Published in final edited form as:
Cancer Res. 2011 August 15; 71(16): 5381–5386. doi:10.1158/0008-5472.CAN-11-0068.

Imatinib sensitivity in BCR-ABL1-positive chronic myeloid leukemia cells is regulated by the remaining normal ABL1 allele

Anna Virgili[1,*], **Mateusz Koptyra**[2,4,*], **Yashodhara Dasgupta**[2], **Eliza Glodkowska-Mrowka**[3], **Tomasz Stoklosa**[3], **Elisabeth P. Nacheva**[1,#], and **Tomasz Skorski**[2,#]

[1] Molecular Cytogenetics Laboratory, Academic Hematology, University College London Cancer Institute, Royal Free Campus, London, United Kingdom [2] Department of Microbiology and Immunology, School of Medicine, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA [3] Department of Immunology, Medical University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

Chronic myeloid leukemia in chronic phase (CML-CP) cells that harbor oncogenic BCR-ABL1 and normal ABL1 allele often become resistant to the ABL1 kinase inhibitor imatinib. Here we report that loss of the remaining normal ABL1 allele in these tumors, which results from cryptic interstitial deletion in 9q34 in patients who did not achieve a complete cytogenetic remission during treatment, engenders a novel unexpected mechanism of imatinib resistance. BCR-ABL1-positive Abl1−/− leukemia cells were refractory to imatinib as indicated by persistent BCR-ABL1 -mediated tyrosine phosphorylation, lack of BCR-ABL1 protein degradation, increased cell survival and clonogenic activity. Expression of ABL1 kinase, but not a kinase-dead mutant, restored the anti-leukemic effects of imatinib in ABL1-negative CML cells and in BCR-ABL1-positive Abl1−/− murine leukemia cells. The intracellular concentration of imatinib and expression of its transporters were not affected, while proteins involved in BCR-ABL1 degradation were downregulated in Abl1−/− cells. Furthermore, twelve genes associated with imatinib resistance were favorably deregulated in Abl1−/− leukemia. Taken together, our results indicate that loss of the normal ABL1 kinase may serve as a key prognostic factor that exerts major impact on CML treatment outcomes.

Introduction

BCR-ABL1 results from t(9;22)(q34;q11) reciprocal translocation or variants generating the Philadelphia chromosome (Ph), which initiates CML-CP. The second (wild-type) *ABL1* allele remains intact on the non-rearranged homologue of chromosome 9 and CML-CP cells at early stages express both forms of the *ABL1* kinase, oncogenic *BCR-ABL1* and normal *ABL1* (1).

ABL1 and BCR-ABL1 can exert opposite effects on a variety of cellular functions (2). For example, BCR-ABL1 can act upstream and downstream of cytochrome *c* to inhibit apoptosis. In contrast, ABL1 kinase may facilitate apoptosis by stimulation of p73, p53, and caspase 9.

[#]To whom the correspondence should be addressed: Elisabeth P. Nacheva, UCL Cancer Institute, Academic Hematology, Molecular Cytogenetics, Royal Free Campus, Rowland Hill Street, London, NW3 2PF, UK, e.nacheva@ucl.ac.uk; and Tomasz Skorski, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, School of Medicine, Temple University, 3400 N. Broad Street, MRB 548, Philadelphia, PA 19140, USA, tskorski@temple.edu.
[*]equal authorship contribution
[4]Present address: Department of Cancer Biology, Kimmel Cancer Center, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA, USA.

Tyrosine kinase inhibitor (TKI) imatinib revolutionized the treatment of BCR-ABL1-positive leukemias (3). The incidence of a continuous complete cytogenetic remission (CCyR) in CML-CP patients treated for 12 months with the drug was 66% (4). Mutations within the kinase domain of *BCR-ABL1*, over-expression of LYN kinase, loss of *p53* and *BCR-ABL1* amplification were implicated in the lack of achieving CCyR (5).

Here we demonstrate that loss of expression of normal ABL1 kinase due to cryptic deletion in remaining normal chromosome 9 [del(9q34)] reduced the sensitivity of BCR-ABL1 leukemia cells to imatinib and may contribute to drug resistance in CML patients.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Chromosome and whole genome analysis of CML-CP samples

Bone marrow cells (BMCs) of CML-CP patients who failed to achieve CCyR within 12 months of TKI treatment were obtained after informed consent and analyzed at presentation and at 3-monthly intervals by G-banding and dual color/dual fusion probe fluorescent in situ hybridization (D-FISH) with a range of bacterial artificial chromosome (BAC) probes to detect the loss of normal 9q34 (6). DNA from BMCs of patients 1 and 3 was also analyzed by array comparative genomic hybridization (aCGH) using DNA Analytics (105K Agilent) and Formatter software (7). All genome addresses are derived from NCBI36/hg18 (March 2006) of the Human Genome. Additional information about the patients and cytogenetic and molecular results are described in Supplementary Materials and Supplementary Table 1.

