Spata6 is required for normal assembly of the sperm connecting piece and tight head–tail conjunction

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Contributed by Ryuzo Yanagimachi, December 24, 2014 (sent for review October 23, 2014)

“Pinhead sperm,” or “acephalic sperm,” a type of human teratozoosperma, refers to the condition in which ejaculate contains mostly sperm flagella without heads. Family clustering and homogeneity of this syndrome suggests a genetic basis, but the causative genes remain largely unknown. Here we report that Spata6, an evolutionarily conserved testis-specific gene, encodes a protein required for formation of the segmented columns and the capitulum, two major structures of the sperm connecting piece essential for linking the developing flagellum to the head during late spermiogenesis. Inactivation of Spata6 in mice leads to accephalic spermatoozoa and male sterility. Our proteomic analyses reveal that SPATA6 is involved in myosin-based microfilament transport through interaction with myosin subunits (e.g., MYL6).

flagellum | centriole | infertility | sperm anomaly | microtubule

Male gametes—spermatozoa—are produced in the testis through a process termed spermatogenesis, which can be divided into three phases: mitotic, meiotic, and haploid (1). In the mitotic phase, spermatogonial stem cells proliferate and differentiate into spermatogonia, which subsequently enter the meiotic phase and become spermatocytes. Spermatocytes undergo crossover, followed by two consecutive meiotic cell divisions to produce haploid spermatids. Spermatids then undergo a multi-step differentiation process, also called spermiogenesis, to form spermatoozoa. Severe disruptions in either the mitotic or the meiotic phase tend to cause azoosperma, whereas spermiogenic defects often lead to reduced sperm counts, aberrant sperm motility, and deformed spermatoozoa, a condition termed oligospermia (2) in humans (2, 3).

OAT accounts for a significant proportion of male idiopathic infertility cases (2, 4). Numerous cases of accephalic spermatoozoa have been reported in teratozoospermic patients (5–19). In these patients, the major anomaly lies in headless spermatoozoa in the ejaculate, and the headless spermatoozoa were initially called “pinhead sperm” because the investigators mistakenly regarded the retained cytoplasmic droplets, which are usually attached to the midprincipal piece junction of the flagella, as the heads of reduced size (8, 13, 14). Extensive ultrastructural studies on humans and animals with accephalic spermatoozoa suggest that this condition results from defects in formation of the connecting piece of spermatoozoa during late spermiogenesis, including failure for the proximal centrioles to attach normally to the caudal portion of the sperm nuclei, leading to abnormal head–midpiece alignment, or a nuclear defect that interferes with formation of the implantation fossa, the normal lodging site for the sperm proximal centriole (16). Aberrant formation of the connecting piece leads to independent development of the sperm heads and flagella, and eventually these structures become separated within the seminiferous tubules or during their transition through the seminal tract as a consequence of increased instability of the head–midpiece junction (16, 18).

Several features of the human “acephalic spermatoozoa,” including its uniform phenotype, origin as a systematic alteration of spermiogenesis, unresponsiveness to hormonal treatment, and familial incidence, suggest a genetic origin of this condition (8, 16, 18–20). Mice lacking Odf1, a gene encoding outer dense fiber protein 1, display fragile sperm connecting pieces in addition to a disorganized mitochondrial sheath and defective outer dense fibers (ODFs) (21). Inactivation of Oaz3, a gene encoding ornithine decarboxylase antizyme 3, also leads to fragile sperm connecting pieces, despite the observation that all major structures of the connecting piece appear to be intact in mice (22). Neither of the two KO lines displays uniformly 100% accephalic spermatoozoa, however, suggesting that in the absence of these genes, the connecting piece still can be formed, but in many spermatoozoa it is not strong enough to maintain stability. Moreover, whether the effects represent the primary defects owing to ablation of the genes or secondary to other relevant factors remains unclear. Overall, the genetic causes of homogenous accephalic spermatoozoa are largely unknown.

Spata6 is known to be expressed exclusively in the testis with multiple transcript isoforms, and a previous attempt to inactivate Spata6 was unsuccessful because the chimera failed to transmit the mutant allele through the germline (23). Here we report that Spata6 encodes a protein that is highly conserved across all vertebrate species and expressed exclusively in developing spermatids and mature spermatoozoa. Ablation of Spata6 completely disrupts connecting piece formation, leading to accephalic spermatoozoa in mice.

