The inducible $\beta 5i$ proteasome subunit contributes to proinsulin degradation in GRP94 deficient β -cells and is overexpressed in type 2 diabetes pancreatic islets

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29 **Keywords:** β 5i, proteasome, proinsulin degradation, GRP94, restoration of proinsulin

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Abstract

Proinsulin is a misfolding-prone protein and its efficient breakdown is critical, when β -cells are confronted with high insulin biosynthetic demands, to prevent endoplasmic reticulum stress, a key trigger of secretory dysfunction and, if uncompensated, apoptosis. Proinsulin degradation is thought to be performed by the constitutively expressed standard proteasome, while the roles of other proteasomes are unknown. We recently demonstrated that deficiency of the proinsulin chaperone GRP94 causes impaired proinsulin-handling and defective insulin-secretion associated with a compensated endoplasmic reticulum stress-response. Taking advantage of this model of restricted folding-capacity, we investigated the role of different proteasomes in proinsulin degradation, reasoning that insulin secretory dynamics require an inducible protein degradation-system.

We show that expression of only one enzymatically active proteasome subunit, namely the inducible $\beta 5i$ -subunit, was increased in GRP94 CRISPR/Cas9 KO cells. Additionally, the level of $\beta 5i$ containing intermediate proteasomes was significantly increased in these cells, as was $\beta 5i$ -related chymotrypsin-like activity. Moreover, proinsulin levels were restored in GRP94 KO upon $\beta 5i$ siRNA-mediated knock down. Finally, the fraction of β -cells expressing $\beta 5i$ subunit is increased in human islets from type 2 diabetes patients. We conclude that $\beta 5i$ is an inducible proteasome subunit dedicated to the degradation of mishandled proinsulin.

1. Introduction

The insulin secretory dynamics and associated transients in proinsulin biosynthesis endanger the pancreatic β -cells for the detrimental consequences of protein misfolding. Even in normal conditions 20 % of proinsulin is misfolded, implicating that β -cells critically depend upon a highly flexible protein degradation system to avoid endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress, cellular dysfunction and death (24). Misfolded proinsulin is disposed from the ER through the Endoplasmic-Reticulum-Associated protein Degradation (ERAD) pathway with final proteolysis performed by the proteasome (10). There are four major types of proteasomes that differ in composition of β subunits forming the enzymatically active inner rings of the 20S proteasome core: the constitutively expressed standard proteasome (composed of β 1, β 2, β 5; s-proteasome), the immunoproteasome (β 1i, β 2i, β 5i), the intermediate proteasome (containing a combination of standard and inducible β subunits; int-proteasome) and the thymus-specific proteasome (containing β 5t subunit) (17). Inducible subunits are constitutively expressed not only in immune cells but also in the pancreatic islets, as reported recently by us and the Human Protein Atlas database (11, 26). Expression of the inducible subunits in β -cells is further upregulated by cytokines e.g. $\text{INF}\gamma/\beta$ and $\text{IL-1}\beta$ (6, 11, 15) during viral infections (16), and their constitutive expression has also been reported in e.g. heart and liver where they form int-proteasomes constituting 1-50% of total proteasomes of a cell (4, 8, 21). However, the role of non-standard proteasomes in proinsulin degradation has not been investigated. Most studies of proteasome biology employ broad-spectrum proteasome inhibitors such as MG132 and lactacystin (9, 13) that cannot clarify the roles of individual proteasome subunits in protein degradation. Moreover, β -cell investigative models have focused on the fate of *mutated* e.g. AKITA proinsulin and not on misfolded *wild-type* proinsulin, as it has been assumed that the relevant degradation mechanisms are similar if not identical (9).

We recently showed that Glucose Regulated Protein 94 (GRP94), an ER resident chaperone, is critical for proinsulin handling. Deficient GRP94 activity results in substantial loss of intracellular proinsulin and a reduction in insulin secretion (7). As the loss of proinsulin in GRP94 knockout (KO) cells occurs at the level of ER (7), we hypothesized that mishandled proinsulin becomes an ERAD and proteasome substrate.

We therefore examined the activity and composition of proteasome(s) in GRP94 KO clonal cell lines derived from β -cell line Ins1-E and showed that these cells specifically overexpress the inducible $\beta 5i$ proteasome subunit that is incorporated into enzymatically active proteasomes. Furthermore, siRNA-based reduction of $\beta 5i$ expression increased intracellular levels of proinsulin. Finally, we demonstrated that the $\beta 5i$ subunit is expressed in an increased fraction of β -cells from type 2 diabetes patients.

