mutation had only a modest effect on the transactivation activity of Pax6(+5a) in our reporter assay using P19 cells. It may be that a putative retina-specific cofactor that is not expressed in P19 cells may regulate the Pax6(+5a) activity in a V54D mutation-sensitive manner, thereby causing the apparent discrepancy. Alternatively, the V54D mutation may show a more potent effect when *cis* elements that diverge from the consensus sequences are used.

The two Pax6 isoforms seem to function differently in a qualitative rather than quantitative fashion. Pax6(−5a) overexpression does induce ectopic retina-like tissues. However, the incidence is far lower and the structures induced are far more immature when compared with those induced by Pax6(+5a) overexpression. As shown in Figure 6, the R26G mutation in the NTS and the R128C mutation in the CTS selectively impaired the induction of aberrant retinal structures by Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a), respectively. Previous *in vitro* assays showed that Pax6(−5a) and Pax(+5a) bind to the distinct consensus sequences P6CON and 5aCON via different DNA-binding domains, namely, the NTS and the CTS, respectively. Thus, it is very likely that Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) have a different structural requirement for retinal development independently of each other and via different mechanisms. As these experiments were done in the retina that has endogenous Pax6 proteins, however, there is also a possibility that Pax6(+5a) exerts its effect on retinal development through modulation of Pax6(−5a) activity.

A different mechanism for Pax6-mediated gene regulation has been identified in *D. melanogaster* (41). There are four Pax6-related genes in *Drosophila*, namely *eyeless, twin of eyeless, eyegone* and *twin of eyegone.* Among them, *eyegone* has strong structural similarity with Pax6(+5a) and has been linked to growth control in the *Drosophila* eye. Overexpression of human Pax6(+5a) but not of Pax6(−5a) in *Drosophila* larvae induces strong overgrowth. Similarity of eyegone and Pax6(+5a) at a functional level is indicated by our data showing that overexpression of human Pax6(+5a) induces strong overgrowth of retina in the vertebrate eye.

Recently, mice lacking the Pax6(+5a) isoform were shown to have iris hypoplasia (38). Thus, the iris may be another part of the eye that is controlled by the Pax6(+5a) isoform. However, the knock-out mice showed no apparent abnormality in the retina. This does not conflict with our data, however, because mice intrinsically lack areas of high dense visual cells, including the fovea.

The regional expression of Pax6(+5a) may also be related to eyeball structure. It has been reported that a strictly controlled level of Pax6 expression is critical for the normal development of eyes. Transgenic mice carrying multiple copies of the Pax6 gene manifest severe eye anomalies and microphthalmos (42), while the same abnormalities are observed in mice with haploinsufficiency of this gene (43). However, microphthalmos is often associated with eye anomalies in which numerous eye tissues are affected (44,45). As Pax6 is expressed in numerous eye tissues throughout development (15–17), it may be that in the transgenic mice, the eye tissues, each of which expresses an abnormal dose of the gene (either loss-of-function or gain-of-function), affect neighbouring tissues and disturb their mutual relationship in eyeball growth, resulting in microphthalmos. In contrast, *in ovo* electroporation is able to transfer genes to a selected tissue. In our experiment, overexpression of Pax6 in the chick retina primordium caused enlarged eyes. The outer coat of the eyeball corresponding to areas of Pax6(+5a) misexpression was prominently enlarged. It is thought that retinal growth influences eyeball growth (1,45), and that the accumulation of retinal cells in the temporal posterior area may cause a larger growth in the temporal side of the eyeball than in the nasal side. Regional expression of the Pax6(+5a) isoform in the temporal posterior retina may lead to eyeball asymmetry.

Our observations also have implications regarding phylogenic development. The retinal layer structures are much more complex in vertebrates than in invertebrates. Structures that caused the visual cells to congregate at high density, such as the fovea, area centralis and visual streak, and eyeball asymmetry first appeared in fishes (1–3). The splice variant of Pax6 with exon 5a is present in vertebrates but not in invertebrates (20,21,38) except for *Drosophila*, which has *eyegone*, a putative homologue of Pax6(+5a) (42). Therefore, the acquisition of the Pax6 splice variant during evolution may have contributed to the formation of highly organized eye architectures that yield better vision. Thereafter, vertebrates may have preserved exon 5a so that they could form a restricted retinal domain that has high visual acuity.

The mechanism that regulates Pax6 alternative splicing has not yet been elucidated. Areas where retinal cells accumulate, including the visual streak, area centralis, and fovea, are positioned to promote visual acuity among animal species. Thus, further studies should focus on the signalling molecules that regulate the expression of Pax6 isoforms. In reproductive medicine research, studies have focused on transferring transcriptional factors into stem cells (46). As Pax6 induces the ectopic formation of eyes in flies (13) and frogs (14), this gene may be useful for regenerating regional eye tissue in vertebrates as well. Our results indicate that the use of Pax6(+5a) may be more suitable than Pax6(−5a) for reproducing highly differentiated retinal structures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Immunohistochemistry and *in situ* hybridization

A monoclonal antibody against chicken Pax6 that reacts to both Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) in chicken, monkey and human tissues has been described previously (16,17). A polyclonal antibody against the 14 amino acid residues encoded by exon 5a (THADAKVQVLDNQN) was raised by immunizing New Zealand white rabbits with a synthetic peptide. After purification, the immunoreactivity of the antibody was confirmed by ELISA and its specificity was further assayed by western blotting (data not shown). Antibodies against GFP (Clontech), 5-bromo-2′-deoxyuridine (BrdU; DAKO), Islet-1 protein (DSHB), Chx10 protein (Exalpha Biologicals), neurofilament H (DAKO) and peanut agglutinin (Vector) were purchased. Specimens were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde, embedded in a Tissue-Tek OCT compound (Sankyo, Tokyo), and cryo-sliced into 8 μm sections. The sections were stained with haematoxylin and eosin (HE), or with a specific antibody followed by visualization with peroxydase

and diaminobenzidine. Section *in situ* hybridization was performed as described (47). Probes were prepared from plasmids that contain chick *Musashi* (*Eco*RI, *T7* polymerase), *Six3* (*Hin*dIII, *T3*) and *Rx* (*Hin*dIII, *T3*).

RNA isolation and RT–PCR

Total RNA was isolated from tissues excised from one to five chick embryos using an RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen) and converted to cDNA by a standard procedure using SuperScript II reverse transcriptase and adapter primers (GibcoBRL). cDNA was amplified under nonsaturating PCR conditions using the following primer sets: chicken *Pax6*, 5′-CGGCAG AAGATCGTGGAACTCG and 5′-GCACTCTCGTTTATA CTGCGCTAT [this yields a 207 bp band for *Pax6(−5a)* and a 249 bp band for *Pax6(+5a)*]; chicken *blue opsin*, 5′-GGCCTTTATGTTCCTCCTCATCG and 5′-CAGATGA CGAGGAAGCGCTCGA (297 bp); *green opsin*, 5′-TCCCT GGTGGTCTTGGCCATAG and 5′-TGCCTCTCGGACTTT GCAGATGA (320 bp); *violet opsin*, 5′-CTACCTACAG ACGGCCTTCATG and 5′-GCAGATAACGATGTAACG CTCGA (310 bp); and *rhodopsin*, 5′-GGCTGCCTACAT GTTCATGCTGA and 5′-ACGGCCAGGACGACGAGT GAC (281 bp). The PCR products were separated by gel electrophoresis. To standardize the RNA amounts, *β-actin* was also amplified by PCR with its specific primers: 5′-GT GGGTCGCCCCAGACATCA and 5′-CTCCTTGATGTCAC GCACAATTTC (540 bp). The PCR amplication involved 30 cycles of 94°C for 1 min, 60°C for 1 min and 72°C for 2 min. It should be noted that the alternative splicing exon of the human and mouse *Pax6* genes is situated between exon 5 and 6 and is known as 5a. However, the *Pax6* gene structure of the chick strain we used has not yet been fully determined. It may be that the alternative splicing exon of the chick may later be designated differently. For example, it has been suggested that this exon in the quail *Pax6* gene should be denoted as exon 4a. Nevertheless, in this report, we employ the term 5a to indicate the alternative splicing exon in the chick *Pax6* gene.

In ovo electroporation

Expression plasmids [pCAGGS-PAX6(−5a) and pCAGGS-PAX6(+5a)] carry the entire human *PAX6* coding region with or without exon 5a under the control of a cytomegalovirus enhancer and chicken β-actin promoter (5,22). The mutant forms of PAX6 expression plasmid were generated by PCR-based *in vitro* mutagenesis (5,22,27). Fertilized eggs of a domestic chick strain were purchased from Nisseizai (Tokyo). A small window was opened for access, and phosphate buffered saline was poured over the embryo to obtain appropriate resistance. The eggs were injected with ∼0.1 μl of the DNA solution that contains an expression construct for GFP (pCAGGS–GFP) and one of the Pax6 expression plasmids (5 mg/ml) together with a fastgreen dye. The dye confirms that the injection was correctly targeted. Eggs, in which early changes are examined, were also injected with BrdU (0.3 mg/ml). The DNA solution was either injected into a region that is close to the primitive retina in the right optic cup or directly into the retina of the right eye of the embryos with a sharp glass pipette. The head of the embryo was then placed between platinum electrodes and electric pulses were applied (25–40 V, 90 ms, one to six times) with a CUY 21 electroporator (BEX Co., Tokyo). The egg-shells were sealed and the embryos were allowed to develop in humidified incubators at 38°C.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary Material is available at HMG Online.

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The *Pax6* isoform bearing an alternative spliced exon promotes the development of the neural retinal structure

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The vertebrate retina has an area where visual cells are closely packed for proper vision that is known as a fovea, an area centralis or a visual streak. The molecular mechanism that regulates the formation of these structures and visual cell gradients is unknown. The transcription factor Pax6 is a master regulator of eye development. A Pax6 isoform that contains an exon 5a-encoded 14 amino acid insertion in its paired domain, Pax6(+5a), has different DNA-binding properties compared with the Pax6(−5a) isoform. Little is known about the functional significance of Pax6(+5a). Here, we show that Pax6(+5a) is expressed especially in the retinal portion where visual cells accumulate during eye development and, when overexpressed, induces a remarkable well-differentiated retina-like structure. Pax6(+5a) proteins that bear point mutations that are found in patients with foveal hypoplasia are unable to induce these ectopic retina-like structures. We propose that Pax6(+5a) induces a developmental cascade in the prospective fovea, area centralis or visual streak region that leads to the formation of a retinal architecture bearing densely packed visual cells.

INTRODUCTION

Most vertebrates have a region of the retina where cone photoreceptors, bipolar cells and ganglion cells accumulate and specialize, which contributes to better vision (1–3). This region comes in two general forms, namely, a visual streak and an area centralis. Animals that are nocturnal or have relatively poor vision bear a visual streak, where the photoreceptors, bipolar cells and ganglion cells congregate and become specialized along a horizontal line of the eye fundus. In contrast, animals that have relatively good vision bear the area centralis, which is a circular spot in the retina. The image of an object becomes centered on this region. A specialized form of the area centralis is the fovea, which helps many reptiles and birds, and most primates achieve greater visual sensitivity. The fovea is an area in which cone photoreceptors are highly concentrated and the inner retina is thinned. Human patients lacking the fovea have a poor visual acuity of 0.1–0.3, even with lens correction (4,5). Thus, the fovea is an essential architectural feature that is required for our sharp visual acuity.

In most vertebrates that have a fovea or an area centralis, the retinal cells first accumulate, differentiate and form synaptic connections at the prospective fovea or area centralis

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region during the very early stages of eye development, corresponding to the time when ganglion cells appear in the retina. The differentiation of the retinal cells then progresses from the centre to the periphery, which results in a gradient of visual sensitivity (2,3). The molecular mechanisms that regulate the formation of these specific retinal structures are not well elucidated, although previous studies have explored mechanism and genes involved in differentiation of the retinal area (6–8).

