Regulation of spermatogonial stem cell self-renewal and spermatocyte meiosis by Sertoli cell signaling

Su-Ren Chen and Yi-Xun Liu

State Key Laboratory of Reproductive Biology, Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

Correspondence should be addressed to Y-X Liu; Email: liuyx@ioz.ac.cn

Abstract

Spermatogenesis is a continuous and productive process supported by the self-renewal and differentiation of spermatogonial stem cells (SSCs), which arise from undifferentiated precursors known as gonocytes and are strictly controlled in a special ‘niche’ microenvironment in the seminiferous tubules. Sertoli cells, the only somatic cell type in the tubules, directly interact with SSCs to control their proliferation and differentiation through the secretion of specific factors. Spermatocyte meiosis is another key step of spermatogenesis, which is regulated by Sertoli cells on the luminal side of the blood–testis barrier through paracrine signaling. In this review, we mainly focus on the role of Sertoli cells in the regulation of SSC self-renewal and spermatocyte meiosis, with particular emphasis on paracrine and endocrine-mediated signaling pathways. Sertoli cell growth factors, such as glial cell line-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF) and fibroblast growth factor 2 (FGF2), as well as Sertoli cell transcription factors, such as ETS variant 5 (ERM; also known as ETV5), nociceptin, neuregulin 1 (NRG1), and androgen receptor (AR), have been identified as the most important upstream factors that regulate SSC self-renewal and spermatocyte meiosis. Other transcription factors and signaling pathways (GDNF–RET–GFRA1 signaling, FGF2–MAP2K1 signaling, CXCL12–CXCR4 signaling, CCL9–CCR1 signaling, FSH–nociceptin/OPRL1, retinoic acid/FSH–NRG/ERBB4, and AR/RB–ARID4A/ARID4B) are also addressed.

