



## Research Paper

## Differential expression of neurogenesis-relevant genes in the peripheral blood lymphocytes of children with polymicrogyria

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Polymicrogyria (PMG), a complex malformation of cortical development, has to date no genetic or biological mechanism attributed. Fine tuning of neuronal proliferation, differentiation, and migration are pivotal in the development and gyrification of cerebral cortex. Several genes are associated with cortical folding and PMG. We compared the peripheral blood gene expressions of a panel of 31 PMG/cortical folding-associated genes between children with PMG and healthy control subjects in an effort to identify any peripheral markers of PMG. **Methods:** Twenty drug-naïve children with PMG and an equal number of age- and gender-matched healthy controls participated in the study. SYBR Green-based comparative Ct method was used to compare the expressions of 31 genes between the PMG and control groups. GAPDH was used as the reference gene.

**Results:** There was a significant difference in the expression of *TUBB2B* ( $p=0.005$ ), *GPSM2* ( $p=0.029$ ), *GMPPB* ( $p=0.019$ ), *IBA57* ( $p=0.012$ ), *NDE1* ( $p=0.005$ ), and *RAB3GAP2* ( $p=0.034$ ) among children with PMG when compared to the control subjects.

**Discussion:** These genes play crucial roles during neurogenesis and development of cerebral cortex. To the best of our knowledge this is the first study to examine the expressions of PMG-/cortical malformation-associated genes in the peripheral blood samples of children with PMG.

## Introduction

Polymicrogyria (PMG) is a complex malformation of cortical development in which the surface of the brain has more than the normal number of gyri which are small, and separated by shallow sulci [1]. PMG accounts for approximately 16% of cortical malformations [2]. While unilateral PMG is generally sporadic, bilateral generalized PMG is inherited as an autosomal recessive trait [3]. PMG is sometimes dichotomized as unilayered or four-layered based on the histopathology, or as focal or diffuse [4]. Considering the lobar topography, frontal PMG is the most common type, followed by perisylvian region, and parietal lobe [2].

PMG is a malformation of the developing brain, where the insult and the resultant alteration of the gyral-sulcal architecture is postulated to

occur late in the process of neuronal migration or early in the process of cortical organization [5]. Though often seen as the sole malformation, PMG may be seen associated with other brain malformations such as, corpus callosal agenesis, megalencephaly, nodular heterotopia or cerebellar hypoplasia [6]. Children with PMG, may present with seizures, developmental delay, hemiparesis, quadriplegia, intellectual disability or language delay [7].

In a population-based pediatric cohort, Kolbjør et al [2] reported a PMG prevalence of 2.3 per 10,000 children and an overall yearly incidence of 1.88. The factors reported to be leading to the development of PMG include, intrauterine cytomegalovirus infection [8], chromosomal aberrations [9], gene mutations [7], maternal drug ingestion [10], placental abruption [10], twin to twin transfusion [11], and intrauterine death of a twin [12].

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A genetic basis for PMG is supported by the occurrence of familial cases [13], and manifestation in patients with chromosomal aberrations/gene mutations [14], and genetically determined syndromes such as Walker-Warburg syndrome [15], Zellweger syndrome [16], and Aicardi syndrome [17]. In a genetic study of 109 patients with PMG, a confirmed genetic cause was present in one-third of the patients [2]. The biochemical, structural and endocrinological mechanisms that facilitate the gyral formation and folding of the human cerebral cortex has been the substrate of various neurobiological investigatory studies. The normal migration of neurons and their final organization into the six-layered cerebral cortex needs accurate regulation of neuronal proliferation, migration and synapse formation [18]. The process of cortical folding that occurs during embryonic development is crucial for the optimal functioning of the brain [19]. The highly patterned and safeguarded nature of cortical organization and folding indicate that it is genetically regulated.

Several genes have been reported to be associated with cortical folding and PMG [14]. Here, we compared the peripheral blood gene expression [messenger RNA (mRNA) levels] of a panel of 31 PMG/cortical folding-associated genes (Table 1) between children with PMG and healthy control subjects in an effort to identify any peripheral markers of PMG.