Cells

Abl1+/− mice were kindly obtained from Dr. A.J. Koleske (Department of Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA) and bred to obtain −/− and +/+ littermates. Animal studies were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee at Temple University. p210BCR-ABL1 –positive growth factor-independent leukemia cells were generated by retroviral infection of *Abl1*+/+ and *Abl1*−/− BMCs with pMIG-*BCR-ABL1*-IRES-*GFP* retroviral construct as previously described (8). CML-BP LAMA84R and KCL22 cell lines were described before (9, 10). LAMA84R and KCL22 cells, and GFP+ BCR-ABL1 –positive Abl1−/− leukemia cells were infected with pKI retroviral construct encoding YFP-ABL1 fusion protein or kinase-dead YFP-ABL1(K290R) mutant (kindly obtained from Dr Koleske). GFP, YFP and YFP/GFP -positive cells were sorted and expanded in growth factor-free conditions.

Sensitivity to imatinib

Cells were treated with imatinib (Novartis Pharma, Basel, Switzerland) and evaluated by clonogenic assay as described before (8). TKI-resistant BCR-ABL1 kinase mutations were not detected in cells used for these experiments.

Imatinib retention

Radiolabeled drug uptake was performed using ^{14}C-labeled imatinib (Novartis) as previously described with modifications (11). Briefly, 2×10^6 cells were incubated with 1.6μM ^{14}C-labeled imatinib (3,052 MBq/mg) at 37°Cfor 2 hours. After incubation, cells were washed twice with ice-cold phosphate-buffered saline and incubated in culture medium at 37°C for another 15 minutes. Cell pellet was then solubilized in 50 μl of distilled water and radioactivity was counted using β-counter (Perkin Elmer, Waltham MA, USA).

Protein expression

Total cell lysates were analyzed by Western blotting using primary antibodies recognizing ABL1, Abcb1, CHIP and tubulin (Calbiochem, San Diego, CA, USA), phosphotyrosine (Upstate, Lake Placid, NY, USA), Bag1, Cbl and GFP (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA, USA), Oct-1 (Novus Biologicals, Littleton, CO, USA), Abcg2, HSP90 and cathepsin B (Abcam Inc., Cambridge, MA, USA), and Hsc70 (Enzo Life Sciences International, Inc., Plymouth Meeting, PA, USA) as described before (8).

Genome-wide expression array

Affymetrix Mouse gene 1.0ST array containing 28,815 probe sets (Affymetrix, Santa Clara, CA, USA) was used to measure mRNA expression levels. Affymetrix arrays were processed by Partek Genomic Suite at the Penn Molecular Profiling Facility - Bioinformatics Group (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA) to determine whether a given transcript was present and if there were consistently significant differences between BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl*−/− and BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl*+/+ BMC based on three separate experiments. Genes were considered to have a significant differential expression between the two groups when displayed a False Discovery Rate (FDR) not exceeding 5% and a cut-off value > 1-fold (up-regulated or down-regulated).

Results and Discussion

Using G-banding, D-FISH, and aCGH we detected that three CML patients who initially failed to achieve CCyR within 12 months of TKI treatment acquired a cryptic deletion in 9q34 region in the normal chromosome 9 [del(9q34)] resulting in the loss of normal *ABL1* allele (Figure 1 and 2, Supplementary Table 1 and Figure 1). Two of these are among 21 CML–CP patients without CCyR on first line TKI we analyzed in the lab. Importantly, in addition to the cryptic loss at 9q34.1 all three patients showed karyotype evolution – from the presence of a second Ph (Figure 2A) to multiple numerical and structural aberrations (Supplementary Table 1).