2. Methods

Cell culture Ins1-E GRP94 KO cells were generated as described in (7). The cells were grown in RPMI-1640 (Life Technologies, Naerum, Denmark) supplemented with 10 % fetal bovine serum (FBS), 1 % Penicillin/Streptomycin (P/S), 10 mM N-2-hydroxyethylpiperazine-N-2-ethane sulfonic acid (HEPES), 50 μ M β -mercaptoethanol and 1 mM sodium pyruvate, on fibronectin coated plasticware. The GRP94 inhibitor PU-WS13 (GRP94i) was described in (19) and used as in (7).

Western Blotting Cells were lysed and protein concentration calculated as in (7). Samples were run on Nu-Page 4-12 % bis-tris gels (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Hvidovre, Denmark), transferred to PVDF membranes before an overnight incubation with primary antibodies (Abcam: $\beta 5i$ ab183506, $\beta 2i$ ab3329, $\beta 1i$ ab243556; Sigma: $\beta 1$ HPA029635, $\beta 2$ HPA026322, $\beta 5$ SAB210895, Thermo Fisher scientific: GRP94 MA3-016, Santa Cruz biotech: Tubulin T6074; Cell Signaling:

Insulin 8138S). Blots were developed using chemiluminescence and captured using the Azure[®]Sapphire Biomolecular Imager. Quantification of Western blots was by ImageJ software (v.1.52a, (22)).

Proteasome activity assay GRP94 KO and control cells were plated in 96-well plates, treated with 50 nM ONX-0914 (Selleck Chemicals, Rungsted, Denmark, IC₅₀:~10 nM for β 5i, (18)) or vehicle-containing control medium for 2 h prior to experiments. As previously described (15) chymotrypsin-, trypsin- and caspase-like activities were measured through luminescent assay using Proteasome-GloTM Assay (Promega, Nacka, Sweden). Statistical analysis was done on the average of each biological triplicate each point represented by a technical replicate.

Proteasome Mass-spectrometry analysis Cells were grown to 90 % confluence, washed with Hank's Balanced Salt Solution (HBSS) before incubation with culture media supplemented with 0.1 % formaldehyde for cross-linking for 15 minutes. Next, 125 mM glycine was added for 10 minutes at 37°C to quench the formaldehyde. The cells were then washed with HBSS, centrifuged and pellets stored at -80°C. Immuno-purification of the proteasomes from the *in vivo* cross-linked lysates, liquid chromatography mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) analysis, protein identification, validation and quantifications were performed as previously described (2, 4). Briefly, proteasomes were purified by incubating the lysates with CNBr sepharose beads (GE Healthcare) covalently bound to the antibody specific for the α 2 subunit of the proteasome (MCP21), using 150 million cells per 50 mg of grafted beads. Two additional cycles of purification were conducted, re-incubating the collected supernatant with antibody-grafted beads. All fractions were pooled and LC-MS/MS analysis performed.

Single-Cell RNA Sequencing of Pancreatic Islets Pancreatic islet cell subpopulations were analyzed for β 5i, β 1i and β 2i expression with human islet single-cell sequencing data (23). FastQ

files were downloaded from ArrayExpress (accession: E-MTAB-5061). Data was analyzed with bcbio nextgen (<https://github.com/chapmanb/bcbio-nextgen>), using the hisat2 algorithm (12) to align reads to human genome version hg38 and the Salmon algorithm (20) for quantitation of gene counts.

β5i siRNA-mediated knockdown GRP94 KO cells were grown in 6-well plates to 80 % confluence and transfected with β5i-directed SMART-POOL siRNA (Dharmacon®, Cambridge, Great Britain), using the Lipofectamine 3000 transfection kit according to manufacturer's protocol (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Hvidovre, Denmark). Supernatants were collected for measurements of proinsulin and insulin by ELISAs (Cat. #10-1232-01 and 10-1250-01, Mercodia, Uppsala, Sweden) according to manufacturer's protocols. Cell viability assay was performed using the staining reagent AlamarBlue (Life Technologies, Naerum, Denmark) added to the cell culture for 4h, incubated at 37°C. The resulting fluorescence was read at 570 nm and 600 nm (reference) on a plate reader. Thapsigargin was used at the dose of 0.1 μM for 24 h.

