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# In vivo Significance of the G<sub>2</sub> Restriction Point

Floris Fojjer, Elly Delzenne-Goette, Marleen Dekker, and Hein te Riele

Division of Molecular Biology, The Netherlands Cancer Institute, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

## Abstract

**Loss of activity of the retinoblastoma pathway is a common event in human cancer. Mouse models have revealed that tumorigenesis by loss of *Rb* was accelerated by concomitant loss of the cell cycle inhibitor *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*. This has been attributed to reduced apoptosis and weakening of the G<sub>1</sub> checkpoint. However, the role of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* in a recently identified G<sub>2</sub> restriction point may offer an alternative explanation for this synergy. Here, we have investigated the significance of the G<sub>2</sub> restriction point in *Rb*-deficient pituitaries. We show that *Rb* loss in the pituitary gland activated the G<sub>2</sub> restriction point, as evidenced by the appearance of cyclin B1-*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* complexes. Somewhat unexpectedly, these complexes remained present in *Rb*-deficient tumors. These results indicate that the G<sub>2</sub> restriction point does operate *in vivo*. However, in the pituitary gland, this mechanism seems to retard rather than to prevent tumor growth.** [Cancer Res 2007;67(19):9244–7]

## Introduction

The retinoblastoma gene family, which is composed of *Rb*, *p107* and *p130*, plays an essential role in regulating the cell cycle and is commonly affected in human cancer (1). Its gene products, the so-called pocket proteins, inhibit E2F transcription factors, whose activity stimulates DNA synthesis and cell cycle progression (2–5). Several forms of stress, such as DNA damage, high cell density, loss of anchorage or mitogenic signaling, or cell differentiation, result in arrest of cells in the G<sub>1</sub> phase of the cell cycle. This G<sub>1</sub> arrest is completely abrogated by ablation of the three pocket proteins (6, 7). However, pocket protein-deficient mouse embryonic fibroblasts (triple knockout, *TKO* MEF) do not completely lack cell cycle control. We recently found that mitogen starvation of *TKO* MEFs led to a robust arrest in the G<sub>2</sub> phase of the cell cycle (8). This arrest was associated with accumulation of the cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitors *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* and *p21<sup>CIP1</sup>* that became strong inhibitors of the mitotic cyclins A and B1 through direct interaction. G<sub>2</sub> arrest also significantly contributed to cell cycle arrest in mitogen-starved *Rb<sup>-/-</sup>* MEFs and became increasingly evident upon concomitant inactivation of *p107* or *p130* (8).

Monoallelic mutation of *Rb* in humans strongly predisposes to retinoblastoma, a tumor of the developing retina (9, 10). In mice, however, *Rb* hemizyosity led to tumors originating from the intermediate lobe of the pituitary gland with an average latency of 40 to 50 weeks. These tumors consistently showed loss of the wild-type *Rb* allele, thus emphasizing the critical role of *Rb* in pituitary tumor suppression (11, 12). Furthermore, in chimeric mice

composed of wild-type and *Rb<sup>-/-</sup>* cells or in mice engineered to inactivate *Rb* exclusively in the anterior and intermediate lobe of the pituitary gland, the latency time of tumor development was strongly reduced (12–14). Interestingly, concomitant loss of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* in *Rb* heterozygous animals accelerated tumor development to 20 weeks, and the tumors were more aggressive. Although the synergistic effect of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* and *Rb* loss has often been explained by progressive loss of G<sub>1</sub> control, the observed synergy may also suggest *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* and pRb to function in different pathways, which both need to be disrupted or attenuated for pituitary tumor growth. Indeed, we and others have recently identified a role for *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* in G<sub>2</sub> control that may provide an alternative explanation for the observed synergy (8, 15–17).

In this study, we show that loss of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* accelerated tumorigenesis in *Rb*-deficient pituitaries. In the presence of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*, loss of *Rb* resulted in an increase of cells arrested or delayed in the G<sub>2</sub> phase of the cell cycle and accumulation of cyclin B1-*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* complexes. However, by comparing the levels of cyclin B1-*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* complexes in tumors in mice of different ages, we did not find selection for loss of this interaction during tumor development. Therefore, *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* may decelerate rather than block the growth of *Rb*-deficient pituitary gland tumors.