## Materials and methods

### Ethical statement

The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committees (IEC) of Government Medical College Thiruvananthapuram (GMCT; HEC No. 11/41/2019/MCT) and Institute for Communicative and Cognitive Neurosciences (ICCONS; IEC/IRB No. 001/IEC/2019/ICCONS-SRR), Shoranur. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents of

all of the participants.

### Subject recruitment

Twenty drug-naïve patients with PMG were recruited for the study (13 males and 7 females; mean age:  $5.7 \pm 0.8$  years). The diagnosis of PMG in clinically suspected cases was confirmed by a neurologist and a radiologist based on 1.5T or 3T magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). There were 14 cases of bilateral PMG and 6 cases of unilateral PMG. PMG was observed in the perisylvian region (n=9), temporal region (n=5), parietal region (n=4), fronto-parietal region (n=3), and superior temporal gyrus (n=2). Agenesis of corpus callosum was observed in five children with PMG. MRI findings indicated the presence of heterotopia in five patients.

Global developmental delay, assessed on the basis of Trivandrum Developmental Screening Chart [51], was observed in 16 children with PMG. Intellectual disability was observed in seven PMG patients, while seizures were noted in six. A delay in speech or a slow progression of speech development was noted in 11 patients. Hemiparesis was identified in three patients, while hemiplegia was observed in four patients. Two patients exhibited microcephaly, and an increased head size was recorded in one patient.

Sixteen patients reported no family history of neurological disorders, whereas three had family members with epilepsy, and one had a first cousin diagnosed with PMG. Among the 20 PMG patients, 17 were born to parents who were not biologically related, whereas third-degree consanguinity was noted in one set of parents, and distant consanguinity in two other sets of parents. The mother of one of the patients reported that she had experienced pregnancy-induced hypertension. There were no other notable prenatal or environmental insults, as reported by the parents, that could have influenced the development of the disease. Pre-term birth occurred in three patients. One of the patients