Real-time Quantitative PCR RNA was isolated using the NucleoSpin® RNA kit (Macherey-Nagel, Bethlehem, USA), followed by cDNA synthesis (iScript™ cDNA Synthesis Kit BioRad, Copenhagen, Denmark) and quantification using SYBR® Green master mix (Life Technologies Naerum, Denmark). The primers used: PSMB8 (F: CCAGGAAAGGAAGGTTTCAGAT, R: ATCTCGATCACCTTGTTTAC); ins-1 (F: GGGGAACGTGGTTTCTTCTAC, R: CCAGTTGGTAGAGGGAGCAG); ins-2 (F: CAGCACCTTTGTGGTTCTCA, R: CACCTCCAGTGCCAAGGT); HPRT1 (F: GCAGACTTTGCTTTCCTT, R: CCGCTGTCTTTTAGGCTT); β-actin (F: CACCCGCGAGTACAACCTTC, R: CCCATACCCACCATCACACC); PPIA (F: AGCACTGGGGAGAAAGGATT, R: GATGCCAGGACCTGTATGCT). The best reference genes for normalization were determined as

in (1), and normalization was carried out using the $2^{(-\Delta CT)}$ method to provide the relative gene expression levels.

Donor human islets were received at 90 % purity from the European Consortium for Islet Transplantation (ECIT). Donor information: female, 56 y.o., BMI 19.4, cause of death was cerebral bleeding, blood group A+, HLA (A:B) 1,29 : 18,57, HLA (DR) 11,11, cold ischemia time 4 h, time for islets isolation to shipment 16 h, estimated purity 80 %. After a 24 h pre-incubation in RPMI medium supplemented with 10 % FBS, 1 % P/S and 5.6 mM glucose, 500 islets per experimental condition were transferred to RPMI medium supplemented with 1 % HS and 24 h later experiments were performed.

Statistical analysis Quantified data of Western blots and proteasome assays were assessed by Bonferroni corrected two-tailed Student's t-test. GraphPad Prism (v. 7.04, La Jolla, CA, USA) was used for all statistical analyses and data presentation. Data is presented as means $\pm$ SD with p-values of ≤ 0.05 considered significant.

3. Results

Increased expression and activity of $\beta 5i$ in GRP94 KO cells

To investigate the expression of enzymatically active proteasome β subunits, we analyzed protein contents of GRP94 KO and control clonal cell lines. We found all standard and inducible β subunits expressed to varying degrees in the tested cells (Fig. 1) but only the $\beta 5i$ subunit was expressed significantly more in GRP94 KO cells compared to controls (Fig. 1A-B). $\beta 5i$ mRNA was upregulated in a similar fashion in GRP94 KO cells (Fig. 1C).

Next, we measured levels of overall substrate-specific proteasome activities. GRP94 KO cells showed increased chymotrypsin-like activity (characteristic for $\beta 5$, $\beta 5i$, $\beta 1i$ subunits (25)) compared to the control group while the other substrate-specific activities remained unchanged (Fig. 1F).

Treatment of cells for 2 h with 50 nM of ONX-0914, a $\beta 5i$ specific inhibitor, reduced chymotrypsin-like activity in the GRP94 KO to the levels observed in control cells treated with ONX-0914, indicating that increase in this type of activity is $\beta 5i$ dependent (Fig. 1F).

Increased incorporation of $\beta 5i$ subunit into active proteasomes in GRP94 KO cells

Next, we investigated the cellular composition of proteasomes through immunoprecipitation (IP) of the 20S $\alpha 2$ proteasome subunit followed by LC-MS/MS analysis. We identified the presence of two types of proteasomes: the s-proteasome and int-proteasome, containing $\beta 1$, $\beta 2$, $\beta 5$ and $\beta 1$, $\beta 2$, $\beta 5i$ subunits respectively, with no other detectable inducible subunits incorporated (Fig. 2A). The s-proteasome was the dominant form present in control (83.2 %) and GRP94 KO cells (79.9 %). Int-proteasome represented 16.8% of proteasomes in control group while its presence was increased to 20.1% in GRP94 KO cells. Furthermore, we identified a significant increase in the 11S regulatory particles (PA28 $\alpha\beta$ and PA200), known to be part of the immunoproteasomes (3), in active proteasomes of GRP94 KO cells (Fig. 2B).