Recently, patients with foveal hypoplasia were found to bear mutations in the *PAX6* gene (4,5). The *Pax6* gene encodes a transcription factor and plays important roles in eye morphogenesis in both vertebrates and invertebrates (9–12). This gene has been reported to induce ectopic eye formation in *Drosophila melanogaster* (13) and *Xenopus* larvae (14), and is known as a master control gene in eye formation (9–11). Pax6 is expressed in various eye tissues. In the neural retina, Pax6 is expressed widely in multipotent progenitor cells at early stages and to a lesser extent in ganglion, horizontal and amacrine cells at late stages (15–17). The *Pax6* gene produces two isoforms by alternative splicing, namely, Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a). Pax6(+5a) differs from Pax6(−5a) by the presence of an exon 5a-encoded 14 amino acid insertion in its paired-type DNA-binding domain (paired domain, or PD) (18,19). Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) show distinct DNA-binding properties (20) and their distinct consensus binding sequences have been determined. These are termed P6CON and 5aCON, respectively (21). Mutational analyses have shown that the N-terminal subdomain (NTS) and the C-terminal subdomain (CTS) of the Pax6 PD are respectively responsible for the DNA-binding abilities of Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) and their transactivation activity (20,22). Pax6(−5a) binds to a promoter element of the *ζ-crystallin* gene at a site that is highly similar to P6CON (23), while target genes of Pax6(+5a) that bear 5aCON-like sequences are yet to be identified.

Many mutations in the *PAX6* gene have been identified in human patients with foveal hypoplasia (4,5,24–27). In most classical aniridia patients, caused by haploinsufficiency of PAX6 due to its deletion or the presence of a nonsense mutation, all other eye tissues apart from the iris, including the cornea, lens, fovea and optic nerve, are also affected. In contrast, missense mutations in the *PAX6* gene cause more specific eye anomalies (4,5,25–27), probably because Pax6 has multiple functional domains and that missense mutations in this gene disturb one or only a few of these domains. Previously, we reported two PAX6 missense mutations, R128C in the CTS of the PD and V54D in exon 5a, in Japanese patients with foveal hypoplasia (4,5). An R128C mutation was again identified in an independent European patient with the same phenotype (26). These findings suggest that the CTS and exon 5a, which are two elements that are thought to be important for the function of the Pax6(+5a) isoform, may be involved in the formation of the fovea. We investigated expression pattern of Pax6(+5a) in the developing retina and effect of the isoform in retinal development by gain-of-function experiments, and here present evidence that Pax6(+5a) contributes to promote the formation of the retinal structure.

RESULTS

Pax6(+5a) is abundantly expressed in the retinal portion where visual cells accumulate

We first examined the regional expression of the Pax6 isoforms by subjecting sections of a neonatal marmoset eye (which has a fovea) to immunohistochemical staining with two different antibodies that can distinguish between the two Pax6 isoforms. One of these antibodies, which is denoted as anti-Pax6, was raised against amino acids 1–223 including those encoded by exon 5a. This antibody reacts with both Pax6(−5a) and Pax6 (+5a), as reported previously (16,17). For this study, we raised another antibody against a synthetic peptide consisting of the 14 amino acid residues that are encoded by exon 5a (anti-exon 5a). Western blotting of proteins prepared from cultured mouse embryonic carcinoma P19 cells that had been transfected with constructs expressing Pax6(−5a) or Pax6(+5a), and of marmoset tissues expressing both isoforms demonstrated the specificity of these antibodies (Fig. 1A). On the marmoset sections, anti-Pax6 visualized three layers, namely, the ganglion cell layer and the inner and outer edges of the inner nuclear layer of the retina. The foveal region was heavily stained, and both the nasal and temporal nasal sides were also stained (Fig. 1C, middle panels). This indicates the wide distribution of Pax6 proteins throughout the entire retina. In contrast, the anti-exon 5a staining pattern suggested that the Pax6(+5a) protein localizes to a restricted retinal area between the optic nerve head and the fovea (Fig. 1C b and c). This was clear when the staining in the nasal and foveal sides of the optic nerve head was compared. The staining was identified scarcely in the nasal side but obviously in the foveal side (Fig. 1C b). From these observations, we conclude that the Pax6(+5a) isoform is expressed especially in the restricted retinal portion where the densely packed visual cells reside.

Reflecting evolutionary conservation of the amino acid sequence encoded by exon 5a, the anti-exon 5a antibody reacts with chicken Pax6(+5a) as well, albeit weakly. In the chicken retina of Hamburger–Hamilton (HH) stage 45, the Pax6(+5a) protein appears to localize in a restricted retinal area of the visual streak, whereas the Pax6(−5a) protein distributes throughout the entire retina (Fig. 2A). To compare the expression levels of the two isoforms, we next performed semi-quantitative RT–PCR analysis using dissected retinal tissues of chick embryos at HH stages 12–45. The isolated RNAs were subjected to RT–PCR analysis using specific primers that flank exon 5a and can distinguish between the two isoforms *Pax6(+5a)* and *Pax6(−5a)*. At an early developmental stage (HH stage12), when the optic vesicle is formed and multipotent progenitor cells still exist in the neural retina, the two isoforms were expressed in both the central nervous system (CNS) and the eye primordium but the *Pax6(−5a)* isoform predominated (Fig. 2B). At HH stage 20, Pax6(−5a) was still the major transcript. At this stage, the formation of the eye is proceeding and lens formation is evident. During HH stages 24–30, the ganglion cells in the retina differentiate. The level of *Pax6(−5a)* expression seems to decrease transiently at HH stage 24 and increase at HH stage 30. Interestingly, the level of *Pax6(+5a)* expression gradually increased during this period

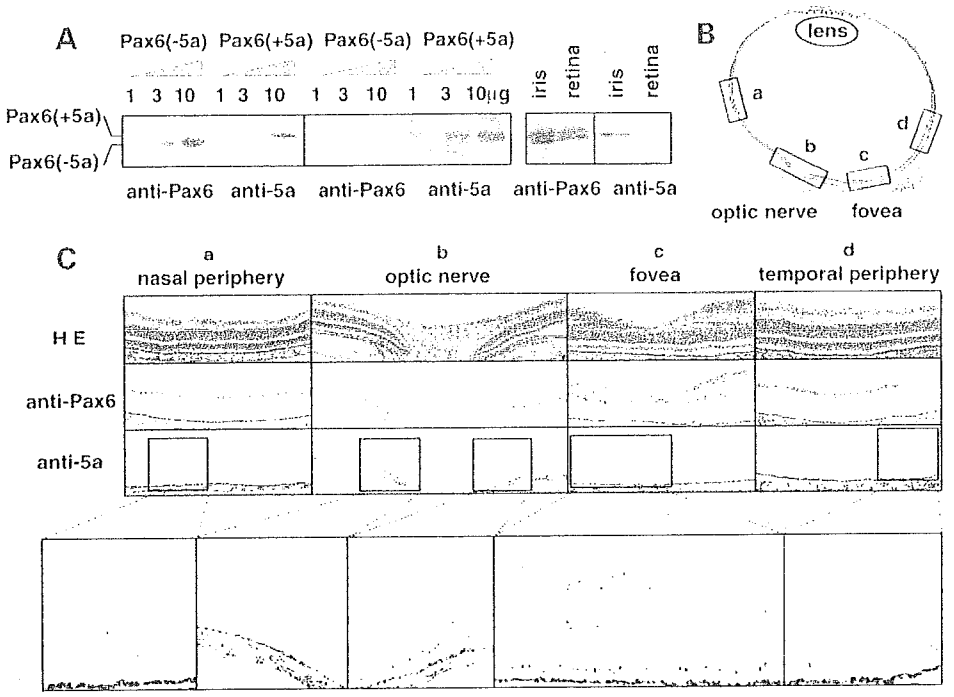

Figure 1. Histochemical analysis of the expression of the two Pax6 isoforms in the neonatal marmoset eye. (**A**) Western blotting analysis confirming the specificity of the two antibodies that were used. P19 cells (10^5 cells) were transfected with either the Pax6(−5a) or Pax6(+5a) expression construct and nuclear protein fractions obtained 24 h post-transfection were analyzed. Anti-Pax6 recognized the exogenously expressed Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) proteins as well as endogenous Pax6(−5a) protein, whereas anti-exon 5a recognized Pax6(+5a) but not Pax6(−5a). Western blotting analysis of nuclear fraction proteins obtained from the iris and retina tissues of the neonatal marmoset (*Callithrix jacchus*) also showed that anti-Pax6 recognized both native Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) proteins, whereas anti-exon 5a recognized Pax6(+5a) but not Pax6(−5a). (**B**) View of a horizontal section of the eye of a neonatal marmoset stained with HE. (**C**) Magnified fields of the eye stained with HE, anti-Pax6 or anti-exon 5a (bar scale 100 μm). Further enlarged images are shown below. a, nasal peripheral area; b, optic nerve head area; c, fovea area; d, temporal peripheral area. The staining for anti-exon 5a localizes around the fovea area, whereas that for anti-Pax6 is detected throughout the entire retina. The result shown is representative of three independent experiments using four marmoset eyes.

in all ocular tissues such as the cornea, lens and retina. Increased expression of *Pax6(+5a)* was also evident in the retina in later stages (HH stages 36–45), when all photoreceptors, horizontal and amacrine cells differentiate. Although the eyes of domestic birds lack the fovea, they possess a distinct visual streak in the posterior portion of the retina (1,2). Expression of *Pax6(+5a)* became particularly intense in this posterior portion. At HH stage 36, the expression of *Pax6(+5a)* exceeded that of *Pax6(−5a)* in the posterior retina. These observations indicate that expression of the two Pax6 isoforms are differentially regulated during retinal development, with Pax6(+5a) expression increasing only in a specified region, whereas Pax6(−5a) expression being throughout the retina.

In *ovo* misexpression of *Pax6(+5a)* gene markedly expands the retinal layer and promotes the growth and differentiation of retinal cells into visual cells

Next, we investigated the roles the two Pax6 isoforms play in the formation of the eye architecture by *in ovo* electroporation (28). Thus, an expression construct for either Pax6(+5a) or Pax6(−5a) was electroporated into the developing retina of HH stages 16–30 chick embryos, together with an expression construct of green fluorescence protein (GFP) (29) to monitor the expression of the transgenes. Expression plasmids [pCAGGS-PAX6(−5a) and pCAGGS-PAX6(+5a)] carry the entire human *PAX6* coding region with or without exon 5a under the control of a cytomegalovirus enhancer and chicken β-actin promoter, as described previously (5,22). Embryos that had been electroporated were harvested at various stages and analyzed. Retinal formation was scarcely affected when either isoform was transduced after HH stage 30 (data not shown). However, marked changes were observed when either isoform was transduced at HH stages 16–24, when the formation of the optic cup was completed. Six to twelve hours after electroporation of Pax6(−5a) and GFP (HH stage 18), the electroporated region, confirmed by staining with anti-Pax6 and anti-GFP antibodies, was found to proliferate excessively, as evidenced by intense staining with anti-5-bromo-2′-deoxyuridine (BrdU) antibody (Fig. 3). The promotion of retinal cell proliferation occurred similarly up to this stage regardless of the Pax6 isoforms overexpressed (data not shown). Electroporation of the empty vector alone, the pCAGGS-GFP or both constructs did not induce any change.