In patient 1 FISH analysis revealed an aberrant signal pattern due to a missing *ABL1* signal, which was mapped to the morphologically normal chromosome 9 indicating a cryptic deletion (Figure 1A(iii) and 1B). In patient 2 the deletion was detectable by G-banding and assessed as del(9q31?;q34) (Supplementary Table 1). In patient 3 the loss of ABL1 was revealed by aCGH and confirmed by FISH mapping (Figure 1B, Supplementary Figure 1). aCGH results for the 9q34 region in patient 1 (blue) and patient 3 (red) show the extent of the cryptic deletions (Figure 1B(i)). The common loss is defined proximally by the *ABL1* breakpoint in patient 3 and distally by the telomeric breakpoint in patient 1 (arrow in Figure 1B(i), Figure 2C, D, and Supplementary Figure 1). The estimated size of the common genome loss is 567Kb, which includes *ABL1* exons a2 to a11 together with downstream sequences encompassing the *LAMC3* and *NUP214* genes. These deletions differ significantly from the deletions at der(9), where the genome loss involves only *ABL1* exons 1a and 1b and spans towards the centromere (Figure 1A(ii) and 1B(ii)).

The observed loss of the wild allele of *ABL1* is an evolutionary event as evidenced by the presence of Ph(+) cells with and without *ABL1* deletion in patient 1 (Figure 2B). Furthermore, it is the *ABL1* deficient cell clone that sustains the disease progression by acquiring a second copy of Ph (Figure 2A, B, D). Our observation combined with other report that inhibition of Abl1 kinase compromises genomic stability suggests that loss of ABL1 not only decreases imatinib sensitivity but also promotes accumulation of chromosomal aberrations (12).

Cryptic deletions in 9q34 causing the loss of normal *ABL1* allele may be under-reported in CML-CP patients probably because they would be missed unless either D-FISH or aCGH have been used for monitoring therapy response. In concordance, similar del(9q34) was found in several CML-BP cell lines (Supplementary Table 2). To detect loss of the *ABL1* signal from the normal 9 homologue, FISH using a BCR-ABL1-ASS tricolor dual fusion translocation probe could be recommended (Supplementary Figure 2), which produces unique signals for the translocation products and the normal non-rearranged loci at 9q34 and 22q11. Importantly, identification of del(9q34) using any of the two double fusion *BCR-ABL1* probe sets is as reliable on interphase cells as on chromosome preparations. In contrast, the popular ES-FISH probe creates in *BCR-ABL1* positive cell with *ABL1* loss a signal pattern (1R1G1F) that cannot reliably differentiate the 'wild' *ABL1* allele from the *ABL1-BCR* fusion (Supplementary Figure 2) thus misreporting del(9q34) as deletions at der(9).

To prove that loss of ABL1 directly contributes to imatinib resistance, BCR-ABL1 was expressed in *Abl1* −/− and +/+ BMCs. The absence of Abl1 reduced the sensitivity of BCR-ABL1 leukemia cells to imatinib whereas expression of YFP-ABL1 fusion kinase, but not the kinase-dead YFP-ABL1(K290R) mutant, in BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*−/− leukemia cells restored anti-leukemia effect of the drug (Figure 3A). YFP-ABL1, but not YFP-ABL1(K290R), also increased imatinib sensitivity in drug-resistant CML-BP cell line LAMA84R (*ABL1*-negative, Supplementary Table 2) (Figure 3B). Since *BCR-ABL1* gene amplification and overexpression of the multidrug resistance P-glycoprotein was observed in LAMA84R cells, loss of *ABL1* may collaborate with other genetic/epigenetic abnormalities to promote drug resistance in CML-BP (9). Moreover, expression of YFP-ABL1 kinase in KCL22 CML-BP cells (relatively low ABL1 expression (10)) increased their sensitivity to imatinib suggesting that increased BCR-ABL1: ABL1 ratio observed during the course of disease can also limit the effect of imatinib (Figure 3C) (13).

The fact that ABL1 kinase may regulate the sensitivity of CML cells to imatinib is rather unexpected because BCR-ABL1 and ABL1 kinases are equally sensitive to imatinib *in vitro* (3). However, inhibition of intracellular ABL1 kinase usually requires higher concentration of the drug in comparison to BCR-ABL1 kinase; in addition ABL1 may work in a kinase-independent manner (14, 15). Moreover, imatinib-induced inhibition of BCR-ABL1 kinase is associated with release of ABL1 from the complex with 14-3-3 sigma, which promotes ABL1 relocation to the nucleus (triggers p73-dependent apoptosis), to the mitochondrial membranes (causes the loss of mitochondrial membrane potential) and to the complex with caspase 9 (activates caspase cascade) (2, 16). In summary, the presence of ABL1 kinase may exert a significant impact on anti-CML effect of imatinib. This speculation is supported by the observation that expression of YFP-ABL1 fusion kinase, but not its kinase-dead K290M mutant restored sensitivity to imatinib in BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*−/− leukemia cells and LAMA84R (*ABL1*-negative) CML-CP cells (Figure 3A and B).