Significance

Male infertility due to accephalic spermatoozoa has been reported in both animals and humans, but its cause remains largely unknown. Here we report that inactivation of Spata6, an evolutionarily conserved gene, in mice leads to failure in development of the connecting piece during late spermiogenesis, along with production of headless spermatoozoa in the epididymis and ejaculates. The defects may be ascribed to the disrupted myosin-based microfilament transport mediated by SPATA6 through its interactions with myosin light-chain and heavy-chain subunits. This study not only unveils the process of sperm neck formation at both the ultrastructural and molecular levels, but also provides a genetic basis for the production of accephalic spermatoozoa in both humans and animals.


The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1424648112/-/DCSupplemental.
Results

*Spata6* Encodes a Highly Conserved Protein Expressed Exclusively in the Connecting Piece of Vertebrate Spermatozoa. Multialignment and phylogenetic analyses of SPATA6 orthologs in 13 vertebrate species revealed that SPATA6 is highly conserved during evolution (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S1). Human SPATA6 shares 88%, 50%, and 33% amino acid sequences with its orthologs in mice, chicken, and zebrafish, respectively. Consistent with a previous study (23), four isoforms of Spata6 transcripts are predicted in mice (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S2A); however, isoform 1 appears to be the sole dominant isoform, with its mRNA and protein detected exclusively in testis among all 10 organs analyzed (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S2B and Fig. 1A). Both Spata6 mRNA and protein were detectable in testes at postnatal day (P) 14 (P14), and the levels kept increasing from P21 onward, with the highest levels detected in adult testes (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S2C and Fig. 1B). This expression pattern suggests that Spata6 mRNA and protein are expressed in late pachytene spermatocytes and spermatids. Indeed, Spata6 mRNA were detected only in purified spermatocytes and spermatids (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S2D), and in situ hybridization analyses also localized Spata6 mRNA to spermatocytes and spermatids (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S2 E and F).

Immunofluorescent staining using rabbit anti-SPATA6 polyclonal antibodies revealed that SPATA6 is localized exclusively to the connecting piece of spermatozoa collected from the epididymis of WT male mice (Fig. 1C). Supporting this antibody specificity, the specific staining was completely absent in Spata6-null spermatozoa with the head still attached to the flagellum (Fig. 1D), which accounted for <1% of the epididymal spermatozoa in Spata6 KO males (see below). Considering the high degree of amino acid similarities among all vertebrates (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S1), we used the same anti-SPATA6 antibodies to stain spermatozoa collected from trouts (Fig. 1E), rats (Fig. 1F), rabbits (Fig. 1G), and monkeys (Fig. 1H), as well as ejaculated human spermatozoa (Fig. 1I). Specific staining was detected exclusively in the connecting piece of spermatozoa in both fish (Fig. 1E) and four mammalian species (Fig. 1 C, D, F–I), suggesting that SPATA6 is a structural protein specifically localized to the connecting piece of spermatozoa in vertebrates.

To further determine the subcellular localization of SPATA6, we performed immunogold labeling followed by transmission
electron microscopy (IG-TEM) on mouse and rabbit epididymal spermatozoa (Fig. 1 J–Q). Gold particles were detected mainly in the segmented columns and the capitulum of the connecting piece of spermatozoa from mice (Fig. 1 J–L) and rabbits (Fig. 1P). No specific gold particles were detected in either WT mouse and rabbit spermatozoa stained with preimmune serum (Fig. 1 M and Q) or Spata6-null mouse spermatozoa stained with the SPATA6 antibodies (Fig. 1 N and O). Taken together, our expression and localization data demonstrate that SPATA6 is an evolutionarily conserved protein localized exclusively to the segmented columns and the capitulum of the connecting piece of spermatozoa.

Inactivation of **Spata6** in Mice Leads to Acephalic Spermatozoa and Male Sterility. To define the physiological role of SPATA6, we generated Spata6 global KO mice using an embryonic stem (ES) cell line obtained from the Knockout Mouse Project (KOMP) repository (EPD0224_2_B05, ID: CSD33302), in which a “knockout first” gene trap cassette was inserted in between exons 2 and 3 of the Spata6 locus, leading to a “gene trap” allele (Fig. 2 A and B). By examining the levels of Spata6 mRNA (Fig. 2C) and protein (Fig. 2D) in WT and KO testes, we confirmed that homozygous (Spata6<sup>+/−</sup>) mice were completely lacking Spata6 mRNAs and protein and thus were truly Spata6-null. The complete ablation of both Spata6 mRNA and protein is also
supported by the data showing an absence of signals in the in situ hybridization (SI Appendix, Fig. 52E), immunofluorescence (Fig. 1D), and IM-TEM (Fig. 1N) analyses of the KO testes.