Inhibition of $\beta 5i$ activity increases proinsulin levels in GRP94 KO cells

As $\beta 5i$ was the only proteasome subunit upregulated in GRP94 KO cells and incorporated into active proteasomes to a higher degree, we evaluated the possible role of the $\beta 5i$ subunit in proinsulin degradation in GRP94-deficient cells. $\beta 5i$ was knocked down with three individual siRNAs (Fig. 2C). Concurrently, levels of intracellular proinsulin and mature insulin increased as compared to siRNA control treated cells (Fig. 2D) with no apparent upregulation in *Ins1-2* genes transcription (Fig. 2E). The observed increase was accompanied by higher amount of constitutively secreted proinsulin but not insulin (experiment was performed in 2 mM glucose containing media; Fig. 2F). Finally, $\beta 5i$ KD induced partial loss of cell viability (Fig. 2G).

$\beta 5i$ expression is increased upon glucose stimulation and GRP94 ATP-ase inhibition

In order to mimic increased insulin demand conditions and increased proinsulin production, Ins1-E cells and human islets were cultured in the presence of 20 mM glucose. As expected, intracellular proinsulin levels increased accompanied by the smaller increase in insulin levels, presumably because mature insulin is secreted at 20 mM glucose concentration. After 24 and 48 h we observed 10-25 % increase in the $\beta 5i$ expression (Fig. 3A, n=3 and 3B, n=1), induced further by the addition of 5-20 μ M of GRP94i (Fig. 3C; n=1). Off note, proinsulin and insulin levels were diminished after treatment with GRP94i, as reported previously (7). At this point, human islets results should be taken with a reservation as they represent only a single experiment with a single islet donor.

$\beta 5i$ expression is increased in pancreatic islet cells in type 2 diabetes

To investigate whether inducible β subunits are overexpressed in islets of type 2 diabetes (T2D) patients, we analyzed RNA-sequencing data of single-cells dispersed from pancreatic islets (23). We found that 20 % more of α -, and 40 % more of β - and δ -cells from T2D patients tested positive for expression of the $\beta 5i$ subunit compared to non-diabetic controls (Fig. 4A). Similarly, 10 % more of all islet cell-types were $\beta 1i$ -positive in T2D compared to control cases (Fig. 4B) with no significant changes observed for $\beta 2i$ (Fig. 4C). When $\beta 5i$ - (and $\beta 2i$ -) positive cells were analyzed for expression levels of β subunits, we found no significant changes (Fig 4D) between control and T2D cases. The $\beta 1i$ subunit exhibited lower expression in T2D cases but significance was reached only in α -cells (Fig. 4E).

Next, we analyzed the inter-dependence between GRP94 and $\beta 5i$ expression and found statistically significant correlation only in β -cells but the correlation was weak ($R^2=0.2$) indicating that only a fraction of β -cells exhibited the inter-dependence in expression of these genes (Fig. 4G-I).

4. Discussion

Here, we report that the expression of the inducible proteasome subunit $\beta 5i$ was significantly higher in GRP94 KO cells, a β -cell model of restricted ER folding capacity and proinsulin mishandling, and in islets of T2D patients. Moreover, we have shown that proteasomes containing the $\beta 5i$ subunit are engaged in proinsulin degradation.

Misfolded proinsulin has been thought to be degraded by the s-proteasome but the experimental procedures employed have not been able to distinguish proteasome subtypes involved in the process (9, 10, 13). Low levels of intracellular proinsulin, accompanied by unaffected preproinsulin transcription in GRP94 KO (7) indicate enhanced proinsulin degradation. We expected a broad upregulation of expression of proteasome subunits to counteract a higher load of mishandled proinsulin. Unexpectedly, we show that limiting folding capacity (GRP94 KO) induces upregulation of only $\beta 5i$ expression (Fig. 1A). The increase in $\beta 5i$ expression was accompanied by an increase in chymotrypsin-like activity in GRP94 KO that was reduced as a result of the treatment with a $\beta 5i$ selective small-molecule inhibitor, ONX-0194 (Fig. 1F). The particular position of the $\beta 5i$ in the inducible proteasomal response in β -cells was confirmed by mass spectrometry showing increased presence of $\beta 5i$ -containing int-proteasomes in GRP94 KO cells (Fig. 2A). We did not detect incorporation of other inducible β subunits despite their demonstrated expression in control and GRP94 KO cells (Fig. 1). Finally, we showed that $\beta 5i$ can be upregulated in response to prolonged exposure to high glucose concentration and ATP-ase inhibition of GRP94 activity that mimics the limited β -cell folding capacity (Fig. 3, note that human islets experiments represent $n=1$ and thus should be viewed with caution).

