

The oncogenic Δ Np73 isoform contributes to aggressiveness in acute promyelocytic leukemia

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Author contributions

C.A.O.R., D.A.P-M., E.A., A.B, F.G. and E.M.R. conceived and designed the study, performed experiments, analyzed, and interpreted data, performed the statistical analyses, and drafted the article. C.H.T., G.A.F., T.B., I.W., and C.L.A.S. conceived and designed the study and reviewed the paper. G.H., S.P., V.M.F., S.P., J.J.S., F.T. and L.L.F.P., reviewed the paper. F.T., L.L.F.P., A.S.G., P.S.S., A.B.G., K.P. and E.C.N., provided patient samples and clinical data and reviewed the paper. E.M.R. gave final approval of the submitted version.

Disclosure of conflicts of interest

The authors have no competing financial interests.

Data availability statement

The data generated from this work is open to be shared under request to the authors.

The road to developing effective therapies against acute promyelocytic leukemia (APL) saw a significant turn with the emergence of *all-trans*-retinoic acid (ATRA) and arsenic trioxide (ATO).¹ However, in the context of low- and middle-income countries the access to ATO as frontline therapy is limited,² thereby maintaining the ATRA-chemotherapy regimen as the first option, with consequent prognostic implications for APL patients. In this scenario, a deeper understanding of molecular mechanisms of ATRA sensitivity and the identification of biomarkers continues to be relevant.

Our group has previously described the association between higher $\Delta Np73/TAp73$ transcripts ratios and the unfavorable treatment outcome in Brazilian patients treated with ATRA+chemotherapy.³ Both transcripts are encoded by the *TP73* gene, which shares significant sequence homology with *TP53*.⁴ Functionally, TAp73 and p53 have similar effects because of their transactivation domains (TAD), that have higher homology. In contrast, $\Delta Np73$ lacks the TAD, and binds to DNA at the same regions of TAp73 and p53 but does not induce gene transcription of their targets. While the role of both isoforms in tumor aggressiveness is well known in solid tumors,^{5,6} the functional consequences of $\Delta Np73$ and TAp73 overexpression in leukemias are poorly understood. Here, we confirmed the prognostic role of p73 isoforms in APL patients treated with ATRA + chemotherapy and evaluated the effect of $\Delta Np73$ and TAp73 expression on ATRA and ATO response using *in vitro* and *in vivo* models.

First, we analyzed diagnostic bone marrow (BM) samples of patients (n=98) enrolled in the International Consortium of Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia (IC-APL) from October 2006 through September 2011.⁷ For comparison, BM samples from healthy individuals (n=14) without hematological abnormalities were included. Written informed consent was obtained from all patients according to the Declaration of Helsinki (CAAE: 819878.5.1001.5440). When comparing the expression with healthy BM, we found a reduced expression of TAp73 and a high expression of $\Delta Np73$ in APL primary blasts (Figure 1A). Subsequently, we evaluated the prognostic significance of both isoforms in APL patients treated with ATRA + chemotherapy. As shown in Figure 1B, we found that higher transcript levels of $\Delta Np73$ were associated with lower OS rates. The OS rate at 5 years of patients with higher $\Delta Np73$ expression was 77.8% (95% CI, 68.5%-88.4%) versus 96.6% (95% CI, 90%-100%) in those with expression values below the cut-off. The frequency of early deaths was higher in the group of patients with higher $\Delta Np73$ expression values (Supplementary Table S1). On the other hand, TAp73 expression was

not associated with prognosis (Figure 1B) or with any clinical-epidemiological (such as sex and age) or genetic characteristic (data not shown).

