable multisystem congenital disorder characterized by short stature, neurodevelopmental abnormalities, craniofacial dysmorphism, skeletal deformities, restricted joint mobility, skin thickening and congenital heart defects (Myhre et al. 1981; Le Goff et al. 2011; Caputo et al. 2012; Lin et al. 2016). In addition to the congenital and connective tissue anomalies, affected individuals may develop progressive cardiac, respiratory, and gastrointestinal fibrosis, which can lead to severe complications. To date, over 60 individuals with Myhre syndrome have been described in the literature with *de novo* missense variants affecting two key residues of the transcription factor SMAD family member 4 (SMAD4) (Le Goff et al. 2011; Caputo et al. 2012; Lin et al. 2016; Lin et al. 2020). Pathogenic variants at I500 (I500V/T/M) have so far been *de novo*, though a recent case of Myhre syndrome caused by the SMAD4-R496C variant was reported as the first case of autosomal dominant Myhre syndrome (Meerschaut et al. 2019). As Myhre syndrome cases numbers rise, understanding the relevant molecular etiology is becoming increasingly pertinent.

SMAD4 is referred to as common-mediator SMAD (co-SMAD) due to its involvement in both transforming growth factor (TGF) and bone morphogenic pathway (BMP) signaling (Ross and Hill 2008). Receptor-regulated SMADs (R-SMADs), SMAD family member 1 (SMAD1), SMAD2, SMAD3, SMAD5, and SMAD9, are phosphorylated following receptor activation by TGF or BMP ligands and trimerize with SMAD4 prior to nuclear localization and subsequent transcriptional regulation (Ross and Hill 2008). The transcriptional network associated with SMAD4 is further extended and modified by its association with transcriptional co-factors, such as NK2 homeobox 5 (NKX2-5) or inhibitory SMADs (I-SMADs), SMAD6, and SMAD7 (Imamura et al. 1997; Hata et al. 1998; Brown et al. 2004; Kang et al. 2012; Hu et al. 2021).

Deletion of *Smad4* in mice leads to embryonic death prior to gastrulation, and heterozygous-null mice develop duodenal and stomach polyposis (Sirard et al. 1998; Yang et al. 1998; Chu et al. 2004; Alberici et al. 2006). Similar observations have been made in individuals with germline heterozygous loss-of-function (LOF) variants in *SMAD4*, indicating haploinsufficiency as a causal mechanism of juvenile polyposis syndrome (JPS, OMIM 174900) and JPS-hereditary hemorrhagic telangiectasia (JPS-HHT, OMIM 175050) (Gallione et al. 2010). In addition, individuals with somatic LOF variants in *SMAD4* manifest pancreatic or colorectal carcinomas (OMIM 260350) (Miyaki and Kuroki 2003; Bardeesy et al. 2006). The non-overlapping phenotypes seen between individuals with Myhre syndrome and JPS-HHT caused by SMAD4 protein dysfunction suggests different aspects of SMAD4 function are perturbed. Several previous studies have examined the molecular consequences of the two hotspot SMAD4 variants that cause Myhre syndrome. Using cells from affected individuals, reduced SMAD4 ubiquitylation, increased SMAD4 protein expression, and a general downregulation of TGF/BMP-dependent target genes were observed (Le Goff et al. 2011; Piccolo et al. 2014). These observations have led to the current consensus that SMAD4-I500V/T/M and SMAD4-R496C pathogenic variants are gain-of-function (GOF), which distinguishes them from the LOF variants that cause JP, JPS-HHT, and cancer.

We here present two individuals with Myhre syndrome carrying the *de novo* SMAD4-I500V variant. Our functional assessment reveals that the SMAD4-I500V variant functions in a dominant-negative manner. We propose that the unique phenotypes of individuals with Myhre syndrome are caused by disruption of wild-type SMAD4 function as well as that of SMAD4 binding partners and aberrant activation of TGF/BMP signaling.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Patient recruitment

Patient 1 was recruited on IRB approved protocol for the genetic analysis of vertebral malformations. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Sydney Children's Hospital Network Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number HREC/18/SCHN/222). Informed, written consent was obtained from all participants.

## 2.2 Whole exome sequencing

Whole exome sequencing, variant calling, annotation and prioritization of patient 1 were performed as per (Martin et al. 2020). Patient 2 had gene panel sequencing (curated syndromic and non-syndromic intellectual disability gene list) performed at Fulgent ([fulgentgenetics.com](http://fulgentgenetics.com)).

## 2.3. Plasmids and mutagenesis

*pDONR223-SMAD2-WT*, *pDONR223-SMAD4-WT* and *pDONR223-SMAD5-WT* plasmids were purchased from Addgene (#81830, #82216, #82217), then subcloned into the *pCMX-FLAG* vector via Gateway cloning (ThermoFisher Scientific). The SMAD4-I500V variant was generated by site directed mutagenesis using the following primers: F 5' GACCTTCGTCGCTTATGCGTACTCAGGATGAGTTTTG 3', R 5' CAAAACATCATCCTGAGTACGCATAAGCGACGAAGGTC 3'. *pCMV5-SMAD1-HA* was purchased from Addgene (#14956). *Xvent2*-luc reporter (Rastegar et al. 1999) was a kind gift from Dr. Craig A. Harrison (Hudson Institute of Medical Research, Clayton, Vic, Australia). *SBE(4)*-luc reporter (Zawel et al. 1998) was acquired from Addgene (#16495). *pDONR221-NKX2-5-WT* was purchased from DNASU plasmid repository ([www.dnasu.org](http://www.dnasu.org)) and subcloned in to *pcDNA3.1-HA* vector via Gateway cloning. *pGL4.24 Snai2*-luc and *pGL4.24 Rad50*-luc reporters have been described previously (Bouveret et al. 2015).

## 2.4. Cell culture and transfections

HEK293T cells were obtained from ATCC ([www.atcc.org](http://www.atcc.org)) and maintained in DMEM medium containing 10% FCS in a humidified incubator at 37°C and 10% CO<sub>2</sub>. 80,000 cells were seeded in 12-well plates for luciferase assays and 100,000 cells were seeded in 6-well plates for RNA extraction or protein extraction. BMP4 ligand (Gibco, #PHC9534) was added to cells at 100 ng/mL and TGFβ1 (Miltenyi Biotec, #130-095-067) was added to cells at 10 ng/mL. Transfections were carried out using Lipofectamine 3000 Reagent (ThermoFisher Scientific) according to manufacturer's instructions.

## 2.5. Luciferase assays

HEK293T cells were transfected with 100 ng of luciferase reporter constructs, 150 ng of expression vectors or empty vector, and 2.5 ng TK-*Renilla*. In dominant negative assays 150 ng, 75 ng, and 35 ng of *SMAD4-I500V* were used with 150 ng of wild-type constructs. Cells were treated with ligands overnight on the day of transfection. Assays were performed 24 hours after transfection. Dual luciferase assays were performed as per manufacturer's instructions (Promega, #E1980). Firefly luciferase activity was normalized to *Renilla* luciferase activity.

## 2.6. Co-IP and western blotting

HEK293T cells were transfected with 1 µg of *SMAD4-WT*, *SMAD4-I500V* or *SMAD4-WT/SMAD4-I500V*. Cells were treated with ligands for 40 minutes prior to protein extraction. Cells were lysed 48 hours after transfection using whole cell extract buffer (20 mM HEPES, 420 mM NaCl, 0.5% NP-40, 25% glycerol, 0.2 mM EDTA, 1.5 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, 1 mM PMSF and protease inhibitors). Cells were washed in PBS and lysed with

250  $\mu$ l WCE buffer for 10 minutes on ice. Lysed cells were scraped off the 6-well plates and homogenized with a 25 Gauge needle 10 times. The lysates were centrifuged for 30 minutes at 4°C. Supernatant was precleared with Protein G (Thermo Fisher Scientific) for 1 hr at 4°C, then incubated with anti-FLAG M2 antibody (Sigma Aldrich, #F1804, RRID AB\_262044) at 1:150 dilution or an equal amount of mouse IgG overnight at 4°C. The lysates were incubated with Protein G beads for 2 hours at 4°C, then washed in WCE buffer 4 times. Protein was eluted in 4x sample buffer (Biorad) for 5 minutes at 95°C and loaded onto TGX stain-free precast gels (Biorad). Western blots were carried out using the following antibodies: anti-FLAG (1:1000, Cell Signaling Technology, #14793, RRID AB\_2572291), anti-HA (1:1000, Cell Signaling Technology, C29F4, RRID AB\_1549585), anti-pSMAD1,5,9 (1:1000, Cell Signaling Technology, #13820, RRID AB\_2493181), anti-pSMAD2 (1:500, Cell Signaling Technology, #18338, RRID AB\_2798798), anti-NKX2-5 (1:1000, Santa Cruz Biotechnology, sc-14033, RRID AB\_650281).