In *Abl1*−/− leukemia cells, imatinib displayed reduced capability to inhibit BCR-ABL1 kinase-mediated tyrosine phosphorylation and to induce BCR-ABL1 protein degradation in comparison to *Abl1*+/+ counterparts and Abl1−/− leukemia reconstituted with YFP-ABL1 (Figure 4A). Moreover, genome-wide array confirmed imatinib-resistant signature of BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1* −/− cells by detecting deregulated expression of 12 genes previously reported in imatinb-resistant CML patients (Figure 4B) (17, 18). Intracellular retention of imatinib, and expression of drug importer Oct-1 and exporters Abcb1 and Abcg2, appear unaffected by Abl1 (Figure 4C, D), but the impact of Abl1 on metabolism of imatinib cannot be excluded. On the other hand, >10-fold downregulation of Cbl E3 ligase, which induce ubiquitin-dependent degradation of "mature" BCR-ABL1 protein, and/or >3-fold downregulation of cathepsin B, which cleaves BCR-ABL1 may be responsible for lack of

degradation of BCR-ABL1 protein in imatinib-treated *Abl1* −/− cells (Figure 4D) (19, 20). Hsc70, Bag1 and E3 ligase CHIP responsible for degradation of "immature" BCR-ABL1 protein, and chaperone protein Hsp90 protecting BCR-ABL1 from proteasomal degradation, are not affected by Abl1 (Figure 4D) (19). Downregulation of BCR-ABL1 in imatinib-treated CD34+ CML-CP cells was implicated in regulating their sensitivity to the drug (20).

Altogether, it can be postulated that loss of expression of ABL1 kinase may contribute to imatinib resistance in CML-CP patients which do not achieve CCyR during 12 months on imatinib and eventually progress to CML-BP. ABL1 loss in CML-CP can be achieved by interstitial deletion in chromosome 9 [del(9q34)] causing a loss of normal *ABL1* allele (this report), which may be combined with epigenetic silencing of the alternative *ABL1* promoter retained in t(9;22) (13). Therefore, detection of del(9q34) may serve as an important prognostic factor and have a significant impact on CML treatment.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

Financial support: Supported by the grants from NIH/NCI CA123014 (T. Skorski), Leukemia and Lymphoma Research Fund 05098 (E.N.), 1M19/NK1W/2009 (T. Stoklosa) and 1M19/WB1/2010 (E.G-M.) from Medical University of Warsaw.

We thank H. Mazzullo, J. Howard-Reeves, D. Brazma, C. Grace and Katia Gancheva for their contribution to the cytogenetic and aCGH analysis as well and L. Foroni for the *BCR-ABL1* mutation analysis. We also thank Dr. J. Tobias for help with statistical analysis of the microarray data.

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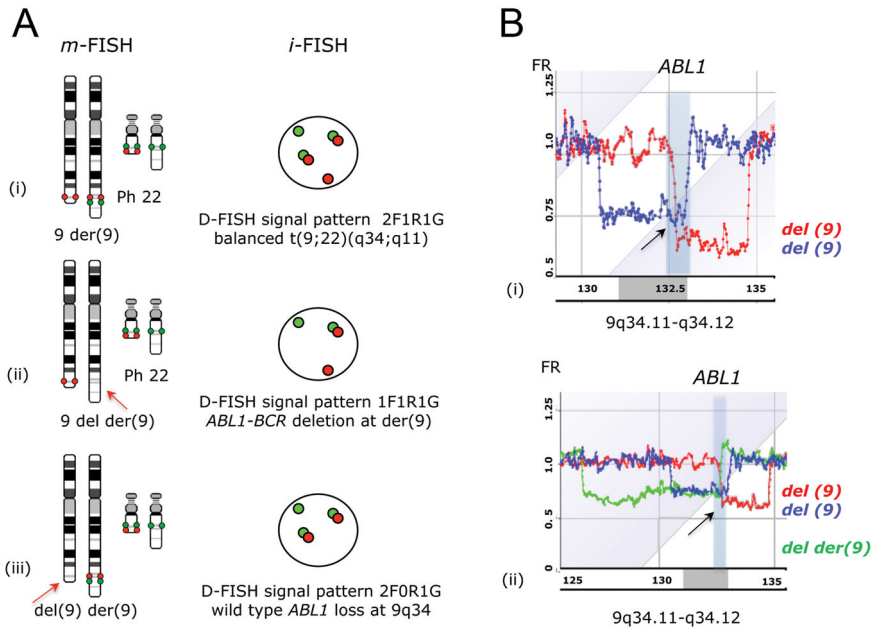

