DATA NOTE

A collection of annotated and harmonized human breast cancer transcriptome datasets, including immunologic classification [version 1; referees: 1 approved with reservations]

Jessica Roelands¹, Julie Decock², Sabri Boughorbel³, Darawan Rinchai¹, Cristina Maccalli¹, Michele Ceccarelli⁴, Michael Black⁵, Chris Print⁶, Jeff Chou⁷, Scott Presnell⁸, Charlie Quinn⁸, Puthen Jithesh⁹, Najeeb Syed¹⁰, Salha B.J. Al Bader¹¹, Shahinaz Bedri¹², Ena Wang¹³, Francesco M. Marincola¹⁴, Damien Chaussabel³, Peter Kuppen¹⁵, Lance D. Miller⁷*, Davide Bedognetti¹*, Wouter Hendrickx¹*¹

¹Tumor Biology, Immunology and Therapy section, Sidra Medical and Research Center, Doha, Qatar
²Qatar Biomedical Research Institute, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar Foundation, Doha, Qatar
³Systems Biology Department, Sidra Medical and Research Center, Doha, Qatar
⁴Qatar Computing Research Institute, Doha, Qatar
⁵Department of Biochemistry, Otago School of Medical Sciences, University of Otago, Dunedin, 9054, New Zealand
⁶Department of Molecular Medicine and Pathology and Maurice Wilkins Institute, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, The University of Auckland, Auckland, 1142, New Zealand
⁷Department of Cancer Biology, Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC, 27101, USA
⁸Benaroya Research Institute at Virginia Mason, Seattle, WA, 98101, USA
⁹Translational Bioinformatics, Division of Biomedical Informatics Research, Sidra Medical and Research Center, Doha, Qatar
¹⁰Biomedical Informatics Division, Sidra Medical and Research Center, Doha, Qatar
¹¹National Center for Cancer Care and Research (NCCCR), Hamad General Hospital, Doha, Qatar
¹²Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar, Doha, Qatar
¹³Division of Translational Medicine, Research Branch, Sidra Medical and Research Center, Doha, Qatar
¹⁴Office of the Chief Research Officer (CRO), Research Branch, Sidra Medical and Research Center, Doha, Qatar
¹⁵Department of Surgery, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, 2333 ZA, Netherlands

* Equal contributors

Abstract

The increased application of high-throughput approaches in translational research has expanded the number of publicly available data repositories. Gathering additional valuable information contained in the datasets represents a crucial opportunity in the biomedical field. To facilitate and stimulate utilization of these datasets, we have recently developed an interactive data browsing and visualization web application, the Gene Expression Browser (GXB). In this note, we describe a curated compendium of 13 public datasets on human breast cancer, representing a total of 2142 transcriptome profiles. We classified the samples according to different immune based classification systems and integrated this information into the datasets. Annotated and harmonized
datasets were uploaded to GXB. Study samples were categorized in different groups based on their immunologic tumor response profiles, intrinsic molecular subtypes and multiple clinical parameters. Ranked gene lists were generated based on relevant group comparisons. In this data note, we demonstrate the utility of GXB to evaluate the expression of a gene of interest, find differential gene expression between groups and investigate potential associations between variables with a specific focus on immunologic classification in breast cancer. This interactive resource is publicly available online at: http://breastcancer.gxbsidra.org/dm3/geneBrowser/list.

This article is included in the Sidra Medical and Research Center gateway.

This article is included in the Data: Use and Reuse collection.
Introduction

Technological progress in the field of biomedical research has resulted in an increased utilization of platforms generating information on a system-scale, e.g. genome, transcriptome and proteome. As researchers are typically willing and often required to share their data collections, the availability of ‘big data’ is expanding rapidly. At this moment, the NCBI Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO), a public repository of transcriptome profiles, holds over 2 million individual transcriptome profiles from more than 76,000 studies (‘Home - GEO - NCBI’, 2016). This large amount of available transcriptomic data provides major opportunities as well as challenges to researchers. Identification of differential gene expression in healthy versus diseased individuals, for example, has the potential to increase our understanding of the disease process, can lead to the identification of novel disease biomarkers or to the recognition of potential therapeutic targets. However, utilization of the available system-scale information can be challenging, since data repositories often lack the analytical and visualization tools needed for data assessment and interpretation. For this reason, proper analysis relies on elevated bioinformatics skills.

To overcome the challenges faced when analyzing transcriptomic data, we previously developed a web application called gene expression browser (GXB), which makes datasets more accessible and interactive (Speake et al., 2015). The application graphically visualizes gene expression data in bar chart or box plot representation and is capable of dynamically changing its interface views upon user input. GXB allows users to upload microarray data, add data annotations, which enables overlay of clinical data, explore gene rank lists based on their differential expression patterns between groups, view the data on a gene-by-gene basis and compare different datasets and diseases. These capabilities stimulate the acquisition of new knowledge from public datasets, as demonstrated by the first paper that employed GXB to identify a previously unknown role of a specific transcript during immune-mediated processes (Rinchai et al., 2015).