The increased presence of the $\beta 5i$ subunit containing int-proteasomes likely signifies the evolution of a positive and inducible adaptive response dedicated to proinsulin degradation under conditions of biosynthetic stress. Conversely, we showed that $\beta 5i$ KD results in an increase in intracellular proinsulin and insulin (Fig. 2C and D) and loss of cell viability (Fig. 2G).

What signaling processes could be responsible for the changes in subunits expression? Our experiments were performed with Ins-1E cells *in vitro* and therefore the upregulation of the expression of $\beta 5i$ had to occur in non-stimulated conditions with cells employing internal mechanisms to upregulate it. Theoretically, constitutive activation of NACHT, LRR and PYD domains-containing protein 3 (NLRP3)-inflammasome may be involved. Classically, this activation requires signal-1 that increases intracellular pro-interleukin (IL)-1 β concentration in response to binding of ligands to toll-like receptors (TLR) and signal-2 that triggers inflammasome-dependent activation of caspase-1 that in turn processes pro-IL-1 β into the mature biologically active cytokine. Some substances can provide both signal-1 and 2 (27) and these include ER stress-inducing drugs such as thapsigargin (14). We have previously reported that GRP94 KO cells mount a compensated ER stress, with a limited PERK response (7) that would lead to increased inflammasome activity through TXNIP (as in (5)), and production of IL-1 β . We have recently showed that externally provided non-toxic concentrations of IL-1 β induce expression of $\beta 5i$ and $\beta 1i$ in Ins-1E cells and mouse and human islets (11). How that result relates to those reported here, with overexpression of only $\beta 5i$, remains to be clarified.

T2D patients exhibited increased fractions of α -, β - and δ -cells expressing $\beta 5i$ mRNA (Fig.4A) and weak but significant correlation between increased GRP94 and $\beta 5i$ mRNAs in T2D. As the demand for insulin biosynthesis increases during the progression of T2D, β -cells respond by increasing proinsulin synthesis and upregulating folding machinery. Despite that compensation, T2D patients display increased proinsulin misfolding. The observed $\beta 5i$ upregulation is therefore likely a positive adaptive mechanism that through the increased degradation of mishandled proinsulin contributes to β -cell homeostasis.

The role of specific proteasomes in proinsulin degradation remains to be uncovered in detail and our results do not preclude involvement of s-proteasomes in this process. However, the perspective

that in a compromised ER folding environment in islets of T2D patients, β -cells specifically overexpress and incorporate the $\beta 5i$ proteasome subunit into inducible int-proteasomes that contributes to proinsulin degradation warrants further investigation into its significance for human cases.

5. Funding

This study was funded by The Punjab Educational Endowment Fund (M.S.K), the Danish Diabetes Academy supported by the Novo Nordisk Foundation (T.D), the Department of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Copenhagen (T.D., and M.T.M.); the Augustinus Foundation (T.D. and M.T.M.); European Foundation for the Study of Diabetes/Lilly European Diabetes Research Programme, Vissing Fonden, Bjarne Jensen Fonden, Kirsten og Freddy Johansens Fond (M.T.M.).

6. Disclosures

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests except for AW who is an employee of AstraZeneca and has shares in the company.

7. Author Contributions

MSK, SEB, DV, THB, CP, PAKA, JBA, CKN, KK developed the protocols, conducted experiments, the statistical analysis, constructed figure, wrote and reviewed the manuscript. TD developed GRP94 KO clones and participated in writing the manuscript. Bioinformatics analysis of single-cell RNA-sequencing data was conducted by AW and BT. M-PB and DZ performed and analyzed mass spectrometry and wrote the manuscript. SJR and NGM performed human islet

286 related experiments and participated in critical analysis of the data. TMP developed the protocols,
287 participated in data analysis and writing the manuscript. MTM is the study guarantor and was its
288 initiator; developed the protocols, performed the statistical analysis and constructed figures and
289 tables as well as wrote the manuscript.