Figure 1. Deletions of the normal *ABL1* allele in CML-CP patients

(**A**) The classical and variants of t(9;22)(q34;q11) are usually balanced and reciprocal translocations, however the translocation may be unbalanced. (**i**) balanced t(9;22)(q34;q11) with two fusion signals on Ph and der(9), one red signal and one green signal on the normal 9q34 and 22q11 respectively (2F1R1G), (**ii**) t(9;22)(q34;q11) accompanied by the loss of *ABL1-BCR* signal at der(9) (1F1R1G), and (**iii**) t(9;22)(q34;q11) accompanied by the loss of wild-type *ABL1* at del(9) (2F0R1G). (**B**) aCGH results: (**i**) the 9q34-qter region of patient 1 showing a 2.6Mb genome loss including the entire *ABL1* together with proximally flanking sequences leading to 2F0R1G aberrant FISH signal pattern (blue) and a 1.8Mb loss in patient 3 encompassing sequences downstream of the *ABL1* breakpoint (red), and (**ii**) added for comparison the ‘classic’ der(9) deletion (graph in green) involves the 5′ *ABL1* and sequences proximal to the *ABL1* breakpoint thus resulting in aberrant 1F1R1G pattern.

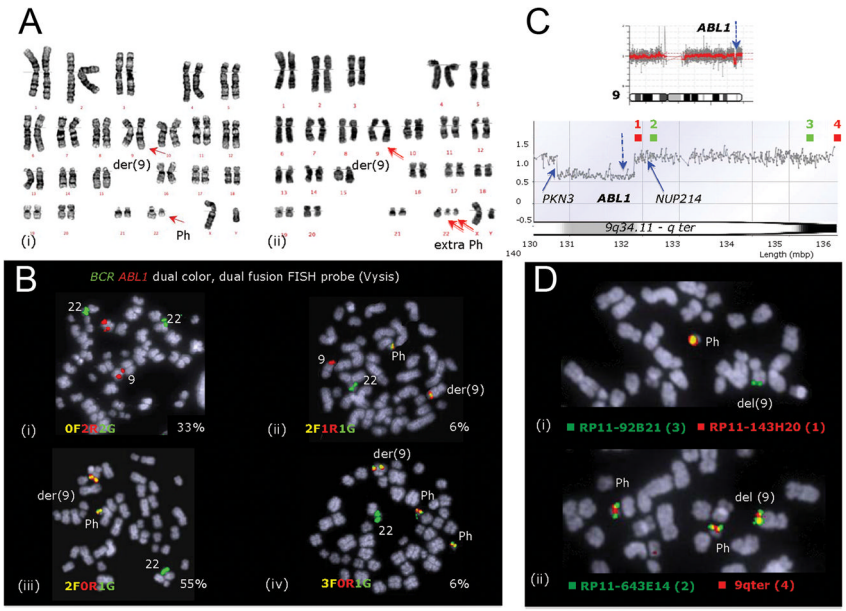

Figure 2. Analysis of del(9) causing a loss of the wild-type *ABL1* allele during imatinib treatment in patient #1

(**A**) G-banding analysis identified (**i**) a t(9;22)(q34;q11) and (**ii**) an additional Ph in 20% of cells. (**B**) FISH analysis showed that (**i**) 33% of the cells were *BCR-ABL1* negative (0F2R2G), (**ii**) 6% were *BCR-ABL1* positive with fusion products on both the Ph and der(9) chromosome and signals from the normal 9q34 and 22q11 regions (2F1R1G) as expected, and (**iii**) 55% had an abnormal 2F0R1G signal pattern indicating cryptic loss of the *ABL1* signal at 9q34 [del(9)] and (**iv**) 6 % had in addition to del(9) also an extra Ph. (**C**) Chromosomes 9 aCGH profile indicates the loss at 9q34.1 (top, blue arrow) with a close-up of 9q34.1-qter region (bottom), showing that the breakpoints fall within the *PKN3* gene and downstream of *ABL1*. The locations of BAC probes (1–4) are shown in green and red. (**D**) FISH mapped the missing *ABL1* sequences to del(9) affecting the wild-type allele of *ABL1* and confirmed the location of the distal breakpoint between (**i**) BACs RP11-143H20 [note the missing red signal from del(9)] and (**ii**) RP11-643E14 within a 128 Kb region containing *NUP214* gene.