Introduction

Spermatogenesis is precisely controlled by intrinsic gene expression and extrinsic stimuli, as shown by many loss- and gain-of-function studies. Spermatogonial stem cells (SSCs) are undifferentiated spermatogonia that maintain the potential to self-renew and differentiate into committed progenitors, which sustains spermatogenesis (Kanatsu-Shinohara & Shinohara 2013). Although self-renewal through cell division continues throughout the life of the organism, little is known about how germline cells acquire and maintain their self-renewal activity. In mice, SSCs (A single) and committed progenitor spermatogonia (A paired and A aligned) are collectively described as undifferentiated A-spermatogonia based on morphological analyses (Clermont & Bustos-Obregon 1968). These undifferentiated A-spermatogonia undergo a series of cell divisions to form differentiating spermatogonia (A1, A2, A3, A4, intermediate, and B spermatogonia) before entering meiosis (de Rooij 2001; see Fig. 1). The SSCs are defined by their ability to self-renew, and it is difficult to distinguish them from the more abundant committed progenitors based on only morphology alone. Several well-defined markers can be used to identify SSCs and other undifferentiated spermatogonia (see Fig. 1). Although PLZF (Costoya et al. 2004), SALL4 (Gassei & Orwig 2013), and CDH1 (Tokuda et al. 2007) are expressed in all undifferentiated A-spermatogonia at all stages, GFRA1 (Grasso et al. 2012), LIN28 (Zheng et al. 2009), NANOS2 (Suzuki et al. 2009), and NGN3 (Yoshida et al. 2004) are primarily expressed in specific types of undifferentiated A-spermatogonia. In addition, ID4 and PAX7 are specific to type A single spermatogonia (Oatley et al. 2011, Aloisio et al. 2014). NANOS3 is detectable in most undifferentiated type A-spermatogonia and differentiating type A1 spermatogonia (Suzuki et al. 2009). c-KIT, a tyrosine kinase receptor for KITL, is expressed in some type A aligned spermatogonia (Oatley et al. 2011, Aloisio et al. 2014). NANOS3 is detectable in most undifferentiated type A-spermatogonia and differentiating type A1 spermatogonia (Suzuki et al. 2009). c-KIT, a tyrosine kinase receptor for KITL, is expressed in some type A aligned spermatogonia, differentiating spermatogonia, and the earliest preleptotene spermatocytes (Yoshinaga et al. 1991). SOHLH1 and SOHLH2 are expressed in both c-KIT-negative and c-KIT-positive spermatogonia, with the exception of GFRA1 spermatogonia (Suzuki et al. 2012). PLZF is the first transcription factor to be identified as being involved in SSC self-renewal. SALL4 functions by removing PLZF from the more abundant committed progenitors based on only morphology alone. Several well-defined markers can be used to identify SSCs and other undifferentiated spermatogonia (see Fig. 1). Although PLZF (Costoya et al. 2004), SALL4 (Gassei & Orwig 2013), and CDH1 (Tokuda et al. 2007) are expressed in all undifferentiated A-spermatogonia at all stages, GFRA1 (Grasso et al. 2012), LIN28 (Zheng et al. 2009), NANOS2 (Suzuki et al. 2009), and NGN3 (Yoshida et al. 2004) are primarily expressed in specific types of undifferentiated A-spermatogonia. In addition, ID4 and PAX7 are specific to type A single spermatogonia (Oatley et al. 2011, Aloisio et al. 2014). NANOS3 is detectable in most undifferentiated type A-spermatogonia and differentiating type A1 spermatogonia (Suzuki et al. 2009). c-KIT, a tyrosine kinase receptor for KITL, is expressed in some type A aligned spermatogonia, differentiating spermatogonia, and the earliest preleptotene spermatocytes (Yoshinaga et al. 1991). SOHLH1 and SOHLH2 are expressed in both c-KIT-negative and c-KIT-positive spermatogonia, with the exception of GFRA1 spermatogonia (Suzuki et al. 2012). PLZF is the first transcription factor to be identified as being involved in SSC self-renewal. SALL4 functions by removing PLZF from its cognate targets (e.g. c-KIT). Thus, the competition between PLZF and SALL4 is an important topic of investigation. It has been recently shown by Liao et al. (2014) that reduced levels of PLZF in Dnmt3l knockout Thy1+ cells results in the releases of the PLZF antagonist...
SALL4, which is associated with maintaining the delicate balance of cycling and quiescent SSCs/progenitor cells. Further study is required to investigate whether SALL4+/PLZF− Asingle and Apaired spermatogonia are destined to differentiate. The human ortholog of the mouse SSC maintenance factor PLZF is expressed in spermatogonia, and its biallelic loss in humans is associated with genital hypoplasia (Fischer et al. 2008). To our knowledge, PAX7 is the only protein known to be expressed in SSCs in a variety of mammals, including human. Further studies are needed to identify additional markers of human SSCs and other undifferentiated spermatogonia. It is also important to test the classic studies of SSCs through spermatogonial transplantation techniques and other functional SSCs assays.

Meiosis is essential for the production of haploid gametes from spermatocytes and maintaining genome integrity (Li et al. 2005). Prophase of meiosis I is unique in that it is elongated and further broken down into leptotene, zygotene, pachytene, diplotene, and diakinesis. During these substages of prophase I, DNA double-strand breaks, alignment and synopsis of homologues, and crossover formation ensure homologous recombination between non-sister chromatids (review in Pawlowski & Cande (2005)). Meiosis is precisely controlled by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as shown in numerous gene knockout studies.

Scrotal hypothermia is essential for normal spermatogenesis (Paul et al. 2009); therefore, it is important to understand why spermatogenesis is negatively affected by heat. Our previous studies demonstrated that temporal heat stress in the testes resulted in a dramatic reduction in the expression of upstream factors, such as androgen receptor (AR), Wilms’ tumor gene 1 (WT1), and liver receptor homolog 1 (LHR1) in monkey (Zhang et al. 2006, Guo et al. 2007, Chen et al. 2008), rat (Guo et al. 2007), and mouse (Cai et al. 2011); however, these effects were reversible. The reversible dedifferentiation of Sertoli cells is followed by a temporary reversible disruption of the blood–testis barrier (BTB), which leads to dramatic germ cell apoptosis in the testis (Lue et al. 2011). Importantly, heat-induced changes in Sertoli cells and the failed spermatogenesis were found to recover over time. Upstream factors may act as transcription factors to regulate the reversible change in Sertoli cell differentiation and the process of spermatogenesis via BTB-associated proteins. For example, when the AR was over-expressed, the heat-induced downregulation of BTB-associated proteins was rescued. AR knockdown by RNA interference (RNAi) or treatment with an AR antagonist (flutamide) inhibited the recovery of BTB-associated proteins. Furthermore, the co-localization and interactions of components of partitioning-defective protein 6 (PAR6)-PAR3-aPKC-Cdc42 polarity complex components were disrupted in both AR-knockdown and heat-treated Sertoli cells (see Fig. 2; Li et al. 2013). Our study suggests that a small number of undifferentiated spermatogonia survival in the disrupted niche after heat treatment and the SSC niche and BTB are re-established after the heat stress is withdrawn. Sertoli cells, which are the principal contributors to the SSC niche and the BTB structure, play a central role in both the disruption and recovery process. Absalan et al. (2011) demonstrated that spermatogonia isolated from bilateral cryptorchid mice have the ability to regenerate spermatogenesis. Based on these findings, we support the notion that spermatogenesis is regulated by a complex paracrine and endocrine system with a structurally well-organized tissue. Central to this system are the Sertoli cells, which provide nutrient and structural support for the differentiating germ cells.