Spata6 KO mice were viable and displayed normal development. Although all of the adult Spata6 KO females were fertile, the adult male KO mice did not produce any pups after breeding with fertility-proven adult WT female mice for 6 months, suggesting that Spata6 KO male mice are sterile. To uncover the cause of the male sterility phenotype, we examined the Spata6 KO males at both gross and histological levels. No differences in testis size and total testis weight were observed between WT and KO mice (Fig. 2 E and F). Computer-assisted sperm analyses (CASA) revealed reductions in both sperm counts (Fig. 2G) and total motility (Fig. 2H). Histological examination did not reveal any severe disruptions in the seminiferous epithelia in KO testes (Fig. 2F and SI Appendix, Fig. S3); however, fewer sperm heads were aligned along the lumen at stage VII in the KO testes compared with the WT stage VII tubules (SI Appendix, Fig. S3). Moreover, spermatozoa within the WT epididymis appeared to be more heavily stained with hematoxylin compared with those in the KO epididymis (Fig. 2F and SI Appendix, Fig. S3). These results suggest the presence of fewer sperm heads in both KO testes and epididymides, and are consistent with the reduced number of sperm heads in both the testicular and epididymal sperm suspensions from the KO mice (see below).

Quantitative analyses revealed that intact spermatozoa accounted for only ∼7%, ∼4%, and ∼3% of the total sperm cells (intact spermatozoa plus sperm flagella) in the KO testes, KO caput, and caudal epididymides, respectively (SI Appendix, Fig. S4). In contrast, the majority (96%–99%) of the WT testicular and epididymal spermatozoa were intact (SI Appendix, Fig. S4). Moreover, more sperm flagella (93%–97%) than sperm heads (14%–16%) were present in both KO testes and epididymides compared with the WT samples (SI Appendix, Fig. S4). These results suggest that separation of sperm heads from the flagella occurs during spermiogenesis before spermatiation, and that the separated sperm heads most likely are engulfed and absorbed by Sertoli cells. Interestingly, ∼10% of the headless sperm flagella collected from the KO cauda epididymis displayed limited progressive motility, and the major waveforms appeared to be confined only to the end piece instead of the principal piece, as seen in WT epididymal spermatozoa (SI Appendix, Movies S1 and S2). Taken together, the foregoing findings demonstrate that inactivation of Spata6 leads to male sterility owing to acetalphic spermatozoa with close to 100% penetrance.

Impaired Development of the Connecting Piece in the Absence of SPATA6. The fact that almost all spermatozoa are acetalphic and sperm heads are scarce in the KO epididymis suggests that the separation of the sperm head from the flagellum occurs within the seminiferous tubules. To identify the underlying structural defects, we examined the ultrastructure of step 15–16 elongated spermatids in WT and Spata6 KO testes using TEM (Fig. 3).

TEM analyses of the longitudinal sections and cross-sections of WT and KO step 15–16 elongated spermatids revealed no discernable defects in either the nucleus or the acrosome; however, the connecting piece was either completely lacking or only partially developed in Spata6-null elongated spermatids (Fig. 3). In WT step 15–16 elongated spermatids, the connecting piece was fully developed and consisted of well-defined segmented columns that united at the anterior and formed the capitulum (Fig. 3A). The capitulum was tightly attached to the basal plate of the caudal portion of the nucleus at the implantation fossa. The mitochondria were well aligned to surround the ODFs of the developing mid-piece (Fig. 3A). In contrast, normal connecting piece development was never observed in step 15–16 KO elongated spermatids, and two major defects included a complete lack of the segmented columns and/or the capitulum (Fig. 3 B–D) and partially formed segmented columns (Fig. 3E). In either case, there were no signs of mitochondrial sheath formation (Fig. 3 B–G), and a lack of mitochondrial sheath was always associated with misplacement of the annulus, which normally forms a belt at the mid-principal piece junction in step 15–16 WT elongated spermatids and epididymal spermatozoa (Fig. 3 H and I).