## Materials and Methods

**Mouse strains.** *Rb<sup>f/f</sup>* mice (18) were bred with Oluc-Cre mice (19) to obtain Oluc-Cre *Rb<sup>f/f</sup>* mice. In addition, Oluc-Cre *Rb<sup>f/f</sup>* mice were bred with *p27<sup>KIP1</sup><sup>-/-</sup>* mice (20) to obtain Oluc-Cre *Rb<sup>f/f</sup>**p27<sup>KIP1</sup><sup>-/-</sup>* mice. All mice were in an FVB-129Ola mixed background.

**Histologic analysis.** Pituitary glands were removed immediately after euthanasia and fixed in 4% formaldehyde (Sigma) in PBS (Invitrogen-Life Technologies) for at least 24 h. For histologic analysis, formaldehyde-fixed pituitaries were embedded in paraffin, cut into 5- $\mu$ m sections, and stained with H&E.

**Fluorescence-activated cell sorting analysis.** Pituitary glands were removed immediately after euthanasia and homogenized to single-cell suspensions through mechanical disaggregation. Single-cell suspensions were fixed in 70% ethanol in PBS and stained for DNA content by propidium iodide. Cell cycle distributions were analyzed by fluorescence-activated cell sorting using “Cell Quest” software (BD Biosciences) and “FACS Express” software (De Novo Software).

**Immunoprecipitations, immunoblots, and antibodies.** Pituitary glands were removed immediately after euthanasia and homogenized to single-cell suspensions through mechanical disaggregation. Subsequently, cells were lysed for 30 min in ELB [150 mmol/L NaCl, 50 mmol/L HEPES (pH 7.5), 5 mmol/L EDTA, 0.1% NP40] containing protease inhibitors (Complete; Roche) and phosphatase inhibitors (5 mmol/L NaF, 0.5 mmol/L sodium vanadate, and 20 mmol/L  $\beta$ -glycerolphosphate). Protein concentrations were determined using the Bradford assay (Bio-Rad). For immunoprecipitations, 50  $\mu$ g of protein was incubated with 0.5  $\mu$ g of immobilized antibody overnight at 4°C while rotating. The antibodies used were mouse anti-*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* (BD Transduction Laboratories), tubulin- $\alpha$  (Sigma), rabbit polyclonal cyclin E (M20), mouse monoclonal CDK1 (17), rabbit polyclonal CDK4 (C22), rabbit polyclonal cyclin B1 (H433) and cyclin B1 (GNS1; Santa Cruz). Secondary antibodies used were horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-conjugated goat anti-mouse and HRP-conjugated goat anti-rabbit (Dako).

**Note:** Current address for F. Fojjer: Department of Systems Biology, Harvard Medical School, 200 Longwood Avenue, Boston, MA 02115.

**Requests for reprints:** Hein te Riele, Division of Molecular Biology, The Netherlands Cancer Institute, Plesmanlaan 121, 1066 CX, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Phone: 31-20-512-2084; Fax: 31-20-669-1383; E-mail: h.t.rielle@nki.nl.