To delve into the difference of *TP73* isoforms in APL cells, we induced stable overexpression (OE) of the Δ Np73 α or TAp73 α isoforms in NB4 (ATRA-sensitive) and NB4-R2 cells (ATRA-resistant) by using a lentivirus system. A tagged GFP was included to express together the p73 isoforms in our strategy. Similar levels of gene expression of two isoforms were observed (Supplementary Figure 1A) in the modified cells. However, at the protein level, the abundance of Δ Np73 α was superior to TAp73 α in both cell lines (Supplementary Figure 1B), suggesting regulation at protein level. The cells harboring Δ Np73 α presented higher proliferation rates compared to their controls, whereas no differences were observed for TAp73 α overexpressing cells (Supplementary Figure 1C). We then evaluated whether these isoforms could regulate the apoptosis response, after treatment with ATO (1 μ M) or ATO+ATRA (1 μ M each). Overall, across the different time-points evaluated we detected minor or non-significant differences in apoptosis induction on NB4 and NB4-R2 cells overexpressing Δ Np73 α or TAp73 α , when compared to the empty vector control (Supplementary Figure 1D-E). These results contrast with our recent report analyzing primary APL blasts in which Δ Np73 OE was induced. Compared to controls, Δ Np73 α OE blasts showed significantly lower rates of apoptosis induced by the *ex vivo* treatment with ATRA, ATO and ATRA+ATO.⁸ These results may reflect differences between NB4 cell lines and primary cells, suggesting that the effect of Δ Np73 α is more relevant in the latter.

Based on previously published data showing that TAp73 isoform is implicated in cell cycle arrest and apoptosis induced by cellular stress in cell lines of lung carcinoma,⁹ we questioned whether increased TAp73 α OE would restore the ATO sensitivity in ATO-resistant (ATOr) NB4 cell lines (carrying a PML S214L mutation). These cells were generated by long-term exposure to increasing concentrations of ATO, until cell death was inferior to 10%. TAp73 α -OE in ATOr cells resulted in increased ATO-induced apoptosis, both in monotherapy and in combination with ATRA (Supplementary Figure 1F).

Next, we aimed to determine if p73 isoforms could affect the ATRA-induced myeloid differentiation. First, we quantified the expression of CD11b, CD14 and CD15 markers by flow cytometry in ATRA-treated NB4 cells. We found that Δ Np73 α prevented the ATRA-induced upregulation of CD11b, CD14, and CD15, suggesting possible disruption of ATRA-induced differentiation (Figure 1C and Supplementary Figure 1G). However, when we evaluated the restoration of PML nuclear bodies and cell morphology after ATRA

exposure, no differences were observed in comparison with control cells, indicating that canonical ATRA effect was not affected (Figure 1D, Supplementary Figure 1H). In this line, p73 isoforms did not impact on ATRA-induced expression of *CEBPA*, *CEBPE*, and *ELANE*, well-known ATRA targets involved in myeloid differentiation (Supplementary Figure 2A). Taking together these results suggest that p73 isoforms do not affect ATRA-induced differentiation. Next, because it was recently described that the BMP4- Δ Np73-NANOG signaling cascade could increase the stem cell-like features of AML cells,¹⁰ we measured the expression of *BMP4* and *NANOG*. We found that these genes were upregulated in Δ Np73 α -OE cells, but only during ATRA treatment, with no differences observed in untreated cells (Figure 1E), suggesting a possible role of this signaling axis in the ATRA response. In addition, ATRA treatment led to an increase in Δ Np73 α protein levels (Supplementary Figure 2B), indicating that Δ Np73 α gains protein stability in the context of ATRA treatment.

To deepen in how p73-dependent pathways could affect APL cells, the total proteomic profile of Δ Np73 α - or TAp73-NB4 cells, with or without ATRA exposure, was analyzed. Briefly, 100 μ g of protein of each sample was subjected to reduction, alkylation, and overnight tryptic digestion. Then, peptides were purified, dried, and labeled with TMT reagents according to the manufacturer's protocol (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Labeled peptides were separated by nanoflow liquid chromatography and analyzed using an Orbitrap Tribrid Eclipse mass spectrometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific).¹¹ Protein identification and quantification were performed with MaxQuant, referencing the human proteome (Swiss-Prot, 20,366 entries, 2020).¹² Next, for cellular pathways evaluation, enrichment scores were calculated based on Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistics after applying spearman coefficient as metric for ranking genes and tested for significance (FDR<0.05) using 1000 permutations. As a result, the top upregulation pathways in Δ Np73 α -OE NB4 cells were related to the RNA splicing process, whereas these pathways were downregulated when TAp73 α was overexpressed (Supplementary Figure 2C). In contrast, this pathway was downregulated during the ATRA treatment independent of the presence of the p73 isoforms (Supplementary Figure 2D). To look for protein interactions and individual proteins altered in different conditions, the proteins differentially abundant in different conditions were evaluated by STRING (<https://string-db.org/>).¹³ As seen in Figure 2, seven clusters of proteins were identified after comparing cells treated with ATRA versus controls. This analysis confirms that p73 isoforms regulate splicing-related proteins (clusters 2 and 3), but also shows that some of the proteins are differently modulated by