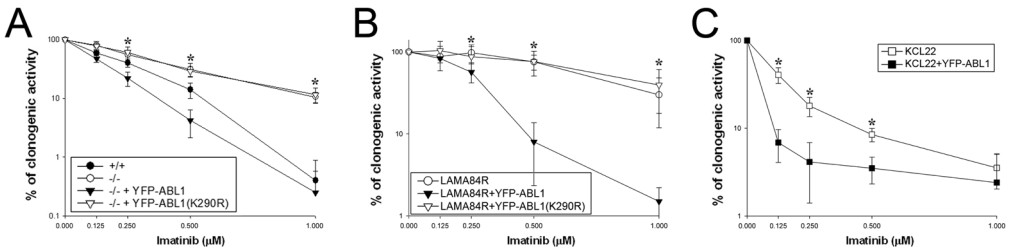

Figure 3. ABL1 kinase regulates imatinib sensitivity of BCR-ABL1 leukemias

(**A**) BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*−/− leukemia cells (−/−), BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*+/+ leukemia cells (+/+) and BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*−/− leukemia cells reconstituted with YFP-ABL1 and YFP-ABL1(K290R), (**B**) LAMA84R cells and these transfected with YFP-ABL1 and YFP-ABL1(K290R), and (**C**) KCL22 cells and these transfected with YFP-ABL1 were incubated with imatinib and clonogenic cells were counted. Results represent mean percentages ± s.d. of control untreated cells; *p<0.05 in comparison to other group(s) as determined by two-tailed Student t test.

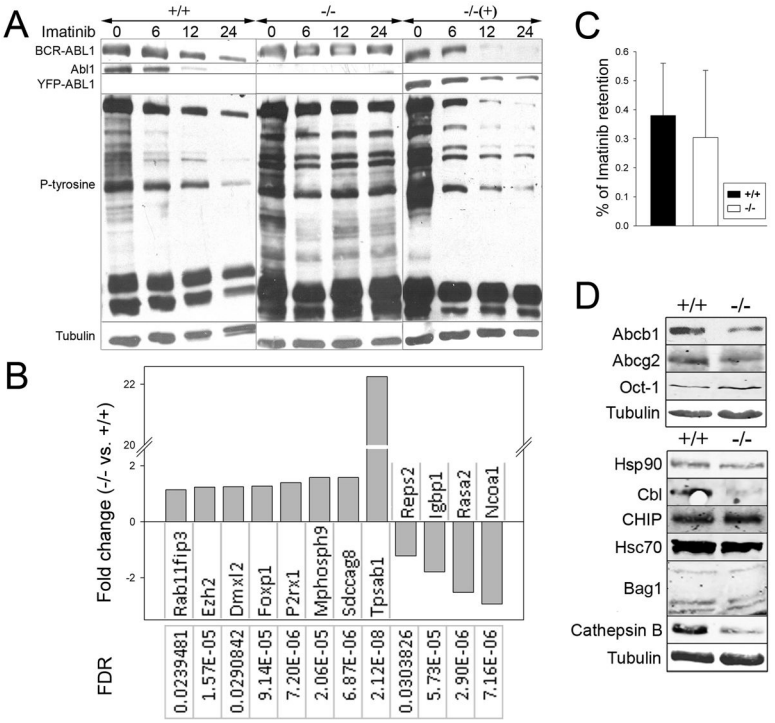

Figure 4. Imatinib-resistant phenotype of BCR-ABL1 –positive Abl1−/− leukemia cells

BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*−/− leukemia cells (−/−), BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*+/+ leukemia cells (+/+) and BCR-ABL1 –positive *Abl1*−/− leukemia cells reconstituted with YFP-ABL1 (−/− (+)) were used. (**A**) Western analysis of the total cell lysates from cells incubated with 1μM imatinib for 0, 6, 12 and 24 hrs. (**B**) Statistically significant (FDR<0.05) fold-changes (>1) of the expression of indicated genes in BCR-ABL1-positive *Abl1*−/− versus BCR-ABL1-positive *Abl1*+/+ samples. (**C**) Intracellular retention of imatinib; results represent mean percentages ± s.d. of total C^{14}-imatinib. (**D**) Western blots of total cell lysates to detect imatinib transporters (upper box) and proteins involved in BCR-ABL1 degradation (lower box).