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## Generation of naïve blastoderm explants from zebrafish embryos

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<b>Corresponding Author:</b>	Margot Williams Baylor College of Medicine Houston, Texas UNITED STATES
<b>Corresponding Author's Institution:</b>	Baylor College of Medicine
<b>Corresponding Author E-Mail:</b>	Margot.Williams@BCM.edu
<b>Order of Authors:</b>	Alyssa Alaniz Emig Margot Williams
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**TITLE:**

Generation of Naïve Blastoderm Explants From Zebrafish Embryos

**AUTHORS AND AFFILIATIONS:**

Alyssa Alaniz Emig, Margot L. K. Williams\*

Center for Precision Environmental Health and Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology,  
Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX

\*Author for correspondence

Email Addresses of co-authors:

Alyssa Alaniz Emig ([aalaniz@bcm.edu](mailto:aalaniz@bcm.edu))

Margot L. K. Williams ([margot.williams@bcm.edu](mailto:margot.williams@bcm.edu))

**SUMMARY:**

Zebrafish blastoderm explants are generated by isolating embryonic cells from endogenous signaling centers within the early embryo, producing relatively naïve cell clusters easily manipulated and cultured *ex vivo*. This article provides instructions for making such explants and demonstrates their utility by interrogating roles for Nodal signaling during gastrulation.

**ABSTRACT:**

Due to their optical clarity and rapid development, zebrafish embryos are an excellent system for examining cell behaviors and developmental processes. However, because of the complexity and redundancy of embryonic signals, it can be challenging to discern the complete role of any single signal during early embryogenesis. By explanting the animal region of the zebrafish blastoderm, relatively naïve clusters of embryonic cells are generated that can be easily cultured and manipulated *ex vivo*. By introducing a gene of interest by RNA injection before explantation, one can assess the effect of this molecule on gene expression, cell behaviors, and other developmental processes in relative isolation. Furthermore, cells from embryos of different genotypes or conditions can be combined in a single chimeric explant to examine cell/tissue interactions and tissue-specific gene functions. This article provides instructions for generating zebrafish blastoderm explants and demonstrates that a single signaling molecule—a Nodal ligand—is sufficient to induce germ layer formation and extension morphogenesis in otherwise naïve embryonic tissues. Due to their ability to recapitulate embryonic cell behaviors, morphogen gradients, and gene expression patterns in a simplified *ex vivo* system, these explants are anticipated to be of great utility to many zebrafish researchers.

**INTRODUCTION:**

A perennial goal of the developmental biology field is to unravel the complexity of developing embryos to understand the origin of animal form and functions. Even early embryos contain a complex medley of signaling molecules, cell and tissue interactions, and mechanical forces, all subject to strict spatial and temporal regulation. For this reason, it is often challenging to pinpoint the precise role of a particular signal in a developmental process of interest. By removing

embryonic tissues from their endogenous environment, embryo explantation creates a simplified platform in which to discern the developmental roles of individual tissues and molecules in relative isolation. Perhaps, the explantation techniques are best known in *Xenopus laevis*, where they have been used to study tissue induction, cell signaling, cell adhesion, and morphogenesis, among other processes<sup>1-4</sup>. The so-called animal cap explants, in which the blastula stage *Xenopus* embryos are isolated before inductive interactions<sup>5-7</sup>, are a widespread and powerful explant technique. Unmanipulated animal caps are fated to become ectoderm<sup>7,8</sup>. Still, they are competent to respond to several inductive factors, allowing them to form tissues of all three germ layers and undergo tissue-appropriate morphogenetic movements<sup>9-11</sup>. However, limited genetic tools and sub-optimal suitability for live imaging prevent the use of *Xenopus* animal cap explants for many developmental biologists. By explanting blastoderm cells from zebrafish embryos, researchers can combine the utility of the animal cap assay with the optical clarity, abundance of genetic tools, and other experimental advantages of the zebrafish model system.