At later stages, a significant difference in the effect of the two Pax6 isoforms was observed. When Pax6(−5a) was misexpressed, 3–7 days after the electroporation (HH stages 28–35), 47% ($n = 198$) of the eyes were larger than the untreated

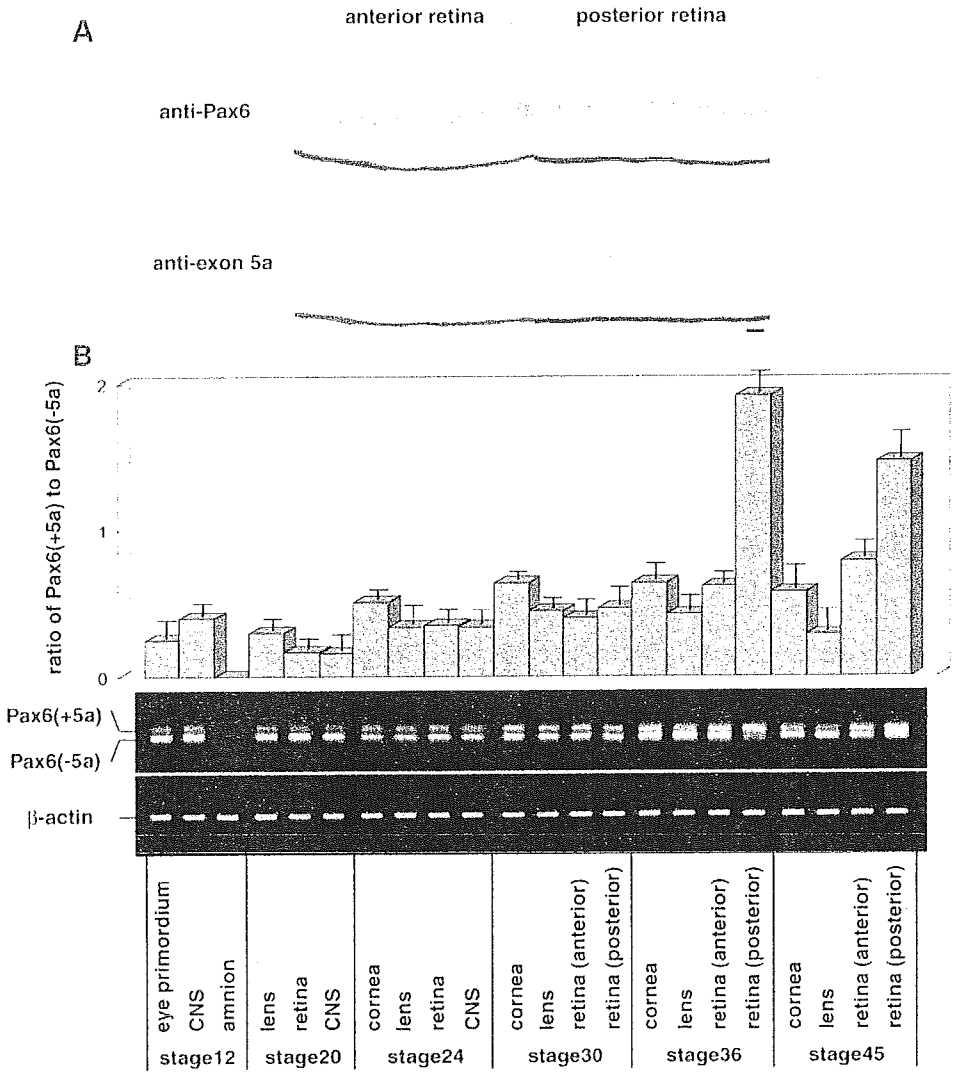

Figure 2. (**A**) Horizontal sections of the chick eye at HH stage 45 stained with anti-Pax6 or anti-exon 5a antibody (bar scale 20 μm). The Pax6(+5a) protein appears to localize in the posterior retina containing the visual streak, whereas the Pax6(−5a) protein distributes throughout the entire retina. (**B**) Semi-quantitative RT–PCR analysis of the expression of the two *Pax6* isoforms in developing chick embryos. As the eye became big enough to be dissected at later stages, *Pax6* expression could be examined in particular parts of the eye structure. The indicated PCR fragments were judged to represent one or the other *Pax6* isoform by their sizes. This was confirmed by sequencing. In the posterior retina, tissues were excised from the visual streak region. Amnion tissues were used as a negative control for *Pax6* expression and *β-actin* represents the amounts of RNA in each lane. The bar graph is shown as mean ± SD ($n = 3$) of expression ratio of Pax6(+5a) to Pax6(−5a). The photograph of RT–PCR analysis under the bar graph is representative of three independent experiments.

control eyes (Fig. 4A). Several isolated swelling spots (bulges) or lines (wrinkles) on the retina were observed in 68% of the 198 treated eyes. Green fluorescence was also observed at these areas (Fig. 4B). Histological examination showed that the retina was thickened and staining with anti-Islet1 and anti-neurofilament antibodies revealed that the differentiation of ganglion cells had expanded to the surface layer at these places (Fig. 4C). In 32% ($n = 198$) of the Pax6(−5a)-treated eyes, an embankment-like structure swelled out on the retina. In addition, several fibres (10–100 μm in length) grew out into the vitreous cavity (Fig. 4D). Sections were stained with specific antibodies for Islet1, a homeodomain-containing transcription factor that is expressed in the ganglion cells in the developing retina (30), and neurofilament protein, an intermediate filament protein specific to retinal neurons (31). The immunohistochemistry suggested that the fibres in the vitreous cavity were nerve bundles derived from ganglion cells (Fig. 4E). These abnormal structures may be caused by the unbalanced growth and differentiation of the retina, because the nerve fibres extended onto the retinal surface and formed additional layers on the retina.

When the Pax6(+5a) isoform was misexpressed instead of Pax6(−5a), more dramatic changes were observed inside the enlarged eyes 3–7 days after electroporation (HH stages 28–35). Of the 187 treated eyes, 6% had a wall-like structure protruding into the vitreous cavity, which was shown to be a

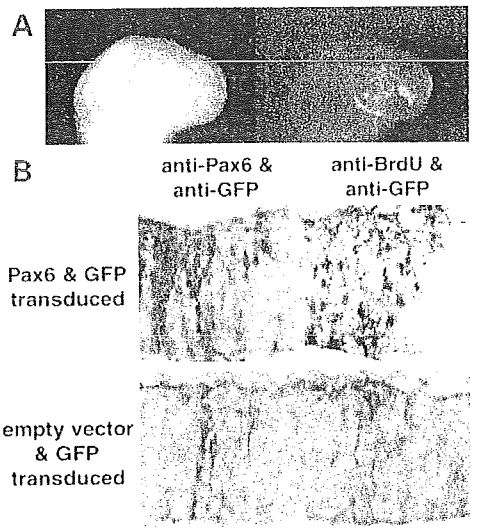

Figure 3. Early changes in the developing chick eye induced by the electroporation of Pax6(−5a). Constructs expressing Pax6(−5a) and GFP were electroporated into the right eye primordium of HH stage 16 chick embryos ($n = 5$). (**A**) Twelve hours after electroporation (HH stage 18), expression of GFP in the right eye was examined using fluorescence microscopy. (**B**) Sections double-immunostained with anti-GFP (violet) and anti-Pax6 (brown) and anti-GFP (violet) and anti-BrdU (brown) antibodies show the expression of the electroporated GFP and Pax6(−5a) constructs and the pronounced proliferation of the retinal progenitor cells around the electroporated area, but transduction of empty vector, pCAGGS-GFP or both constructs did not induce any change ($n = 5$ for each). (bar scale 20 μm). Transduction of the Pax6(+5a) isoform had a similar effect on eye development at these stages ($n = 5$; data not shown).

folded retina by histological analysis (Fig. 4G and H) and 42% showed thick stick-like structures protruding from the retina into the vitreous cavity (Fig. 4I and J). These protruding structures were very long and some even approached the lens on the opposite side. Cross sections of these protrusions were subjected to *in situ* hybridization with probes specific for *Musashi*, which encodes a neural RNA-binding protein highly enriched in neural precursor cells (32), *Six3*, a homologue of *Drosophila* homeobox gene *sine oculis*, that is expressed in inner and outer nuclear layers (33), and *Rx*, a paired-class homeobox gene, which is expressed in the inner nuclear layer, presumably bipolar cells of the developing retina (34). Immunohistochemical staining with anti-ISlet1 and anti-neurofilament antibodies was also performed (Fig. 4K). These analyses suggested that the tubular structures consist of well-differentiated retinal layers, which include nerve fibres, ganglion cells and developing inner and outer nuclear layer cells, with an outer surface layer of nerve fibres and an inner surface of photoreceptor cells. These tubular and fold structures suggest that the horizontal overgrowth of the neural retinal layer occurred at the regions where Pax6(+5a) was misexpressed. As space was limited even in the enlarged eyeball, the regional expansion of the cells seemed to push the retinal layer up into the vitreous cavity. Such drastic outgrowths that contain all retinal cell types was never obtained when Pax6(−5a) was misexpressed. Electroporation of the empty vector alone or the pCAGGS-GFP or both constructs did not induce any phenotypic changes. Thus, we conclude that the Pax6(+5a) isoform can induce horizontal overgrowths of the retina that protrude into the vitreous cavity. Of the 187 treated eyes, 34% of the Pax6(+5a)-treated eyes, which showed protrusion of the retina, became significantly larger than untreated control eyes (Fig. 4F). Although we have reproducibly generated this protruding retina by electroporating at HH stages 16–24, such morphological alterations were not induced when the electroporation was performed at later stages. Transduction of Pax6(−5a) or Pax6(+5a) using an adenoviral vector or electroporation using smaller amounts of plasmid DNAs caused similar, although somewhat weak phenotypic changes (data not shown). The incidence of the Pax6(−5a)- and Pax6(+5a)-dependent eye architectural changes at each stage is available in Supplementary Material.

We next examined the distribution of photoreceptor cells in the protruding retinal structures. Embryos were allowed to develop just before hatching (HH stages 40–45) and then analyzed. Some lectins, including peanut agglutinin and wheat germ agglutinin, specifically stain cone photoreceptor cells (35), which are normally condensed at the visual streak in the posterior portion of the chick eye (Fig. 5A and B e region). Histochemical examination revealed that the cone cells were detectable in the folded retina not only near the visual streak (d region) but also in the peripheral portion (c region) where lectin-staining is normally negative as observed in an unaffected peripheral portion (b region). Colour opsins are components of cone cells (2,3,36). RT–PCR showed that three types of colour *opsins* were expressed in the peripheral and posterior portions of the folded retina (c and d regions) at a similar level as in an unaffected region in the posterior portion of the retina (e region), and more intensely than an unaffected region of the peripheral portion of the retina (b region) (Fig. 5D). In contrast, the expression level of *rhodopsin*, a component of rod cells, was high in the peripheral areas and low in the visual streak (2,3). The peripheral portion of the folded retina (c region) exhibited *rhodopsin* expression at a similar level as the control peripheral area, whereas the expression level in the affected region in the posterior portion of the retina (d region) was similar to that in the visual streak (e region). These results suggest that the differentiation of retinal cells is highly promoted in the protruding retina to the level seen in the visual streak with regard to both the layer structure and the density of cone cells.

Effect of missense mutations of the *Pax6* gene on retinal overgrowth

To understand which element or structure of Pax6 is important for inducing the retinal overgrowth observed, we introduced several mutations into the Pax6 PD: (a) the R26G mutation in the NTS (25), (b) the R128C mutation in the CTS (4) or (c) the V54D mutation in exon 5a (5). The transactivation potentials of wild-type and mutant Pax6 with or without exon 5a have been assayed previously (5,22) or in this study using reporter genes containing P6CON or 5aCON, which are consensus binding sites for the (−5a) and (+5a) isoforms, respectively. As summarized in Figure 6A, the NTS in Pax6(−5a) wild-type is responsible for P6CON-binding,