In this review, we summarize findings regarding the paracrine regulation of SSC self-renewal and spermatocyte meiosis by Sertoli cells. The well-defined glial cell line-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF) is a soluble factor that is secreted by Sertoli cells and influences the self-renewal of SSCs while inhibiting their differentiation (Meng et al. 2000). The generation and characterization of male total and conditional AR knockout mice from different laboratories demonstrate the exceeding necessity of Sertoli cell-expressed AR signaling for meiosis (review in Wang et al. 2009)). Significant progress has recently been made by us and others in exploring the effects of Sertoli cells on the regulation of SSC self-renewal and spermatocyte meiosis. Several authoritative reviews have recently been presented that describe the
transcriptional regulation of spermatogonial differentiation and spermatocyte meiosis by intrinsic factors (Rossi & Dolci 2013, Hai et al. 2014, Song & Wilkinson 2014). Thus, in this review, we focus on Sertoli cell-controlled paracrine signaling during early stages of spermatogenesis.

**GDNF signaling**

Niche factor GDNF, secreted by Sertoli cells, is a well-defined paracrine factor that promotes SSC self-renewal and maintenance, as shown both in vivo and in vitro. Gdnf−/− mice die at birth with renal and neuronal abnormalities (Meng et al. 2000). Gdnf+/− mice present an exhausted SSC pool and progressive germ cell loss, whereas mice overexpressing GDNF show an accumulation of undifferentiated spermatogonia (Meng et al. 2000). Subsequent studies have described the long-term culture of SSCs based on this finding (Kubota et al. 2000, Hofmann et al. 2005). This culture system allows a large number SSCs to be collected; thus, the investigation of SSCs at the molecular level is now possible using these techniques. Human and mouse spermatogonia use the same extrinsic factor, GDNF, for their maintenance and growth in vitro (Wu et al. 2009). GDNF signaling acts via the RET tyrosine kinase present on undifferentiated type A-spermatogonia (Naughton et al. 2006) and requires a ligand-specific co-receptor GFRA1 (Jing et al. 1996) to promote spermatogonial self-renewal in mice (see Fig. 3). Studies in RET Y1062F knockin mice suggest that GDNF–RET signaling is essential for the self-renewal of SSCs via tyrosine 1062 (Jijiwa et al. 2008).