p73 isoforms even during ATRA treatment (cluster 2 and 3). Additionally, motor proteins (like DYNC1H1), clathrin binding elements (CLTCL1, CLTC and COPG1), nucleotides and fatty acids metabolism enzymes (FASN and CAD), and proteins related to ion transporter (ATP1A1, ATP2A2, VDAC3 and SLC25A3) were downregulated in Δ Np73 α -OE cells while up-regulated in TAp73-OE cells. Finally, we found that NAP1L1 and ANP32E (cluster 5), proteins involved in chromatin accessibility during embryonic stem cell differentiation¹⁴ by interaction with sox motifs,^{14,15} are upregulated in Δ Np73 α -OE cells only during the ATRA treatment. This last finding is in line with the upregulation of *NANOG* observed in ATRA-treated Δ Np73 α -OE cells. This data suggests that, although Δ Np73 α does not block the core molecular differentiation process induced by ATRA, it represses surface markers related to mature leukocytes and upregulates stemness-associated factors upon ATRA exposure. This suggests that Δ Np73 α could maintain a degree of stemness even under differentiation pressure.

To validate our data, we evaluated p73 isoforms in an APL transgenic murine model. A total of 1×10^4 Δ Np73 α or TAp73 α OE GFP⁺ murine APL blasts (CD117⁺Gr1^{dim}, Figure 3A) obtained from leukemic hCG-PML::RARA mice were transplanted intravenously to 8 weeks old NOD/SCID gamma (NSG) mice. As shown in Figure 3B, after 14 days of transplant, we divided the animals into three treatment groups: ATRA, ATRA+ATO and control groups. Males and females were used in similar proportions in all groups. Then, after 21 days of treatment, spleen and bone marrow tissues were analyzed by flow cytometry to assess leukemic burden by measuring GFP⁺ cell content (Figure 3B). All procedures were performed under pathogen-free conditions and approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of the University of São Paulo (protocol #097/2018). As a result, we found a persistence of leukemic cells in bone marrow and spleen after the ATRA treatment in animals transplanted with Δ Np73 α overexpressing blasts (Figure 3C-D). In contrast, ATRA drastically reduced the leukemic burden in blasts overexpressing TAp73 α or control cells. Of note, we observed a similar response to the combination of ATO plus ATRA regardless of which isoform was expressed.

Overall, our results validate the clinical relevance of TP73 isoforms in APL, confirming that high expression of Δ Np73 α is associated with lower overall survival and a higher rate of early death. Our in vivo model corroborates that Δ Np73 α favors disease persistence following ATRA treatment, conferring a resistance phenotype not observed with the TAp73 isoform. Mechanistically, this persistence is not driven by blocking canonical granulocytic differentiation. Unlike other molecular alterations such as FLT3-

ITD,¹⁶ Δ Np73 α prevents neither the restoration of PML nuclear bodies nor morphological differentiation, indicating a mechanism independent of the PML::RARA fusion. However, we observed that ATRA paradoxically stabilizes Δ Np73 α , which concur with the promotion of expression of proteins related to stem-like phenotype only under the pressure of ATRA treatment. This suggests that while ATRA triggers differentiation signaling, in APL cases with higher expression of Δ Np73 α can activate stemness and alternative splicing programs, allowing cells to survive despite differentiation pressure. These findings highlight the importance of Δ Np73 α not only as a prognostic biomarker but also as a key regulator of cellular plasticity.