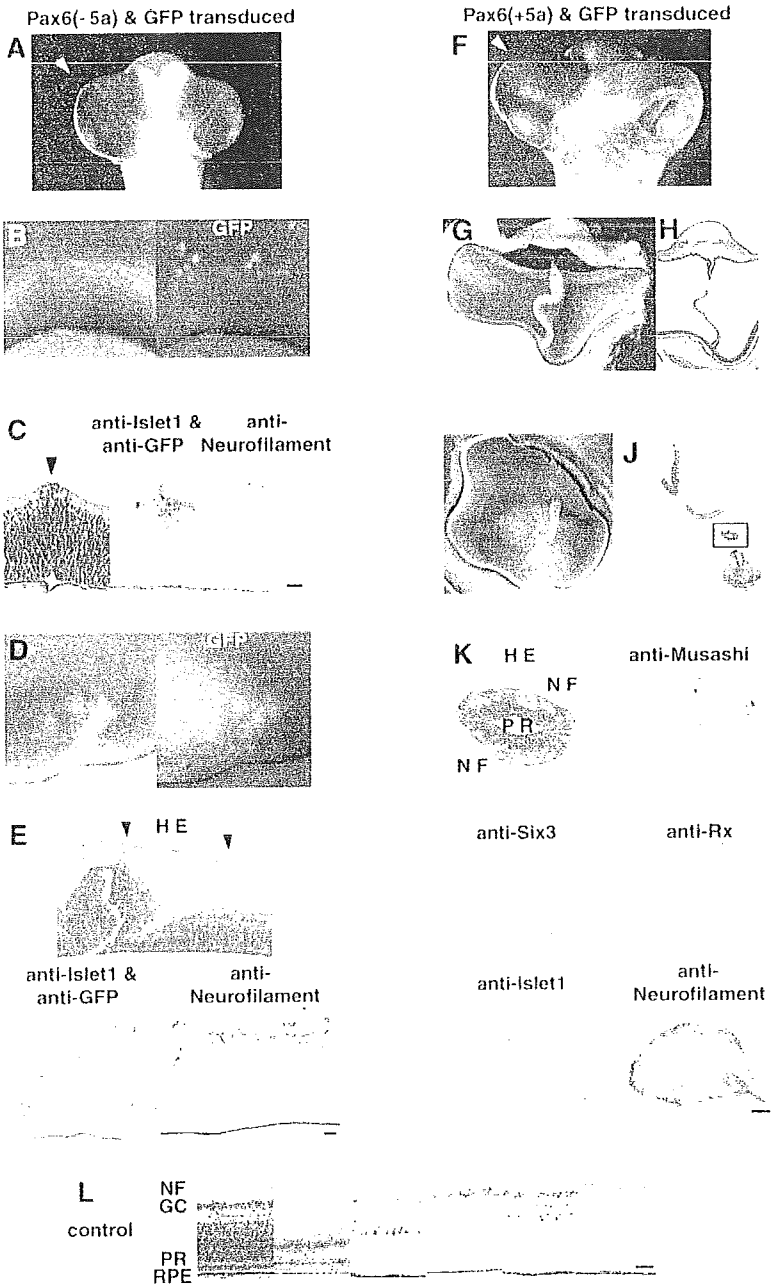

Figure 4. Later changes in the developing chick eye induced by electroporation of Pax6(−5a) (**A**–**E**) or Pax6(+5a) (**F**–**K**) together with GFP. (A–C) A Pax6(−5a)-transduced embryo at HH stage 30. (A) The frontal view shows an enlarged eye (arrowhead). (B) The inside views show several areas of swelling on the retinal layer with green fluorescence (the right panel, matched field). (C) Sections stained with HE, anti-islet1, anti-GFP and anti-neurofilament antibodies. Islet1 (brown) and GFP (violet) were double-stained. Ganglion cells (arrowhead) excessively differentiated in the surface layer of the thickened retina where the electroporated GFP constructs is expressed (bar scale 20 μm). (D, E) A Pax6(−5a)-transduced embryo at HH stage 34. (D) A view of the split eyeball shows embankment-like swelling from the retina with numerous fibres with green fluorescence (matched field). (E) Numerous fibres grow from the embankment-like retina into the vitreous cavity (arrowheads). Sections immunostained with anti-ISlet1 (brown), anti-GFP (violet in the left lower panel) and anti-neurofilament (brown) antibodies show expression of the electroporated constructs and ectopic growth of the nerve bundles from the retina (bar scale 20 μm). (F–H) A Pax6(+5a)-transduced embryo at HH stage 34. (F) A frontal view shows a significantly enlarged eye that breaks through the eyelid skin (arrowhead). Views of the split eyeball (G) and section with HE staining (H) show that the retina overgrows to show fold structure. (I–K) A Pax6(+5a)-transduced embryo at HH stage 36. Views of the split eyeball (I) and section with HE staining (J) show that the retina overgrows into stick structure. GFP expression was weak and could not be detected in the aberrantly growing tissues. (K) Analysis of the boxed region of the section indicated by (J) by *in situ* hybridization using probes specific for *Musashi*, *Six3* and *Rx* and immunohistochemistry with anti-islet1 and anti-neurofilament antibodies. These analyses suggest that the aberrantly growing tissues in the Pax6(+5a)-transduced eyes are composed of well-differentiated retina layers (bar scale 20 μm). NF, nerve fibres; PR, photoreceptors. (**L**) A portion of the posterior retina normally developing at a corresponding stage is illustrated for comparison. NF, nerve fibres; PR, photoreceptors; RPE, retinal pigment epithelium (bar scale 20 μm).

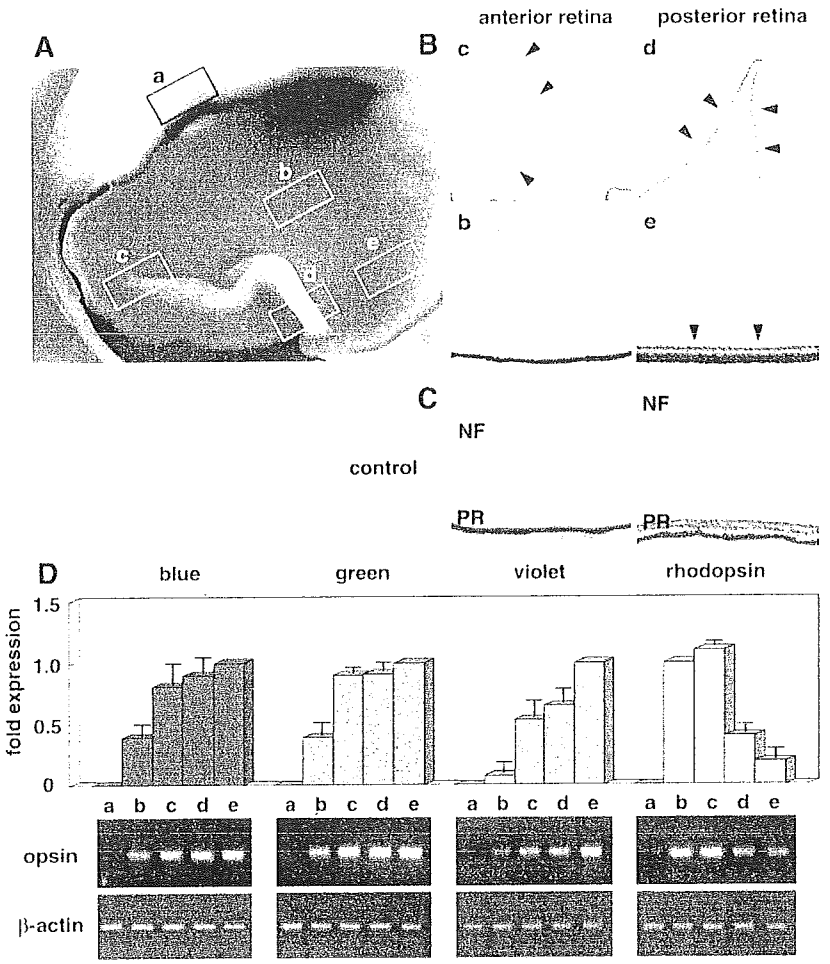

Figure 5. Differentiation of photoreceptor cells in the extruding and folded retina induced by electroporation of Pax6(+5a) at HH stage 18. (**A**) A view of a split eyeball at HH stage 45 shows the folded retina. Five areas were examined: (a) the cornea, (b) an unaffected region in the peripheral portion of the retina, (c) a peripheral portion of the folded retina, (d) a posterior portion of the folded retina and (e) an unaffected region in the posterior portion of the retina including the visual streak. (**B**) Staining with peanut agglutinin shows the presence of cone photoreceptor cells in the c region as well as in the d and e regions (arrowheads). (**C**) A portion of the retina normally developing at a corresponding stage is also illustrated for comparison. NF, nerve fibres; PR, photoreceptors (bar scale 20 μm). (**D**) Semi-quantitative RT–PCR demonstrates the expression of three colour *opsins* (*blue, green* and *violet*) and *rhodopsin* in the various regions. The bar graphs are shown as mean ± SD ($n = 3$) of ratio of expression in a–d region to that in e region (blue, green and violet *opsins*), or ratio of expression in a or c–e region to that in b region (*rhodopsin*). The photograph of RT–PCR analysis under the bar graph is representative of three independent experiments using six treated eyes.

while in Pax6(+5a) wild-type, the insertion of 14 amino acids encoded by exon 5a into the NTS abolishes its NTS P6CON-binding activity and unmasks the CTS 5aCON-binding ability. The R26G mutation in the NTS strongly impairs the NTS- and P6CON-mediated transcriptional activation of Pax6(−5a) and increases the CTS- and 5aCON-mediated transcriptional activation of Pax6(+5a). In contrast, the R128C mutation in the CTS abolishes the CTS- and 5aCON-mediated transcriptional activation of Pax6(+5a), and hyperactivates the NTS- and P6CON-mediated transcription activation of Pax6(−5a). The V54D mutation in exon 5a has a weak inhibitory effect on the CTS-and 5aCON-mediated transcriptional activation, but increases the NTS- and P6CON-mediated transcriptional activation. Thus, it has been proposed that the two subdomains negatively regulate each other, and exon 5a thus appears to function as a molecular switch that determines target gene specificity. When these mutants were misexpressed in the primordial retina of HH stages 16–30 chick embryos, only Pax6(+5a) R26G and Pax6(−5a) R128C induced a phenotypic change. Retinal overgrowth was observed in 34% and 26% of the eyes that had received Pax6(+5a) R26G ($n = 54$) and Pax6(−5a) R128C ($n = 56$) respectively, although the observed phenotypic changes were less significant than those induced by the respective wild-type Pax6 isoforms. Morphological changes induced by Pax6(+5a) R26G were more drastic than those induced by Pax6(−5a) R128C. Retinal swelling and string- and stick-like structures induced by Pax6(+5a) R26G (Fig. 6B), and fibres induced by Pax6(−5a) R128C (Fig. 6C) are shown as examples. The incidence of eye architectural changes by transduction of

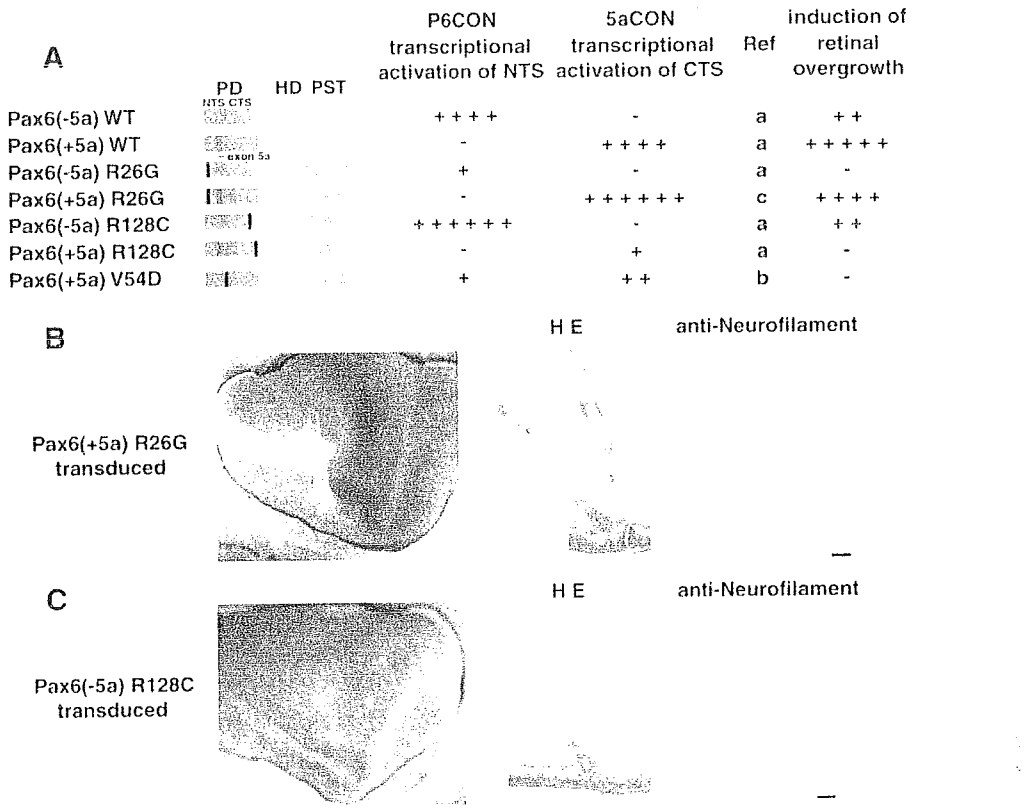

Figure 6. Effect of missense mutations of the *Pax6* gene on retinal overgrowth. (**A**) Schematic structure of the Pax6 wild-type and mutant (R26G, R128C and V54D) proteins with or without exon 5a that were used in this study. Our *in vitro* functional assays using P6CON- and 5aCON-CAT reporters in P19 cells have been reported previously [a, Yamaguchi *et al.* (22); b, Azuma *et al.* (5)] or are reported for the first time in this study (c). The effects of the mutants on overgrowth of the retina are also summarized. PD, paired domain (red, NTS; purple, CTS; blue, exon 5a; black bar, missense mutation); HD, homeodomain; PST, proline–serine–threonine rich transactivating domain. Each of the Pax6 mutants was electroporated into the right eye of HH stage 16 chick embryos and the changes around HH stage 35 were observed. (**B**) An eye that misexpresses Pax6(+5a) that carries the R26G mutation. The split eyeball shows the string- or stick-like structure of the overgrowing retina (left panel) (Pe, the pecten). Sections stained with HE and anti-neurofilament antibody suggest that the overgrowing tissues are thick bundles of nerve fibre and immature retina tissues (right panels, bar scale 100 μm). (**C**) An eye that misexpresses Pax6(−5a) that carries the R128C mutation. The split eyeball shows areas of swelling on the retina with fine fibres (left panel). Sections stained with HE and anti-neurofilament antibody reveal excessive differentiation of ganglion cells and their nerve fibres (right panels, bar scale 100 μm).

each mutant at each developmental stage is available in Supplementary Material.