Further studies have been undertaken to identify the signaling pathways through which these molecules function. The molecular machinery of the GDNF signaling pathway in SSC self-renewal has been investigated in *in vitro* SSC culture experiments with specific inhibitors. Using this approach, it was shown that the PI3K/AKT-dependent pathway (Lee et al. 2007) or the SRC family kinase (SFK) pathway (Oatley et al. 2007) mediate GDNF function in SSCs. A microarray analysis of cultured Thy1+ SSCs was conducted to identify GDNF-inducible genes in SSCs, which show decreased expression upon GDNF withdrawal and increased expression upon GDNF replacement (Oatley et al. 2006). The transcription factors B cell CLL/lymphoma 6 member B (BCL6B), ETS variant 5 (ERM; also known as ETV5), DNA-binding protein 4 (ID4), LIM homeobox 1 (LHX1), BRACHYURY (T), and POU class 3 homeobox 1 (POU3F1) were reported to be essential for SSC self-renewal (Oatley et al. 2006). BCL6B has been shown to be important for maintenance of the self-renewal of SSCs *in vitro* based on results obtained using siRNA; the degeneration of spermatogenesis or a Sertoli cell-only phenotype was observed in the Bcl6b-null testes (Oatley et al. 2006). ETV5 was
expressed both in Sertoli cells (Chen et al. 2005) and in SSCs (Oatley et al. 2007, Tyagi et al. 2009). Etv5-null germ cells fail to initiate spermatogenesis after transplantation into the testes of W/Wv mice. Specifically, a germ cell failure to initiate spermatogenesis after transplanted SSCs (Oatley (2015)) Sertoli cells and stimulates SSC self-renewal. In vitro fibroblast growth factor 2 (FGF2, also known as basic FGF) (bFGF) is expressed and secreted by mammalian Sertoli cells and stimulates SSC self-renewal. In vitro, supplementation of FGF2 in combination with GDNF allowed for long-term self-renewing expansion of SSCs (Kubota et al. 2004). In humans, FGF2 treatment increased the diameters of SSC colonies (Mirzapour et al. 2012). Although the role of the GDNF signaling pathway has been described in SSCs, little is known about the involvement of FGF2. A recent study has demonstrated that FGF2 relies on MAP2K1 activation to drive SSC self-renewal via upregulation of Etv5, Bcl6b, and Lhx1 genes using a mouse germ line stem (GS) cell culture system that allows for in vitro expansion of SSCs (Ishii et al. 2012; see Fig. 3). GS cells with activated MAP2K1 proliferate in the presence of GDNF, which indicates that MAP2K1 can substitute for FGF2. Thus, PI3K/AKT, SFK, and MAP2K1 are critical regulators of SSC self-renewal. Interestingly, Lee et al. (2009) used a SSC transplantation assay to show that the activation of H-RAS is sufficient to induce SSC self-renewal and that PI3K/AKT and MAP2K1 are ras effectors.

A subsequent study indicated that FGF2 may regulate mouse SSC proliferation and stem cell activity in vitro via autocrine phosphorylation of AKT and ERK1/2 pathway (Zhang et al. 2012). Conditional knock out of the Fgf2 gene in postnatal Sertoli cells and SSCs could help to elucidate the essential role of FGF2 in SSC self-renewal in vivo.

**CXCL12–CXCR4 signaling**

Cxc12 encodes a chemokine that is expressed and secreted by Sertoli cells and binds to the CXCR4 receptor on SSCs to regulate self-renewal and maintenance (see Fig. 3). The reduction of CXCR4 signaling in primary cultures of undifferentiated mouse spermatogonia by treatment with a CXCR4-specific inhibitor and the injection of CXCL12-blocking-antibody results in SSC loss, and the inhibition of CXCR4 signaling in testes of adult mice by injection of CXCR4-specific inhibitor impairs SSC maintenance, leading to loss of the germline (Yang et al. 2013). Both GDNF and FGF2 regulate the expression of Cxcr4 mRNAs in Thy1+ spermatogonial cell cultures. Microarray profiling of gene expression revealed that the disruption of CXCL12–CXCR4 signaling leads to a significant decrease in the abundance of the Fgf2 transcript (Yang et al. 2013), suggesting that CXCL12, FGF2, and GDNF form a cooperative network that influences SSC self-renewal. Moreover, CXCR4 participates in both primordial germ cell homing during embryogenesis and SSC homing to the germline niche in postnatal testes (Ara et al. 2003, Kanatsu-Shinohara et al. 2012). Sertoli cell-specific Sin3a deletion resulted in the formation of few undifferentiated spermatogonia. Chemokine CXCL12 and its receptor CXCR4 are not detected in neonatal Sertoli cell-specific Sin3a-knockout testes (Payne et al. 2010), indicating that CXCL12–CXCR4 signaling influences the establishment of the SSC niche.

Mciver et al. (2013) observed that the CXCL12 and its receptor CXCR4 are expressed in the human testis,
which led us speculate that CXCL12–CXCR4 signaling may be involved in human SSC biology.