In recent years, a large number of transcriptional studies have been conducted with the aim to characterize breast cancer on a genetic basis. GEO holds about 1297 datasets relating to breast cancer. One of the main impacts gene expression profiling has had on our understanding of breast cancer has been through the classification of breast cancer into intrinsic molecular subtypes (IMS). Three main methods have been described to achieve this, which have the same subtypes, but actually use different gene sets to stratify the patients (Hu et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2009; Sorlie et al., 2003;). Four major IMS of breast cancer have been identified: Luminal A, Luminal B, HER2-enriched and Basal-like. A less common molecular subtype called Claudin-low has been characterized at a later time point (Prat et al., 2010). Stratified IMS groups present critical differences in incidence, survival and response to treatment, and most importantly add prognostic information that is not provided by classical stratifications, like estrogen receptor status, histologic grade, tumor size, and node status (Parker et al., 2009).

Recent breakthroughs in the field of cancer immunotherapy and especially the application of checkpoint blockade inhibitors has ignited a fierce drive to understand the genetic basis for the huge differences observed between patients with different immune phenotypes. Several papers have shown that expression profiles are able to distinguish between those patients that have an active immune environment and those that do not (Galon et al., 2013; Herbst et al., 2014; Ji et al., 2012; Ribas et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2013). A clear correlation can be seen both regarding prognosis (survival) and prediction of therapeutic effectiveness of immune regulatory therapies. The expression of genes observed in association with tissue-specific destruction in a broader context, defined as the immunological constant of rejection (ICR), can distinguish between breast cancer patients with different prognosis. This immunological classification is based on the consensus clustering of ICR genes (Galon et al., 2013), e.g. genes underlying Th1 polarization, related chemokines, adhesion molecules and cytokotoxic factors, in combination with immune regulatory genes IDO1 and FOXP3, PDCD1, CTLA4 and CD274/PD-L1 (Figure 1A) (Bedognetti et al., 2015). In Miller et al. (2016), a novel survival-based immune classification system was devised for breast cancer based on the relative expression of immune gene signatures that reflect different effector immune cell subpopulations, namely antibody-producing plasma B cells (the B/P metagene), cytotoxic T and/or NK cells (the T/NK metagene), and antigen-presenting myeloid/dendritic cells (the M/D metagene). The system defines a tumor’s immune subclass based on its survival-associated immunogenic disposition status (IDS), which discriminates between poor immunogenic disposition (PID), weak immunogenic disposition (WID) and favorable immunogenic disposition (FID). The ability of IDS to distinguish patients with differential prognosis is dependent on the tumor’s immune benefit status (IBS), which is defined by IMS and the expression of cell proliferation markers. The IBS classification segregates immune benefit-enabled (IBE) and immune benefit-disabled (IBD) tumors. In IBE tumors, but not IBD tumors, FID status confers a protective survival benefit compared to WID and PID status (Figure 1B) (Miller et al., 2016; Nagalla et al., 2013). In this data note, we demonstrate the use of GXB to evaluate cancer gene expression across immunologic classifications of breast cancer.

Since the amount of possible datasets to be included in GXB is enormous, we chose to start with the GEO datasets underlying the immunologically classified breast cancer datasets by (Miller et al., 2016). In Hendrickx et al. (2017), these same datasets were classified according to ICR. This will allow us to share our immune related classifications in a comprehensible way and allow others to reuse them. A harmonization effort of the other available clinical data had been undertaken and should help the downstream analysis of the expression data. Therefore, gathering these datasets with their detailed study and sample information will facilitate the identification of clinically-relevant genetic signatures for biomarker and/or therapeutic purposes.

In this data note, using GXB, we have made available a curated compendium of 13 public datasets relevant to human breast cancer, representing a total of 2142 cases.
Figure 1. Basis of ICR and IDS/IBS classifications and prognostic value. (A) Consensus clustering based on ICR genes segregates breast cancer patient in four different groups: ICR1, 2, 3 and 4. Patients with tumors categorized as ICR4 have the highest expression of the ICR gene signature and have a better prognosis compared with other ICR groups. (B) Immune metagene model based on the relative expression of immune metagenes (B/P, T/NK and M/D) distinguishes PID, WID and FID tumors (horizontal axis: genes, vertical axis: individual cases). This classification has prognostic value in IBE tumors, and not in IBD tumors. Diagrams are based on Hendrickx et al., 2017 (A) and Miller et al., 2016 (B). ICR, Immunologic Constant of Rejection; IBE/D, Immune Benefit Enabled OR Disabled; F/P/WID, Favorable OR Poor OR Weak Immune Disposition.

Methods
Selection of breast cancer datasets
The starting point of our selection of breast cancer datasets are the patient cohorts included in the multi-study breast cancer database described by Nagalla et al. (2013). These 13 NCBI GEO datasets (GEO accession numbers: GSE45255, GSE2034, GSE5327, GSE12093, GSE9195, GSE11121, GSE1456, GSE2603, GSE6532, GSE7390, GSE7378 and GSE4922) resulted in 2142 cases initially uploaded in GXB. 22 of these cases reflect data from breast cancer cell lines and were therefore excluded from our data.
collection. A total of 1839 cases represent primary invasive breast
tumors sampled at the time of surgical resection without prior
neoadjuvant treatment and were therefore annotated with survival
data, IMS, IBS, IDS and ICR status (Hendrickx et al., 2017; Miller
et al., 2016). 281 of the cases did not fulfill these criteria and were
therefore not annotated. Of note, 115 cases of original meta-cohort
used Nagalla’s study (n=1954) were not shared within GEO, but
shared within other platforms (caArray and ArrayExpress). For this
reason, these samples were not included in our GXB collection
(Figure 2).