Because of the lack of connecting piece formation, the developing flagella, derived from the distal centrioles, were often misaligned with the developing nuclei/heads (Fig. 3D). To determine whether the failure in the assembly of the segmented columns could cause disrupted flagellar development, we further analyzed cross-sections of the Spata6-null sperm flagellum. Indeed, we identified severe flagellar defects in Spata6-null spermatozoa. In the mid-piece, WT spermatozoa have a well-defined mitochondrial sheath, enveloping nine ODFs and the axoneme consisting of the typical “9 + 2” microtubules (Fig. 3A). However, the Spata6-null spermatozoa displayed a lack of or partially formed mitochondrial sheaths, along with incomplete ODFs and axonemes with missing ODFs and axonemal microtubules (Fig. 3F). In the end piece, although the fibrous sheath was intact in both WT and Spata6 KO spermatozoa, disorganized axonemal microtubules were obvious in Spata6-null spermatozoa, showing the “8 + 2” or “7 + 2” microtubular compositions instead of the normal “9 + 2” organization in the WT axoneme (Fig. 3F). These severe flagellar defects may explain why Spata6-null spermatozoa displayed minimal motility (Fig. 2H and SI Appendix, Movies S1 and S2). Taken together, these ultrastructural analyses reveal that failure of assembly of the segmented columns and the capitulum in developing spermatids represents the primary defects of SPATA6 deficiency, consistent with the exclusive localization of SPATA6 to the segmented columns and the capitulum in the connecting piece of spermatozoa (Fig. 1 C–Q).

Normal Development of the Segmented Columns Is Required for Proper Attachment and Alignment of the Sperm Head to the Mid-Piece, As Well As Formation of the Mitochondrial Sheath. Previous ultrastructural studies have documented that flagellar development starts with a functional transformation of the distal centriole into the basal body that serves as the template for the assembly of axonemal doublet microtubules (20, 25). As the flagellar axoneme grows, the basal body migrates to the cell periphery, where distal centrioles dock perpendicularly to the plasma membrane as the axoneme sprouts toward the extracellular space. Meanwhile, the axoneme growth is also accompanied by complex modifications in the dense “pericentriolar materials,” from which new proteins or structural components arise and organize to form the nine longitudinal segmented columns of the connecting piece (20, 25). Segmented columns are nine cylindrical structures with periodic densities that fuse cranially to form the capitulum, a curved plate-like disk that links the connecting piece to the basal plate, a dense structure lining the outer nuclear membrane at the implantation fossa (Figs. 1 J–M and 3A). At the caudal end, each segmented column is continuous with one of the nine ODFs that associate with peripheral microtubular doublets of the growing axoneme (20, 25).

To delineate the developmental process of the connecting piece during late spermiogenesis, we analyzed the ultrastructure of elongating (steps 9–12) and elongated spermatids (steps
13–16), as well as epididymal spermatozoa in WT and KO mice (Fig. 4A). In both WT and KO testes, nuclear condensation, nuclear elongation, and flagellar development start in step 9 spermatids. In step 9 spermatids, the proximal centriole was present at the caudal side of the nucleus, and signs of segmented column formation could be seen in the step 10 WT spermatids, but not in the step 10 KO spermatids (Fig. 4A). From step 11 to step 12, the segmented columns developed further and became highly defined, and the capitulum started to form in WT spermatids (Fig. 4A); however, in KO step 11–12 spermatids, the segmented columns and the capitulum were often absent or only partially formed and severely disorganized (Fig. 4A). In step 13–16 WT spermatids, both the segmented columns and capitulum were fully developed, and the flagellum was attached to the basal plates