## 2.7. Quantitative real-time PCR

HEK293T cells were transfected as per co-IP and treated with ligands for either 2 hours or 48 hours. Cells were lysed 48 hours after transfection and RNA extracted using PureLink RNA Mini kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific). cDNA synthesis and qPCR were performed as per (Alankarage et al. 2019). The following primers were used: *SMAD4* For 5' CTGCTGCTGGAATTGGTGTT 3', Rev 5' GTCTAAAGGTTGTGGGTCTGC 3'; *ID1-3* For 5' CATCTCCAACGACAAAAGGAG 3', Rev 5' CTTCCGGCAGGAGAGGTT 3'; *COL1A1* For 5' CCCCAGGCTCTGAAGGT 3', Rev 5' GCAATACCAGGAGCACCATTG 3'; *SMAD6* For 5' GGGCCCCGAATCTCCGC 3', Rev 5' ACATGCTGGCGTCTGAGAAT 3'; *SMAD7* For 5' TTCAGGACCAACGATCTGC 3', Rev 5' GGGATGGTGGTGACCTTTG 3'; *CTGF* For 5' CTCCTGCAGGCTAGAGAAGC 3', Rev 5' GATGCACTTTTGGCCCTTCTT 3'; *NKX2-5* For 5' AAGTGTGCGTCTGCCTTCC 3', Rev 5' GCGCGCACAGCTCTTTCTTT 3'; *HSP90AA1* For 5' CGTTTCTGAGAAGCAGGGCA 3', Rev 5' GGGAATGCAGAGACGTGGAA 3'.

## 2.8. Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using Graphpad Prism software (9.2.0). Luciferase and qPCR data were analyzed using ANOVA and presented as mean  $\pm$  SD.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. SMAD4-I500V has greatly reduced ability to activate TGF $\beta$ 1- and BMP4-responsive promoters and inhibits wild-type SMAD4

SMAD4-I500V variant was identified in two previously unpublished individuals, who presented with phenotypes consistent with Myhre syndrome (case reports in supplementary data, Fig. S1). SMAD4 is the common-mediator SMAD, acting downstream of both TGF and BMP signaling. In order to assess whether SMAD4 carrying the I500V variant (SMAD4-I500V) affects the signaling pathways differently to wild-type SMAD4, two promoters were used to test transcriptional activation: (1) the *SBE(4)*-luc reporter which contains four consecutive SMAD binding elements and is strongly activated by

TGF $\beta$ 1 (Zawel et al. 1998); and (2) the *Xvent2*-luc reporter which contains the BMP4-responsive element from the *Xenopus Xvent-2B* gene that regulates patterning of the ventral mesoderm (Rastegar et al. 1999; Henningfeld et al. 2000). After confirming that SMAD4-I500V was able to translocate to the nucleus similar to its wild-type counterpart (Fig. S2), HEK293T cells were transfected with *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4-I500V*, or empty vector alongside either *SBE(4)*-luc or *Xvent2*-luc. Luciferase activity was measured in untreated cells or cells treated with TGF $\beta$ 1 or BMP4 ligands.

WT-SMAD4 activated the *SBE(4)*-luc reporter above vector levels in untreated conditions, and more significantly in TGF $\beta$ 1-treated conditions (Fig. 1A). SMAD4-I500V was able to activate the promoter above vector levels in basal conditions, although activity was 1.8-fold lower than *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells. In TGF $\beta$ 1-treated cells, the activity of the variant fell below that of empty vector-transfected cells and was 1.9-fold lower than *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells. Overall, SMAD4-I500V showed reduced capacity to activate the *SBE(4)*-luc reporter compared to WT-SMAD4 in both basal and ligand-activated conditions. WT-SMAD4 was not able to activate the *Xvent2*-luc above vector levels in both untreated and BMP4-treated cells (Fig. 1B). However, SMAD4-I500V could not reproduce WT-SMAD4 level activity in either condition, and its activity was 3-fold lower than vector or *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells.

Given that the variant could not reach vector level of activity with either promoter, the ability of the variant to act dominant-negatively on WT-SMAD4 was tested. Increasing amounts of *SMAD4-I500V* were titrated with a constant amount of *WT-SMAD4*. On both *SBE(4)*-luc and *Xvent2*-luc reporters, SMAD4-I500V was able to downregulate WT-SMAD4 activity in untreated and ligand-activated conditions (Fig. 1C,D). These results show that in addition to reduced ability to activate target promoters, SMAD4-I500V also decreases the activity of WT-SMAD4.

### 3.2. SMAD4-I500V interferes with promoter activation by SMAD1, SMAD2, and SMAD5

Dominant-negative function of the SMAD4-I500V variant was further investigated by assessing its impact on the activity of SMAD1, SMAD2, and SMAD5. Again, *SMAD4-I500V* was added in increasing amounts with wild-type expression constructs (Fig. S3a). The ability of SMAD4-I500V to influence SMAD1 and SMAD5 directed signaling was tested on the *Xvent2*-luc reporter with BMP4 activation while the variant's effect on SMAD2 was assessed on the *SBE(4)*-luc reporter with TGF $\beta$ 1 treatment.

In cells co-transfected with *WT-SMAD4* and *SMAD1* with the *Xvent2*-luc reporter, SMAD1 activity was significantly increased in the presence of SMAD4 under basal conditions (Fig. 2A). There was no difference in SMAD1 activity between *SMAD1/WT-SMAD4* and *SMAD1*-only transfected cells, however, when treated with BMP4. Unlike WT-SMAD4, the SMAD4-I500V variant did not increase the activity of SMAD1 in either of the transfected conditions, and instead significantly downregulated the activation by BMP4.

Addition of WT-SMAD4 increased the activation of the *SBE(4)*-luc promoter by SMAD2 in both basal and TGF $\beta$ 1-treated conditions (Fig. 2B). This activation was lost when *SMAD2* was co-transfected with *SMAD4-I500V* in both basal and ligand-treated conditions.

In contrast to SMAD1 and SMAD2 observations, activation of the *Xvent2-luc* reporter by SMAD5 was negated by both WT-SMAD4 and SMAD4-I500V in both basal and BMP4-treated cells (Fig. 2C). However, *SMAD5/SMAD4-I500V* co-transfected cells had lower reporter activity than cells co-transfected with *SMAD5/WT-SMAD4* in both basal and BMP4-treated conditions.

These results show that in addition to inhibiting WT-SMAD4, SMAD4-I500V also reduces the ability of R-SMADs to transcriptionally activate promoters by dominant-negative inhibition, and thus more profoundly affect TGF $\beta$  and BMP signaling.

### 3.3. SMAD4-I500V binds pSMAD1,5,9 and pSMAD2

Given the I500V variant resides in the Mad homology domain 2 (MH2) that dictates SMAD4 interaction with R-SMADs, whether protein-protein interactions were affected by the SMAD4 variant was tested using co-immunoprecipitation assays. HEK293T cells were transfected with FLAG-tagged *WT-SMAD4* or *SMAD4-I500V* or co-transfected with *WT/I500V*, then assessed in untreated, TGF $\beta$ 1-treated or BMP4-treated conditions. SMAD4 (WT or I500V) was pulled down using an anti-FLAG antibody, then probed with antibodies against phosphorylated (p) SMAD1,5,9 or phosphorylated SMAD2.

The SMAD4-I500V variant bound to pSMAD1,5,9 in untreated (Fig. 3A, lanes 2,3), TGF $\beta$ 1-treated (Fig. 3A, lanes 5,6) and BMP4-treated (Fig. 3A, lanes 8,9) cells. Similarly, SMAD4-I500V bound to pSMAD2 in all three treatment conditions (Fig. 3B, lanes 2,3,5,6,8,9). Interestingly, in untreated cells and in cells treated with ligand, SMAD4-I500V bound more pSMADs than WT-SMAD4. These results show that heterodimerization of the SMAD4-I500V variant is unperturbed, retaining the capacity to bind activated SMADs during basal cell conditions as well as during active ligand signaling.

### 3.4. SMAD4-I500V perturbs target gene regulation by TGF $\beta$ 1 and BMP4

To assess the impact of the variant on gene transcription, genes that have previously been assessed (Le Goff et al. 2011) as TGF/BMP target genes were selected, in addition to *SMAD4* and *SMAD7*. Gene expression was assessed by quantitative real-time PCR, in several conditions: untransfected cells that were untreated, TGF $\beta$ 1-treated or BMP4-treated (Fig. 4A); *WT-SMAD4*-, *SMAD4-I500V*-, or *WT/I500V*-transfected cells that were untreated (Fig. 4B); transfected cells that were TGF $\beta$ 1-treated for 2 hours or 48 hours (Fig. 4C,D); and transfected cells that were BMP4-treated for 2 hours or 48 hours (Fig. 4E,F).