**Table 1**  
Genes and primers.

Genes	Forward primer sequence	Reverse primer sequence	Product size (bp)	Reference <sup>1</sup>
<i>ADGRG1</i>	CGACATGCTGGGAGATTACA	GGTGACAGAAGTGGCTAACA	138	[20]
<i>ASPM</i>	TGTCAGACCCAGCGAAATAG	GCCTCTCCATAATGCCTGAA	123	[21]
<i>COL18A1</i>	GGCTCGATTCTCCAGGATTT	CTGCTAACACGGTCTGGGTTT	116	[22]
<i>COL3A1</i>	CTGGCATTCCCTTCGACTTCT	AGCTTCAGGGCCTCTTTTAC	116	Jorgensen et al, 2014 [23]
<i>CPT2</i>	CGAGCTGACTGATGCCTAAA	TTCTTTGCCTCCTCTCTGAAAC	112	[24]
<i>DCHS1</i>	CCCAATTCCAGAGACTTTCTAC	GAATAGGAGAGGAGGCCAAATG	121	[25]
<i>DOCK6</i>	CGAGTTCTACGAGGAGTCAAG	AGCAGTGGGATCCAAGTAAAG	147	[26]
<i>DYNC1H1</i>	GCTCTCTCCAAAGCCATTA	CGTTCTCTTTCTCCCTCTTATC	117	[27]
<i>EML1</i>	CGGGTCATTCCAGCTTCATTA	TCCACACTACGACTTGCTTAC	127	[28]
<i>FLNA</i>	CCACCATGACAACACCTACA	GGAGATACTGCCACTGAGAAAG	120	[29]
<i>GMPPB</i>	GCCAGGGCTGTATGGAATAATA	CCTGCCTGTATCCTCATTGG	127	[30]
<i>GPSM2</i>	TGAGCAGCGTCTCCTTATTG	TGTAGTATTCGAGGAGGTTTC	122	[31]
<i>HSD17B4</i>	GGAGTTGGTAAAGGCTCCTTAG	CACAACCTTCTCTCTCTTCC	111	[32]
<i>IBA57</i>	GCTGTGGTCAGAGAAGATCAAG	TCCGACTACTGGAGACTGTAG	114	[33]
<i>LAGE3</i>	CAAGTTCTTGACCAGCTTTCC	CCTACAAGGAGAGCGCAAAGT	120	[34]
<i>LAMB1</i>	CTCTACAGACAGAAGCCGAAAG	GCCTCAAGAGACATCTGAAATA	133	[35]
<i>LAMC3</i>	CTGTCTGATTCCAGCTTCTC	CTCTGAACACCATCTCCATTAG	135	[36]
<i>NDE1</i>	TCCTTCTCACTCCTACTCTTT	CTAACAGCCTCAAAGGGACTTAT	134	[37]
<i>PAX6</i>	GTCCAACGGATGTGTGAGTAA	CCCGCTTATACTGGGCTATTT	134	[38]
<i>PEX1</i>	GGGTAATTGCACGAGAGAGTAG	TTGCAGCCTGTGCTCTAATAA	123	[39]
<i>PEX26</i>	GCAAGAGTTGGTGAGCAATAAG	CTGGGCGACGATACTACTAAAC	104	[40]
<i>PI4KA</i>	CTCCACTGCCTTTGACTACTT	GGCGGTCAGGTACTTCTTATC	133	[41]
<i>PIK3CA</i>	TCCTTCTCACTCCTACTCTTT	CTAACAGCCTCAAAGGGACTTAT	134	[42]
<i>PIK3R2</i>	CGCGAGTATGACCAGCTTTA	CAGGTATTCCITGCTGAGATTC	147	[43]
<i>POMGNT1</i>	AGGAGAGTACCTGGGAATCAT	GCCCTCAGGACAGTCAATAAA	125	[44]
<i>POMT1</i>	TCTCTGATGAGCACCTCCTT	CTACGCTGGCCTCTGAAATAC	112	[45]
<i>RAB3GAP2</i>	CCAGCTTAGCTGTGGATTTAG	GAATGGCCTTCTCTCTAAGTG	118	[46]
<i>RELN</i>	CTTGCTGGTGACAGGACTATAC	GGCTACCACACTGCACATAA	133	[47]
<i>TUBB2B</i>	AGAGTGGAGCCGGGAATAA	TCACAGCTCTCTGACTCCTT	103	[48]
<i>USP18</i>	CTAACTACCAGTGGCAGGAAAC	CGTAGATCCAGGAACGGAAATG	125	[49]
<i>WDR62</i>	GTTGGAGGTATCTCTGAGTTTG	TCCAAGTTCAGAAGCGAATG	101	[50]
<i>GAPDH</i> *	GACCACCTTTGCAAGCTCATTTC	CTCTCTCTCTTGTGCTCTTG	119	-

\* Reference gene

† PMG/cortical malformation-related

was born with arthrogryposis multiplex congenita.

Twenty age-and-gender-matched healthy control subjects (14 males and 6 females; mean age:  $6.8 \pm 0.9$  years) were also recruited for the study.

#### RNA extraction and cDNA synthesis

Two milliliters of peripheral blood samples were collected from the participants in EDTA vacutainer tubes. Total RNA was extracted from the whole blood samples using NucleoSpin RNA Blood, Midi kit (Macherey-Nagel, Duren, Germany) following the manufacturer's protocol. cDNA was synthesized from total RNA using PrimerScript RT Reagent Kit (Takara Bio, Shiga, Japan) following the manufacturer's protocol.

#### Quantitative PCR (qPCR) to examine gene expression (mRNA levels)

SYBR Green-based comparative Ct method ( $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$ ) was used to compare the expressions of 31 genes between the PMG and control groups. GAPDH was used as the reference gene. Table 1 gives the list of primers used in qPCR. The primers were designed using PrimerQuest Tool (<https://www.idtdna.com/PrimerQuest/Home/Index>).