DISCUSSION

We have shown here that when Pax6 is overexpressed in the developing chick eye, it induces ectopic differentiation of the retina. Compared with the effect of Pax6(−5a), Pax6(+5a) induces a remarkable artificial retina-like structure. Intriguingly, the ectopic retina-like structure induced by Pax6(+5a) is highly differentiated and contains well-formed retinal layers that express cone-specific colour opsins. We believe that the retinal overgrowth reported here is not an artifact but rather an exaggeration of the natural role of Pax6(+5a) in retinal development, namely, in the formation of the retinal area where visual cells highly accumulate. The assumption is based on two lines of evidence, as described subsequently.

First, Pax6(+5a) is expressed in a region of the developing retina where visual cells are densely packed (Figs 1 and 2). Previous studies have revealed that Pax6(+5a) is abundantly expressed in the lens and iris (37,38), but the expression pattern of Pax6(+5a) in the retina has not been clarified. As shown in previous studies and in the study reported here, the expression of the two Pax6 isoforms in the developing eye seems highly regulated at the levels of transcription and mRNA splicing (39,40).

Secondly, there is a clear correlation between the mutations in Pax6(+5a) that are associated with abnormal foveal formation in humans and that affect ectopic retinal formation in chick embryos. The V54D and R128C mutations disturbed the ectopic retinal structures induced by Pax6(+5a) as shown in Figure 6, while previous genetic analyses showed that these mutations are associated with foveal hypoplasia in human patients (4,5,26). As the V54D mutation in exon 5a should not affect the structure of Pax6(−5a), these observations suggest that Pax6(+5a) probably plays an important role in the formation of the fovea. Curiously, the V54D

mutation had only a modest effect on the transactivation activity of Pax6(+5a) in our reporter assay using P19 cells. It may be that a putative retina-specific cofactor that is not expressed in P19 cells may regulate the Pax6(+5a) activity in a V54D mutation-sensitive manner, thereby causing the apparent discrepancy. Alternatively, the V54D mutation may show a more potent effect when *cis* elements that diverge from the consensus sequences are used.

The two Pax6 isoforms seem to function differently in a qualitative rather than quantitative fashion. Pax6(−5a) overexpression does induce ectopic retina-like tissues. However, the incidence is far lower and the structures induced are far more immature when compared with those induced by Pax6(+5a) overexpression. As shown in Figure 6, the R26G mutation in the NTS and the R128C mutation in the CTS selectively impaired the induction of aberrant retinal structures by Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a), respectively. Previous *in vitro* assays showed that Pax6(−5a) and Pax(+5a) bind to the distinct consensus sequences P6CON and 5aCON via different DNA-binding domains, namely, the NTS and the CTS, respectively. Thus, it is very likely that Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) have a different structural requirement for retinal development independently of each other and via different mechanisms. As these experiments were done in the retina that has endogenous Pax6 proteins, however, there is also a possibility that Pax6(+5a) exerts its effect on retinal development through modulation of Pax6(−5a) activity.

A different mechanism for Pax6-mediated gene regulation has been identified in *D. melanogaster* (41). There are four Pax6-related genes in *Drosophila*, namely *eyeless, twin of eyeless, eyegone* and *twin of eyegone*. Among them, *eyegone* has strong structural similarity with Pax6(+5a) and has been linked to growth control in the *Drosophila* eye. Overexpression of human Pax6(+5a) but not of Pax6(−5a) in *Drosophila* larvae induces strong overgrowth. Similarity of eyegone and Pax6(+5a) at a functional level is indicated by our data showing that overexpression of human Pax6(+5a) induces strong overgrowth of retina in the vertebrate eye.

Recently, mice lacking the Pax6(+5a) isoform were shown to have iris hypoplasia (38). Thus, the iris may be another part of the eye that is controlled by the Pax6(+5a) isoform. However, the knock-out mice showed no apparent abnormality in the retina. This does not conflict with our data, however, because mice intrinsically lack areas of high dense visual cells, including the fovea.

The regional expression of Pax6(+5a) may also be related to eyeball structure. It has been reported that a strictly controlled level of Pax6 expression is critical for the normal development of eyes. Transgenic mice carrying multiple copies of the Pax6 gene manifest severe eye anomalies and microphthalmos (42), while the same abnormalities are observed in mice with haploinsufficiency of this gene (43). However, microphthalmos is often associated with eye anomalies in which numerous eye tissues are affected (44,45). As Pax6 is expressed in numerous eye tissues throughout development (15–17), it may be that in the transgenic mice, the eye tissues, each of which expresses an abnormal dose of the gene (either loss-of-function or gain-of-function), affect neighbouring tissues and disturb their mutual relationship in eyeball growth, resulting in microphthalmos. In contrast, *in ovo* electroporation is able to transfer genes to a selected tissue. In our experiment, overexpression of Pax6 in the chick retina primordium caused enlarged eyes. The outer coat of the eyeball corresponding to areas of Pax6(+5a) misexpression was prominently enlarged. It is thought that retinal growth influences eyeball growth (1,45), and that the accumulation of retinal cells in the temporal posterior area may cause a larger growth in the temporal side of the eyeball than in the nasal side. Regional expression of the Pax6(+5a) isoform in the temporal posterior retina may lead to eyeball asymmetry.

Our observations also have implications regarding phylogenic development. The retinal layer structures are much more complex in vertebrates than in invertebrates. Structures that caused the visual cells to congregate at high density, such as the fovea, area centralis and visual streak, and eyeball asymmetry first appeared in fishes (1–3). The splice variant of Pax6 with exon 5a is present in vertebrates but not in invertebrates (20,21,38) except for *Drosophila*, which has *eyegone*, a putative homologue of Pax6(+5a) (42). Therefore, the acquisition of the Pax6 splice variant during evolution may have contributed to the formation of highly organized eye architectures that yield better vision. Thereafter, vertebrates may have preserved exon 5a so that they could form a restricted retinal domain that has high visual acuity.

The mechanism that regulates Pax6 alternative splicing has not yet been elucidated. Areas where retinal cells accumulate, including the visual streak, area centralis, and fovea, are positioned to promote visual acuity among animal species. Thus, further studies should focus on the signalling molecules that regulate the expression of Pax6 isoforms. In reproductive medicine research, studies have focused on transferring transcriptional factors into stem cells (46). As Pax6 induces the ectopic formation of eyes in flies (13) and frogs (14), this gene may be useful for regenerating regional eye tissue in vertebrates as well. Our results indicate that the use of Pax6(+5a) may be more suitable than Pax6(−5a) for reproducing highly differentiated retinal structures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Immunohistochemistry and *in situ* hybridization

A monoclonal antibody against chicken Pax6 that reacts to both Pax6(−5a) and Pax6(+5a) in chicken, monkey and human tissues has been described previously (16,17). A polyclonal antibody against the 14 amino acid residues encoded by exon 5a (THADAKVQVLDNQN) was raised by immunizing New Zealand white rabbits with a synthetic peptide. After purification, the immunoreactivity of the antibody was confirmed by ELISA and its specificity was further assayed by western blotting (data not shown). Antibodies against GFP (Clontech), 5-bromo-2′-deoxyuridine (BrdU; DAKO), Islet-1 protein (DSHB), Chx10 protein (Exalpha Biologicals), neurofilament H (DAKO) and peanut agglutinin (Vector) were purchased. Specimens were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde, embedded in a Tissue-Tek OCT compound (Sankyo, Tokyo), and cryo-sliced into 8 μm sections. The sections were stained with haematoxylin and eosin (HE), or with a specific antibody followed by visualization with peroxydase

and diaminobenzidine. Section *in situ* hybridization was performed as described (47). Probes were prepared from plasmids that contain chick *Musashi* (*Eco*RI, *T7* polymerase), *Six3* (*Hin*dIII, *T3*) and *Rx* (*Hin*dIII, *T3*).

RNA isolation and RT–PCR

Total RNA was isolated from tissues excised from one to five chick embryos using an RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen) and converted to cDNA by a standard procedure using SuperScript II reverse transcriptase and adapter primers (GibcoBRL). cDNA was amplified under nonsaturating PCR conditions using the following primer sets: chicken *Pax6*, 5′-CGGCAG AAGATCGTGGAACTCG and 5′-GCACTCTCGTTTATA CTGCGCTAT [this yields a 207 bp band for *Pax6(−5a)* and a 249 bp band for *Pax6(+5a)*]; chicken *blue opsin*, 5′-GGCCTTTATGTTCCTCCTCATCG and 5′-CAGATGA CGAGGAAGCGCTCGA (297 bp); *green opsin*, 5′-TCCCT GGTGGTCTTGGCCATAG and 5′-TGCCTCTCGGACTTT GCAGATGA (320 bp); *violet opsin*, 5′-CTACCTACAG ACGGCCTTCATG and 5′-GCAGATAACGATGTAACG CTCGA (310 bp); and *rhodopsin*, 5′-GGCTGCCTACAT GTTCATGCTGA and 5′-ACGGCCAGGACGACGAGT GAC (281 bp). The PCR products were separated by gel electrophoresis. To standardize the RNA amounts, *β-actin* was also amplified by PCR with its specific primers: 5′-GT GGGTCGCCCCAGACATCA and 5′-CTCCTTGATGTCAC GCACAATTTC (540 bp). The PCR amplication involved 30 cycles of 94°C for 1 min, 60°C for 1 min and 72°C for 2 min. It should be noted that the alternative splicing exon of the human and mouse *Pax6* genes is situated between exon 5 and 6 and is known as 5a. However, the *Pax6* gene structure of the chick strain we used has not yet been fully determined. It may be that the alternative splicing exon of the chick may later be designated differently. For example, it has been suggested that this exon in the quail *Pax6* gene should be denoted as exon 4a. Nevertheless, in this report, we employ the term 5a to indicate the alternative splicing exon in the chick *Pax6* gene.

In ovo electroporation

Expression plasmids [pCAGGS-PAX6(−5a) and pCAGGS-PAX6(+5a)] carry the entire human *PAX6* coding region with or without exon 5a under the control of a cytomegalovirus enhancer and chicken β-actin promoter (5,22). The mutant forms of PAX6 expression plasmid were generated by PCR-based *in vitro* mutagenesis (5,22,27). Fertilized eggs of a domestic chick strain were purchased from Nisseizai (Tokyo). A small window was opened for access, and phosphate buffered saline was poured over the embryo to obtain appropriate resistance. The eggs were injected with ∼0.1 μl of the DNA solution that contains an expression construct for GFP (pCAGGS–GFP) and one of the Pax6 expression plasmids (5 mg/ml) together with a fastgreen dye. The dye confirms that the injection was correctly targeted. Eggs, in which early changes are examined, were also injected with BrdU (0.3 mg/ml). The DNA solution was either injected into a region that is close to the primitive retina in the right optic cup or directly into the retina of the right eye of the embryos with a sharp glass pipette. The head of the embryo was then placed between platinum electrodes and electric pulses were applied (25–40 V, 90 ms, one to six times) with a CUY 21 electroporator (BEX Co., Tokyo). The egg-shells were sealed and the embryos were allowed to develop in humidified incubators at 38°C.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary Material is available at HMG Online.