The datasets that comprise our collection are listed in Table 1 and
can be searched interactively in GXB. All GEO datasets consist of
unique cases with the exception for 36 cases from NUH Singapore,
which are both present in the Bordet Radcliff NUH (GSE45255)
dataset and the Uppsala and Singapore (GSE4922) dataset.

Data of the 1839 GEO-cases annotated with survival data that were
previously combined and used in the Nagalla study, have been
uploaded to GXB in the dataset “Nagalla 2013 reconstituted public
dataset”.

Dataset upload into GXB
All datasets were downloaded from NCBI GEO in SOFT file
format and were uploaded into GXB with the exception of the
Guy’s hospital dataset (GUYT2; GSE9195). Expression data in the
SOFT file of this dataset was expressed as fold change. Therefore,
we had to revert to reprocessing of the CEL files found attached
to the GSE on GEO. In this case, the cell files were read into
R (v3.2.2) using the ‘affy’ package (v1.50.0). Data was normalized
using the RMA (Robust multichip averaging) and gene annotation
data was added using the hgu133plus2.db package (v3.2.3).

GSE records containing data generated with different or multiple
platforms have been split by platform using the import process of
GXB. GSEs containing data from both clinical as in vitro origin
(GSE2603) have been split manually using the GXB Graphical
interface.

Metadata of the different studies was added to GXB both from
the descriptive information found on GEO or from the method
sections of the publications linked to these datasets. Short links to
PMID (Pubmed) and GEO records were added.

Construction of the Nagalla’s dataset
The constitution of the complete cohort has previously been
described by (Nagalla et al., 2013). The dataset “Nagalla 2013
reconstituted public dataset” available in GXB contains only
the samples that were publicly available via GEO. Briefly, raw
data (CEL files) were extracted from GEO. The array platforms
employed for these 13 datasets were Affymetrix U133A, U133A2,
and U133 PLUS 2.0 gene chips; the 22,268 probe sets present in
each of these platforms were included in the gene expression file.
Data were MAS5.0 normalized using the justMAS function in the
simpleaffly library from Bioconductor (Gentleman et al., 2004)
using a trimmed mean target intensity of 600 without background
correction. COMBAT empirical Bayes method was used to correct
for batch effects (Johnson et al., 2007).

Figure 2. Schematic representation of dataset selection and annotation. Breast cancer cases included in 13 NCBI GEO datasets were
uploaded in GXB (n=2142). 22 cases described data from breast cell lines and were excluded from our data collection. We annotated 1839
cases with survival data, IMS, IBS, IDS and ICR status. 281 cases were either neoadjuvant treated, did not represent a primary invasive
tumor, were not sampled at the time of surgical resection without available survival data and were therefore not annotated. The total collection
includes 1839 cases from the original cohort described in Nagalla et al. (2013) (n=1954). Of note, 115 cases of this cohort are not included
in our collection as these were not shared via GEO. *251/1839 cases have been classified for IMS “Normal-like”. IDS is not applicable for
normal-like breast cancer tissue; therefore, IDS is non-classified for these samples. DMFS, Distant Metastasis Free Survival; GXB, Gene
Expression Browser; IMS, intrinsic molecular subtype; IBS, immune benefit status; IDS, immune disposition status; ICR, immunologic constant
of rejection.
Clinical data annotation

Gene expression data is accompanied with clinical data in CSV file format. Gene expression data and clinical data are coupled to the sample via variable “Sample ID”. We annotated a total of 1839 cases with 10-year survival (time and event), IBS (IBE, IBD), IDS (PID, WID and FID) (Miller et al., 2016) and ICR (ICR1, ICR2, ICR3 and ICR4) immune classifications (Hendrickx et al., 2017) (Figure 2). IMS (i.e., Basal-like, HER2-enriched, Luminal A and Luminal B) were defined using the Single Sample Predictor (SSP) algorithm by Hu (Hu et al., 2006) utilized by (Fan et al., 2006). Claudin-low tumors were identified using the method of (Prat et al., 2010). Of the 1839 samples, 251 samples were “Normal-like” in IMS classification. Therefore, these samples are not classified according to IDS. For the separate dataset containing samples of in vitro origin (GSE2603), survival annotations and immune classifications are not applicable. A final 281 cases were not annotated and non-classified, since for these cases either samples were not taken at the time of surgical resection, were neoadjuvant-treated or cases were not annotated with distant metastasis free survival (DMFS) time and event.