TB Green Premix Ex Taq II (Tli RNase H Plus) (Takara Bio) was used for SYBR Green-qPCR. Each 10  $\mu$ l qPCR reaction consisted of 0.4  $\mu$ M each of the forward and reverse primers, 0.2X ROX Reference Dye, 1X TB Green Premix, and cDNA template. All of the qPCR reactions were performed in duplicate. QuantStudio 5 Real-Time PCR system (Applied Biosystems by Thermo Fisher Scientific, Singapore) was used for carrying out qPCR. The shuttle PCR standard protocol for qPCR was as follows. A hold stage of 95°C for 30 s was followed by 40 cycles of 95°C for 3 s, 60°C for 30 s, and a Melt Curve Stage.

Comparison of gene expression between the PMG and control groups was done by the  $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$  method of relative quantification.

#### Statistical analysis

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to assess the normality of data distribution. Any significant difference in the expression of various genes between the PMG and control groups was done by t-test for normally distributed data or by Mann-Whitney test for skewed data.

## Results

There was no significant difference in age (t-test  $p=0.367$ ) or gender distribution (Chi-square  $p=0.736$ ) between the PMG and control groups.

Among the 31 genes studied (Table 1), the expressions of nine genes (*ADGRG1*, *DOCK6*, *EML1*, *LAMB1*, *LAMC3*, *PAX6*, *PEX26*, *PIK3R2*, *RELN*) were not found in detectable levels in the peripheral blood cDNA, and were omitted from further analyses.

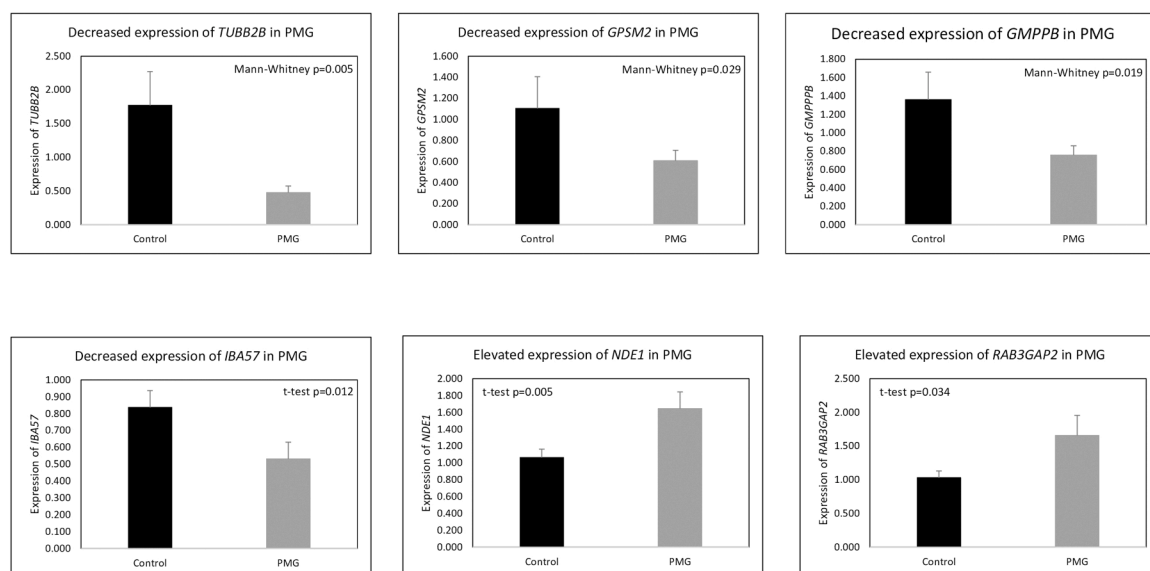
There was a significant difference in the expression of *TUBB2B*, *GPSM2*, *GMPPB*, *IBA57*, *NDE1*, and *RAB3GAP2* among children with PMG compared to control subjects. While the expressions of *TUBB2B* (Mann-Whitney  $p=0.005$ ), *GPSM2* (Mann-Whitney  $p=0.029$ ), *GMPPB* (Mann-Whitney  $p=0.019$ ), and *IBA57* (t-test  $p=0.012$ ) were decreased in the blood samples of children with PMG, the expressions of *NDE1* (t-test  $p=0.005$ ), and *RAB3GAP2* (t-test  $p=0.034$ ) were increased in the PMG group compared with the healthy controls (Fig. 1). There was no significant difference in the expressions of the other genes between the PMG and control groups.