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## Results

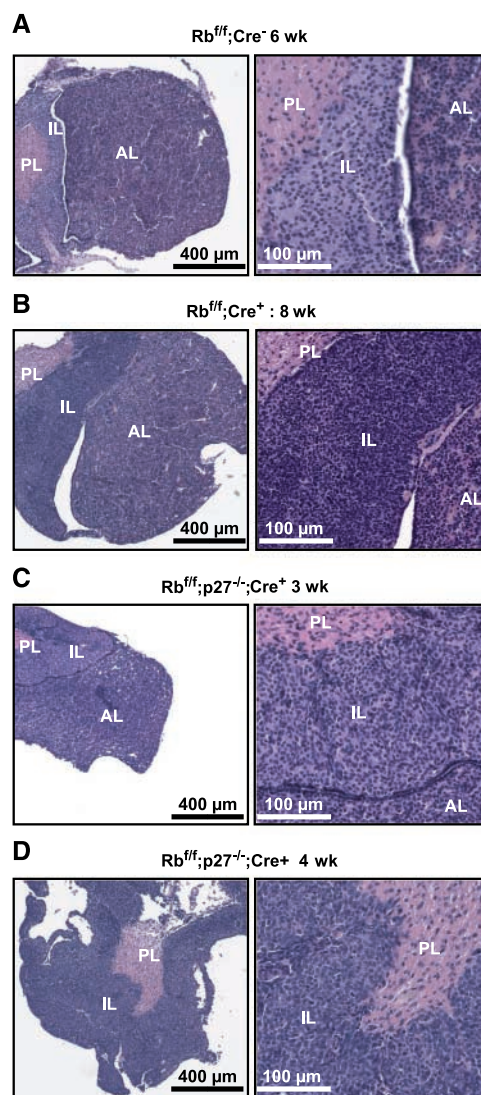
**Loss of p27<sup>KIP1</sup> accelerates pituitary tumorigenesis.** Both p27<sup>KIP1</sup><sup>-/-</sup> mice (20, 21) and *Rb* heterozygous mice (11, 12, 14, 22) developed tumors originating from the intermediate lobe of the pituitary gland. Furthermore, p27<sup>KIP1</sup> loss accelerated pituitary tumorigenesis in *Rb* heterozygous mice (23). We wondered whether this acceleration was (partly) caused by alleviation of the G<sub>2</sub> restriction point. To address this issue, we examined pituitary glands from p27<sup>KIP1</sup> wild-type or knockout mice in which floxed *Rb* alleles could be inactivated by a pituitary gland-specific (POMC) Cre recombinase (18, 19). Consistent with previous findings (12–14), we did not detect macroscopically visible abnormalities in *Rb*-deficient, p27<sup>KIP1</sup> wild-type pituitary glands up to 8 weeks of age (Table 1), although histologic analysis revealed that the intermediate lobe of *Rb*-deficient pituitaries was much enlarged at 8 weeks and showed higher cell density (Fig. 1, compare *B* and *A*). Concomitant loss of p27<sup>KIP1</sup> dramatically changed this phenotype, causing hyperplasia in the intermediate lobe within 3 weeks (Fig. 1C) and full-blown pituitary gland tumors at 4 weeks of age (Fig. 1D; Table 1). Thus, tumorigenesis in the pituitary gland, as a consequence of *Rb* loss, is delayed by activity of p27<sup>KIP1</sup>.

***Rb*-deficient pituitary glands show an increased G<sub>2</sub> population.** Next, we examined whether the delay of pituitary tumorigenesis by p27<sup>KIP1</sup> is caused by arrest of *Rb*-deficient pituitary cells in G<sub>2</sub>. Therefore, we homogenized *Rb*-proficient and *Rb*-deficient pituitaries and determined DNA content by flow cytometry. Figure 2A shows that the vast majority (~83%) of wild-type pituitary cells resided in the G<sub>1</sub> phase of the cell cycle. A similar profile was seen in p27<sup>KIP1</sup>-deficient pituitaries (Fig. 1C). Loss of *Rb* alone resulted in an 8% decrease of G<sub>1</sub> cells and an increase of G<sub>2</sub> cells from 12% to 21% (Fig. 2, compare *A* and *B*), indicative of a partial G<sub>2</sub> arrest. The number of S-phase cells was unaffected (4% in wild-type and 3% in *Rb*<sup>-/-</sup> pituitaries).

In contrast, in *Rb/p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*-deficient tumors, which arose at 4 weeks, the number of S-phase cells was increased up to 7%, whereas the number of G<sub>2</sub> cells was decreased (Fig. 2, compare *B* and *D*). These data suggest that *Rb* deficiency leads to increased G<sub>2</sub> arrest in the pituitary gland, which is alleviated upon concomitant loss of p27<sup>KIP1</sup>.