**Fig. 3.** Impaired development of the connecting piece and the flagellum in Spata6 KO spermatids revealed by TEM analyses. (A) Longitudinal section of a WT step 15 elongated spermatid. The connecting piece consists of the well-defined segmented columns (Sc) and the capitulum (Cp), and the capitulum is attached to the basal plate at the implantation fossa (If). Mitochondria (Mi) are well aligned along the ODFs (Od) in the mid-piece of the flagellum, and the redundant nuclear envelope (Rn) is present. (Scale bar: 1 μm.) (B) Longitudinal section of a Spata6 KO step 15 elongated spermatid. Segmented columns and capitulum are completely absent, although the basal plate (Bp) can be seen. There is a complete lack of mitochondrial sheath along the ODFs, in all cases accompanied by misplacement of the annulus (An). (Scale bar: 1 μm.) (C) Longitudinal section of a Spata6 KO step 16 elongated spermatid. Although the proximal centriole (Pc) is present, the segmented columns, capitulum, and mitochondrial sheath are completely lacking, and the annulus is misplaced. (Scale bar: 1 μm.) (D) Longitudinal section of a Spata6 KO step 15 elongated spermatid. There is no sign of segmented column formation, although a capitulum-like structure can be seen. Moreover, the developing flagellum is misaligned with the developing nucleus (Nu). (Scale bar: 0.5 μm.) (E) Longitudinal section of a Spata6 KO step 16 elongated spermatid. The segmented columns appear to be partial, and there is no obvious capitulum, although the half-baked segmented columns seem to be attached to the basal plate at the implantation fossa. Again, the mitochondrial sheath is completely lacking, and the annulus is misplaced. (Scale bar: 1 μm.) (F–I) Longitudinal sections and cross-sections of step 16 spermatids in Spata6 KO testes showing a lack of formation of the mitochondrial sheath (Mt) and misplacement of the annulus (An) compared with WT step 16 spermatids (H and I). (Scale bars: 2 μm in longitudinal sections (F and H) and 1 μm in cross-sections (G and I).) (J) Cross-sections showing the ultrastructure of the mid-piece and the end piece of WT and Spata6 KO spermatozoa. Note that the mid-piece of KO spermatozoa exhibits structural defects, including malformed (Upper Middle) or a complete lack of (Upper Right) mitochondrial sheath, partially formed ODFs, and the axonemal microtubules (Ax). In the end piece, WT flagellum consists of fibrous sheath and the typical “9 + 2” arrangement of axonemal microtubules, whereas the KO flagellum contains an atypical “7 + 2” or “8 + 2” composition of axonemal microtubules. (Scale bar: 100 nm.)
at the implantation fossa (Fig. 4). In contrast, in step 13–16 KO spermatids, the segmented columns and the capitulum were either completely absent or only partially formed, and the annulus was misplaced (Fig. 4). In the KO epididymis, sperm heads accounted for 14–16% of the total sperm cell content (SI Appendix, Fig. S4), and the headless sperm flagella usually carried enlarged CDs stuffed with mitochondria (Fig. 4), which were never observed in CDs of WT epididymal spermatozoa (Fig. 4). Taken together, the step-by-step TEM analyses further confirm that in the absence of SPATA6, the segmented columns either do not form or form only partially at a slower pace (Fig. 4B), leading to instability in the neck region and, ultimately, complete disconnection between the sperm heads and the flagella within the seminiferous epithelia (Fig. 4B).

TEM analyses of the KO sperm heads revealed no discernable defects, suggesting that disruptions in the connecting piece formation may have no impact on sperm head formation. This idea is also supported by the fact that ~40% of the sperm heads collected from KO cauda epididymides maintained plasma membrane integrity and thus were considered “live” (26, 27), as demonstrated by eosin-nigrosin staining (SI Appendix, Fig. S5).

To determine whether the KO sperm heads are functionally competent, we evaluated their fertility by intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI). No significant differences in preimplantation development (from two-cell to blastocyst stage) or the number of live-born pups were observed when WT or Spata6 KO sperm heads were injected into WT eggs (Table 1). Moreover, the Spata6+/− offspring derived from ICSI using Spata6-null spermatozoa, both male and female, were all healthy and fertile when they reached adulthood. These data suggest that the Spata6 KO sperm heads, although lacking the connecting piece and separated from the flagella, are fully developed and competent for fertilization and production of normal offspring when injected into WT oocytes.

**SPATA6 Interacts with Multiple Myosin Subunits.** Because SPATA6 has no known homologs in somatic tissues, it is difficult to predict its molecular function. To gain insight into the molecular action of SPATA6, we adopted an unbiased approach, with immunoprecipitation (IP) followed by liquid chromatography–mass spectrometry (LC-MS), to identify protein partners that interact with SPATA6. Using our rabbit polyclonal anti-SPATA6 antibody, we identified multiple myosin subunits as potential partners of SPATA6 (Fig. 5).
antibodies, we performed IP on both WT and KO testes and then subjected the immunoprecipitants to LC-MS analyses. The IP and LC-MS assays identified a total of 308 putative SPATA6-interacting proteins, all of which showed greater than twofold enrichment (WT vs. KO) and were represented by at least five peptide reads in the LC-MS results (SI Appendix, Table S1). Gene Ontology (GO) term analyses identified 29 biological processes that were significantly enriched (P < 0.05) among all SPATA6-interacting proteins (SI Appendix, Table S2). The three most-enriched biological processes (P < 0.001) included cytoskeleton-dependent intracellular transport, actin filament-based process, and actin filament-based movement (Table 2), and the proteins with the greatest fold enrichment were four myosin subunits, including myosin light-chain (MYL) polypeptide 6 (MYL6), myosin heavy-chain (MYH) polypeptide 10 (MYH10), MYL polypeptide 11 (MYH11), and MYH polypeptide 14 (MYH14) (Table 2).