**ERM–chemokine signaling**

Chen et al. (2005) demonstrated that ERM is expressed exclusively within Sertoli cells and is required for SSC self-renewal. Mice with targeted disruption of the ERM cannot maintain SSC self-renewal without a disruption in normal spermatogenic differentiation; thus, progressive germ cell depletion and Sertoli-cell-only syndrome were observed (Chen et al. 2005). Microarray analysis of purified wild type (WT) and Erm−/− Sertoli cells indicates that GDNF expression was unchanged and that several chemokine genes, Cxcl12, Cxcl5, and Ccl7, were significantly reduced in Erm−/− Sertoli cells, suggesting that these genes play a role in regulating the SSC niche (Chen et al. 2005). Simon et al. (2010) reported that recombinant CCL9 restored the chemoattractive ability of Erm−/− Sertoli cells, suggesting that CCL9/CCR1 may be a direct target of ERM. Transient siRNA oligonucleotides targeting ERM in mouse SSC cultures further confirmed that ERM is a regulator of Cxcr4 (Wu et al. 2011). Therefore, changes in chemokine production and the consequent decreases in chemoattraction by Erm−/− Sertoli cells result in SSC loss in Erm−/− mice (see Fig. 3). ERM appears to be one of the few transcription factors expressed by Sertoli cells that control SSC self-renewal through either CXCL12/CXCR4 or CCL9/CCR1 signaling. The intracellular mechanisms of CXCL12/CXCR4 and CCL9/CCR1 signaling require further investigation.

**Role of follicle-stimulating hormone–nociceptin/OPRL1 signaling in meiosis**

Total serum immunoactive follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) levels increase in mice beginning at 8 days post-partum onward (Barakat et al. 2008). FSH directly activates the intracellular signaling pathway and leads to the secretion of paracrine factors that indirectly promote spermatogenesis. Recently, the paracrine factors have involved in the signaling between Sertoli cells and germ cells to mediate the effect of FSH on spermatocyte meiosis has been investigated. Nociceptin was found to be upregulated by a surge in FSH levels in mouse Sertoli cells (Eto et al. 2012), and the nociceptin receptor OPRL1 is exclusively expressed on the plasma membrane of spermatocytes (Eto et al. 2013). Nociceptin induces and maintains REC8 phosphorylation, which is responsible for meiotic chromosome dynamics in spermatocytes during meiosis (Lee et al. 2003, Eto et al. 2013; see Fig. 4). Although the mechanism by which nociceptin stimulates REC8 phosphorylation in spermatocytes remains unclear, nociceptin/OPRL1 is a novel extrinsic signaling pathway that plays a crucial role in the progression of meiosis.

**Effect of retinoic acid/FSH–neuregulin signaling in meiosis**

In murine juvenile testes, Sertoli cell-synthesized retinoic acid (RA) serves as a fundamentally positive regulator in the commitment of spermatocytes to meiosis and it also regulates progression of the early stages of meiotic prophase via the stimulated RA gene 8 (Stra8) (Mark et al. 2008). However, the molecular pathway by which RA induces meiosis requires further elucidation. Neuregulin 1 (NRG1), a member of the epithelial growth factor family, has only been found to be present in Sertoli cells, and its receptor, ERBB4, localizes to the surface of germ cells (Falls 2003, Zhang et al. 2011). Recently, Zhang et al. (2011) have demonstrated that RA and FSH act on Sertoli cells to promote the expression of NRG1 and NRG3, directly inducing meiosis in pre-spermatocytes, based on the analyses of Nrg1K−/− mutant mice and of re-aggregated cultures consisting of spermatogonia and Sertoli cells (see Fig. 4). However, the mechanisms by which RA promotes Nrg1 and Nrg3 mRNA expression in Sertoli cells and how NRG1/3 stimulates Stra8 gene expression remain to be elucidated.