To enable comparisons between datasets and to facilitate efficient data analysis, the clinical data was harmonized to reflect a nomenclature similar to that of The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA).
Clinical variable names and availability in datasets are listed in Table 2. In general, variable values have been replaced by descriptive values (e.g. “1” and “0” are replaced by “ER+” and “ER-”, respectively). For disease free survival, variable values have been adapted to “DistantFree” or “Recurred/Progressed”, and for distant metastasis survival to “DistantMetastasisFree” and “DistantMetastasis”. Numeric values of variable “tumor size” have been converted to units in cm for all datasets. This variable was used to generate the additional variable pathology T stage according to the 7th edition of the AJCC staging system for breast cancer (Edge & Compton, 2010). For tumors with a diameter larger than 5 cm, pathology T stage could be either T3 or T4, therefore value “T3/T4” has been assigned to these cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clinical variable</th>
<th>Available in N datasets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDS</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICR</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMFS 10Y EVENT</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMFS 10Y TIME</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease free survival event</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease free survival time</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant metastasis free survival event</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant metastasis free survival time</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at initial pathologic diagnosis</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymph node status</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ER status</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR status</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histology differentiation grade</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumor size</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathology T Stage</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type treatment, bone metastasis event, bone metastasis free survival time, breast cancer cause of death, HER2 status, histologic diagnosis, lung metastasis event, lung metastasis free survival time, lung metastasis gene expression signature status, vital status, angio invasion indicator, disease specific survival time, genetic grade signature status sws classifier, GGI indicator, lymph nodes examined count, number of lymph nodes positive, lymphocyte infiltration, molecular subtype, NPI, overall survival, p53 mutation status, probability by sws classifier, RFS 5Y EVENT, risk AOL indicator, risk NPI indicator, risk SG, risk veridepix indicator, tissue type, van’t Veer signature, <2

Group sets for IBS/IDS, ICR cluster, Lymph Node (LN) Status, IMS, Histological grade, stage and Estrogen Receptor (ER) status were defined with matching differential gene expression rank lists. Rank lists are based on differential gene expression between two relevant groups for each group set: IBD-FID vs IBE-FID (IBS/IDS); ICR1 vs ICR4 (ICR1/ICR4); LN+ vs LN- (LN status); G1 vs G3 (histological grade); ER+ vs ER- (ER status). For IMS, no rank list was generated, as this variable is not ordered. For tumor stage, no rank list was generated because the spread of samples between categories was small.

**Dataset demonstration**

**Utilization of GXB**

The GXB software has been described in detail in a recent publication (Speake et al., 2015). This custom software interface provides users with a means to easily navigate and filter the dataset collection available at http://breastcancer.gxbsidra.org/dm3/landing.gsp. A web tutorial is also available online: http://breastcancer.gxbsidra.org/dm3/tutorials.gsp#gxbtut.

**Example case: Expression of HLA-G across ICR groups**

In GXB, users can search interactively for a specific gene of interest. Differential expression across different group sets can be observed in the graphical interface, either in bar or box plots. For illustrative purposes, we choose to evaluate the abundance of the HLA-G transcripts across ICR groups.

HLA-G is a non-classical class I gene of human Major Histocompatibility Complex that is primarily expressed on fetal derived placental cells (Ellis et al., 1990). In contrast to its classical counterparts, HLA-G does not initiate immune responses, but instead has immunosuppressive effects (Naji et al., 2014; Rouas-Freiss et al., 1997). Expression of HLA-G has been reported in a variety of cancers, including breast cancer, and has been assigned a role in tumor immune escape (Naji et al., 2014; Rouas-Freiss et al., 1997; Swets et al., 2016; Zeestraten et al., 2014).

Concerning its role in tumor immunity, it may be of interest to investigate whether HLA-G expression is elevated in breast tumors of specific immune phenotypes. The ICR gene signature segregates breast tumors into four immune phenotype groups based on the expression of genes underlying immune-mediated tissue-specific destruction, with ICR1 having the lowest and ICR4 the highest expression of this signature (Bedognetti D et al., in press).
To compare HLA-G expression across ICR groups using the breast cancer datasets uploaded to GXB, we start by selecting one of the datasets. After opening this dataset: 1) the gene of interest, HLA-G, can be identified using the search box in the upper left corner of the user interface. Upon selection of “HLA-G” in the left panel, the central panel displays the expression values of this gene for all samples as a bar chart. 2) Sample grouping is default as “All sample”, it is changed by selecting “Immunologic Constant of Rejection” and 3) plot type is set to “Box Plot” in drop down menus in the central panel. The central panel now presents a graphical display of the observed abundance of HLA-G transcripts in breast cancer samples across the different ICR groups, each sample is represented by a single point in a boxplot (Figure 3A). A tendency of increased HLA-G expression in groups with the highest expression of ICR genes can be observed. 4) To verify whether this trend can also be observed in other breast cancer datasets, GXB’s “Cross Project View” is used. By selecting “Cross Project View” in the “Tools” drop-down menu located in the top right corner of the user interface, a list of available datasets/projects appears in the left pane. By consecutive selection of single datasets, box plots with HLA-G transcripts across ICR groups are displayed for each individual dataset.