Endogenous expression of *SMAD4* was barely detectable regardless of treatment condition (Fig. 4A). *SMAD4* expression increased in transfected cells with no significant differences between *WT-SMAD4*-, *SMAD4-I500V*-, or *WT/I500V*-transfected cells, indicating equal transfection between conditions (Fig. 4B). *SMAD4* expression remained without any significant changes in transfected cells treated with TGF $\beta$ 1 for 2 or 48 hours (Fig. 4C,D). In comparison to *WT-SMAD4*-transfected-BMP4-treated cells, at 2 hours, *SMAD4* transcript levels in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells and in *WT/I500V*-transfected cells were 14-fold and 21-fold increased, respectively (Fig. 4E). After 48 hours of BMP4 treatment, *SMAD4* expression in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells remained at similar levels to 2 hours of BMP4 treatment (Fig. S4a). However, compared to *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4* expression in *I500V*-

transfected cells had dropped by 28-fold and 12-fold in *SMAD4-I500V*- and *WT/I500V*-transfected cells, respectively (Fig. 4F), and by 281-fold and 192-fold compared to transcript levels at 2 hours of BMP4 treatment (Fig. S4a).

Expression of inhibitor of DNA binding 3 (*ID3*), a transcriptional inhibitor downstream of BMP signaling, increased significantly in BMP4-treated, untransfected cells (4-fold increase) compared to untreated, untransfected cells (Fig. 4A). No differences in *ID3* expression were observed between *WT-SMAD4* or *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in untreated cells (Fig. 4B). Significant differences in *ID3* expression were observed at 48 hours of BMP4 treatment, where expression in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells had increased to 8-fold higher than untreated cells and 2-fold higher than 2 hours of BMP4 treatment (Fig. S4b). At 48 hours of BMP4 treatment, *ID3* gene expression in *SMAD4-I500V*- and *WT/I500V*-transfected cells were 2-fold lower than *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells (Fig. 4F).

The gene expression of collagen type 1,  $\alpha 1$  (*COL1A1*), an extracellular matrix component, increased by 3-fold in untreated *WT/I500V*-transfected cells compared to *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells (Fig. 4B). *COL1A1* expression after 2 hours of BMP4 treatment in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells was 5-fold higher than untreated *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells (Fig. S4c). However, in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells, *COL1A1* transcript was 2.5-fold lower than in WT-transfected cells. At 48 hours, there was a slight reduction of *COL1A1* gene expression in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in TGF $\beta$ 1-treated cells (1.3-fold) and a more significant reduction of expression in BMP4-treated cells (2-fold) (Fig. 4D,F; Fig. S4c).

Transcript levels of connective tissue growth factor (*CTGF*), another extracellular matrix component, decreased by 3-fold in untreated *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells compared to *WT-SMAD4*-transfected levels (3-fold) (Fig. 4B). After 2 hours of BMP4 treatment, *CTGF* transcript in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells was 2-fold higher than untreated levels. BMP4 also rescued *CTGF* expression in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells, which was at similar levels to *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells (Fig. S4d). In contrast, *CTGF* expression in *WT/I500V*-transfected cells was lower (1.5-fold) than the WT- or *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells (Fig. 4E; Fig. S4d). At 48 hours of BMP4 treatment, *CTGF* transcript in *WT/I500V*-transfected cells remained at similar levels to 2 hours of BMP4 treatment whereas transcript levels in *WT-SMAD4*- and *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells had dropped to levels similar to untreated conditions (Fig. 4E; Fig. S4d).

Expression of the I-SMADs, *SMAD6* and *SMAD7*, were also assessed in our cell culture system. *SMAD6* responded strongly to BMP4 and to WT-SMAD4 independently, and there was significantly lower gene expression in *SMAD4-I500V*- and *WT/I500V*-transfected cells (Fig. 4A,B). In TGF $\beta$ 1-treated cells at 2 hours, a trend of increased *SMAD6* expression was observed in *I500V*-transfected cells which was maintained at 48 hours although overall levels of transcript were lower across all three transfection conditions (Fig. 4C,D; Fig. S4e). BMP4 treatment for 2 hours revealed a slight decrease in *SMAD6* transcript levels in *SMAD4-I500V*- and *WT/I500V*-transfected cells compared to *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells (Fig. 4E). Interestingly, at 48 hours, transcript levels in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells had decreased by 2.5-fold compared to expression levels in *SMAD4-I500V*- or double-

transfected cells (Fig. 4F). Furthermore, after 48 hours of TGF $\beta$ 1 and BMP4 treatment, *SMAD6* transcript levels in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells were decreased compared to 2 hours of ligand treated *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells (Fig. S4e). The results show that *SMAD6* is not maintained as an inhibitor in cells exposed to *WT-SMAD4*-BMP4 for longer periods of time, whereas its expression is maintained in *I500V*-BMP4 (48 hr) cells.

*SMAD7* transcript increased significantly in BMP4-treated, untransfected cells compared to untreated, untransfected cells (Fig. 4A). 48 hours of TGF $\beta$ 1 treatment saw an increase in *SMAD7* transcript in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells while levels in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells remained similar to levels at 2 hours of treatment (Fig. 4C,D; Fig. S4f). In *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells and in *WT/I500V*-transfected cells, 2 hours of BMP4 treatment led to similar *SMAD7* expression levels, whereas *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells could not maintain equivalent levels of gene expression (Fig. 4E). In cells treated with 48 hours of BMP4, *SMAD7* expression was at similarly high levels as 2 hours of BMP4 treatment in *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells. In contrast, in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells, as well as in *WT/I500V*-transfected cells, *SMAD7* levels were 2.3-fold and 2.6-fold lower than in *WT-SMAD4* transfected cells (Fig. 4F), respectively. These results show that BMP4 regulates *SMAD7* transcription, which exerts its inhibitory function on TGF $\beta$ 1 signaling.

Overall, gene expression responded positively to ligand treatment (*ID3*, *SMAD6*, *SMAD7*) or *WT-SMAD4* (*SMAD6*, *SMAD7*), or both (*SMAD6*, *SMAD7*). Transfection with *SMAD4-I500V* or *WT/I500V* lead to downregulation of transcription in most tested genes (*ID3*, *COL1A1*, *SMAD7*) and up-regulation of I-SMADs in TGF $\beta$ 1- (*SMAD7*) or BMP4- (*SMAD6*) treated cells.

### 3.5. *SMAD4-I500V* decreases *NKX2-5* transcription, binds and negatively impacts promoter activation by *NKX2-5*

Several previous studies have investigated the relationship between *SMAD4* and crucial cardiac developmental transcription factor, *NKX2-5* (Lien et al. 2002; Brown et al. 2004; Hu et al. 2021). Most recently, it was shown that *SMAD4* directly binds *NKX2-5*, thereby regulating its transcription and cellular localization (Hu et al. 2021). Heart abnormalities, both congenital and post-natal, are a common occurrence in individuals with Myhre syndrome (Lin et al. 2016). To assess whether *SMAD4-I500V* differentially affects regulation of *NKX2-5*, transcriptional regulation of *NKX2-5* by *SMAD4*, direct binding between *SMAD4* and *NKX2-5*, and the effect of *SMAD4-I500V* on *NKX2-5*-mediated transcriptional regulation were tested.

*NKX2-5* transcription was induced by *WT-SMAD4* (2-fold over untransfected cells), whereas in *WT/I500V*-transfected cells, transcript remained at untransfected levels (Fig. 5A). Two hours of TGF $\beta$ 1 treatment saw a general upregulation of *NKX2-5* transcript in all transfected conditions. BMP4 treatment at 2 hours did not induce a transcriptional response above untransfected cells in any transfected condition. At 48 hours, *NKX2-5* gene expression in TGF $\beta$ 1-treated *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells remained at similar levels to 2-hour treatment, however, *SMAD4-I500V*- and *WT/I500V*-transfected cells no longer maintained *NKX2-5* expression, which dropped down to basal conditions. After 48 hours of BMP4 treatment saw a 1.7-fold and 2.3-fold decrease in *NKX2-5* transcript levels in

*SMAD4-I500V*- and *WT/I500V*-transfected cells, respectively, compared to *WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells.

Co-immunoprecipitation assays confirmed that *WT-SMAD4* bound to *NKX2-5* in untreated (Fig. 5B, lane 1), *TGFβ1*- (Fig. 5B, lane 4), and *BMP4*- (Fig. 5B, lane 7) treated conditions and revealed that *SMAD4-I500V* maintained binding to *NKX2-5* in all treatment conditions (Fig. 5B, lanes 2,3,5,6,8,9).