**The function of androgen–AR signaling in meiosis**

Genetic studies in the mouse demonstrate that meiosis is one of the most important processes controlled by androgen–AR signaling. Currently, more than 1029 different AR missense mutations have been reported, contributing to ~2% of cases of non-specific male infertility (Gottlieb et al. 2012). When bound by
androgen, cytoplasmic AR in Sertoli cells quickly translocates to the nucleus and binds to the androgen response elements (ARE) on androgen-responsive genes (Zhou et al. 2002). In addition to Sertoli cells, testicular AR is also expressed in Leydig cells and peritubular myoid (PM) cells. In the absence of AR in Sertoli cells in mice, spermatogenesis does not progress beyond the pachytene or diplotene stages of meiosis (Chang et al. 2004, De Gendt et al. 2004), while the deletion of the Ar gene in mouse germ cells does not affect spermatogenesis or male fertility (Tsai et al. 2006). Germ cells themselves lack AR function, but they depend on androgen to progress beyond meiosis, indicating that androgens regulate meiosis indirectly by acting on Sertoli cells. Therefore, the molecular mechanism by which Sertoli cells transduce the androgenic stimulus to germ cells is of great significance and should be addressed.

Retinoblastoma (RB) has been reported to interact with AR and functions as a co-activator to induce AR transcriptional activity. A recent study has identified several AR- and RB-responsive genes acting as downstream targets of ARID4A and ARID4B (Wu et al. 2013). ARID4A and ARID4B are expressed mainly in Sertoli cells. An investigation of germ cell development in Arid4a<sup>−/−</sup> Arid4b<sup>+/−</sup> mice revealed spermatogenic arrest in the meiotic spermatocytes and post-meiotic haploid spermatids (Wu et al. 2013). This study thus indicates that ARID4A/B functionally links the AR and RB pathways in the regulation of spermatogenic meiosis. The signaling pathways of spermatocyte meiosis regulated by Sertoli cells are illustrated in Fig. 4.

**Perspectives and concluding remarks**

In summary, we have systematically addressed the roles of Sertoli cell-derived soluble factors and Sertoli cell-expressed transcription factors in the regulation of SSC self-renewal and spermatocyte meiosis. ID4 and PAX7 are two proteins known to be expressed in A<sub>single</sub> spermatogonia (SSCs), and Id4–GFP is a candidate reporter line that preferentially labels SSCs (Oatley et al. 2011). Special attention should be paid to determine whether the cessation of spermatogenesis is accompanied by a deficiency in SSCs. Analyses of cells that retain the label long-term may be a useful approach for detecting an SSC defect. In the future, it will be crucial to identify SSC-specific markers and reporter lines that preferentially label SSCs to distinguish between SSC and spermatogonial progenitors.

Microarray analysis can be used to identify the genes and microRNA that are regulated by GDNF-inducible transcription factors involved in SSC self-renewal, such as BCL6B, ETV5, ID4, LHX1, T, and POU3F1 (review in Song & Wilkinson (2014)). Similar studies suggest that GDNF and FGF2 share common target genes. However, microarray data cannot distinguish between direct and indirect targets, and further analysis of the transcriptional regulation is required. Very recently, Kanatsu-Shinohara et al., have reported that F-box and WD-40 domain protein 7 (FBXW7) play an important role in negatively regulating self-renewal. To our knowledge, this is the first report of increased SSC activity in knockout mice. Investigation of other negative regulators that may counteract self-renewal signals will deepen our knowledge of SSC biology (Kanatsu-Shinohara et al. 2014).

Human SSCs share some but not all phenotypes with rodent SSCs, and long-term culture of SSCs has not yet been achieved in humans (Guo et al. 2014). Most of the knowledge related to the paracrine regulation of SSC fate has been derived from rodents. To our knowledge, no transcription factors have yet been identified that have roles in either SSC self-renewal or differentiation in humans. Because of the significant differences between rodent and human spermatogonia, human orthologs of mouse transcription factors that control SSC events in mice have yet to be further investigated. It will also very important to explore the regulation of human SSC self-renewal by Sertoli paracrine signaling to provide insights into male infertility.