To date, researchers have made use of two flavors of zebrafish explants: the so-called pescoids and the blastoderm explants. In the pescoid model, the entire blastoderm, including the marginal zone, is isolated from the yolk and allowed to develop *ex vivo* without the extraembryonic yolk syncytial layer (YSL)<sup>12,13</sup>. In this way, pescoids bear a notable resemblance to the *Fundulus* explants generated decades ago by Jane Oppenheimer and John Trinkaus<sup>14,15</sup>. These explants recapitulate many aspects of embryonic patterning and morphogenesis<sup>12,13</sup>. However, because these isolates contain endogenous signaling centers (the embryonic margin), they are not simplified as their molecular milieu. Alternatively, researchers can generate relatively naïve zebrafish blastoderm explants by excluding the marginal zone<sup>16-21</sup>. Unmanipulated zebrafish blastoderm explants express high levels of bone morphogenetic protein (BMP) morphogens<sup>19</sup> and give rise to non-neural ectoderm and enveloping layer (EVL) when cultured *ex vivo*<sup>18</sup>. However, they recapitulate many aspects of axial patterning and morphogenesis in response to exogenous signaling gradients<sup>19-21</sup>, similar to *Xenopus* animal caps. For this reason, blastoderm explants are an advantageous model to study the role of a given morphogen (or morphogens) in germ layer specification, morphogenetic cell movements, and signaling gradients within a simplified signaling environment. Furthermore, blastoderms from embryos of different genotypes or conditions can be combined in a single chimeric explant<sup>19,21</sup> to investigate cell/tissue autonomy and inductive interactions.

Zebrafish blastoderm explants can be used to investigate the role of embryonic signals (for example, Nodal) in morphogenesis and tissue specification during gastrulation. By injecting synthetic *ndr2* RNA (encoding a Nodal ligand) at the single-cell stage, Nodal signaling is activated throughout the blastoderm of the embryo. Explants from these embryos generate Nodal signaling gradients, form all three germ layers, and undergo convergence and extension (C&E) gastrulation movements as seen in intact embryos<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, chimeric explants are used to illustrate further the ability of mesoderm tissues to induce neuroectoderm from uninjected (naïve) blastoderm. This protocol provides instructions for creating zebrafish blastoderm explants and demonstrates their utility in defining the role of Nodal signaling in tissue induction and morphogenesis.

**PROTOCOL:**

**1. Preparation of reagents and supplies**

**1.1. Reagent preparation**

1.1.1 Prepare 500 mL of 3x Danieau's solution (Solution 1, **Table 1**).

1.1.2 Prepare 1 L of egg water (Solution 2, **Table 1**).

1.1.3 Prepare a 1.2% solution of agarose in egg water. Melt the agarose entirely in the microwave, and then cool to 55 °C in a water bath.

1.1.4 Prepare 4 mL explant media (Solution 3, **Table 1**, modified slightly from<sup>19,21</sup>) per experimental condition.

NOTE: Remember to account for at least one well of explants from uninjected (or control injected) embryos when calculating the required volume.

1.1.4.1 Sanitize the workspace with 70% ethanol.

1.1.4.2 Remove cell culture media from 4 °C and spray/wipe with 70% ethanol.

1.1.4.3 Make explant media and place in the 28.5 °C incubator to warm while the embryos are injected.

NOTE: Always include age-matched, intact sibling embryos for staging purposes. Dechorionate these embryos and culture them on agarose-coated plates in 0.3x Danieau's solution (Solution 4, **Table 1**).

1.1.5 Remove pronase aliquots (1 mL at 20 mg/mL) from -20 °C and allow to thaw on ice. Thaw one 1 mL aliquot for every three experimental conditions.

**1.2 Prepare agarose plates**

1.2.1 Make the injection plates.

1.2.1.1 Fill a 100 mm x 15 mm plastic Petri dish half-filled with molten agarose in egg water.

1.2.1.2 Gently place the injection mold on top of the molten agarose at a 45° angle and lower it gradually into the agarose, ensuring that no bubbles are trapped underneath. Let it cool completely.

1.2.1.3 Remove the mold. Use the plate immediately or save for later by adding 2 mL of egg water, wrapping the plate, and storing it at 4 °C. Warm the plate for 15–30 min in the 28.5 °C incubator before injection.

## 1.2.2 Make explant cutting plates.

1.2.2.1 Add 3 mL of molten 1.2% agarose in egg water to a 60 mm x 15 mm Petri dish, ensuring that the entire bottom of the well is coated. Let it cool completely.