Whether *SMAD4-I500V* could interfere with the activation of target promoters by *NKX2-5* was then assessed using *Snai2-luc* and *Rad50-luc* reporters, both of which are targets of *NKX2-5* (Bouveret et al. 2015) (Fig. 5C,D). On both reporters, *NKX2-5* was able to activate luciferase transcription as previously observed (Bouveret et al. 2015). Co-transfection of *NKX2-5* with *SMAD4-I500V* or with *WT/I500V* was able to significantly decrease the activity of *NKX2-5* on both reporters.

#### 4. Discussion

To date, at least 61 individuals with Myhre syndrome carrying *SMAD4* pathogenic variants have been published, most with a *de novo* *I500V/T/M* variant (Lin et al. 2020). We identified the pathogenic *SMAD4-I500V* variant in two previously unreported individuals with Myhre syndrome. Although there is phenotypic variability between the two individuals, they fall within the spectrum of previously observed Myhre syndrome phenotypes. We assessed the functional impact of the *SMAD4-I500V* variant with the aim of understanding the underlying disease mechanism that may not only provide insights into Myhre syndrome pathogenesis but also reveal possible mechanisms of dysfunction in other SMAD proteins.

Our results show that the primary mechanism of *SMAD4-I500V*-mediated disease causality is the greatly reduced transcriptional activity of *SMAD4*. However, it is not a simple LOF model as made evident by the unique phenotypes of individuals with Myhre syndrome compared to those with *JPS-HHT*. Our findings suggest that an additional mechanism underlying disease causality of the *SMAD4-I500V* variant is the retained ability to dimerize. *SMAD4* is able to homodimerize, which is a means to sequester inactive *SMAD4* dimers in the cytoplasm (Hata et al. 1997; Shi et al. 1997; Qin et al. 1999). Thus, *SMAD4-I500V* may prevent *WT-SMAD4* activity by direct protein-protein interaction. The direct interaction of the *SMAD4-I500V* variant with R-SMADs is also likely to exacerbate this loss of activity, where transcriptional activation by *SMAD4-SMAD1* and *SMAD4-SMAD2* is lost when the *SMAD4-I500V* variant replaces *WT-SMAD4*. The loss of transcriptional ability of *SMAD4-I500V* is the likely mechanism leading to the decrease in reporter activation in co-transfected cells, given that binding between *SMAD4-I500V* and R-SMADs remain undisturbed by the variant.

The perturbation of biological processes regulated by TGF and BMP signaling via the R-SMADs would be a major factor underlying the congenital and progressive phenotypic manifestations in Myhre syndrome. Individuals with pathogenic LOF *SMAD2* variants present with congenital defects and connective tissue disorder reminiscent of Myhre syndrome (Granadillo et al. 2018), and *Smad1*, *Smad2*, and *Smad5* knock-out mouse models

exhibit similar skeletal, cardiac and gastrointestinal defects (Chang et al. 1999; Tremblay et al. 2001; Aubin et al. 2004; Monteiro et al. 2008; Wang et al. 2011), which suggests that SMAD1, SMAD2 and SMAD5 functions are perturbed by the SMAD4-I500V variant.

In our cell culture system, where both *WT-SMAD4* and *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells are treated with equal amounts of ligands, we observe that SMAD4-I500V binds more phosphorylated R-SMADs than WT-SMAD4. We believe that aberrant ubiquitination of SMAD4 due to the I500V variation may underlie this observation. Monoubiquitylation of SMAD4 at K519 by TRIM33 has been demonstrated to negatively regulate TGF signaling by hindering trimerization of SMAD4 with R-SMADs (Dupont et al. 2009). The authors showed that deubiquitylation does not stabilize SMAD4, and instead regulates its ability to respond to TGF signaling, possibly by preventing homodimerization of SMAD4. Previous work has shown that SMAD4 is less ubiquitylated in individuals with the SMAD4-I500T variant; this loss of ubiquitylation is thought to underlie the increased SMAD4 protein observed in fibroblasts from individuals with SMAD4-I500V, SMAD4-I500T, and SMAD4-R496C pathogenic variants (Le Goff et al. 2011). In terms of the impact of the SMAD4-I500V variant on ubiquitylation, there are two possibilities. The first is that the SMAD4-I500V variant directly hinders the ubiquitylation of K519, leading to loss of ubiquitylation and perdurance of SMAD4-I500V that remains bound to R-SMADs and co-factors. The second possibility is that in response to loss of SMAD4 activity, the cell actively prevents SMAD4 ubiquitylation in order to rescue function, which increases the amount of non-ubiquitylated SMAD4 available for signal propagation. Non-ubiquitylated SMAD4-I500V is not dislodged from the R-SMAD trimers and remains bound (Dupont et al. 2009), leading to a build-up of phosphorylated R-SMADs. Furthermore, cells may also increase ligand activation of R-SMAD phosphorylation in an attempt to recover SMAD signaling, which may exacerbate SMAD4-I500V-R-SMAD buildup. Although we only tested the SMAD4-I500V variant, it is likely that the SMAD4-I500M and SMAD4-I500T variants also perturb TGF $\beta$  and BMP signaling in a similar manner, given the same build-up of SMAD4 and R-SMADs has been observed in SMAD4-I500M/T cases, and there are no phenotypic distinctions between individuals with any of the three SMAD4-I500 variants.

Our assessment of transcriptional misregulation by SMAD4-I500V showed a 200-fold upregulation of the *SMAD4-I500V* transcript in the BMP4-treated, *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells. As the variant has reduced transactivation ability, this unexpected increase in transcript most likely indicates a compensatory stabilization of the *SMAD4-I500V* transcript as an attempt by the cells to rescue lost SMAD4 activity. The lack of corresponding gene expression in the target genes analyzed confirms the loss of transcriptional activity of the SMAD4-I500V variant. Instead, expression of the majority of the target genes (*ID3*, *COL1A1*, *SMAD7*) were downregulated at 48 hours of BMP4 treatment in *WT/I500V*-transfected cells compared to cells transfected only with *WT-SMAD4*, and similar to observations in fibroblasts of individuals with Myhre syndrome (Le Goff et al. 2011). In contrast, we saw an increase in *SMAD6* expression in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells. Le Goff *et al.*, assessed *SMAD6* gene expression in Myhre syndrome fibroblasts, saw an increase in expression in cells of Myhre syndrome individuals compared to control cells (Le Goff et al. 2011). As an inhibitory SMAD, SMAD6 responds to increased BMP signaling, replacing SMAD4 in SMAD1-SMAD4 transcriptional complexes

to inactivate SMAD1-mediated transcriptional regulation (Hata et al. 1998). This increase in *SMAD6* could explain the decrease in luciferase activity in *SMAD1/SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells, whereby the available SMAD1 is inactive because it is bound by both SMAD4-I500V and SMAD6. The higher expression of *SMAD6* in Myhre syndrome fibroblasts is likely a response to the buildup of phosphorylated R-SMADs within the cell that is typically indicative of elevated ligand activity and requires maintenance of inhibitors such as SMAD6 and SMAD7. Collectively, our results establish the direct transcriptional impact of interrupted SMAD signaling due to SMAD4-I500V and validate *WT/I500V* transfected cells as an experimental condition similar to heterozygous individuals (Le Goff et al. 2011).

SMAD4-I500V resides within the MH2 domain of SMAD4 (321–530aa), which dictates transcriptional activation and dimerization. Our work establishes that the SMAD4-I500 residue is essential for the transcriptional activity of SMAD4. Whether this is a function directly attributable to SMAD4-I500 or whether the SMAD4-I500V variant nullifies the function of R502, R496, and R416 (previously shown to be crucial for SMAD4-mediated transcriptional activation (Chacko et al. 2001)) remains to be investigated. It is possible that pathogenic variants at SMAD4-I500 and SMAD4-R496 in Myhre syndrome individuals are observed because they are the only residues in the MH2 domain responsible for mediating the transcriptional activity of SMAD4 where certain mutations are compatible with life. Mutation of SMAD4-I500 or SMAD4-R496 to more damaging residues (I500R, I500K, R496P, R496G) or mutation of other residues within this region of the protein such as R515 (essential for heterodimerization), or K519 (ubiquitylated), which are absent from ClinVar (Landrum et al. 2016) and the gnomAD reference dataset (Karczewski et al. 2020), may cause embryonic lethality (Chacko et al. 2001; Dupont et al. 2009).