## Discussion

To the best of our knowledge this is the first study to examine the gene expressions of PMG-/cortical malformation-associated genes in the peripheral blood samples of children with PMG. We observed decreased expressions of *TUBB2B*, *GPSM2*, *GMPPB* and *IBA57*, and increased expressions of *NDE1* and *RAB3GAP2* in the PMG group compared to healthy controls.

*TUBB2B* is a beta isoform of tubulin, and constitutes a major component of microtubules. The microtubules play a crucial role in neurogenesis, neuronal migration, neuronal differentiation, and cortical development [52]. Mutations in tubulin genes have been implicated in malformations of cortical development [53]. *TUBB2B* is mainly expressed in the developing neurons, and its expression undergoes a developmental transition [54]. Pathogenic variants in *TUBB2B* is associated with PMG, pachygyria, dysgyria, dysmorphic basal ganglia, corpus callosum dysgenesis, and cerebellar anomalies [55,56-57].

During early neurogenesis, *GPSM2* (G Protein Signaling Modulator 2) plays a major role in cell-fate determination in the cerebral cortex [58]. *GPSM2* mutations cause brain malformations such as, frontal PMG, agenesis of corpus callosum, and grey matter heterotopia in



**Fig. 1.** Differential expression of *TUBB2B*, *GPSM2*, *GMPPB*, *IBA57*, *NDE1*, and *RAB3GAP2* in the polymicrogyria (PMG) group compared with healthy controls. SYBR Green-based comparative Ct method was used to compare the gene expressions between PMG and control groups. GAPDH was used as the reference gene for normalization.  $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$  values are shown along the Y-axis.

Chudley-McCullough syndrome [31,59].

*GMPPB* encodes a cytoplasmic protein that catalyzes the synthesis of GDP-mannose from GTP and mannose-1-phosphate. The expression of *GMPPB* protein increases during brain and skeletal muscle development, implicating its role during the development and differentiation of neuronal and myogenic cells [60]. *GMPPB* is associated with a wide spectrum of muscular/neuromuscular disorders [61]. PMG, microcephaly, and cortical hypoplasia are reported in patients harboring bi-allelic mutations of *GMPPB* [30].

*IBA57* is a nuclear-encoded mitochondrial protein. The mitochondria play a vital role in the fine tuning of energy metabolism during neurogenesis [62]. *IBA57* mutations disrupt the iron-sulfur cluster assembly leading to cortical malformations including PMG, white matter abnormalities, hypoplasia of corpus callosum and medulla oblongata, cavitating leukoencephalopathy, microcephaly, cytotoxic edema of the cortex, and abnormal signal alterations in the brainstem and spinal cord [33,63].

*NDE1*, a key modulator of cytoplasmic dynein, is abundantly expressed in the neuroepithelial cells of the developing cerebral cortex, predominantly at the centrosome [64]. It protects the brain genome during the S phase of the initial differentiation of neural progenitor cells [65]. *NDE1* has an essential role in neurogenesis and cortical gyrification [66]. *NDE1* deficiency results in severe disruption of neurogenesis and defective cortical lamination [64]. Bi-allelic variations in *NDE1* cause extreme primary microcephaly with lissencephaly [67].