**Figure 3.** Illustrative example of abundance of HLA-G transcripts across ICR groups in multiple breast cancer datasets in GXB.  
(A) Cross Project View in GXB showing HLA-G expression across ICR groups. ICR represents the immune gene signatures observed in association with tissue-specific destruction. In this view of GXB, expression of HLA-G can be visualized across projects listed on the left.  
(B) Boxplots of HLA-G expression across ICR groups of three additional representative datasets selected from the dataset collection and the complete dataset including all annotated cases (right bottom plot). Plots indicate an increased HLA-G expression in breast tumors with a high expression of ICR genes. ICR, Immunologic Constant of Rejection.
Each of the boxplots corresponding to the 13 datasets show a similar pattern, indicating an increased HLA-G expression in breast tumors with a high expression of ICR genes (representative plots are shown in Figure 3B). In the combined dataset containing the total of 1839 annotated cases from these datasets, this trend is also observed (Figure 3B). From a biological perspective, increased expression of an immunosuppressant in an immunologically active tumor would be in line with our current view of the tumor microenvironment. Pro-inflammatory tumor environments, as observed in ICR4 tumors, also show counter regulatory mechanisms to suppress the immune system (Bedognetti et al., 2015; Galon et al., 2013).

This observation made by exploring transcriptome data in GXB provides an interesting starting point for further analysis. Statistical analysis of this potential association is required and, of course, the clinical relevance of the observed difference in abundance of transcripts should be determined. Most importantly, the functional relevance of HLA-G expression depends on its interaction with inhibitory receptors including ILT2, ILT4 and KIR2DL4 (LeMaoult et al., 2005). Therefore, combined analysis of both HLA-G and these inhibitory receptors is suggested in future analyses.

This example illustrates the convenience of exploring gene expression data in GXB. The browser facilitates intuitive navigation and visualization of gene expression across different group sets.

Differential gene expression between IBS/IDS subgroups

The breast cancer datasets uploaded in GXB are provided with a rich context of immune classifications and clinical parameters. As opposed to start a search with a specific gene of interest, as presented in the HLA-G example case, differential gene expression between groups of interest can be explored in GXB by evaluation of gene rank lists. Here, we demonstrate the use of GXB to explore differential gene expression across IBS/IDS groups.

The IDS group set is based on an immune metagene model segregating breast tumors in groups of different immunogenic dispositions: PID, WID and FID (Nagalla et al., 2013). The prognostic value of this classification is dependent on the molecular subtype and the proliferative capacity of the tumor, hereby segregating tumors in IBE and IBD groups, with and without prognostic value of the IDS, respectively. Since the hypothesis is that IBE-FID tumors confer metastasis-protective potential and IBD-FID tumors do not, transcriptional differences between these specific subgroups are of particular interest and have systematically been analyzed by Miller et al. (2016).

The Nagalla 2013 reconstituted dataset containing all annotated cases of this GXB breast cancer instance (n=1839) is used to explore differential gene expression between IBE-FID and IBD-FID tumors in GXB. Group set “Immune Benefit Status” is selected and corresponding gene rank list “IBD-FID vs IBE-FID” will load in the left panel by default. Filtering for specific immune gene categories, e.g. cytokine and chemokine ligands, cytokine and chemokine receptors, B and T cell signaling, and antigen presenting cell processing, is possible by selecting gene list category in the rank list menu. Exploring the expression of genes with known roles in tumor immunology reveals two important observations: 1) markers of immune cell infiltration, including CD8, CD3, CD19 and CD2, show similar expression in IBD-FID and IBE-FID subgroups (Figure 4A); while (2) markers of immune functional orientation, including CXCL10 (tissue rejection chemokine), GZMB (cytotoxic effector molecule), INFg and STAT1, show differential expression across IBD-FID and IBE-FID groups (Figure 4B). A comprehensive statistical analysis of expression of these and other immune-related genes confirmed these observations, suggesting that while the composition of the immune infiltrate is similar in these tumors, the functional molecular orientation determines the metastasis-protective phenotype (Miller et al., 2016).

This demonstration indicates that GXB allows for easy and efficient visualization of differential gene expression between subgroups. Subsequently, elaborate statistical analysis is required to confirm the differences in gene expression observed in GXB.

Overview of breast cancer immune classifications in GXB

Since this GXB data collection is provided with multiple immune classifications of breast cancer, it is interesting to visualize the relationship between these classifications in GXB. The overlay feature in GXB can be used to visualize the assignment of different classifications to individual samples simultaneously.

To illustrate this overlay option, we choose to select the Erasmus Medical Center dataset 2 (EMC2) with CXCL9 expression, as this is one of the chemokines included in the ICR gene signature. Graphical representation in GXB is set to bar plot and group set ICR is selected. As anticipated, the CXCL9 expression gradually increases from ICR1-ICR4. The drop down menu “Overlays” is used to add multiple layers of additional variables, “IBS”, “IDS” and “IMS”. Boxes underneath the individual bars (each bar represents a single case) display the assigned classifications (Figure 5A). When comparing IBS classifications across ICR groups, it is evident that IBE tumors are frequently assigned to the higher ICR clusters, ICR3 and ICR4, while IBD tumors tend to concentrate to the clusters with a low expression of the ICR signature (ICR1, ICR2) (Figure 5A). This result is consistent with our previous observations: pathways that distinguish IBE and IBD are associated with the immune functional orientation of the tumor, and genes in these same pathways are crucial components of the ICR signature (Bedognetti et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2016).