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Figure 1. Expression and activity of proteasome β subunits.

SDS-PAGE and Western blot analysis with quantification of relative levels of expression of β inducible (A-B) and (D-E) standard proteasome subunits in Ins-1E derived GRP94 KO and control clonal cells (n=3). C. mRNA levels of $\beta 5i$ gene were analyzed by quantitative reverse transcription-PCR (qRT-PCR) in control and GRP94 KO cells (n=6, individual clones data shown). F. Proteolytic-specific activities exhibited by proteasome subunits treated with $\beta 5i$ subunit specific inhibitor ONX-0914 (2 h, 50 nM). Proteasome activity was evaluated in cultured cells and the data is shown as luminescence per cell. Statistical analysis performed by Bonferroni corrected unpaired two-tailed Student's t-test. The data are presented as means $\pm$ SD.

Figure 2. Proteasome activity and structure in GRP94 KO clonal cells and an effect of $\beta 5i$ KD on proinsulin/insulin contents.

A-B Proteasomes were precipitated with anti-MCP21 from 4×10^8 cells and analyzed by LC-MS/MS. The absolute quantities of each of the β subunits and regulatory particles measured by the LC-MS/MS method were computed to calculate the stoichiometry of 20S proteasome subtypes and 20S proteasome-associated regulators, n=4. Statistical analysis performed by Bonferroni corrected unpaired two-tailed Student's t-test. C-G siRNA KD of $\beta 5i$ in GRP94 KO cells was analyzed 72 h post siRNA delivery via: C. SDS-PAGE and Western blot analysis of proinsulin and insulin expression; D. quantification of WB data from six independent experiments; data depicted as percentage of control; E. mRNA levels of $\beta 5i$ and *Ins-1-2* genes were analyzed by qRT-PCR in control and GRP94 KO cells (n=4); F. evaluation by ELISA assays of proinsulin and insulin secretion after additional 2 h culture in 2 mM glucose containing medium (n=3); G. Cell viability evaluated with AlamarBlue reagent. Thapsigargin was used at the dose of 0.1 μ M for 24 h (n=4). Statistical analysis performed by Bonferroni corrected paired two-tailed Student's t-test. The data is presented as means $\pm$ SD.

Figure 3. $\beta 5i$ expression is increased upon glucose stimulation and GRP94 ATP-ase inhibition.

A-C Ins1-E cells and human islets from deceased donor were cultured in depicted glucose conditions for 24-48 h and their protein content analyzed by SDS-PAGE and Western blotting (3A: n=3 and 3B: n=1). **C.** Human islets were cultured for 24 h in the presence of 20 mM glucose and 20 μ M of GRP94i and their content analyzed (n=1).

Figure 4. Proteasome inducible subunits expression in islets of control and T2D patients. A-C

Single cell RNA sequencing analysis of $\beta 5i$ (A), $\beta 1i$ (B) and $\beta 2i$ (C) gene expression in human pancreatic islets α -, β - and δ -cells from healthy individuals (n=6) and T2D patients (n=4). **D-F** Expression levels of inducible subunits were quantified as expression values (CPM, log2) per individual cell. Data is presented as means $\pm$ SD. **G-I** Pair-wise expression correlation between *GRP94* (*HSP90B1*) and inducible subunit $\beta 5i$ (*PSMB8*) expression in α -, β - and δ -cells from healthy and T2D patients (Pearson's correlation coefficients are shown; blue: healthy, green: T2D). Statistical analysis was performed using ANOVA with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons of T2D versus healthy donors.

Fig. 1

Expression of inducible proteasome β subunits

Expression of standard proteasome β subunits

F

Substrate-specific total proteasome activity

Fig. 2**Proteasome types detection by mass spectrometry** **siRNA-based knockdown of $\beta 5i$ subunit- protein expression** **siRNA-based knockdown of $\beta 5i$ subunit – mRNA expression** **siRNA-based knockdown of $\beta 5i$ subunit – secretion** **siRNA-based knockdown of $\beta 5i$ subunit – cell viability**

Fig. 3

β 5i expression upon glucose stimulation and/or GRP94 ATP-ase inhibition

Fig. 4

mRNA sequencing of single cells from human islets