We then chose to analyze MYL6 to validate the proteomic findings. Western blot analyses revealed similar levels of MYL6 expression in both WT and KO testes (Fig. 5A), suggesting that Spata6 inactivation does not affect MYL6 expression. We further performed reciprocal IP assays using antibodies specific for SPATA6 and MYL6. In the immunoprecipitants of SPATA6 antibodies, both SPATA6 and MYL6 were detected in WT testes, but not in KO testes (Fig. 5B). In contrast, in the immunoprecipitants of anti-MYL6 antibodies, both SPATA6 and MYL6 were detected in WT testes, whereas MYL6, but not SPATA6, was detected in KO testes (Fig. 5B). These results confirm that SPATA6 and MYL6 are indeed bona fide interacting partners in the testes. Further supporting their interactions, our immunofluorescence analyses revealed that both SPATA6 and MYL6 were localized to the manchette of elongating spermatids (steps 9–12) in WT testes (Fig. 5C). Although SPATA6 was eventually confined to the segmented column and the caputulum in spermatozoa (Fig. 1), it was expressed mainly on the manchette in step 9–14 spermatids within the testis (Fig. 5C). This finding is common for most, if not all, of the proteins that ultimately become sperm flagellar structural proteins, because the manchette, a microtubule-enriched perinuclear structure present exclusively in step 9–14 spermatids, plays a pivotal role in orchestrating the final assembly of functional spermatozoa, not only by providing the physical forces for shaping the sperm head, but also by serving as a “conveyor belt” that mediates the efficient transportation and processing of proteins required for sperm flagellar assembly (28–33).

Myosin has been considered a molecular motor that converts chemical energy (i.e., ATP) to mechanical power to generate force and to achieve movement in muscle and nonmuscle cells (34). Myosin is composed of two myosin heavy chains, two regulatory light chains, and two essential light chains (35). As a major form of cytoskeleton-dependent intracellular transport, myosin is known to bind actin filaments and to function in the transport of protein cargos in the cytoplasm (36, 37). Interactions between SPATA6 and myosin light and heavy chain subunits strongly suggest that SPATA6 is involved in myosin-based microfilament transport, which may be responsible for transporting basic building blocks for the assembly of the segmented columns during connecting piece formation in developing spermatids (Fig. 5D).

Discussion
Spermatozoa in most species adopt a tadpole-like shape, and the sperm head and tail are bridged by the connecting piece, which not only serves as a physical linkage, but also participates in sperm motility by initiating and regulating the waveforms during swimming (38–41). Given the high degree of similarity in sperm shape, it is not surprising that many spermiogenic genes are highly conserved across vertebrate species. In this study, we report that Spata6, as one of the highly conserved spermiogenic genes, encodes a protein expressed exclusively in elongating and elongated spermatids, as well as mature spermatozoa, and is essential for proper assembly of the segmented columns and caputulum during the development of the sperm connecting piece.

An earlier attempt to inactivate Spata6 was unsuccessful owing to failure of germline transmission of the mutant allele (23). The fact that their high-percent chimeric embryos tend to die suggests that genes other than Spata6 might have been targeted or affected in that study, because we succeeded in germline transmission of the Spata6-null allele, and Spata6-null mice are viable and develop normally except for male infertility. The primary defects in KO testes lie in the malformation or total lack of formation of segmented columns in elongating and elongate spermatids, which is consistent with the exclusive localization of

Table 1. Development of WT oocytes injected with epididymal sperm heads from WT and Spata6-null males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sperm genotype</th>
<th>Experimental series 1</th>
<th>Experimental series 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total oocytes injected, n (n of experiments)</td>
<td>Two-cell embryos, n (% of 2PN total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WT</td>
<td>171 (10)</td>
<td>150 (87.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spata6−/−</td>
<td>148 (5)</td>
<td>122 (82.4)</td>
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</table>

*All males developed into fertile adults with normal spermatozoa.