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Transdifferentiation of the retinal pigment epithelia to the neural retina by transfer of the Pax6 transcriptional factor

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The *Pax6* gene plays an important role in eye morphogenesis throughout the animal kingdom. The *Pax6* gene and its homologue could form ectopic eyes by targeted expression in *Drosophila* and *Xenopus*. Thus, this gene is a master gene for the eye morphogenesis at least in these animals. In the early development of the vertebrate eye, Pax6 is required for the instruction of multipotential progenitor cells of the neural retina (NR). Primitive retinal pigment epithelial (RPE) cells are able to switch their phenotype and differentiate into NR under exogenous intervention, including treatment with fibroblast growth factors (FGFs), and surgical removal of endogenous NR. However, the molecular basis of phenotypic switching is still controversial. Here, we show that Pax6 alone is sufficient to induce transdifferentiation of ectopic NR from RPE cells without addition of FGFs or surgical manipulation. Pax6-mediated transdifferentiation can be induced even at later stages of development. Both *in vivo* and *in vitro* studies show that the Pax6 lies downstream of FGF signaling, highlighting the central roles of Pax6 in NR transdifferentiation. Our results provide an evidence of retinogenic potential of nearly mature RPE and a cue for new therapeutic approaches to regenerate functional NR in patients with a visual loss.

INTRODUCTION

Once the neural retina (NR) is damaged by developmental malformation or age-related degeneration, it is unable to regenerate, therefore resulting in a significant visual loss. Regeneration of well-defined NR has not been induced in human retinal tissues by previous trials. In contrast, in adult salamander eyes, fully functional NR regenerates from retinal pigment epithelial (RPE) cells, when the endogenous NR is surgically removed (1). However, this regenerative event can be seen only in some amphibian eyes, but not in the eyes of other higher animals. Nonetheless, Muller cells in the postnatal chick NR de-differentiate and form NR neurons, in response to acute chemical damage (2). Pigmented ciliary margin cells in the adult mouse eye are able to form sphere colonies *in vitro* and differentiate into NR specific

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cells, including photoreceptors (PR), bipolar cells and Muller cells (3). Iris tissues in the adult rat eye generate cells expressing rhodopsin, a specific antigen for rod PR (4). These observations suggest that, even in higher animals, regeneration of functional NR could be induced in some circumstances.

In embryonic eyes of chicks and mice, the primitive RPE (until embryonic day 4.5 in chick embryos, and E15 in rat embryos) is able to switch its phenotype and transdifferentiate into NR when treated with fibroblast growth factors (FGFs) (5–8). The two distinct functional components of the vertebrate retina, the inner NR and outer RPE, develop as a two-layered optic cup that is formed by folding the optic vesicle at an early stage of development. Because FGFs are expressed in the anterior parts of the primitive eye, they are considered to play roles for NR differentiation as well (6). Primitive RPE may still have retinogenic potential, but once it differentiates to mature one, it loses its potential to transdifferentiate to NR even by treatment with FGFs. Although several transcription factors and signaling cascade have been reported to act downstream of FGF signaling (7,8), nuclear events that control the differentiation competence of FGF signaling remain unsolved.

The *Pax6* gene, encoding a paired-class transcription factor, is critical for eye development (9). Target expression of the *eyeless* gene, a *Pax6* homologue of *Drosophila melanogaster*, results in ectopic formation of functional compound eyes on the wings, legs and antennae (10). The *Pax6* can also induce ectopic eyes in frog *Xenopus larvae* (11), indicating that the gene can initiate the regulatory cascade for eye formation in both invertebrates and vertebrates. Ectopic eyes in frogs contain all major components of eye, but not the full architecture. Ectopic eye architectures have been also induced by misexpression of other transcription factors, *eyes absent* (12–14), *sine oculis/Six*(14–18), *dachshund* (13,19), *Rx* (20) and *teashirt*(21), that lie downstream of or cooperate with *eyeless/Pax6* in the eye morphogenesis, in *Drosophila* (12–14,19,21) and vertebrates (15–18,20). However, such ectopic eye architectures are far smaller and more immature compared with those induced by *eyeless/Pax6* misexpression. Thus, *Pax6* could be a useful tool for the regeneration of eye tissues in vertebrates. We transduced the human *Pax6* gene into avian RPE cells *in vivo*, and elucidate here a direct role of the *Pax6* gene in transdifferentiation of fully structured NR from nearly mature RPE cells and also a functional relationship between FGF signaling and this gene.

RESULTS

In ovo misexpression of the *Pax6* gene induces fully structured NR from RPE cells

To analyze the effect of Pax6 on RPE, expression plasmids that carry the human *Pax6* cDNAs were misexpressed in the RPE of chick embryos by *in ovo* electroporation (22). The *Pax6* gene produces two isoforms by alternative splicing: one with exon 5a and another without this exon. The variant 5a form has an additional 14 amino acid residues inserted into the DNA-binding domain, paired domain (PD) (23,24). We generated two plasmids carrying each isoform [pCAGGS–Pax6(−5a) or pCAGGS–Pax6(+5a)] (25–27). Areas expressing the exogenous gene were monitored by signals of green fluorescence protein (GFP) by co-electroporating pCAGGS–GFP (Fig. 1A) (28).

When Pax6(−5a) or Pax6(+5a) was misexpressed in the RPE at stage 12–40, RPE cells were found to lose their intracellular pigments and form a thick cell layer 1–2 days after electroporation, whereas the control RPE, in which empty plasmid (pCAGGS) alone, pCAGGS–GFP or both constructs were electroporated, showed the normal morphology. Immunohistochemical analyses using anti-GFP and anti-Pax6 antibodies detected distinct staining in the thickened RPE layer. Cross sections were subjected to *in situ* hybridization with probes specific for transcription factors or signaling molecules that regulate the proliferation of retinal progenitor cells and the specification of cell fate. *Musashi*, which encodes a neural RNA-binding protein, highly enriched in neural precursor cells (29). *Notch1*, which encodes a receptor for a signaling pathway, regulates neurogenesis (30). *Six3*, a homologue of *Drosophila* homeobox gene *sine oculis*, is early on expressed in the optic vesicle, turns off in the future pigment epithelium and becomes restricted to the prospective NR and to the lens placode. In the NR development, *Six3* is expressed in the entire undifferentiated neuroepithelium, then in differentiating cell layers including the inner and outer nuclear layer, and ganglion cell layer (31). *Rx*, a paired-class homeobox gene, is expressed early on in the optic vesicle and later on in the inner on nuclear layer, presumably bipolar cells of the developing NR (20). *In situ* hybridization detected signals for *Musashi, Notch1* and *Rx* 12 h after electroporation (Fig. 1B), then that for *Six3* 36 h after electroporation (Fig. 1C), suggesting that they transdifferentiate to NR. Signals for *Rx* in endogenous and ectopic retinas transiently decreased at a stage when bipolar cells do not yet differentiate. At these early phases post-*Pax6* transduction, immunohistochemical staining with antibodies against retinal cell markers cited below was yet undetectable (data not shown). When electroporation was performed even in stage 40 embryos, RPE cells were still found to transdifferentiate to NR. GFP fluorescence is no longer detectable 5–7 days after electroporation, as expression of GFP was terminated or faded out owing to cell growth. In a serial section of each eye at early phases after electroporation, NR transdifferentiation was seen only within the areas showing GFP fluorescence. Electroporation of the pCAGGS alone, pCAGGS–GFP or both constructs failed to induce transdifferentiation, suggesting that the *Pax6* gene alone is able to transdifferentiate NR from RPE cells without addition of FGFs or surgical manipulation. Embryos were unable to survive or hatch, when electroporation was performed at later than stage 40.

Four to five days after electroporation, formation of ectopic NR occurred as a wide sheet, but later in spotted areas, which scattered in the whole fundus (Fig. 2A). Sections showed that the ectopic NR is well differentiated, and the vertical direction of the transdifferentiated NR layers was reversed with PR inside and ganglion cells outside (Fig. 2B), similar to the FGF-treated eyes (5–8). Cross sections were subjected to *in situ* hybridization with probes specific for *Musashi, Notch1, Six3* and *Rx*. Sections also were subjected to immunohistochemistry with antibodies against retinal cell markers: Islet1, a homeodomain-containing transcription factor that is

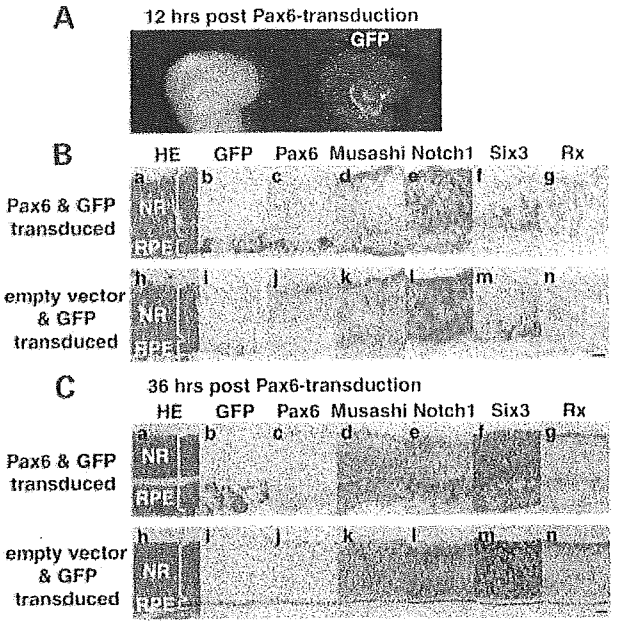

Figure 1. Early phases of NR transdifferentiation from RPE cells by electroporation of the *Pax6* gene. The *Pax6* and *GFP* genes were misexpressed into the outer layer of the optic cup of stage 18 chick embryos. Eyes were examined 12 h (**A** and **B**) and 36 h (**C**) after electroporation. (A) Expression of GFP in the outer layer of the right eye was examined using fluorescence microscopy. (B and C) Light microscopy [a, h; hematoxylin and eosin (HE) staining]. Immunohistochemistry with antibodies for GFP (b, i) and Pax6 (c, j). *In situ* hybridization with probes specific for *Musashi* (d, k), *Notch1* (e, l), *Six3* (f, m) and *Rx* (g, n). Eyes misexpressed with Pax6 (a–g) and conrols (h–n). Pax6 in the thickened RPE layer are exogenous, whereas that in NR may be endogenous (c). Bars, 20 μm.