*RAB3GAP2*, which belongs to the *RAB3* protein family, is the regulatory subunit of Rab3 GTPase-activating complex. Members of the *RAB3* protein family are involved in the exocytosis of neurotransmitters [68]. Developmental expression studies in zebrafish have shown that *Rab3gap2* expression was restricted to the central nervous system, implicating its role in neurodevelopment [69]. *RAB3GAP* variants lead to Warburg Micro syndrome, characterized by congenital cataracts, absence of visually evoked potentials, microphthalmia, microcephaly, PMG, hypoplasia of corpus callosum, and severe developmental delay [46,70]. *RAB3GAP2* variants have been identified in Martsolf syndrome as well, characterized by postnatal microcephaly, moderate mental retardation, axial hypotonia and PMG [71].

The PMG patients included in this study have previously undergone whole exome sequencing (WES) during which clinically relevant pathogenic variants were identified in *ROSI* and *PIK3R2* genes in one patient each. The *TUBB2B* gene harboured a variant, c.743C>T (p.Ala248Val), which was found in five PMG patients. This variant has conflicting classifications of pathogenicity (benign, likely pathogenic) with a CADD-PHRED score of 25. Despite the absence of clinically pathogenic predictions, variants exhibiting CADD-PHRED scores >20 were identified in several other genes; however, such variants were observed in only one or two patients each [72].

Studies on the expression of all the aforementioned genes have highlighted their crucial role in early neurogenesis. Additionally, *TUBB2B*, *GMPPB*, and *NDE1* are abundantly expressed in the developing brain. BioGRID (<https://thebiogrid.org/>) has recognized *GMPPB* as a prominent interacting partner of *TUBB2B*, with a quantitative score (relative biotinylation score) of 1. Interestingly, we noted a significant positive correlation between the expressions of *TUBB2B* and *GMPPB* in our control subjects (Spearman's rho=0.468, p-value=0.04), but not in the PMG patients (Spearman's rho=-0.044, p-value=0.86). Although the precise onset time of PMG remains undetermined, it has been proposed to occur both early, due to abnormal proliferation and migration of neuroblasts, and late, due to impaired post-migrational maturation of the cortex. Given the available information, while it is challenging to provide a mechanistic explanation for the observed altered expression of *TUBB2B*, *GPSM2*, *GMPPB*, *IBA57*, *NDE1*, and *RAB3GAP2* in the peripheral blood of PMG patients, it can be inferred that the normal functions of these genes during neurodevelopment may be disrupted by their altered expression in PMG. Whether they operate within a shared molecular pathway is yet to be clarified.

## Limitation

A limitation of this study is the small sample size. Further, the gene expression was analyzed in blood samples. PMG, being a neurodevelopmental abnormality, the results need to be replicated in brain tissues. Even though the blood samples are non-invasive, easily accessible alternatives to brain samples, there is always the issue of whether they can serve as direct correlates of intricate brain dysfunctions. Another limitation of the study is that a heterogeneous group of PMG patients were recruited for the study. Due to the high clinical and etiological heterogeneity associated with PMG, interpreting the results can become challenging.

## Summary statement

We observed differential expression of neurogenesis-relevant genes (*TUBB2B*, *GPSM2*, *GMPPB*, *IBA57*, *NDE1*, *RAB3GAP2*) in the peripheral blood lymphocytes of children with PMG compared to healthy controls.

## Funding

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## Data availability statement

The data from this study are confidential, but may be obtained with proper Data Use Agreements with Institute for Communicative and Cognitive Neurosciences (ICCONS). Researchers interested in this data may contact Dr. Ayyappan Anitha at anitha.a72@gmail.com. It may take a few months to negotiate data sharing agreements. The corresponding author may be approached for assistance in replication attempts for two years following publication.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Mary Iype:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Mithran Omana Surendran:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Jesmy James:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Aadhira Raghu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Smriti Menon:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Arya K. S:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Gokul Babu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Rahul Kumminimana:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Ayyappan Anitha:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

No competing interests declared.

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of blood collection.

## Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.nexres.2026.101540](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nexres.2026.101540).

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