Stem cell niches are formed on the basis of both architectural support and external stimuli produced by niche cells. In this study, we summarize the recent understanding of Sertoli paracrine regulation of SSC function. However, contributions from other somatic cell populations surrounding the seminiferous tubules, such as PM cells, interstitial Leydig cells, and blood vessels, are also possible. Yoshida et al. (2007) demonstrated a vascular and interstitial tissue-associated niche for undifferentiated spermatogonia in the mouse. However, the role of the vasculature by layers of appears to be indirect because spermatogonia are separated from the vasculature by the layers of basement membrane. Colony-stimulating factor 1 (CSF1) has been identified as an extrinsic stimulator of SSC self-renewal that implicates Leydig and selects PM cells as contributors of the testicular stem cell niche in mammals (Oatley et al. 2009). However, whether in vivo SSCs express the CSF1 receptor remains to be investigated. A recent study has reported that testosterone-dependent regulation of GDNF expression in PM cells has a significant influence on the microenvironment of the niche and SSC maintenance (Chen et al. 2014). Future studies should investigate how the activity of the SSC niche is regulated by interstitial tissues, hormones, spermatogenic cycles, and aging. Although in vivo analysis of the niche is difficult owing to the three-dimensional structure of seminiferous tubules, in vitro reconstitution of the SSC niche has recently become possible (Kanatsu-Shinohara et al. 2012). Characterization of the in vitro reconstituted niche will provide a unique tool to study the interactions between SSCs and their microenvironment.

Azoospermia has been observed in 10–15% of cases of male infertility and in 1% of the general population, and non-obstructive azoospermia has been diagnosed in 60% of azoospermic men. The ability of generating
mature and functional male gametes from SSCs could enable us to understand the precise etiology of male infertility and offer an invaluable source of autologous male gametes for treating male infertility in azoospermic patients. From this viewpoint, the development of in vitro differentiation methods will be the next important step. In addition, spermatogonia transplantation is inefficient in nonrodent animals because of the difficulties related to preparing the recipients and the low concentrations of SSCs. Thus, the development of in vitro differentiation approaches will overcome these problems. Currently, considerable progress has been made in generating male germ cells, including spermatogonia, spermatocytes, and spermatids, from various types of stem cells (reviewed in Hou et al. (2014)). Of note, haploid spermatids were generated in human SSCs from cryptorchidism patients by treatment with RA and stem cell factor (Yang et al. 2014). We developed an efficient system by co-culturing GFRα1-positive gonocytes/undifferentiated spermatogonia with autologous testicular cells isolated from mice around 2.5 days old, creating a functional ‘testis’ in vitro which undergoes spermatogenesis to produce haploid sperm (Y Zhang, SL Deng, SR Chen, CY Cheng and YX Liu, unpublished data). This culture system will provide an invaluable source of autologous male gametes for treating male infertility in azoospermic patients.

Other candidate molecules in Sertoli cells that may be involved in SSC self-renewal and meiosis include WNT5a, doublesex and MA3-related transcription factor 1 (DMRT1), and WT1. Yeh et al. (2011) have identified WNT5a as an extrinsic regulator of SSC self-renewal (Yeh et al. 2011). WNT5a was shown to be present in the Sertoli cells of the mouse testis, and the WNT5a receptor was detected on the SSC cell surface. It remains unknown how WNT5a influences SSCs. Germ cells in Sertoli cell-specific knockout of DMRT1 testes efficiently enter meiosis, but the majority exhibit arrest at or before the pachytene stage (Kim et al. 2007). In our study, mice with a deletion of WT1 exhibited clear meiotic arrest and undifferentiated spermatogonial accumulation in the seminiferous tubules (Zheng et al. 2014). However, it remains to be defined how DMRT1 and WT1 regulate meiosis in a paracrine manner.

The results of studies carried out in Sertoli-Ar knockout mice clearly demonstrate that AR function in Sertoli cells is essential for the maintenance of fully competent Sertoli cell functions that support the completion of meiosis I during spermatogenesis. The next study will focus on which signaling events mediate AR function in spermatogenesis. Genetic screening of infertile males has revealed many AR mutations that are associated with male infertility. The restoration of spermatogenesis in Ar-knockout mice via alteration of candidate paracrine signals will be a powerful tool for demonstrating male infertility caused by AR mutation.

We expect that further investigation of Sertoli cell-specific genes and cell signaling in the regulation of self-renewal and spermatocyte meiosis in SSCs will yield useful insights into the treatment of male infertility and the development of safe and effective male contraception.

Declaration of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the review.

Funding
Supported by the Major Research Plan ‘973’ Project (2011CB944302 and 2012CB944702), the National Technology Support Project (2012DAI131080), and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (31471352, 31471400, 31171380, 31071018, 31071271, and 81270662).

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Received 15 September 2014
First decision 20 October 2014
Revised manuscript received 25 November 2014
Accepted 11 December 2014