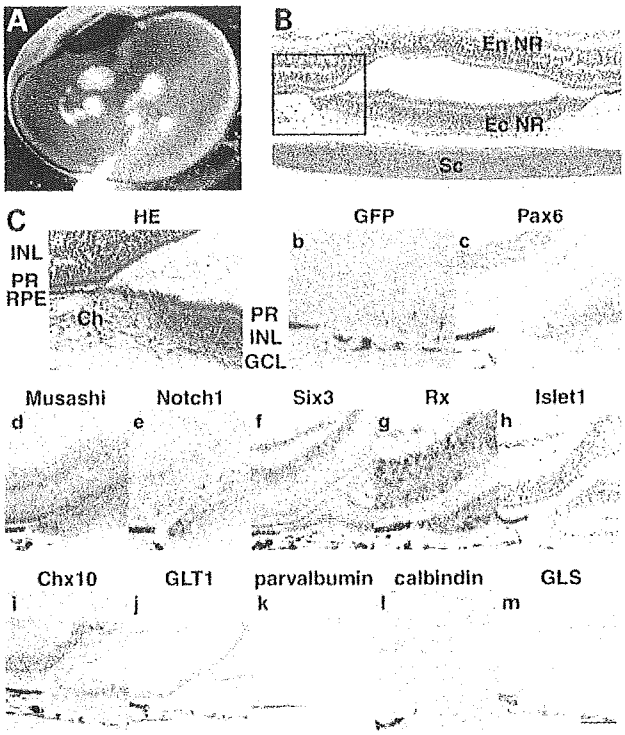

Figure 2. Fully structured NR transdifferentiation from RPE cells by electroporation of the *Pax6* gene. The *Pax6* gene was misexpressed into the RPE layer of stage 24 chick embryos, and eyes were examined at stage 40. (**A**) In a half of the eyeball, patched areas of white swelling tissue are scattered. At this time, GFP is no longer detectable by fluorescence microscopy (data not shown). (**B**) Light microscopy [hematoxylin and eosin (HE) staining] of the white swelling tissue in (A). EcNR, the ectopic NR transdifferentiated from RPE; EnNR, the endogenous NR; Sc, the sclera. (**C**) Light microscopy (a; HE staining), immunohistochemistry with antibodies for GFP (b), Pax6 (c), Islet1 (h), Chx10 (i), glutamate transporter 1 (GLT1, j), parvalbumin (k), calbindin (l) and glutamine synthetase (GLS, m), and *in situ* hybridization against *Musashi* (d), *Notch1* (e), *Six3* (f) and *Rx* (g) in magnified fields of the boxed area in (B). GCL, the ganglion cells layer; INL, the inner nuclear layer; PR, photoreceptors and Ch, the choroid. Immunoproducts for GFP was detectable in few cells in the ectopic NR. Bar, 100 μm. The results shown are representative of more than 200 independent experiments.

expressed in the ganglion cells in the developing retina (32); Chx10, a paired-type homeobox-containing transcription factor that is expressed in bipolar cells (33); glutamate transporter 1 that removes glutamine from the synaptic cleft and is expressed in bipolar cells and terminals of PR (34); parvalbumin, a low molecular weight calcium-binding protein that is expressed in amacrine cells (35); calbindin, a calcium binding protein involved in calcium transport that is expressed in horizontal cells (35,36) and glutamine synthetase that catalyzes the amination of glutamic acid to form glutamine and is highly enriched in Muller glial cells (37). The *in situ* hybridization and immunohistochemical staining resulted in distinct staining of each type of NR neuronal and glial cells, including PR, bipolar cells, amacrine cells, horizontal cells, ganglion cells and Muller cells, at correct layers (Fig. 2C), suggesting that they were well-differentiated NR as observed in the endogenous NR. The endogenous NR attaching to the ectopic NR is slightly thinner than that attaching to the intact RPE. Fully structured NR was formed through the fundus, albeit in small spotted areas, when Pax6 was misexpressed until stage 40 (Fig. 3B). Nearly mature RPE cells lose their intracellular pigments and form a thick NR layer, in which the neuronal cell-specific genes were expressed, when Pax6(−5a) or Pax6(+5a) was misexpressed in the RPE even at stage 35–40 (Fig. 3A). The *in situ* hybridization and immunohistochemistry also showed that the ectopic NR is relatively well differentiated, which forms irregular laminar structure but contains each type of NR neuronal and glial cells (Fig. 3C).

Ectopic NR was identified histologically in 83% ($n = 393$) of the eyes transduced with *Pax6* at stage 12–24 and in 68% ($n = 196$) of eyes treated at stage 30–40. Fully structured ectopic NR was identified in 77% ($n = 250$) of morphologically altered eyes treated at stage 12–24 and in 46% ($n = 134$) of altered eyes treated at stage 30–40. Further details on the incidence of the Pax6-dependent eye architectural changes at each stage are available in Supplementary Material, Table S1. No difference was seen between two *Pax6* isoforms (either −5a or +5a) by the *in situ* hybridization and immunohistochemical analysis. Transduction of *Pax6* using an adenoviral vector or electroporation using lower dose of plasmid constructs caused similar, although somewhat weak, phenotypic changes (data not shown).

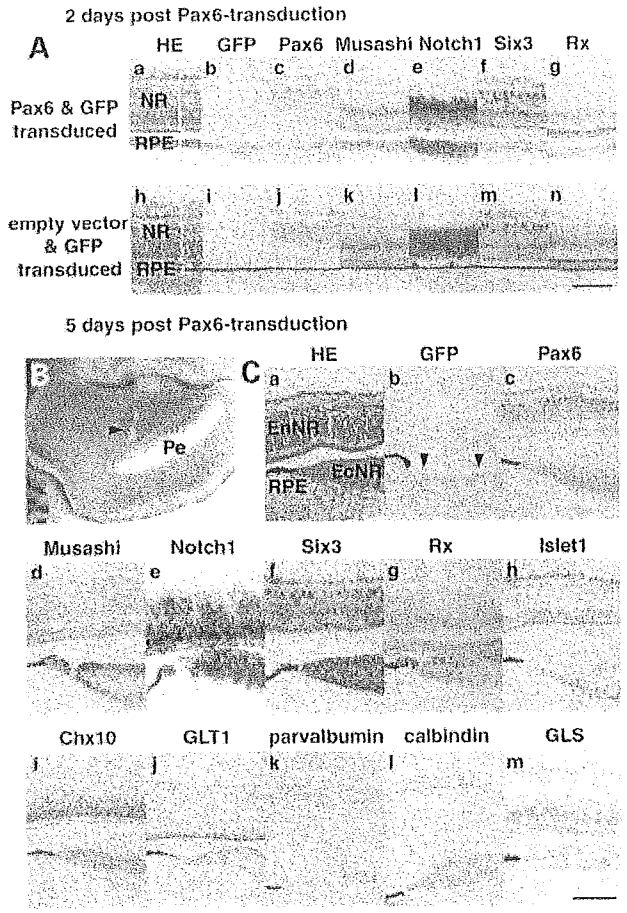

Figure 3. NR transdifferentiation from RPE cells by electroporation of the *Pax6* gene at a late stage. The *Pax6* and *GFP* genes were misexpressed into the RPE layer at stage 35. Eyes were examined 2 days (at stage 37) (**A**) and 5 days (at stage 40) (**B** and **C**) post electroporation. (A) Light microscopy [a, h; hematoxylin and eosin (HE) staining], immunohistochemistry with antibodies for GFP (b, i) and Pax6 (c, j), and *in situ* hybridization with probes specific for *Musashi* (d, k), *Notch1* (e, l), *Six3* (f, m) and *Rx* (g, n). Pax6 in the thickened RPE layer are exogenous, whereas that in NR may be endogenous (c). (B) In a half of the eyeball, small areas of white swelling tissue (arrowhead) are detected. At this time, GFP is no longer detectable by fluorescence microscopy. Pe, the pecten. (C) Light microscopy (a; HE staining), immunohistochemistry for GFP (b), Pax6 (c), Islet1 (h), Chx10 (i), glutamate transporter 1 (GLT1, j), parvalbumin (k), calbindin (l) and glutamine synthetase (GLS, m), and *in situ* hybridization for *Musashi* (d), *Notch1* (e), *Six3* (f) and *Rx* (g). EcNR, the ectopic NR transdifferentiated from RPE; EnNR, the endogenous NR. GFP in the ectopic NR is expressed partially and weakly (b, arrowheads), whereas Pax6 is widely but in mottle (c). Bars in each, 100 μm. The results shown are representative of more than 50 independent experiments.

Effect of missense mutations or repression of the *Pax6* gene in NR transdifferentiation

To identify the critical domains in the Pax6 for the ectopic NR induction, we transduced several mutations into the *Pax6* gene and misexpressed them in the RPE of stage 12–40 embryos. For this purpose, we generated expression plasmids carrying several Pax6 mutants, in which an amino acid is substituted in either the PD or the homeodomain (HD). Namely, (a) F258S mutant with substitution in HD found in optic nerve anomaly (27) (Fig. 4A, (2)], (b) R26G mutant with an amino acid substitution in the N-terminal subdomain (NTS) of PD found in patients with anterior segment eye anomaly (38) [Fig. 4A, (3)] and (c) R128C mutant with amino acid substitution in the C-terminal subdomain (CTS) of PD found in foveal hypoplasia (39) [Fig. 4A, (4)]. Repression by these mutations of DNA-binding to respective binding-consensus motifs was already confirmed by an *in vitro* functional assay (25–27). When these mutants were misexpressed, only the F258S mutant, either with or without exon 5a, induced the RPE to NR conversion, yet with an incomplete layers structure (Fig. 4B and C). Other mutants failed to induce ectopic NR formation in more than 200 eyes we examined.

To analyze the effects induced by repression of the endogenous Pax6 function in the development of NR and RPE, we next expressed a dominant-negative form of the gene into the early developing eye. For this purpose, we fused an *Engrailed* (*En*) repressor domain to Pax6delC+, in which the C-terminal proline–serine–threonine rich transactivation domain was deleted [En(s)–Pax6delC+, Fig. 4A, (5)] (40,41). When this mutant was expressed in the optic vesicle at stage 8–10, eye formation was totally disturbed, consequently resulting in anophthalmos (data not shown). In contrast, when this plasmid was electroporated in the optic cup at stage 12–18, microphthalmos was induced with relatively normal RPE, but with scarce, malformed NR (Fig. 4D and E). Consistent with previous results, these findings indicate that endogenous Pax6 is important and pivotal for correct NR differentiation, but not for RPE development. The incidence of eye architectural changes by the transduction of each mutant at each developmental stage is available in Supplementary Material, Table S1.

These findings indicated that the ectopic retina was formed not as an artifact by electroporation procedure, but by function of misexpressed Pax6, and that PD, but not HD, is required for retinal transdifferentiation and ectopic NR formation.

Pax6 is expressed in the ectopic NR transdifferentiated from RPE by FGFs treatment

According to previous protocols (5–8), we injected FGF2 or FGF8 protein or electroporated *Fgf-8* cDNA into mesenchymal tissue surrounding the eye of stage 12–40 chick embryos. In both cases, NR was transdifferentiated from RPE, and the vertical direction of its layers was again reversed (Fig. 5A–D) (data on FGF8 protein not shown), as observed in Pax6 misexpression (Figs 1–3) and previous reports (5–8). Ectopic NR was identified histologically in 85% ($n = 177$) and 67% ($n = 159$) in FGF2 and FGF8 protein-treated eyes and 67% ($n = 92$) in *Fgf-8* cDNA introduced eyes, respectively, and fully structured NR layers were found in 45% ($n = 151$), 27% ($n = 107$) and 25% ($n = 63$) in morphologically altered eyes, only when FGF treatment was carried out before stage 24, whereas Pax6-mediated transdifferentiation can be induced until much later stages. In other cases, a mixture of various NR architectures including cell aggregation and rosettes was observed. We examined endogenous Pax6 expression in ectopic NR by immunohistochemistry and confirmed that Pax6 expression is induced in RPE cells 6–12 h

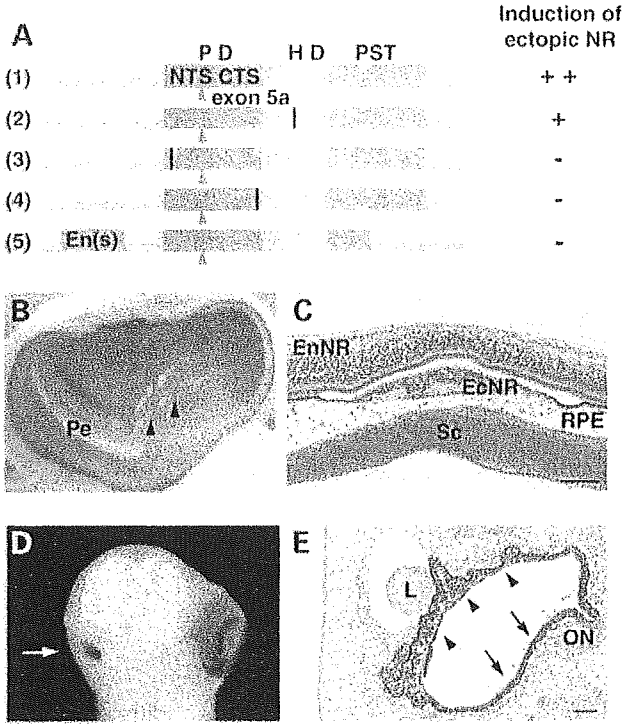

Figure 4. Effect of missense mutations or repression of the Pax6 gene in NR transdifferentiation. (**A**) Structure of the *Pax6* cDNA (1), Pax6 mutants [F258S (2), R26G (3) and R128C (4)] and En(s)–Pax6delC+ (5) used in these studies. The effects of the mutants and repression on NR transdifferentiation are also summarized. PD, paired domain [red, N-terminal subdomain (NTS); purple, C-terminal subdomain (CTS); red triangle, exon 5a]; HD, homeodomain; PST, proline–serine–threonine rich transactivating domain; En(s), En repression domain. (**B** and **C**) A stage 40 chick embryo, in which a Pax6 mutant F258S was misexpressed in RPE at stage 24. (B) A half of the eyeball shows linear areas of white tissue (arrowheads) were scattered. Pe, the pecten. (C) Light microscopy [hematoxylin and eosin (HE) staining] shows the ectopic NR (EcNR) that contains rosettes was transdifferentiated from RPE. EnNR, the endogenous NR; Sc, the sclera. Bar, 100 μm. (**D** and **E**) The Pax6 suppressant, pCAGGS–En(s)–Pax6delC+, was misexpressed by electroporation into the right eye of stage 18 chick embryos, and the resulting morphology was examined at stage 28. (D) The right eye developed microphthalmos (arrow) as evident in comparison with the normally developed eye on the other side. (E) The endogenous NR retina is absent, while in contrast, development of RPE (arrows) and the ciliary body (arrowheads) are less disturbed (HE staining). L, the lens; ON, the presumable optic nerve. Bar, 50 μm. Each result shown is representative of more than 50 independent experiments.