## 1.2.3 Coat culture plates with agarose.

1.2.3.1 For each experimental condition, dispense 1 mL of molten 1.2% agarose in egg water into one well of a 6-well plate, ensuring that the entire bottom of the well is coated. Let it cool completely.

1.2.4 For making chimeric explants, create an explant cutting dish with small wells by adding twelve 1 mm glass beads to molten agarose in a 60 mm x 15 mm Petri dish. Remove the beads with forceps once the agarose gets cooled completely.

# 2 Injection of the embryos with RNA

2.1 Wearing gloves, remove an aliquot of synthetic *ndr2* mRNA from storage at -80 °C and immediately place it on ice.

## 2.2 Prepare the injection needle.

2.2.1 Fill a pulled glass capillary needle with RNA. Place the filled needle into a micro-manipulator and break the tip of the needle with forceps.

2.2.2 Calibrate injection volume using a stage micrometer with a drop of mineral oil, adjusting injection time and pressure on the pneumatic injector to achieve a bolus of the desired size. A bolus with a diameter of 120 µm (micrometers) has a volume of 1 nL (nanoliter).

NOTE: The desired volume of the bolus will depend on the concentration of the RNA and the desired dose per embryo. For example, if RNA is aliquoted at 10 ng/mL, inject 1 nL to achieve a final amount of 10 pg.

2.2.2.1 Keep the RNA needle tip submerged in the oil until ready to inject.

## 2.3 Loading of the embryo and subsequent injections

2.3.1 Pull the dividers in breeding tanks, allow fish to spawn for 10–15 min, and collect the embryos using a tea strainer.

2.3.2 Load the embryos into the injection plate using a Pasteur pipette and pipette pump, and then use a gloved finger to press the eggs into the troughs gently.

2.3.3 Inject 10 pg *ndr2* RNA into the yolk of single-cell embryos until the desired number of embryos is reached or until embryos begin to divide.

NOTE: Do not inject after the single-cell stage to ensure even distribution of the RNA throughout the embryo.

2.3.4 Wash the embryos out of the injection plate into a labeled 100 mm x 15 mm Petri dish with a gentle stream of egg water from a squeeze bottle.

NOTE: Always keep a group of age-matched, uninjected siblings as controls.

2.3.5 Place the embryos into the 28.5 °C incubator until they reach the 128-cell stage. Remove unfertilized eggs and dead embryos from the dish.

### **3 Dechoriation of the embryos**

3.1 Once the embryos have reached the 128-cell stage, place them into labeled glass Petri dishes and decant as much egg water as possible from them.

3.2 Label glass crystalizing dishes with lab tape (corresponding to small dish names) and fill 2/3 of the way with egg water. Place these dishes next to the dissecting microscope for quick accessibility.

3.3 Add 1 mL of pronase stock (20 mg/mL, thawed on ice) to 15 mL of 3x Danieau's solution in a 50 mL conical tube.

NOTE: This amount is sufficient for up to three experimental conditions. Increase the volume of pronase and 3x Danieau's solution for additional explant conditions.

CAUTION: Pronase is an irritant; hence wear gloves when handling.

3.4 Add at least 5 mL of pronase solution to each glass Petri dish containing embryos.

3.5 Agitate the glass dishes in a circular motion, monitoring the progress of dechoriation consistently under a dissecting microscope.

3.6 Once the chorions begin to wrinkle and 1-2 embryos are out of their chorions, carefully dunk the glass Petri dish containing pronase and the embryos into the corresponding glass crystallizing dish containing egg water.

3.7 Wash the dechorionated embryos.

3.7.1 Wash the embryos three times with egg water by gently adding and then decanting egg water from the dish.

3.7.2 The third and final wash is with 0.3x Danieau's solution.

NOTE: If the embryos still have chorions after washing, gently pipette the embryos until the chorions are removed or let them sit in the wash (egg water or 0.3x Danieau's solution) for a minute or two and gently agitate with circular motions.

3.8 Cover dechorionated embryos with a Petri dish lid and return them to the incubator (28.5 °C) until they reach the 256-cell stage.

#### 4 Cut explants

4.1 Fill the agarose-coated 60 mm x 15 mm Petri dish with 3x Danieau's solution.

4.2 Once the embryos are at the 256-cell stage, transfer them into the agarose-coated plate containing 3x Danieau's solution, lining them up along the center of the dish.