We believe that the SMAD4-I500V may contribute to disease causality in several ways: limited transcriptional activity of SMAD4-I500V, loss of WT-SMAD4 activity, sequestering of phosphorylated R-SMADs and other co-factors in inactive transcriptional complexes, and an increase in I-SMADs (Fig. 6). The high phenotypic variability in individuals with the identical underlying SMAD4-I500V variant may be explained by the effect of SMAD4-I500V upon the diverse co-factors associated with SMAD4-mediated transcriptional regulation of TGF/BMP targeted processes. Further interaction of these pathways with other transcriptional modifiers, such as hypoxia, which has been shown to alter gene expression during organ development and affect embryo survival, may also determine variant expressivity (Moreau et al. 2019).

An important finding from our assessment is the impact of SMAD4-I500V upon NKX2–5. This early developmental transcription factor is essential for cardiac development and pathogenic variants can cause congenital heart defects (Schott et al. 1998; Benson et al. 1999). SMAD4 transcriptionally regulates *NKX2–5* and was recently shown to directly interact with NKX2–5 (Brown et al. 2004; Hu et al. 2021). In our assays, transcription of *NKX2–5* itself is downregulated in *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells, indicating that the expression of this transcription factor would be decreased in affected individuals. We show that NKX2–5 is bound to SMAD4-I500V, similar to what we observe with the phosphorylated R-SMADs, thereby affecting the ability of NKX2–5 to activate its target

promoters. The dysregulation of *NKX2-5* by direct binding and reduced transcription may underlie certain phenotypes observed in individuals with Myhre syndrome (Lin et al. 2016). Hu *et al.*, 2021 (Hu et al. 2021) showed that loss of *SMAD4* did not completely abolish *NKX2-5* expression, indicating that its expression can be maintained independently of *SMAD4*, which may explain the absence of heart defects in 30% of cases with Myhre syndrome (Lin et al. 2016).

Pathogenic LOF variants of *SMAD4* are found in JPS/HHT caused by germline *SMAD4* variants and, in cancer, caused by somatic *SMAD4* variants (Miyaki and Kuroki 2003; Gallione et al. 2010). The mechanism of protein dysfunction of the Myhre syndrome variants was believed to be distinct from the LOF variants due to the lack of cancer development in Myhre syndrome and non-overlapping phenotypes from JPS/HHT. Recently, the same germline variants that cause Myhre syndrome were identified in somatic tissue of individuals with gastrointestinal cancers, including most recently the observation of neoplasia or endometrial cancer in individuals with Myhre syndrome (Ashktorab et al. 2017; Lin et al. 2020). These novel observations are consistent with our disease model and the dominant-negative action of the *SMAD4-I500V* variant.

*SMAD* proteins acting dominant-negatively have been previously observed, including functional characterization of *SMAD2* variants identified in somatic cancer (Mucsi and Goldberg 1997; Goto et al. 1998; Hoodless et al. 1999; Ho et al. 2007). Dominant-negative function of *SMAD4* has been previously studied using deletion constructs that showed reduced expression of *COL1A1* (Tsuchida et al. 2003). However, to our knowledge, this is the first report of a dominant-negative *SMAD4* variant linked to human disease. Furthermore, we expect that as more patients are reported, damaging variants in the MH2 domain of R-SMADs in residues that functionally correspond to *SMAD4-I500* which affect transcriptional activity but not heterodimerization, will yield unique phenotypes that are distinct from those caused by LOF variants or missense variants in the other domains of these related genes.

Our results confirm that addition of ligands is unable to overcome the dominant-negative activity of *SMAD4-I500V*. In addition, our transcriptional findings in ligand treated, *WT/I500V* transfected cells are similar to transcriptional data from Myhre syndrome fibroblasts, which suggest that TGF $\beta$  and BMP ligands are highly active in the affected individuals. This is likely to be an attempt at rectifying loss of *SMAD4-I500V*-mediated transcription but may instead lead to pathological induction of *SMAD4*-independent TGF/BMP processes that may partially underlie Myhre syndrome phenotypes (Imamichi et al. 2005; Aashaq et al. 2021). Promisingly, a recent trial of losartan, a TGF $\beta$  inhibitor, showed signs of improving the fibrosis-related phenotypes associated with Myhre syndrome, thereby establishing activated TGF signaling as a disease mechanism in Myhre syndrome (Cappuccio et al. 2021). Their findings suggest that attenuation of TGF may be a viable approach for managing at least the fibrotic phenotypes observed in Myhre syndrome.

We conclude that the congenital and progressive fibrotic defects observed in Myhre syndrome patients may be explained by the culmination of dysregulated signaling, wherein active TGF/BMP signaling is unable to compensate for loss of canonical *SMAD4* function,

thereby over-activating SMAD4-independent cellular processes. We propose that similar variants identified in R-SMADs in patients with phenotypes discordant from those expected be given sufficient consideration with respect to their contribution towards disease causality. Finally, we expect that our findings may facilitate consideration of novel modes of therapeutic interventions for individuals with Myhre syndrome.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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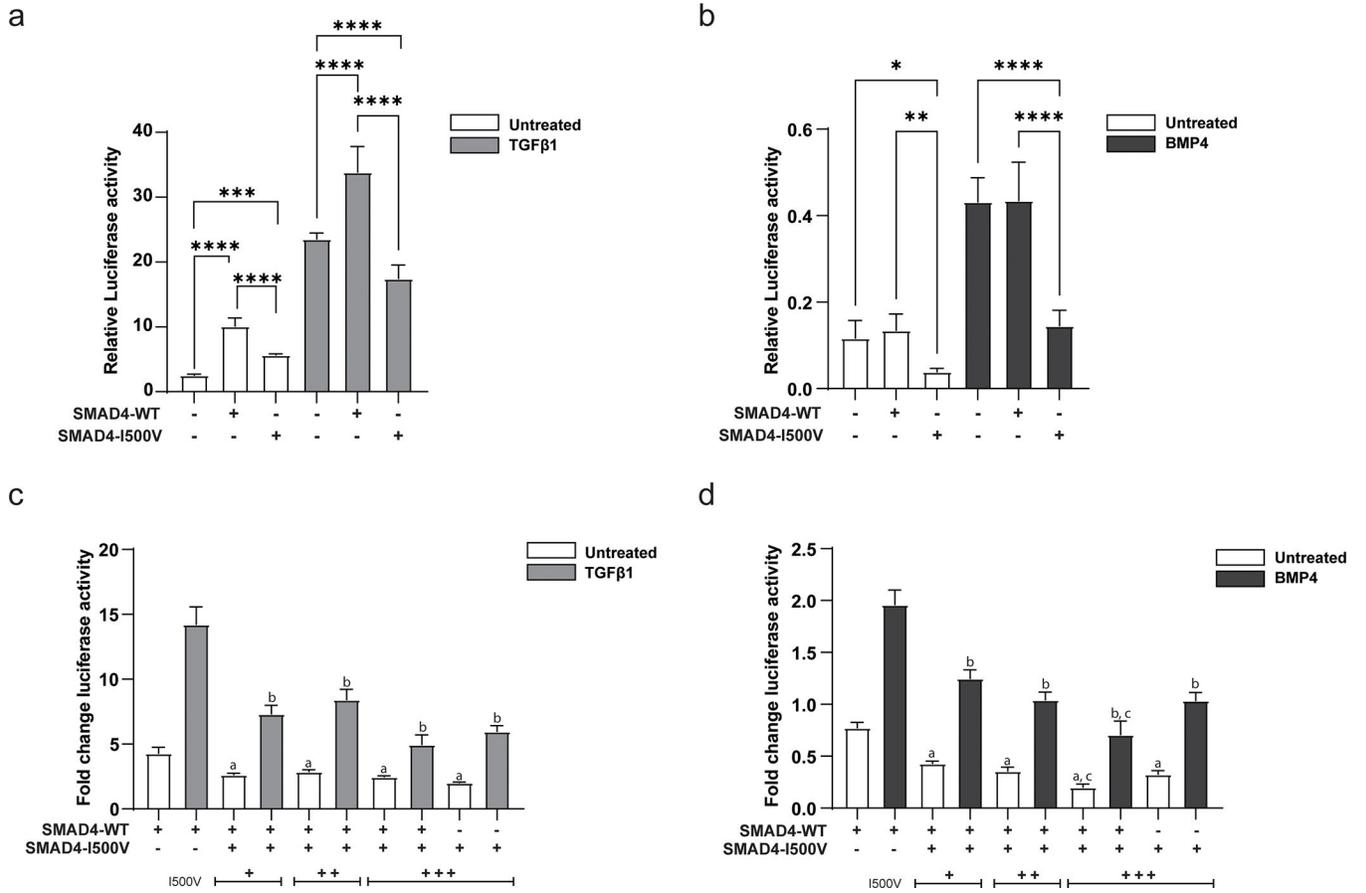
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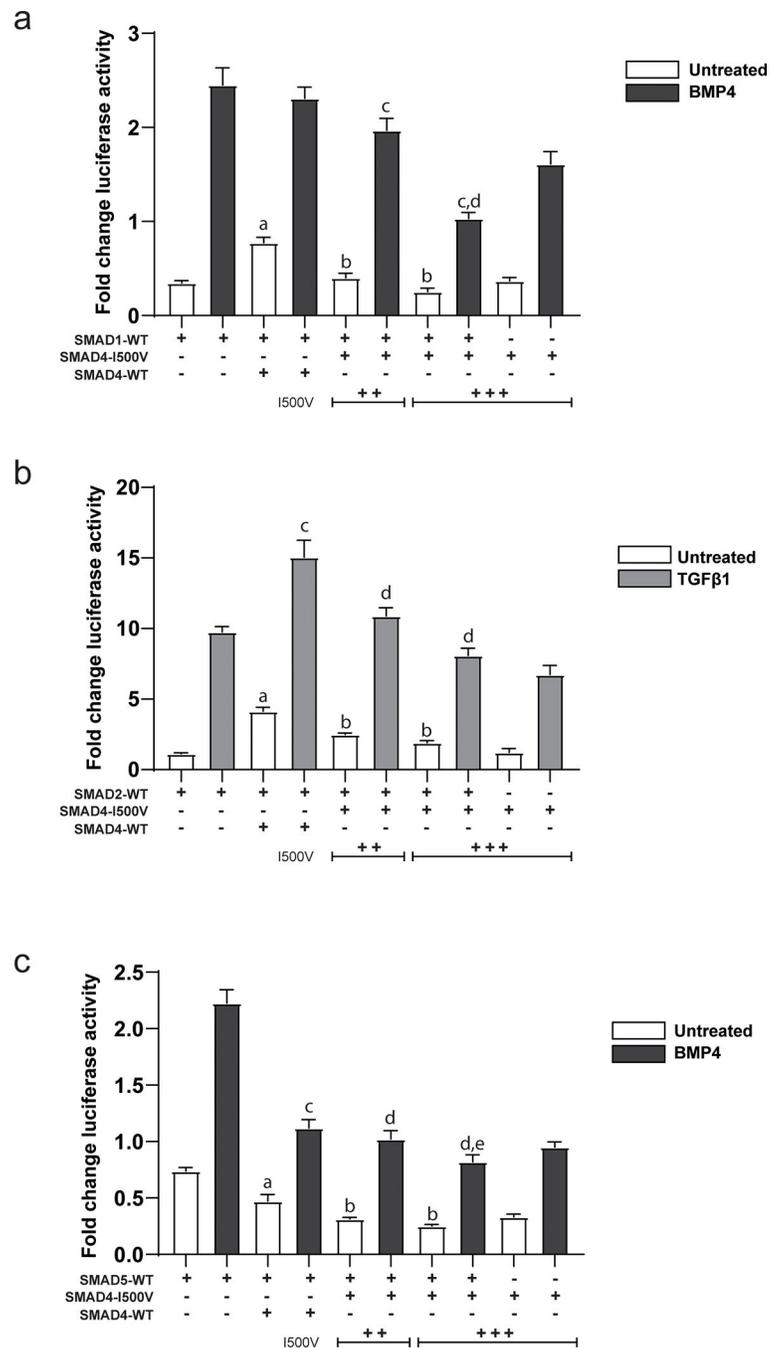
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**Fig. 1. SMAD4-I500V shows greatly reduced ability to activate target promoters and acts dominant-negatively on WT-SMAD4.**