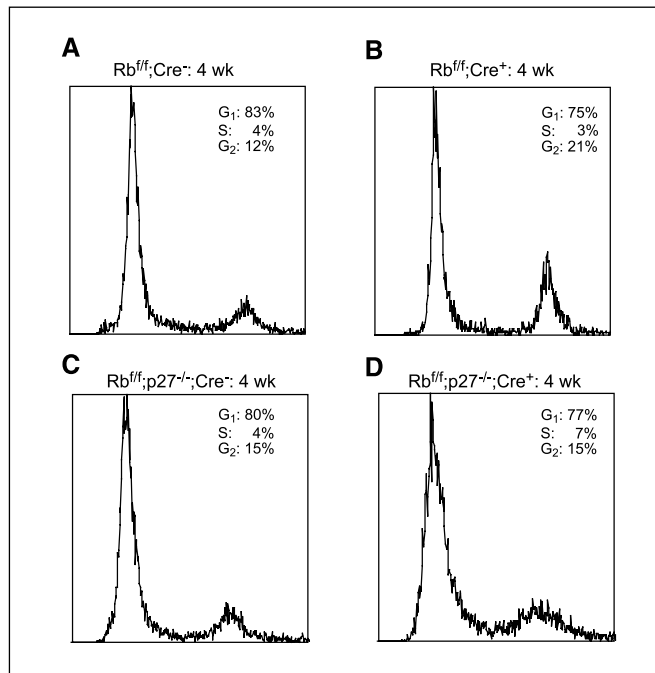
***Rb* deficiency in pituitary glands leads to accumulation of cell cycle proteins.** pRb is a well-established suppressor of E2F activity (1). Consequently, loss of *Rb* leads to activation of E2F and

Genotype	Age (wk)	Tumors
<i>Rb</i> <sup>fl/fl</sup> ; <i>Cre</i> <sup>-</sup>	3.5	0/8
	5	0/5
	8	0/3
	10	0/9
<i>Rb</i> <sup>fl/fl</sup> ; <i>Cre</i> <sup>+</sup>	3.5	0/9
	5	0/8
	8	0/3
<i>Rb</i> <sup>fl/fl</sup> ; p27 <sup>KIP1</sup> <sup>-/-</sup> ; <i>Cre</i> <sup>-</sup>	3	0/1
	4	0/1
	4	1/1 (enlarged)
<i>Rb</i> <sup>fl/fl</sup> ; p27 <sup>KIP1</sup> <sup>-/-</sup> ; <i>Cre</i> <sup>+</sup>	3	3/3
	4	3/3



**Figure 1.** Loss of p27<sup>KIP1</sup> accelerates pituitary gland tumorigenesis. Histologic slides showing control pituitary tissue at 6 wk (*A*), premalignant pituitary tissue of an Oluc-Cre *Rb*<sup>fl/fl</sup> mouse at 8 wk (*B*), premalignant pituitary tissue of an Oluc-Cre *Rb*<sup>fl/fl</sup>p27<sup>KIP1</sup><sup>-/-</sup> mouse at 3 wk (*C*), and an intermediate lobe pituitary tumor in a Oluc-Cre *Rb*<sup>fl/fl</sup>p27<sup>KIP1</sup><sup>-/-</sup> mouse at 4 wk (*D*). Magnification, 10× (*left*) and 40× (*right*).

increased transcription of E2F target genes *in vitro* (24). We wondered whether *Rb* loss in the pituitary gland similarly affected the expression of E2F target genes. Therefore, we compared the protein levels of the E2F targets *cyclin B1* and *cyclin E* in *Rb*-proficient and *Rb*-deficient pituitaries harvested at 4 and 8 weeks of age. Figure 3A shows that both *cyclin B1* (*top*) and *cyclin E* (*second row*) levels were strongly elevated in *Rb*-deficient pituitaries. Interestingly, cyclin accumulation coincided with increased p27<sup>KIP1</sup> levels (*third row*). Because we observed an increased number of G<sub>2</sub> cells in *Rb*-deficient pituitaries, and p27<sup>KIP1</sup> was shown to prevent G<sub>2</sub> progression through interaction with cyclin B1 (8, 15–17), we immunoprecipitated cyclin B1 from *Rb*-proficient and *Rb*-deficient pituitary glands harvested at 4 weeks of age, the stage at which we observed partial G<sub>2</sub> arrest. Consistent with the presence of



**Figure 2.** *Rb* deficiency leads to a partial G<sub>2</sub> arrest, which is abrogated upon concomitant loss of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*. Histograms showing cell cycle distributions of single-cell suspensions from pituitary glands of an *Rb<sup>fl/fl</sup>* mouse (A) and an Oluc-Cre *Rb<sup>fl/fl</sup>* mouse (B) at 4 wk and of an *Rb<sup>fl/fl</sup>p27<sup>KIP1</sup><sup>-/-</sup>* mouse (C) and an Oluc-Cre *Rb<sup>fl/fl</sup>p27<sup>KIP1</sup><sup>-/-</sup>* mouse (D) at 4 wk.