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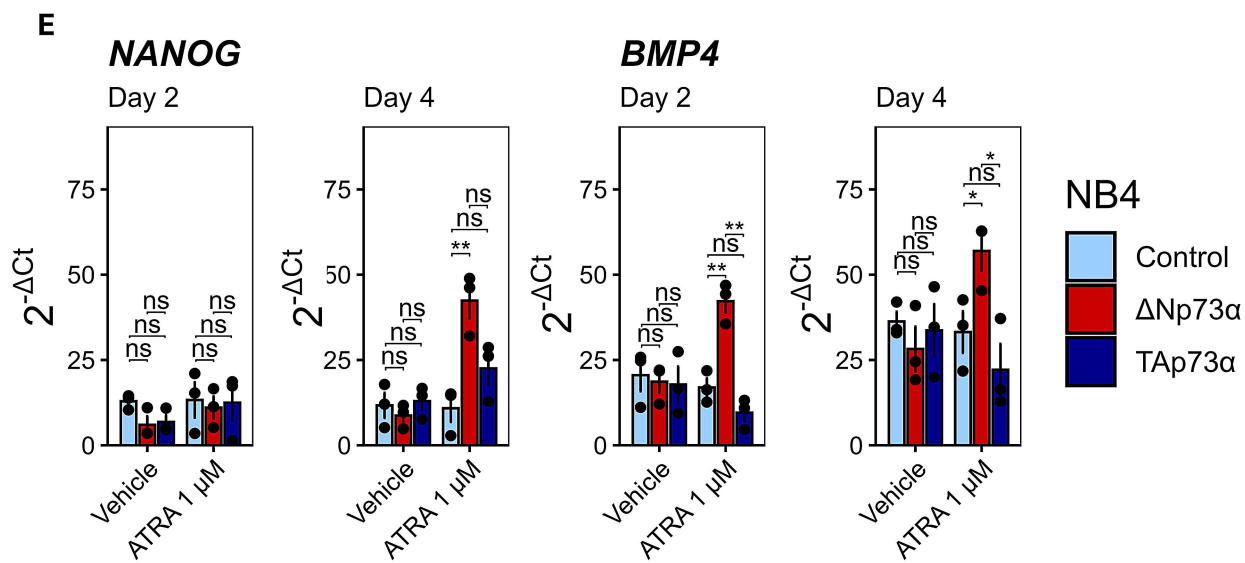
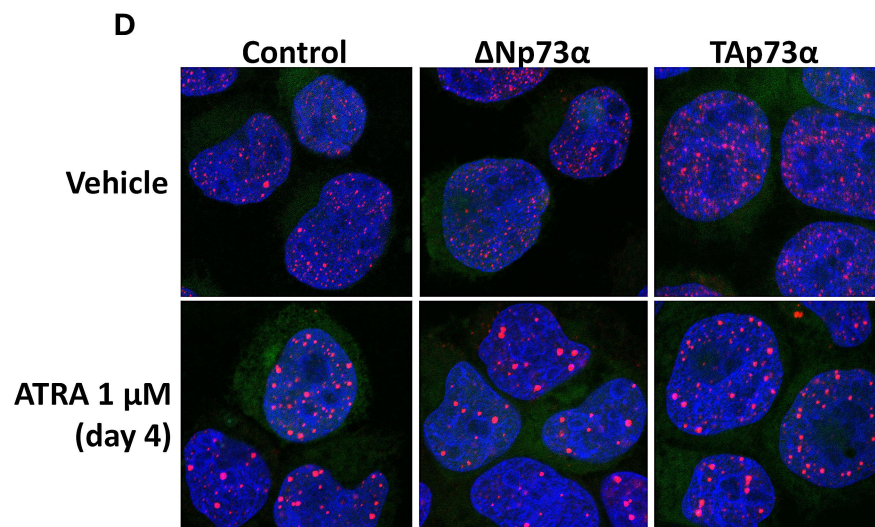
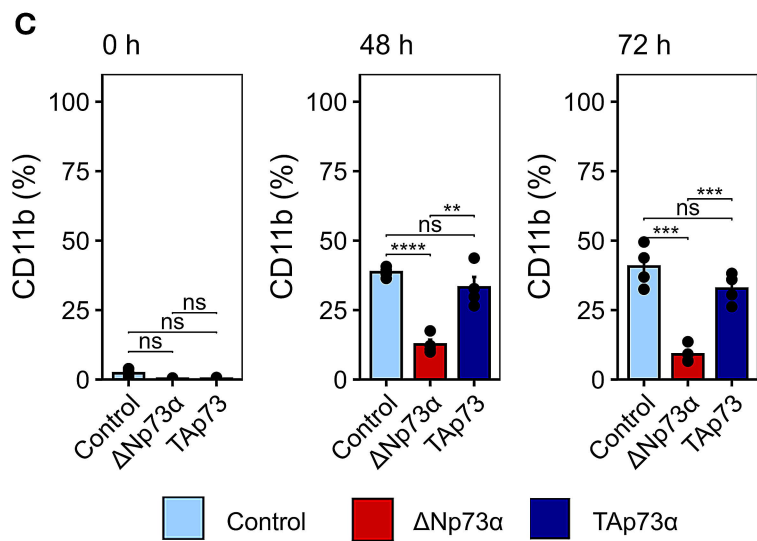
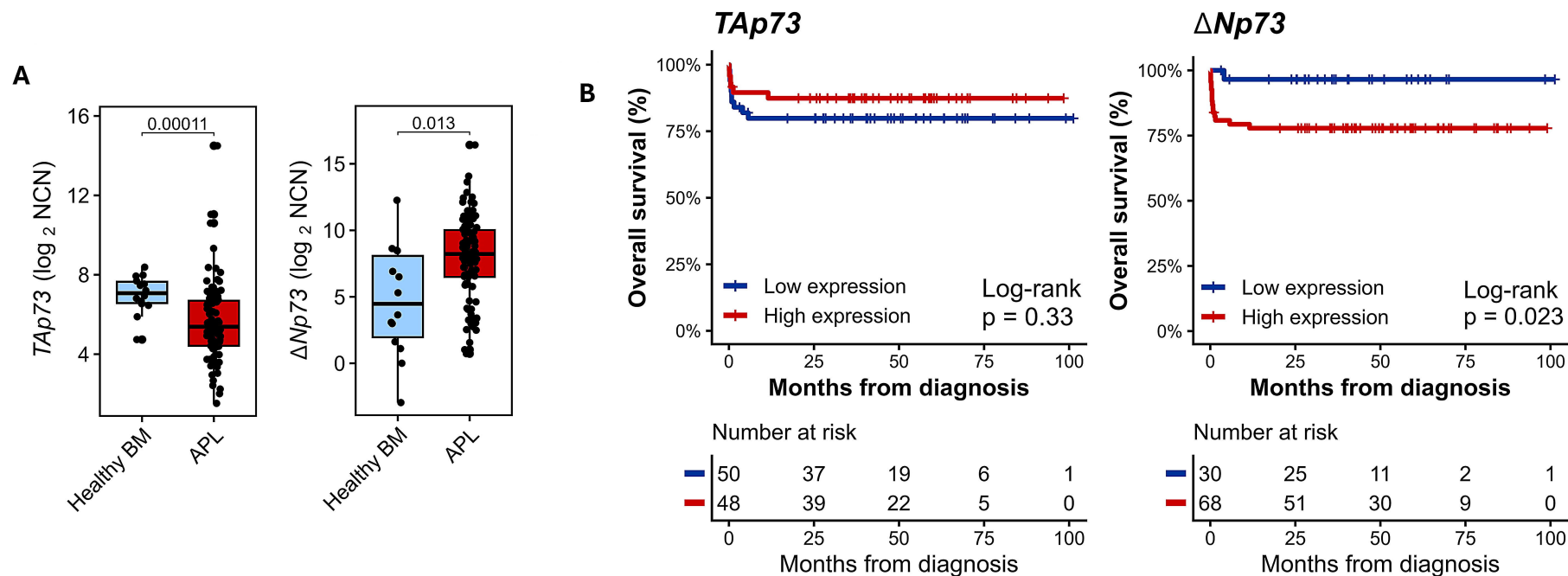
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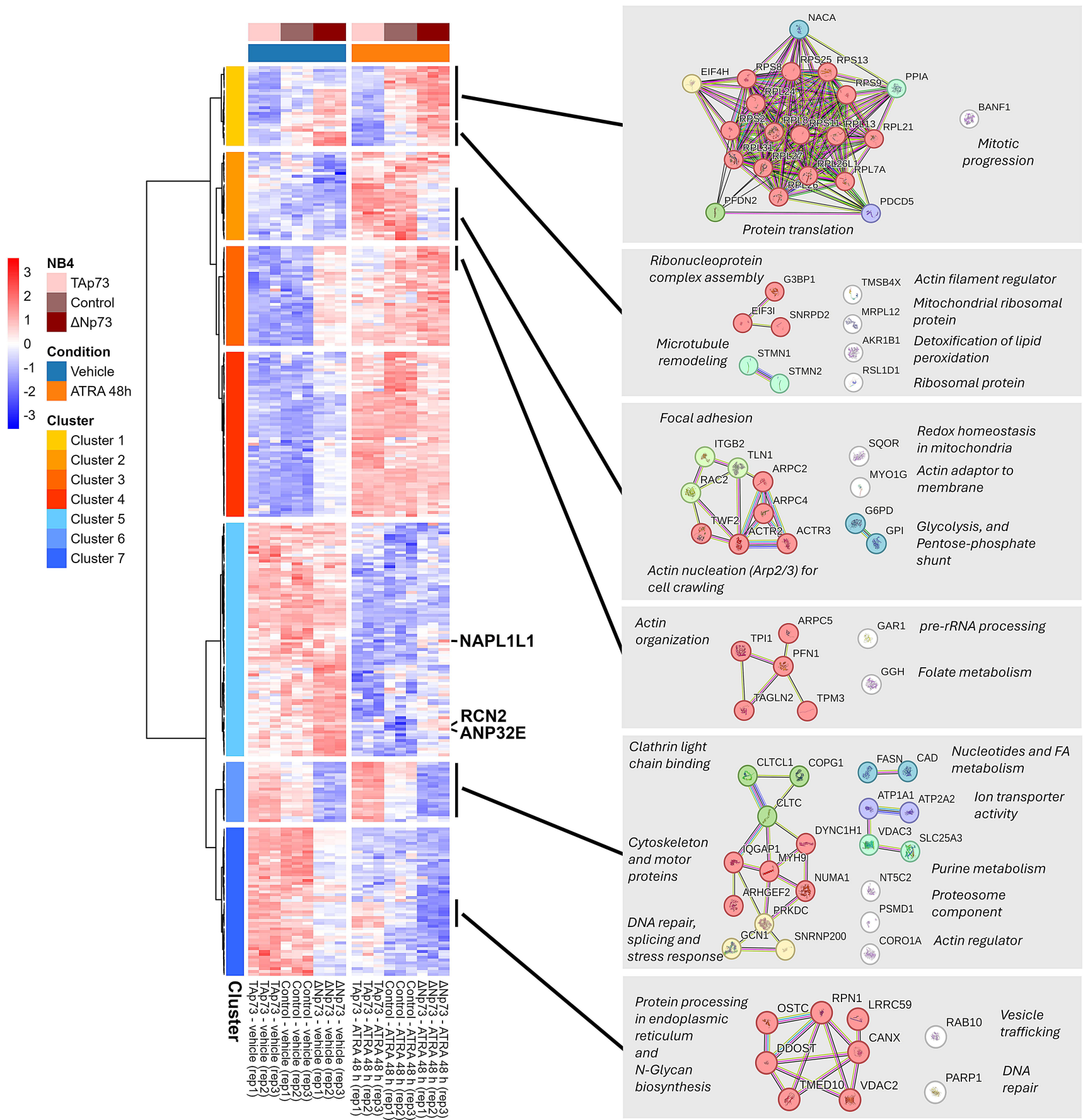
Figure 1. Expression levels, survival association and effect on ATRA-induced differentiation of *TAp73 α* and $\Delta Np73\alpha$ in acute promyelocytic leukemia. (A) Normalized copy numbers (NCN, #copies of target gene/copies of *ACTB*) of *TAp73* (left) and $\Delta Np73$ (right) in APL samples and healthy bone marrow. Number of (B) Overall survival (Kaplan-Meier) according to expression levels of *Tap73* (left) and $\Delta Np73\alpha$ (right). The cutoffs used to establish patients with high and low expression were calculated from overall survival (OS) data by using the receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve and those were 43.4 and 105.6 for *TAp73* and $\Delta Np73$, respectively. (C) Percentage levels of the CD11b marker in ATRA-treated NB4 cells overexpressing p73 isoforms. (D) PML-nuclear bodies restoration evaluated by immunofluorescence microscopy after incubation with the PG-M3 monoclonal antibody in NB4 cells treated with ATRA for 96 h. (E) *BMP4*, and *NANOG* expressions were evaluated in NB4 cells, finding that $\Delta Np73$ modulates positively the BMP4/*NANOG* axis during the ATRA treatment.