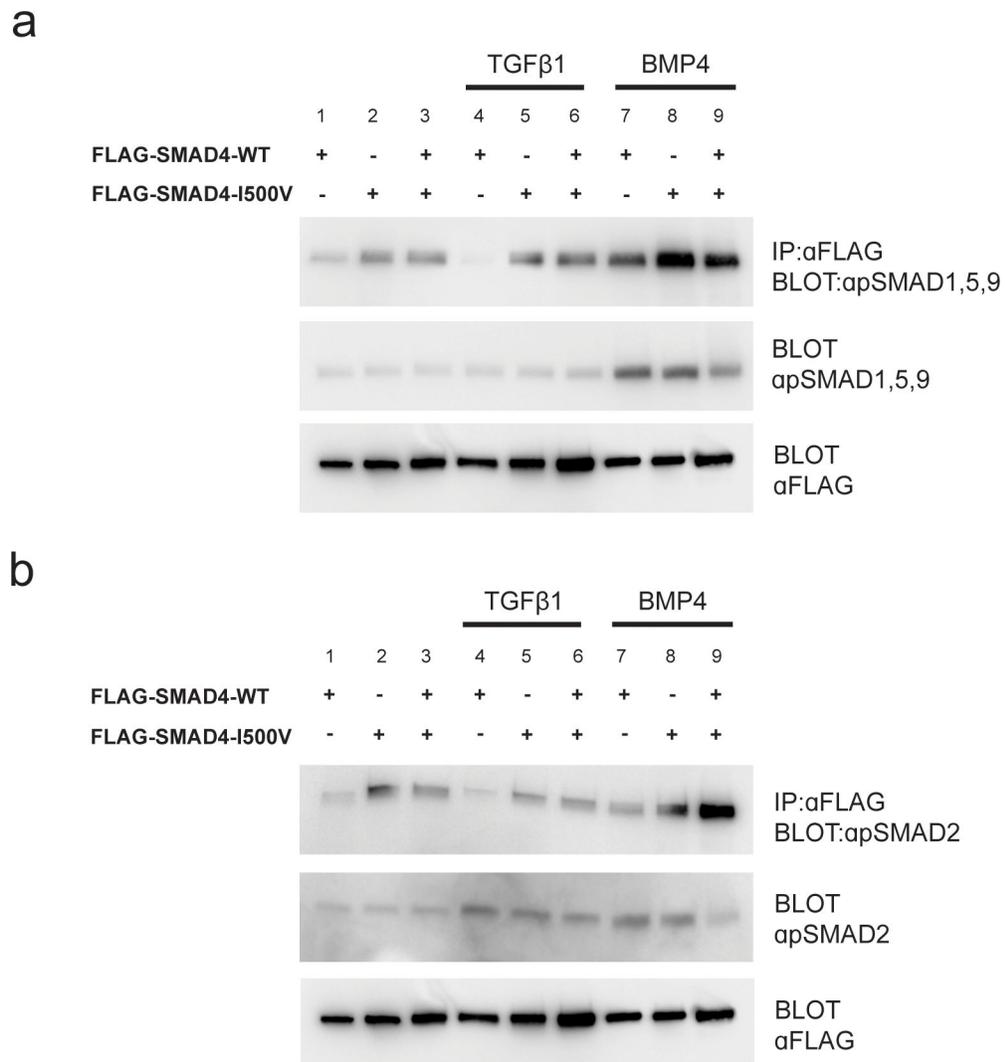
(A) Impact of the I500V variant on basal and TGFβ1-activated *SBE(4)*-luc was assessed by luciferase assays, \*\*\* $<0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $<0.0001$ ,  $n = 9-12$ . (B) Impact of the I500V variant on basal and BMP4-activated *Xvent2*-luc was assessed by luciferase assays, \*  $<0.05$ , \*\*  $<0.01$ , \*\*\*\*  $<0.0001$ ,  $n = 9-12$ . Luciferase activity was normalized to *Renilla* and analyzed by one-way ANOVA, presented as mean  $\pm$  SD. (C) Dominant-negative response of the I500V variant on WT-SMAD4 action on *SBE(4)*-luc in basal and TGFβ1-treated cells. (D) Dominant-negative response of the I500V variant on WT-SMAD4 action on *Xvent2*-luc in basal and BMP4-treated cells, a: comparison between *WT-SMAD4* and *WT/I500V*- or *I500V*-transfected cells in basal conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; b: comparison between *WT-SMAD4* and *WT/I500V*- or *I500V*-transfected cells in TGFβ1/BMP4-treated cells,  $p < 0.001-0.0001$ ; c: comparison between *WT/I500V*- and *I500V*-transfected cells in basal and BMP4-treated cells,  $p < 0.001-0.01$ . Luciferase activity was normalized to vector transfected cells within each treatment group, analyzed by one-way ANOVA, presented as mean  $\pm$  SD,  $n = 6$ .