Table 2. GO term analyses of biological processes enriched among SPATA6-interacting proteins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biological process</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Genes</th>
<th>Fold enrichment</th>
<th>P value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cytoskeleton-dependent intracellular transport</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Myl6, Uchl1, Myh14, Myh10</td>
<td>27.00</td>
<td>4.06E-04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actin filament-based process</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Myl6, Myh11, Myh14, Cap1, Cdir, Myh10</td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>1.06E-03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actin filament-based movement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Myl6, Myh14, Myh10</td>
<td>44.55</td>
<td>1.94E-03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cell redox homeostasis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Prdx6, Prdx4, Pdia4, Prdx1</td>
<td>14.37</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Fabp9, Myh11, Myh10</td>
<td>18.56</td>
<td>1.09E-02</td>
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Discussion
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<td>Cell redox homeostasis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Prdx6, Prdx4, Pdia4, Prdx1</td>
<td>14.37</td>
<td>2.57E-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell proliferation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Aopn1, Nasp, Uchl1, Prdx1, Park7, Myh10</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>4.62E-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbohydrate catabolic process</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hhex, Pgam1, Pgam2, Pkg2</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>5.47E-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellular component assembly involved in morphogenesis</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fabp9, Myh11, Myh10</td>
<td>18.56</td>
<td>1.09E-02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SPATA6 to the same structure in the connecting piece of mature spermatozoa. These data suggest that SPATA6 is essential for the proper formation of segmented columns during the development of the connecting piece in mice. Interestingly, similar ultrastructural defects (i.e., malformation or partial formation of segmented columns) have been reported in some human infertility patients with acephalic spermatozoa (16, 18–20, 42), suggesting that a similar underlying mechanism is conserved between mice and humans.

Segmented columns represent a major structure of the connecting piece, and have been suggested to arise from the so-called “pericentriolar materials” (20, 43). Given its exclusive localization to the segmented columns and the capitulum in elongating and elongated spermatids, SPATA6 should represent one of these pericentriolar materials. Considering that the capitulum represents the fused cranial portion of the segmented columns, disruptions in the segmented columns are destined to lead to malformation or absence of the capitulum. Therefore, the primary defects in the absence of SPATA6 involve disruption in segmented column formation or assembly in developing spermatids. Our findings that SPATA6 is involved in myosin-based microfilament transport may explain the failure of segmented column assembly in Spata6-null spermatids. One possibility is that assembly of the segmented columns requires transportation of the “building blocks,” most likely microtubules, and that this transport function is, at least in part, achieved through the spermatid-specific myosin motor proteins, based on that fact that four types of myosin light- and heavy-chain polypeptides all interact with SPATA6 during assembly of the segmented columns in elongating and elongated spermatids. The absence of SPATA6 may compromise the myosin-based microfilament transport of building blocks for constructing the segmented columns, thereby leading to partial formation or complete lack of segmented columns during development of the connecting piece in elongating and elongated spermatids.

Assembly of the segmented columns is organized by the proximal centrioles, whereas both the flagellar axoneme and ODFs originate from the distal centrioles (20, 25). As such, these two processes appear to be independent of each other, except that the caudal ends of the nine segmented columns in the connecting piece eventually fuse with the nine ODFs in the mid-piece by the time of late flagellar development (20, 25). However, our data strongly suggest that these two processes are in fact interrelated, because when the segmented columns fail to form, or become malformed owing to SPATA6 deficiency, both the axoneme and the ODFs in the mid-piece also become malformed, with aberrant composition of the microtubules and the ODFs, respectively. Given that SPATA6 is expressed exclusively in the segmented columns and the capitulum, the disruptions observed in the axoneme and ODFs most likely represent secondary effects.

The persistence of SPATA6 in mature spermatooza suggests that SPATA6 is involved in the regulation of myosin motor activity if the associations remain in mature spermatozoa. Alternatively, SPATA6 may interact with other partners in mature sperm and thus exert other unknown functions. Given that the connecting piece is known to initiate and regulate the tail waveforms and overall motility in mature spermatozoa (40, 41, 44, 45), it remains
to be determined whether SPATA6-dependent myosin motor activity contributes to sperm motility. Of note, Spata6-null spermatooza are in fact naturally formed headless sperm flagella, most of which never connect to the sperm head. Interestingly, these headless flagella still display motility, although the waveforms appear to originate from the principal−end piece junction instead of the connecting piece, as is typically observed in WT spermatooza, suggesting the existence of a second waveform source at the principal−end piece junction that is independent of the first waveform initiated from the connecting piece. This secondary waveform has been reported previously (46), and it will be interesting to use these headless spermatooza to study the role of the secondary waveform in the overall sperm motility.