IDS relates to the ICR classification in a similar manner. FID tumors are mostly assigned to ICR4, while WID tumors are frequently classified to intermediate clusters (ICR2 and ICR3), and PID tumors prevail in the ICR1 cluster (Figure 5A). This observation is also in line with our expectations, the IDS classification is based on an immune metagene model that relies on immune gene
Figure 4. GXB overview of expression of genes with known roles in tumor immunology across IBS/IDS subgroups in reconstituted Nagalla’s breast cancer dataset. (A) Expression values of CD8 and CD19, indicators of immune cell infiltration, are similar in IBD-FID and IBE-FID groups, indicating equal immune cell infiltration in these subgroups. (B) Expression values of CXCL10, GNZB, IFNG and STAT1, markers of immune functional orientation, are increased in the IBE-FID group compared with IBD-FID, indicating a differential functional orientation of the immune infiltrate between IBD-FID and IBE-FID tumors. IBE/D, Immune Benefit Enabled OR Disabled; F/P/WID, Favorable OR Poor OR Weak Immune Disposition.

subclusters that reflect the relative abundance of tumor-infiltrating immune cells (Nagalla et al., 2013). As markers of immune cell infiltration are also included in the ICR signature, IDS is closely associated with ICR.

For a more comprehensive overview of the relationship between different immune classifications in breast cancer, the overlay of immune classifications was evaluated in the Nagalla 2013 reconstituted public dataset (n=1839). The observations made in the EMC2 dataset (n=58; Figure 5A) are also apparent in the dataset containing all annotated cases of this GXB breast cancer instance (Figure 5B). Moreover, in this dataset it is clearly visible that IBS/IDS subgroups with an improved prognosis are more prevalent in the ICR4 cluster. For example, IBE-FID tumors are relatively more frequently assigned to ICR4 compared with IBD-FID. Vice versa, IBD-PID tumors are proportionally more frequently observed in the ICR1 cluster compared with IBE-PID tumors, which are in comparison more frequently assigned to ICR2 ICR3.

The overlay of the different immune classifications demonstrates a coherency between the IBS/IDS classification and the ICR clusters. Bearing in mind that the ICR signature is associated with a broader phenomenon of immune-mediated, tissue-specific destruction, this coherency strengthens the hypothesis of a common final pathway of tissue destruction.
Figure 5. Overlay of immunologic classifications in breast cancer as evaluated in GXB. (A) Bar graph showing CXCL9 expression in individual samples from Erasmus Medical Center (EMC) dataset 2 split by ICR (single bar represents single case). Overlay of additional variables IBS, IDS and IMS is shown (http://breastcancer.gxbsidra.org/dm3/miniURL/view/Lv). (B) Frequency plot showing number of breast cancer cases across IBS/IDS subgroups split by ICR cluster. ICR, Immunologic Constant of Rejection; IBE/D, Immune Benefit Enabled OR Disabled; F/P/WID, Favorable OR Poor OR Weak Immune Disposition.
Conclusions

In this data note, we highlighted the opportunities provided by the availability of public datasets. We uploaded 13 public datasets on human breast cancer, including a combined dataset, with harmonized clinical data annotation and immune classification to GXB to facilitate the reuse of gene expression data. The use of GXB to explore gene expression and the different possible approaches were illustrated by the following: (1) an example case of a specific gene of interest, HLA-G; (2) comparison of gene expression between specific subgroups, IBD-FID vs IBE-FID; and (3) the evaluation of the relationship between different categorical variables, IBS/IDS and ICR immune classifications. To conclude, GXB provides a convenient environment to explore gene expression profiles in the context of breast cancer.

Data availability

All datasets included in our curated collection are available publicly via the NCBI GEO website: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/, and are referenced throughout the manuscript by their GEO accession numbers (e.g. GSE7390). Signal files and sample description files can also be downloaded from the GXB tool under the “downloads” tab.

Author contributions

JR: curated, uploaded and annotated datasets, interpreted the data and drafted the manuscript and accepted final version. JD: critically reviewed the datasets annotation, drafted the manuscript and accepted final version. SBo: installed the software, uploaded datasets, programmed portions of the web application, tested the software, and assisted in drafting the manuscript. DR: critically reviewed gene expression data, sample annotation, drafted the manuscript and accepted final version. CM: reviewed manuscript and accepted final version. MC: technical support annotating datasets and accepted final version of manuscript. MB: assembled and curated datasets and accepted final version of manuscript. CP: assembled and curated datasets and accepted final version of manuscript. JC: assembled and curated datasets and accepted final version of manuscript. SP: participated in the design of the software, programmed portions of the original web application, installed the software, tested the software, assisted in drafting the manuscript and accepted final version. CQ: participated in design and programmed portions of the original web application, tested the software, assisted in drafting the manuscript and accepted final version. PJ: critically reviewed sample annotation and gene expression data and accepted final version of manuscript. NS: critically reviewed quality of gene expression data and accepted final version of manuscript. SBa: reviewed manuscript and accepted final version. SBe: reviewed manuscript and accepted final version. DC: participated in software and study design, tested the software, assisted in drafting the manuscript and accepted final version. EW, FM: critically reviewed the manuscript. PK: Interpreted the data, critically reviewed manuscript and accepted final version. LM: assembled and curated datasets, provided immunological attributes, interpreted the data, drafted the manuscript and accepted final version. DB: designed the study, provided immunological attributes, supervised the project, interpreted the data, drafted the manuscript and accepted final version. WH: coordinated the uploading and annotation of datasets, contributed to the study design, provided immunological attributes, interpreted the data, drafted the manuscript and accepted final version.