**Fig. 2. Dominant-negative activity of SMAD4-I500V inhibits function of R-SMADs.**

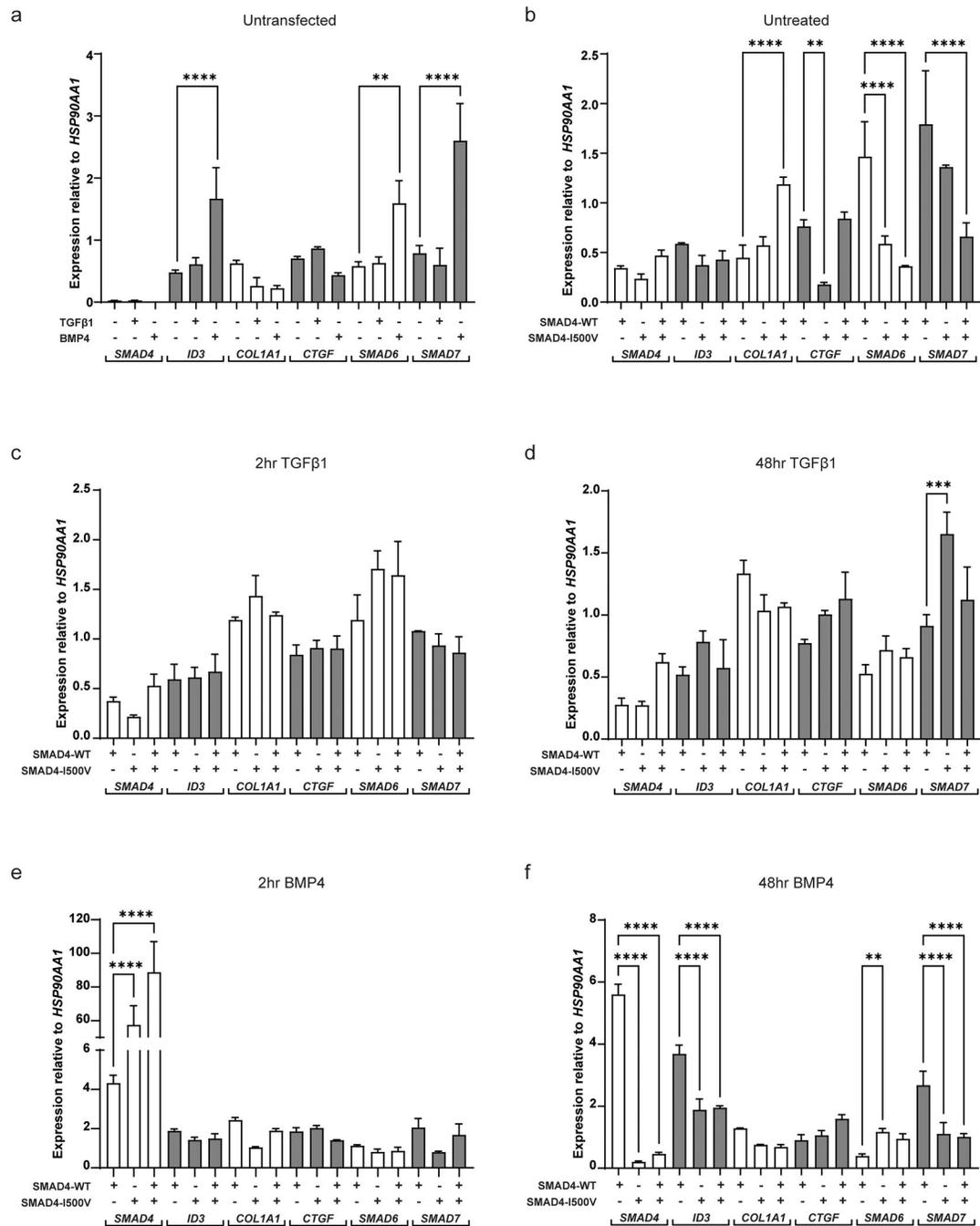
(A) Action of the I500V variant on SMAD1 activity on the *Xvent2*-luc reporter in basal and BMP4-treated cells was assessed, a: comparison between *SMAD1*- and *SMAD1*/*WT-SMAD4*- transfected cells in basal conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; b: comparison between *SMAD1*/*WT-SMAD4*- and *SMAD1*/*SMAD4-I500V*- transfected cells in basal conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; c: comparison between *SMAD1*/*WT-SMAD4*- and *SMAD1*/*SMAD4-I500V*- transfected cells in BMP4-treated cells,  $p < 0.0001$ ; d: comparison between *SMAD4-I500V*- and *SMAD1*/*SMAD4-I500V*- transfected cells in BMP4-treated cells,  $p < 0.0001$ . (B)

Action of the I500V variant on SMAD2 activity on the *SBE(4)*-luc reporter in basal and TGF $\beta$ 1-treated cells was assessed, a: comparison between *SMAD2*- and *SMAD2/WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells in basal conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; b: comparison between *SMAD2/WT-SMAD4*- and *SMAD2/SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in basal conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; c: comparison between *SMAD2*- and *SMAD2/WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells in TGF $\beta$ 1-treated conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; d: comparison between *SMAD2/WT-SMAD4*- and *SMAD2/SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in TGF $\beta$ 1-treated conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ . (C) Action of the I500V variant on SMAD5 activity on the *Xvent2*-luc reporter in basal and BMP4-treated cells was assessed, a: comparison between *SMAD5*- and *SMAD5/WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells in basal conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; b: comparison between *SMAD5/WT-SMAD4*- and *SMAD5/SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in basal conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; c: comparison between *SMAD5*- and *SMAD5/WT-SMAD4*-transfected cells in BMP4-treated conditions,  $p < 0.0001$ ; d: comparison between *SMAD5/WT-SMAD4*- and *SMAD5/SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in BMP4-treated conditions,  $p < 0.05, 0.0001$ ; e: comparison between *SMAD5/SMAD4-I500V*- and *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in BMP4-treated cells,  $p < 0.001$ . Luciferase activity was normalized to vector transfected cells and analyzed by one-way ANOVA, presented as mean  $\pm$  SD,  $n = 6-9$ .



**Fig. 3. SMAD4-I500V binds phosphorylated R-SMADs.**

(A) Immunoprecipitation of WT-SMAD4 or SMAD4-I500V with anti-FLAG and detection of phospho-SMAD1,5,9. (B) Immunoprecipitation of WT-SMAD4 or SMAD4-I500V with anti-FLAG and detection of phospho-SMAD2. FLAG-WT-SMAD4, FLAG-SMAD4-I500V, or FLAG-WT-SMAD4/FLAG-SMAD4-I500V were immunoprecipitated from cell lysates at basal, TGFβ1-treated, or BMP4-treated conditions, and blotted for phosphorylated SMAD1,5,9 or phosphorylated SMAD2.



**Fig. 4. SMAD4-I500V leads to transcript expression changes in genes downstream of TGFβ1 and BMP4 signaling.**

(A) Gene expression of *SMAD4*, *ID3*, *COL1A1*, *CTGF*, *SMAD6* and *SMAD7* in untransfected cells treated with or without TGFβ1 or BMP4. (B) Gene expression in cells transfected with *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4-I500V* or *WT/I500V*. (C) Gene expression in cells treated with TGFβ1 for 2 hours in cells transfected with *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4-I500V*, or *WT/I500V*. (D) Gene expression in cells treated with TGFβ1 for 48 hours in cells transfected with *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4-I500V*, or *WT/I500V*. (E) Gene expression in cells treated with BMP4 for 2 hours in cells transfected with *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4-I500V*, or