Figure 2. Proteomic profiling and protein-protein interaction networks regulated by p73 isoforms in ATRA-treated NB4 cells. Hierarchical clustering heatmap showing the total proteomic profile of NB4 cells with stable overexpression of *TAp73 α* , $\Delta Np73\alpha$, or empty vector control, treated with either vehicle or ATRA (1 μ M) for 48 hours. The color scale represents row-scaled protein abundance (Z-score), with red indicating high expression and blue indicating low expression. Seven distinct protein clusters based on expression patterns are identified by the color bars on the left. Specific proteins involved in chromatin accessibility and stress response, such as *NAP1L1*, *RCN2*, and *ANP32E*, are highlighted with arrows. The diagrams on the right show STRING protein-protein interaction networks derived from selected clusters, illustrating enriched biological processes and functional pathways differentially modulated by p73 isoforms and ATRA.

Figure 3. $\Delta Np73\alpha$ reduces blast clearance induced by ATRA in an APL mice model. (A) To evaluate the effect of p73 isoforms in vivo, we transplanted overexpressing $\Delta Np73\alpha$ or *TAp73 α* , or control APL blasts (from leukemic hCG-PML-RARA) to NSG mice. After lentiviral infection, we enriched the modified cells by sorting the GFP+ cells, achieving more than 98% of purity. As shown in the figure, the CD117+ cells were the main cell population in the GFP+ fraction. (B) Treatment scheme and groups of animals evaluated