Competing interests

No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information

JD, SB, DR, DC, DB, WH received support from the Qatar Foundation. JR received support from Qatar National Research Fund (grant number: JRREP07-010-3-005).

The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge all the investigators who decided to make their datasets publicly available by sharing them in NCBI GEO.

References


Open Peer Review

Current Referee Status: ?

Version 1

Referee Report 24 July 2017
doi:10.5256/f1000research.11813.r24330

Benjamin Haibe-Kains
Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, University Health Network, Toronto, ON, Canada

In this manuscript, Roelands et al. describe the implementation of the gene expression browser (GXB), a database and web-application integrating 13 breast cancer datasets containing gene expression and clinical data for a total of almost 2000 patients. The authors focused their case studies on the investigation of immune-related genes and subtypes and made their curated data publicly available. I think GXB is a welcome contribution to the breast cancer research community and its public availability will help other scientists to leverage this valuable collection of datasets. However, I have several concerns that need to be addressed before indexing, as listed below.

The manuscript is well written and easy to understand.

Major comments

In Table 1 and on the front page of the web-application, Princess Margaret Cancer Centre is listed in the sample set name even though these data have not been generated in this institution, which is misleading.

When selecting "Breast Cancer", which I assumed contained the whole database, many datasets got filtered out, which is confusing.

I tried AURKA and selected GSE9195 as dataset. Then I played a bit with the barplot to overlay different kinds of information. I added DMFS 10Y (categorical) and sorted the patients based on this but there were some patients with very low DMFS at the beginning and the end of the plot, which is confusing.

Since the authors are dealing with survival data, I was expecting survival statistics and/or survival curves but I did not see any in GXB or the manuscript. Figure 1 is somehow misleading as these plots do not seem to be part of the web-application.

The authors decided to limit their database to Affymetrix data. In that case, I suggest the authors reprocess all the CEL files consistently using (f)RMA and up-to-date chip description files (CDF), such as BrainArray CDFs. This would increase the consistency across all the datasets.

Given the authors' large collection of datasets, mining each dataset separately is cumbersome. Implementing meta-analysis pipelines would help draw an overall conclusion before digging into dataset-specific results (e.g., Figure 3). This is what the authors seem to have done with the "Nagalla" dataset that is a compendium of all the datasets reprocessed using MAS5 and further corrected with
ComBat. It is not clear why the authors used MAS% to normalize the data in this case vs (f)RMA for some other datasets. Please clarify. Why not recommending users to first explore Nagallia before going after each dataset separately to detect trends that may be (in)consistent with the majority of the datasets?

There have been many molecular subtyping schemes published, including the Integrative Subtypes (IntClust; Curtis et al, Nature 2012), the Subtype Classification Models (SCMGENE, SCMOD1, SCMOD2; Haibe-Kains et al, JNCI 2012) and the Absolute Assignment of Breast Cancer Intrinsic Molecular Subtype (AIMS; Paquet et al, JNCI 2015). The authors should discuss the rationale for their choice of relying solely on PAM50.

**Minor comments**

Table 2 would be better represented as a barplot or a similar figure.

GXB would benefit from the inclusion of normal samples (from healthy patients or adjacent normal samples). METABRIC, TCGA and GTEx are relevant data sources for such gene expression profiles.

**Is the rationale for creating the dataset(s) clearly described?**
Yes

**Are the protocols appropriate and is the work technically sound?**
Yes

**Are sufficient details of methods and materials provided to allow replication by others?**
Partly

**Are the datasets clearly presented in a useable and accessible format?**
Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

I have read this submission. I believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 17 Sep 2017

Wouter Hendrickx, Sidra Medical and Research Center, Qatar

Answers are in Italic and bold

**Major comments**

In Table 1 and on the front page of the web-application, Princess Margaret Cancer Centre is listed in the sample set name even though these data have not been generated in this institution, which is misleading.

Names of datasets have been changed from “Princess Margaret Cancer Centre dataset - GSE6532.GPL96” and “Princess Margaret Cancer Centre dataset - GSE6532.GPL97”, to
“John Radcliff Hospital (OXFU, OXFT) dataset- GSE6532.GPL96” and “John Radcliff Hospital (OXFU, OXFT) dataset- GSE6532.GPL97” respectively. “Princess Margaret Cancer dataset- GSE6532.GPL570” was changed to “Guys hospital (GUYT) dataset- GSE6532.GPL570”. Tables and figures throughout the manuscript have been revised accordingly.