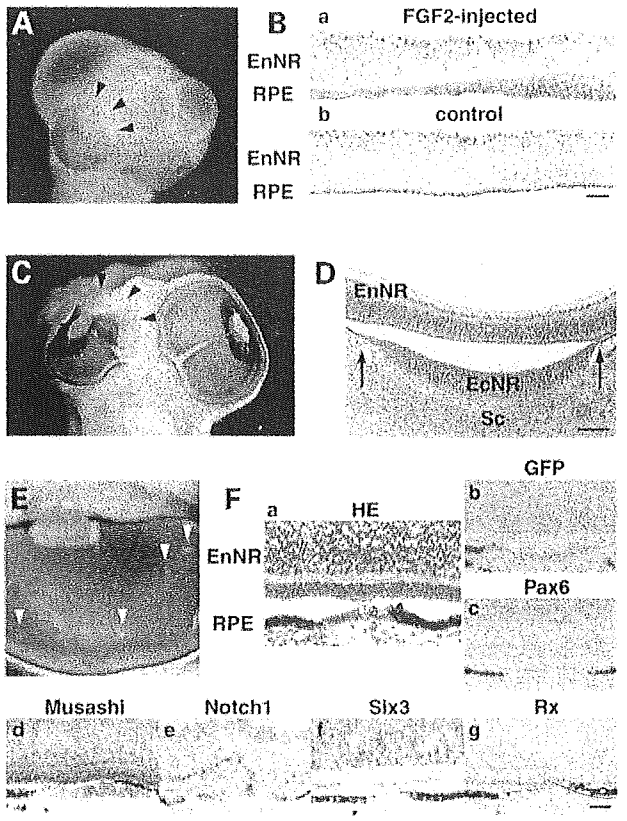

Figure 5. Expression of Pax6 in the ectopic NR transdifferentiated from RPE by FGFs treatment. (**A** and **B**) A stage 20 embryo, in which FGF2 was injected 12 h before (stage 18). (A) In the anterior half of the eye, the RPE layers lose pigments (arrowheads). (B) Immunohistochemistry shows expression of Pax6 in the endogenous NR (EnNR) and RPE of the eye treated with FGF2 that begins to transdifferentiate (a), but only in EnNR in the control tissue (b). Bar, 20 μm. (**C** and **D**) A stage 30 chick embryo, in which *Fgf-8* DNA was electroporated into RPE at stage 18. (C) A half of the eyeball shows that the anterior portion of RPE transdifferentiates to NR (arrowheads). (D) Light microscopy [hematoxylin and eosin (HE) staining] shows the layers of the ectopic NR (EcNR) in the back match with those of the endogenous NR (EnNR). Sc, the sclera; arrows, transition portion of RPE and the ectopic NR. Bar, 100 μm. (**E** and **F**) A stage 30 chick embryo, in which Fgf-8 expression plasmid, a Pax6 dominant-negative form expression plasmid [pCAGGS–En(s)–Pax6delC+] and GFP expression plasmid were co-electroporated into RPE at stage 18. (E) Small spots of white tissue (arrowheads) scattered in the fundus were formed. GFP is undetectable by fluorescence microscopy (data not shown). (F) Light microscopy (a; HE staining) shows loss of pigments and morphological change in RPE cells. Immunohistochemistry for anti-GFP (b) and anti-Pax6 (c) antibodies and *in situ* hybridization against *Musashi* (d), *Notch1* (e), *Six3* (f) and *Rx* (*g*). Compared with number of GFP-positive cells, Pax6 is expressed rarely and weakly in morphologically altered RPE cells, although the anti-Pax6 antibody detects both endogenous Pax6 and exogenous En(s)-Pax6delC+. Bar, 20 μm. Each result shown is representative of more than 10 independent experiments.

after FGFs treatment, at which the cells began to switch their phenotype (Fig. 5A and B).

Next, we co-electroporated two expression plasmids that contain *Fgf-8* cDNA and dominant-negative *Pax6* (En(s)–Pax6delC+) into the developing eye. In this case, only a few small spots of white tissue were formed (Fig. 5E). Histological analysis showed immature NR formation. *In situ* hybridization signals for *Musashi* and *Notch1* were distinctly positive and those for *Six3* and *Rx* were faint (Fig. 5F), whereas immunohistochemical staining with antibodies against retinal cell markers was not detectable (data not shown), indicating that NR differentiation of RPE was premature and incomplete. These findings suggest that Pax6 mediates ectopic NR formation by FGFs treatment. The incidence of the FGFs-dependent eye architectural changes at each stage is available in Supplementary Material, Table S1.

FGFs upregulates Pax6 in mouse embryonic carcinoma P19 cells

To investigate the effects of FGF signaling on Pax6 expression, we performed an *in vitro* functional assay using

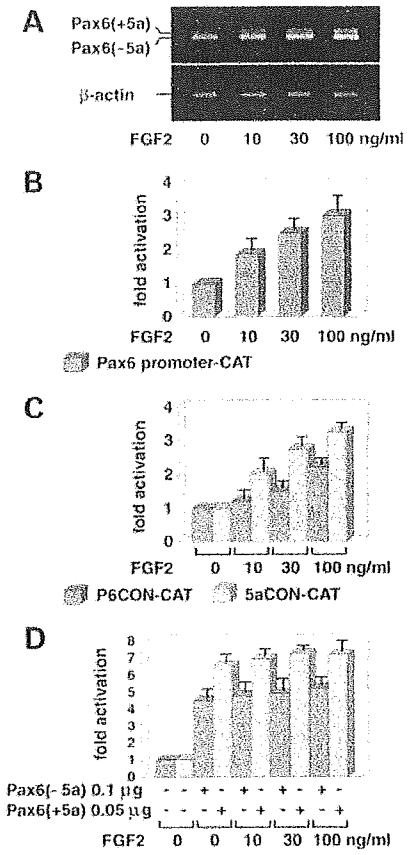

Figure 6. Effect of FGFs on Pax6 expression by functional assay. **(A)** Semi-quantitative analyses for expression levels of endogenous *Pax6* by RT–PCR in P19 cells treated with FGF2. The results shown are representative of three independent experiments. **(B** and **C)** CAT activities in P19 cells after transfection of a *Pax6*-promoter (B), P6CON or 5aCON reporter construct (C) and treatment with FGF2. **(D)** CAT activities in P19 cells after co-transfection of a small amount of *Pax6* [0.1 μg of *Pax6(−5a)* or 0.05 μg of *Pax6(+5a)*] and P6CON- or 5aCON-CAT reporter plasmids. The results shown are an average of three independent experiments.

mouse embryonic carcinoma P19 cells that are frequently used for functional analysis of the *Pax6* gene. From P19 cells cultured for 3 days in a medium containing FGF2 or FGF8 protein, total RNA was isolated and reverse-transcribed to cDNA. This cDNA mixture was then amplified for semi-quantitative PCR using specific primers for mouse *Pax6*. When cells were cultured with an increasing amount of FGF2 or FGF8, PCR products corresponding to both the *Pax6(+5a)* and the *Pax6(−5a)* increased in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 6A) (data on FGF8 not shown), indicating that FGF signaling upregulates expression of endogenous Pax6 in this system. Using a chloramphenicol acetyltransferase (CAT) reporter construct carrying ~2 kb genomic DNA upstream of the *Pax6* initiation codon, in which various control elements were found (42), activity of *Pax6* promoter was quantified after addition of FGF2 or FGF8 protein. When an increasing amount of FGFs was added into the medium, the CAT activities increased in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 6B), indicating that FGF signaling stimulates the transcription of the *Pax6* gene.

To see whether FGFs induce the production of functionally active Pax6 proteins, we next transfected CAT reporter plasmids carrying six copies of P6CON or two copies of 5aCON, the consensus binding sequences of the NTS or CTS of Pax6 PD (24–26), respectively. As mentioned earlier, two Pax6 isoforms were produced by alternative splicing [Pax6(+5a) or Pax6(−5a)] (23). These structural differences affect DNA-binding configuration, namely, the NTS mainly functions as a DNA-binding domain in Pax6(-5a) and the CTS in Pax6(+5a) (24,25). Hence, Pax6(+5a) binds to 5aCON, whereas Pax6(−5a) binds to P6CON. When cells were cultured with an increasing amount of each FGF, both P6CON- and 5aCON-CAT activities increased in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 6C), compatible with the idea that FGFs stimulate Pax6-dependent transcription. To explore the possibility that FGFs may also regulate Pax6 activity at a post-transcriptional level, small amounts of pCAGGS–Pax6(−5a) or pCAGGS–Pax6(+5a) were co-transfected along with P6CON- or 5aCON-CAT reporter plasmids, respectively. CAT activities were several folds higher and were not activated significantly by further addition of FGFs at various concentrations (Fig. 6D), suggesting that the stimulatory effect of FGFs on Pax6 is mainly at the transcriptional level. Overall, these data indicate that Pax6 is one of downstream targets of FGF signaling.

DISCUSSION

Our studies clearly showed that Pax6 alone is sufficient to induce transdifferentiation of ectopic NR from RPE. Reflecting evolutionary conservation of the amino acid sequence of the Pax6 protein, the human Pax6 acts well in chicken cells. At an early stage of eye development (e.g. stage 10–12 of a chick embryo and 4–5 weeks human gestation), Pax6 is expressed in both inner and outer layers of the optic cup, the respective future NR and RPE. Then, this gene is widely expressed in multipotential progenitor cells in the primitive NR, although its expression disappears rapidly from RPE (43,44). Transduction of the dominant-negative *Pax6* in the optic cup induced premature and scarce NR, yet leaving RPE layer relatively normal. These findings suggest that Pax6 is required for the specification of NR and RPE and for the maturation of NR, but not for the maturation of RPE (45). RPE cells differentiate and mature at earlier stages than NR. Nonetheless, as we have shown, even nearly mature RPE cells can lose their phenotype and re-differentiate to complete NR when Pax6 was misexpressed. It remains to be elucidated whether *Pax6 per se* triggers de-differentiation of RPE and converts its fate to re-differentiate to NR cells or whether this gene initiates genetic cascade for NR formation by repressing that for RPE formation. In either case, once initiated by *Pax6*, a set of endogenous genes begins to start the pathway of NR formation. *In situ* hybridization showed ectopic expression of some transcription factors or signaling molecules that regulate the proliferation of NR progenitors and the specification of cell fate. Immunohistochemistry with antibodies against retinal cell markers identified each type of neuronal and glial cells at correct layers in the ectopic NR, although the vertical direction of the ectopic