in the experiment. (C-D) Leukemic burden, evaluated by GFP+ cells, in bone marrow and spleen after 21 days of treatment, showing that $\Delta Np73\alpha$ reduces the blast-clearance induced by ATRA in comparison with the control group.





Supplementary Table and Figures**The oncogenic Δ Np73 isoform contributes to aggressiveness in acute promyelocytic leukemia**

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Supplementary Table 1

Characteristics	Δ Np73 expression		p	
	Low	High		
Number of patients	30	68		
Gender (%)				
female	14 (46.7)	34 (50.0)	0.828	
male	16 (53.3)	34 (50.0)		
Age (median [IQR])	36.6 [27.9, 43.4]	34.88 [26.42, 48.34]	0.829	
Classification risk (%)			0.641	
Favorable	6 (20.0)	9 (13.2)		
Intermediate	12 (40.0)	32 (47.1)		
	Adverse	12 (40.0)	27 (39.7)	0.458
Break cluster region (%)	bcr1	17 (58.6)	37 (62.7)	
	bcr2	2 (6.9)	1 (1.7)	
	bcr3	10 (34.5)	21 (35.6)	0.355
ECOG (%)	0	22 (75.9)	38 (55.9)	
	1	3 (10.3)	13 (19.1)	
	2	3 (10.3)	10 (14.7)	
	3	1 (3.4)	7 (10.3)	0.657
Fever at diagnosis (%)	No	13 (44.8)	35 (52.2)	
	Yes	16 (55.2)	32 (47.8)	0.219
FLT3-ITD (%)	Detected	2 (9.5)	15 (23.4)	
	Non detected	19 (90.5)	49 (76.6)	0.905
WBC, 10⁹/L (median [IQR])		5930 [1737.5, 24450]	6125 [1850, 30187]	
WBC, no. (%), x 10⁹/L	≤ 10	18 (60.0)	40 (58.8)	1
	> 10	12 (40.0)	28 (41.2)	
Platelet, 10⁹/L (median [IQR])		27200 [15750, 49500]	25500 [14000, 39000]	0.459
Platelet count, no. (%), x 10⁹/L	> 50	8 (26.7)	11 (16.2)	0.271
	≤ 50	22 (73.3)	57 (83.8)	
Hb, g/dL (median [IQR])		8.55 [7.65, 9.07]	8.85 [7.35, 10.10]	0.464
Hb, no. (%), g/dL	> 10	4 (13.3)	19 (27.9)	0.131
	≤ 10	26 (86.7)	49 (72.1)	
Creatinine, mg/dL (median [IQR])		0.79 [0.66, 0.92]	0.80 [0.70, 1.00]	0.228
Creatinine, no. (%), mg/dL	≤ 1.4	29 (96.7)	65 (97.0)	
	> 1.4	1 (3.3)	2 (3.0)	0.026
Albumin, g/dL (median [IQR])		4.40 [3.80, 4.60]	4.00 [3.60, 4.30]	
Albumin, no. (%), g/dL	> 3.5	21 (100.0)	42 (79.2)	0.028
	≤ 3.5	0 (0.0)	11 (20.8)	
Uric acid, mg/dL (median [IQR])		3.70 [2.58, 5.67]	3.80 [3.20, 5.00]	0.544
Uric acid, no. (%), mg/dL	≤ 7	26 (92.9)	64 (98.5)	0.215
	> 7	2 (7.1)	1 (1.5)	
Fibrinogen, mg/dL (median [IQR])		149.5 [88.3, 196.5]	159.5 [100, 233.8]	0.374
Fibrinogen, no. (%), mg/dL	> 170	13 (46.4)	28 (42.4)	0.821
	≤ 170	15 (53.6)	38 (57.6)	
Complete remission (%)	No	1 (3.3)	12 (17.6)	0.06
	Yes	29 (96.7)	56 (82.4)	
FAB subtype (%)	M3	28 (93.3)	65 (95.6)	0.64
	M3v	2 (6.7)	3 (4.4)	
Early mortality (%)	No	30 (100.0)	57 (83.8)	0.017
	Yes	0 (0.0)	11 (16.2)	

*IQR: Interquartile range. Categorical variables were compared with Fisher's exact test while continuous variables with Mann-Whitney test.

Supplementary Figure legends

Supplementary Figure 1. Effect of Δ Np73 α and TAp73 α on the proliferation and ATO response of NB4 and NB4-R2 cells. (A) Normalized copy numbers (NCN, N copies of target gene/copies of *ACTB*) of OE cells versus controls (transduced with empty vector). (B) Protein abundance of Δ Np73 α and TAp73 α in OE NB4, NB4-R2, and control cells. The antibodies used to detect Δ Np73 α was the pan anti-p73 antibody (Novus biologicals: NB100-56674, 1:1000) and for TAp73 we used an anti-TAp73 (abcam: ab14430; 1:1000). (C) Proliferation assay of transduced APL cells showing higher proliferation index in Δ Np73 α OE-NB4 cells. (D-E) Annexin V apoptosis assay after treatment with ATO (D) or ATO+ATRA (E) in OE-NB4 and -NB4-R2, and control cells. (F) Apoptosis assay in NB4 ATOr cells overexpressing TAp73 indicating resensitization to ATO mediated by TAp73. (G) Percentage levels of CD14 and CD15 markers in ATRA-treated NB4 cells overexpressing p73 isoforms. (H) Wright's stain of transduced NB4 cells after 120 h of ATRA-treatment and controls.

Supplementary Figure 2. Evaluation of ATRA-modulated genes and proteome analysis of ATRA-treated NB4 overexpressing Δ Np73 α or TAp73 α . (A) CEBPA, CEBPE, and ELANE expressions were evaluated during the ATRA-treatment, finding no impact of Δ Np73 α or TAp73 α . (B) Increased stability of Δ Np73 α protein observed during ATRA treatment. (C) Following a proteomic approach, pathway enrichment analysis revealed RNA splicing processes as top differentially modulated between Δ Np73 α and TAp73 α in NB4 cells. (D). However, these same pathways were uniformly downregulated during ATRA treatment, regardless of p73 isoform overexpression.