When selecting “Breast Cancer”, which I assumed contained the whole database, many datasets got filtered out, which is confusing.

Thank you for noticing this. Only a single disease type can be assigned per dataset. We can change ER+ and LN- datasets to disease type: Breast Cancer, effectively disabling the user to filter datasets based on ER+ and LN status. We preferred changing the name of Breast cancer (general) to “mixed breast cancer types” for clarity.

I tried AURKA and selected GSE9195 as dataset. Then I played a bit with the barplot to overlay different kinds of information. I added DMFS 10Y (categorical) and sorted the patients based on this but there were some patients with very low DMFS at the beginning and the end of the plot, which is confusing.

We were able to reproduce the barplot you described. By sorting by the categorical variable DMFS 10Y EVENT, you only sort based on this variable (DistantMetastasisFree or DistantMetastasis). The continuous counterpart of this variable (DMFS 10Y TIME) is not taken into account when you perform the sorting, explaining your observation. An alternative is to sort based on the continuous variable DMFS 10Y TIME, though this sorting results in a plot that mixes DistantMetastasisFree and DistantMetastasis categories. Unfortunately, subsequent sorting based on 2 variables is not possible using GXB. We have suggested this improvement to the GXB developing team.

Since the authors are dealing with survival data, I was expecting survival statistics and/or survival curves but I did not see any in GXB or the manuscript. Figure 1 is somehow misleading as these plots do not seem to be part of the web-application.

Survival statistics are not yet part of the GXB web-application. To prevent any misconception, we have added an extra sentence in the legend of figure 1: “This figure is for explanatory purposes only and does not serve as a demonstration of the GXB web application.”

The authors decided to limit their database to Affymetrix data. In that case, I suggest the authors reprocess all the CEL files consistently using (f)RMA and up-to-date chip description files (CDF), such as BrainArray CDFs. This would increase the consistency across all the datasets. The purpose of this data note is to share existing data from GEO in a more comprehensible format and does not involve any data processing. We had to make an exception for dataset GSE9195.GPL570, since only raw format was available on GEO.

Given the authors' large collection of datasets, mining each dataset separately is cumbersome. Implementing meta-analysis pipelines would help draw an overall conclusion before digging into dataset-specific results (e.g., Figure 3). This is what the authors seem to have done with the “Nagalla” dataset that is a compendium of all the datasets reprocessed using MAS5 and further corrected with ComBat. It is not clear why the authors used MAS5 to normalize the data in this case vs (f)RMA for some other datasets. Please clarify.

Normalization of the complete Nagalla cohort was previously performed as described in Nagalla et al. 2013 and Miller et al. 2016 To make this data available as published in this
article, we used the same data file to upload to GXB. Normalization is different between datasets because the data was transferred straight from GEO and different contributors use different methods depending on the times it was performed and the need of their specific work.

Why not recommending users to first explore Nagallia before going after each dataset separately to detect trends that may be (in)consistent with the majority of the datasets?

In this dataset collection, it is indeed possible to first explore the Nagalla dataset, which is a dataset that includes all samples from the collection. This advantage is specific for this breast cancer compendium of datasets, so your suggestion is a very good strategy to explore these datasets. We have added this recommendation in the text of the Dataset Demonstration section of the data note.

There have been many molecular subtyping schemes published, including the Integrative Subtypes (IntClust; Curtis et al, Nature 2012), the Subtype Classification Models (SCMGENE, SCMOD1, SCMOD2; Haibe-Kains et al, JNCI 2012) and the Absolute Assignment of Breast Cancer Intrinsic Molecular Subtype (AIMS; Paquet et al, JNCI 2015). The authors should discuss the rationale for their choice of relying solely on PAM50.

Categorization using the PAM50 molecular subtyping was performed as part of the research performed by Nagalla et al. 2013 and Miller et al. 2016. These annotated datasets were uploaded in GXB as described in this data note. The choice to rely on this 50-gene classifier was dependent on its high prognostic and predictive value of this subtyping method in combination with the high clinical applicability of PAM50 testing.

Minor comments

Table 2 would be better represented as a barplot or a similar figure. For the purpose of listing which clinical variables are available in how many datasets from the collection, we found a table the more appropriate option.

GXB would benefit from the inclusion of normal samples (from healthy patients or adjacent normal samples). METABRIC, TCGA and GTEx are relevant data sources for such gene expression profiles.

Comparing healthy control tissue with cancerous tissue on gene expression level indeed represents an interesting aspect that can be explored using the GXB browser. At this moment, different types of dataset collections have already been uploaded to GXB, including case versus control comparisons. For example, a dataset with gene expression of whole blood samples from both lung cancer patients and healthy controls and a dataset with head and neck cancer and cervical cancer tissue samples, matched with site-matched normal epithelial samples are currently available. The TCGA, METABRIC dataset and datasets in the GTEx portal are valuable resources that can be used to upload new datasets into GXB. We will definitely take this suggestion into consideration for our new dataset collection to upload into GXB.

Discussed changes will be applied in version 2 of the manuscript.
Competing Interests: none