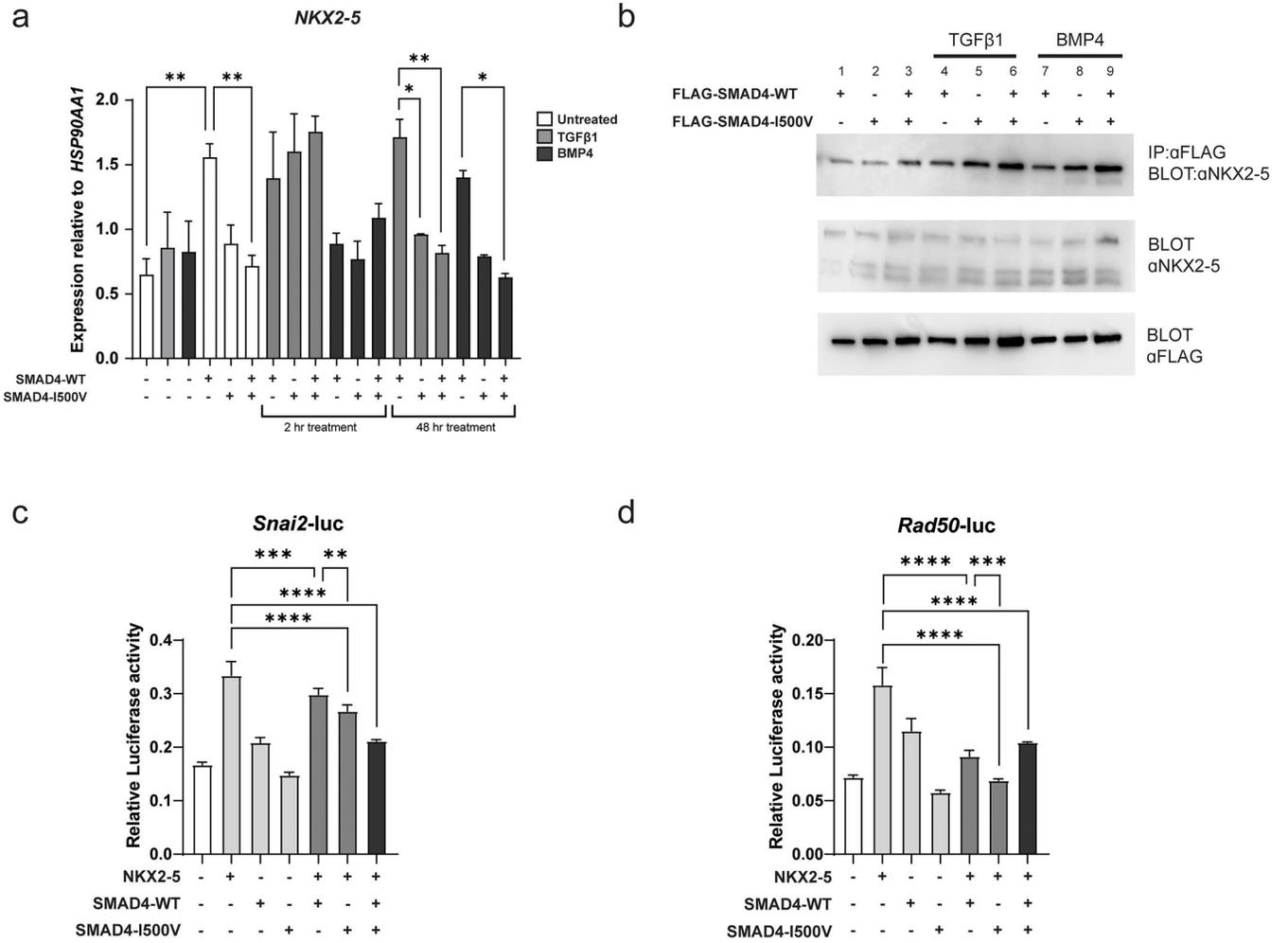
*WT/1500V*. (F) Gene expression in cells treated with BMP4 for 48 hours in cells transfected with *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4-1500V*, or *WT/1500V*. Differences in expression between *WT-SMAD4*, *SMAD4-1500V*, or *WT/1500V*-transfected cells were statistically analyzed by one-way ANOVA and presented as mean  $\pm$  SD, \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*\*\*  $p < 0.0001$ ;  $n = 3$ .

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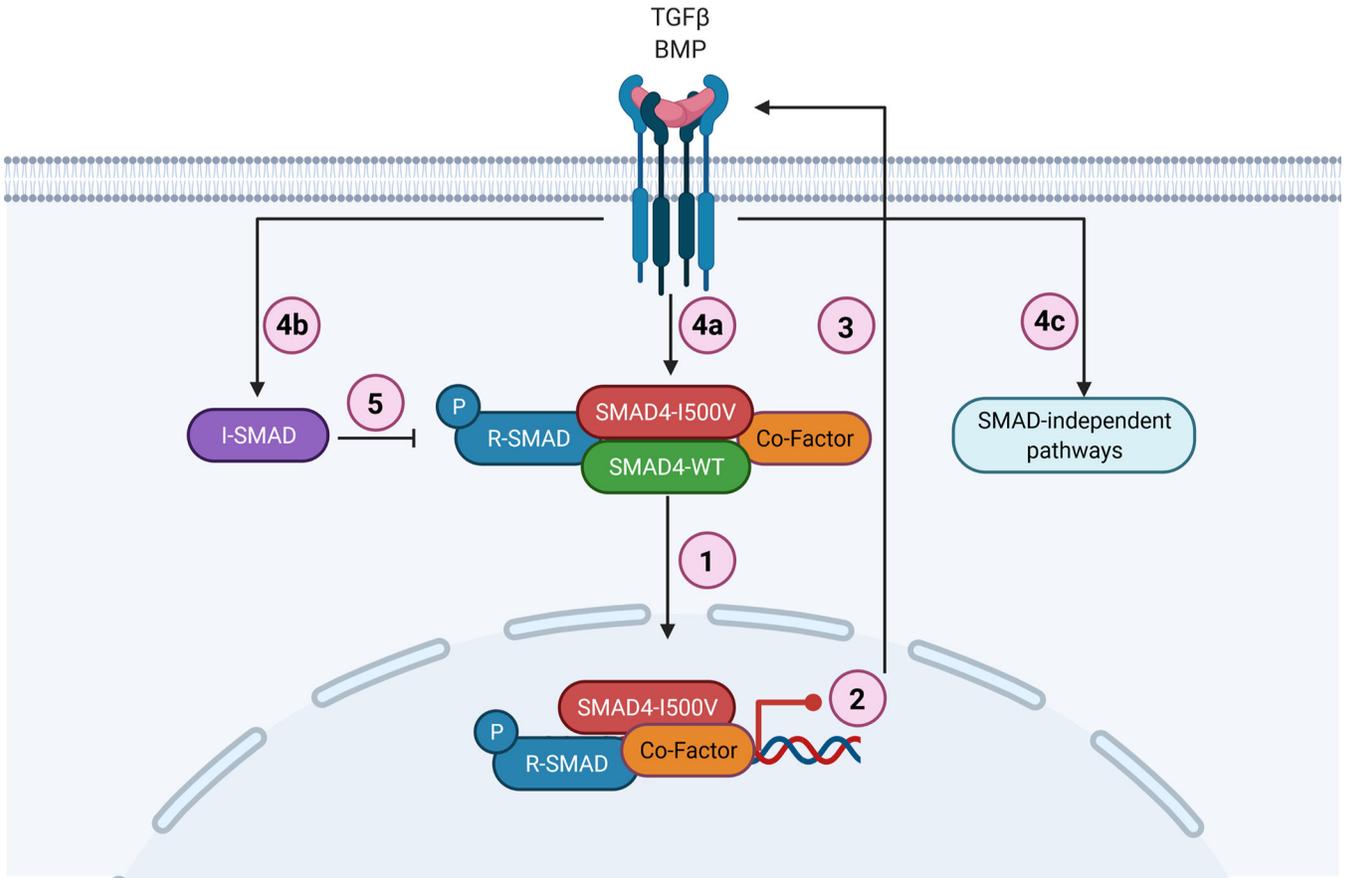
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**Fig. 5. SMAD4-I500V reduces SMAD4-mediated *NKX2-5* transcription, binds to *NKX2-5*, and perturbs *NKX2-5*-mediated transcriptional regulation.**

(A) *NKX2-5* gene expression was measured in untransfected and transfected cells in basal, TGFβ1-, and BMP4- treated conditions at 2 hours and 48 hours. Differences in expression between *WT-SMAD4* and *SMAD4-I500V*-transfected cells in different treatment groups were statistically analyzed by two-way ANOVA and presented as mean ± SD, \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ ;  $n = 3$ . (B) FLAG-WT-SMAD4, FLAG-SMAD4-I500V or FLAG-WT-SMAD4/FLAG-SMAD4-I500V were immunoprecipitated from cell lysates at basal, TGFβ1-, or BMP4- treated conditions, and blotted for *NKX2-5*. (C) Impact of SMAD4-I500V on *NKX2-5*-mediated activation of the *Snai2-luc* reporter. (d) Impact of SMAD4-I500V on *NKX2-5*-mediated activation of the *Rad50-luc* reporter. Data was analyzed by one-way ANOVA and presented as mean ± SD, \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\*\*\* $p < 0.0001$ ;  $n = 3-6$ .



**Fig. 6. Schematic representation of SMAD4-I500V disrupting TGFβ and BMP signaling.**

(1) SMAD4-I500V binds to SMAD4, R-SMADs, and co-factors such as NKX2-5.  
 (2) SMAD4-I500V has reduced transcriptional activity and expression of downstream target genes is perturbed.  
 (3) Loss of SMAD4 function activates TGF/BMP signaling.  
 (4a) Active TGF/BMP signaling leads to increased phosphorylation of R-SMADs and buildup of SMAD4-I500V-R-SMADs.  
 (4b) Activation of TGF/BMP signaling leads to increased I-SMADs.  
 (4c) Activation of TGF/BMP signaling leads to initiation of SMAD-independent pathways.  
 (5) Increased I-SMADs lead to further inhibition of SMAD-mediated transcriptional regulation. Image created with BioRender.