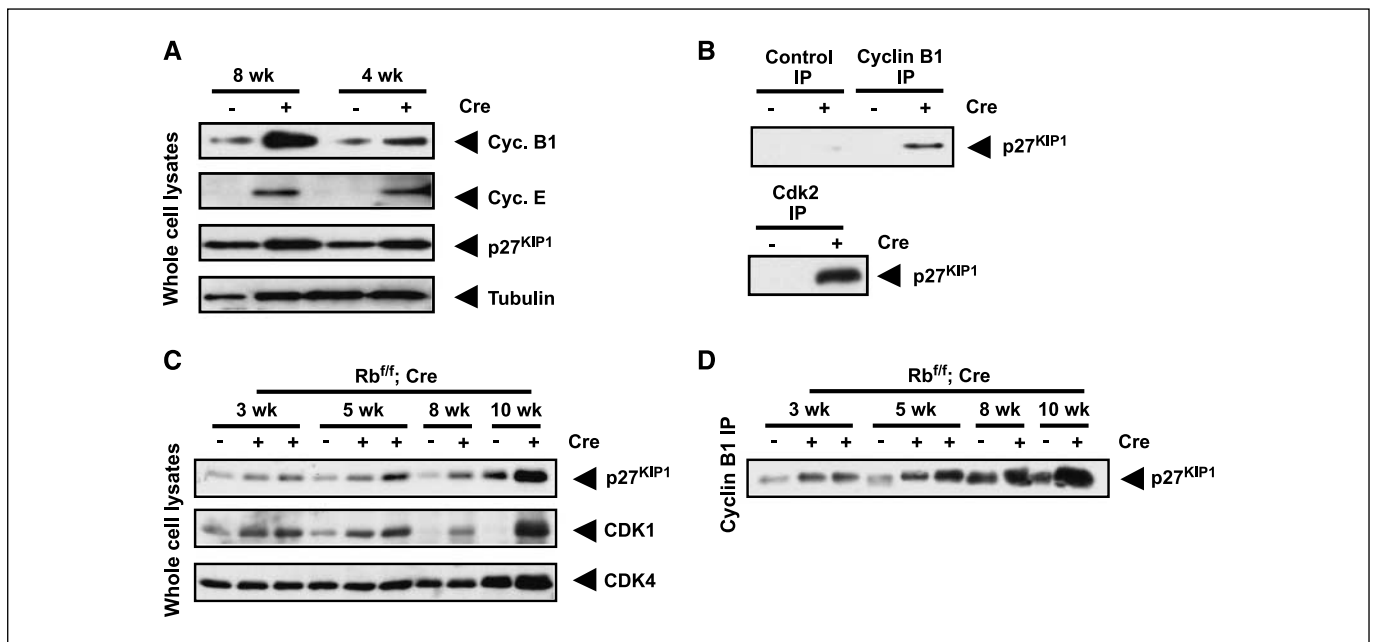
G<sub>2</sub>-arrested cells, we detected an interaction between cyclin B1 and *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* in *Rb*-deficient pituitaries (Fig. 3B, top). Additionally, we detected *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*-CDK2 complexes (Fig. 3B, bottom), which can be indicative for G<sub>1</sub> (25), but also G<sub>2</sub> arrest (8, 15–17).

These results suggest that *Rb* deficiency in the pituitary gland stimulates cell cycle progression by induction of the E2F targets cyclin B1 and E, which is counteracted by accumulation of the CKI *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*, resulting in G<sub>1</sub> and G<sub>2</sub> cell cycle arrest or delay.