Among all reported human cases of accephalic spermatooza, only several displayed accephalic spermatooza with full penetrance (~100% headless), with the rest displaying various percentages of accephalic spermatooza (5−19). Similarly, mice lacking Odf1 or Oac3 also display accephalic spermatooza with partial penetrance (21, 22). Partial penetrance observed in both humans and animals (5−19, 47, 48) suggests that this condition is variable and can be caused by either a partial loss of function of Spata6 or mutations in other genes involved in SPATA6-mediated segmented column formation during spermiogenesis. Nevertheless, this study has identified a candidate for screening causative genes for human accephalic sperm conditions.

In summary, we have discovered that SPATA6 is essential for the connecting piece formation during spermiogenesis, and that malfunction of Spata6 may be involved in human accephalic sperm conditions.

Materials and Methods
Animal Use. The University of Nevada, Reno’s Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee approved all animal use protocols. Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

Generation of Spata6 Mutant Mice. Spata6 mutant mice were generated using a targeted ES cell clone (EPD0224_2_B05; ID: CSD3302) obtained from the KOMP Repository, in which a “knockout first” gene trap cassette was inserted in between exons 2 and 3 of the Spata6 gene (Fig. 2A). Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

Fertility Test. The fertility test was carried out by mating adult Spata6 KO (Spata6−/−) male mice with WT adult female mice with proven fertility for at least 3 mo. A total of eight Spata6 KO males and eight of their male heterozygous littermates (Spata6+/−), as the control group, were tested. The number and size of litters sired by each breeding pair were recorded.

Histology and Immunocytochemistry. Histological evaluation was performed on periodic acid-Schiff-stained, paraffin-embedded sections of the testes, and on hematoxylin and eosin-stained epididymal spermatooza. Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

CASA. Total sperm motility and number were analyzed using the CASA system (version 14.0; Hamilton-Thorne Bioscience). Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

Sperm Head/Flagellum Counting and Eosin-Nigrosin Staining. The total number of intact spermatooza, sperm heads, and flagella were counted, and the proportions of each of the three types of sperm components were calculated based on the common denominator (i.e., intact spermatooza plus flagella) (SI Appendix, Fig. S4). Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

TEM and IG-TEM. TEM studies were performed as described previously with minor modifications (24, 49, 50). Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

Real-Time Quantitative PCR Analyses. SYBR Green-based quantitative PCR (qPCR) analyses were performed on an Applied Biosciences 7900HT Real-Time qPCR system. Primers used for the qPCR analyses are listed in SI Appendix, Table S3. Gapdh served as an internal control. Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

RNA in Situ Hybridization. Spata6 mRNA in situ hybridization in testis was performed as described previously (51). Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

Western Blot Analyses. A rabbit anti-SPATA6 antibody (1:1,000) and a rabbit anti-MYL6 antibody (1:500; Abcam catalog no. ab84349) were used for Western blot analyses. Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

IP Followed by LC-MS. Spata6 IP and LC-MS analyses were conducted as described previously with some modifications (52). Details are provided in SI Appendix, Materials and Methods.

Statistical Analysis. Data are reported as mean ± SEM. Statistical differences between datasets were assessed by one-way ANOVA or the t test using SPSS 16.0 software. P < 0.05 was considered to indicate a significant difference and P < 0.01 to indicate a very significant difference between two groups. ICSI data were analyzed using the χ2 test compared with the WT group.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. This work was supported in part by National Institutes of Health (NIH) Grants HD060858, HD071736, and HD074573 (to W.Y.). The KO mice were generated and maintained in the University of Nevada Genetic Engineering Center supported by NIH Center of Biomedical Research Excellence (COBRE) Grant RR18751. The TEM analyses were made possible by NIH Grants GM103554 and GM103440, which support the COBRE and the IDEA Network of Biomedical Research Excellence. The ES cell line used for this research project was generated by the trans-NIH Knock-Out Mouse Project (KOMP) and obtained from the KOMP Repository (www.komp.org). NIH grants to Velocigen at Regeneron Inc. (U01HG004085) and the CSD Consortium (U01HG004080) funded the generation of gene-targeted ES cells for 8,500 genes in the KOMP Program, which are archived and distributed by the KOMP Repository at the University of California Davis and Children’s Hospital Oakland Research Institute (U42RR024244).