**Cyclin B1–*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* interaction persists in tumors.** Because *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* loss accelerated pituitary tumorigenesis, we wondered whether *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*-mediated inhibition of cyclin B1 was attenuated or even abrogated during tumor progression. To address this issue, we first determined the levels of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* and CDK1, the latter as a measure for E2F activity. Figure 3C (middle) shows that loss of *Rb* led to increased levels of CDK1, both in normal pituitary glands (3 weeks) and in full-blown tumors (10 weeks). However, also *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* was increased in *Rb*-deficient pituitary glands at ages ranging from 3 to 10 weeks (Fig. 3C, top). Furthermore, when we immunoprecipitated cyclin B1 from *Rb*-deficient pituitaries, we found that the cyclin B1–*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* interaction, rather than disappearing, persisted or became even increasingly evident upon aging (Fig. 3D, compare 3, 5, 8, and 10 weeks). These data indicate that *Rb* loss resulted in E2F activation and stimulation of the cell cycle, but also in elevated *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* levels and cyclin B1–*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* interaction.

## Discussion

Our findings confirm that loss of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* strongly synergizes with loss of *Rb* in tumorous outgrowth of the pituitary gland. *Rb/p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*-deficient tumors arose earlier and grew more aggressively than *Rb*-deficient tumors. We have investigated here whether tumor development by loss of *Rb* alone was delayed by *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*-mediated G<sub>2</sub> arrest by a mechanism that we have previously described *in vitro* (8). Taken together, our findings indicate that the G<sub>2</sub> restriction point also operates *in vivo*: upon loss of *Rb* in the pituitary gland, the number of cells in G<sub>2</sub> increased, and this was accompanied by the appearance of cyclin B1–*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* complexes.



**Figure 3.** *Rb* loss leads to activation of several E2F targets that are involved in cell cycle progression and is associated with the formation of cyclin B1–*p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* complexes. A, Western blots showing levels of cyclin B1, cyclin E, and *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* in pituitary glands in the presence (–Cre) or absence (+Cre) of pRb. Tubulin functions as a loading control. B, immunoprecipitation of cyclin B1 (top) or CDK2 (bottom) from *Rb*-proficient and *Rb*-deficient pituitary glands probed for the presence of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>*. C, Western blots showing CDK1 and *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* levels in pituitaries of *Rb*-proficient and *Rb*-deficient mice at different ages. CDK4 functions as a loading control. D, immunoprecipitation of cyclin B1 from pituitaries of *Rb*-proficient and *Rb*-deficient mice probed for the presence of *p27<sup>KIP1</sup>* at different ages.

We have previously shown that this interaction inhibits cyclin B1-dependent kinase activity (8). The cyclin B1-p27<sup>KIP1</sup> interaction was induced upon loss of *Rb*, but strikingly, was not lost during tumor progression. We envisage that in *Rb*-deficient pituitary tumors, p27<sup>KIP1</sup> contributed to slower tumor growth by interacting with cyclin B1 and that within the time frame tumor development and behavior was followed, no selection occurred for loss of this interaction. We do realize that the contribution of the cyclin B1-p27<sup>KIP1</sup> interaction to slower tumor growth was only modest. Our earlier *in vitro* experiments have shown that the G<sub>2</sub> restriction point is particularly important in *TKO* cells that are devoid of all three pocket proteins. In the presence of one or two of the pocket proteins, the major mechanism of cell cycle control operated in G<sub>1</sub> whereas the contribution of G<sub>2</sub> arrest was less prominent. Thus, the presence of p107 and p130 and the interaction of p27<sup>KIP1</sup> and CDK2 (Fig. 3B) likely explain the modest level of G<sub>2</sub> cells in *Rb*-deficient pituitary glands. Furthermore, it should be noted that activation of the G<sub>2</sub> restriction point in pocket protein-deficient cells *in vitro*

only occurred in response to mitogen deprivation. It is therefore possible that inhibition of CDK2 and CDK1 by p27<sup>KIP1</sup> was confined to a subset of tumor cells that was deprived of mitogens and that only these cells were arrested in G<sub>1</sub> or G<sub>2</sub>. Alternatively, p27<sup>KIP1</sup> may have inhibited CDK activity in the majority of tumor cells but rather than imposing cell cycle arrest, this only caused a slower progression through the cell cycle. Either mechanism may explain that loss of p27<sup>KIP1</sup> strongly synergizes with loss of *Rb* in tumorigenesis and that loss of p27<sup>KIP1</sup> expression in human cancers is associated with poor prognosis (26, 27).

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