4.3 Cut the explants using forceps (**Figure 1**).

4.3.1 Use one pair of forceps, held closed, to stabilize the embryo and use the other to cut through the blastoderm at approximately half of its height (from margin to animal pole) (**Figure 1A**).

4.3.2 To cut, gently squeeze the blastoderm cells with one pair of forceps. Then, take the stabilizing forceps and run them along the other forceps to slice approximately halfway across the blastoderm (**Figure 1B**).

4.3.3 Rotate the embryo, placing the forceps into the existing cut, and then sever the remaining blastoderm orthogonal to the first cut (**Figure 1C**).

4.4 Keep explants in 3x Danieau's solution for at least 5 min to heal, then transfer them to the well of a 6-well plate coated with agarose and filled with 4 mL of explant media.

NOTE: Cut explants from uninjected (or control injected) siblings as negative controls. If explants are performed correctly, these explants will neither extend nor express markers of endoderm, mesoderm, or neuroectoderm.

4.5 Place the explant culture plates into the 28.5 °C incubator until the desired timepoint/stage (determined from intact siblings) is reached.

NOTE: During compound treatment, such as a small molecule inhibitor, the compound of appropriate concentration can be added directly to the explant media within the wells at desired time points. Remember to include the volume of agarose when calculating concentrations. (Example: 1 mL agarose + 4 mL explant media = 5 mL total volume per well).

## **5 Chimeric explants**

5.1 In place of a regular agarose coated plate, cut chimeric explants in a dish with agarose molded into twelve small, shallow wells using 1 mm glass beads (section 1.2.4). Fill this plate with 3x Danieau's solution.

NOTE: Chimeric explants are generated from blastoderm cells of two embryos of different genotypes or conditions. Ensure that these conditions can be distinguished from one another by the expression of transgenic or injected fluorescent markers.

5.1.1 Prepare by adding twelve embryos of one genotype/condition to the left side of the plate and twelve embryos of the other genotype/condition to the right side of the plate.

5.1.2 Move one embryo of each condition into the center of the plate, near one of the 12 wells.

5.1.3 Using forceps, cut an explant from each embryo described for single embryo explants (step 4.3).

5.1.4 Quickly press the cut edges of the two explants together within the shallow well using forceps to allow the two halves to heal together into a single explant.

5.1.5 Continue with the remaining twelve wells within the plate. Once explants are healed, transfer them to the well of a 6-well plate coated with agarose and filled with 4 mL of explant media. Repeat until the desired number of explants is achieved.

## **6 Culturing and/or imaging of fixed explants**

6.1 Culture explants in the 28.5 °C incubator until intact sibling embryos reach the desired stage.

6.2 Live explants can be mounted for continuous time-lapse imaging, imaged periodically throughout the culture period, or imaged live at the experimental endpoint.

6.3 Fix the explants if desired. Once the explants reach the desired endpoint, note the stage of intact embryo siblings and place the explants into a glass scintillation vial with 1 mL of 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS. Fix overnight on a shaker at 4 °C.

CAUTION: Paraformaldehyde is toxic. Wear gloves when handling this chemical and dispose of it via methods approved by each institution.



6.3.1 After fixation, rinse explants six times, 15 min each with PBS + 0.1% Tween-20, and dehydrate gradually into methanol. Store explants at -20 °C for later analysis by the whole-mount *in situ* hybridization, immunofluorescent staining, etc.

## REPRESENTATIVE RESULTS:

### Nodal ligands drive germ layer formation and C&E of zebrafish blastoderm explants

Control explants cut from uninjected wild-type (WT) embryos or those injected with 50 pg of mRNA encoding green fluorescent protein (GFP) remained rounded throughout the culture period (**Figure 2A–C**) and failed to express markers of mesoderm, endoderm, or neuroectoderm (**Figure 3C**)<sup>20</sup>. Together, these indicate an absence of the morphogenesis and germ layer formation that characterize vertebrate gastrulation. However, explants cut from embryos injected with 10 pg of *ndr2* mRNA became highly elongated after 8–9 h in culture (**Figure 2D**). Live time-lapse imaging of these explants by differential interfering contrast (DIC) microscopy revealed that extension onsets at or around 8 h post-fertilization (hpf) (**Figure 2F**), the same time that C&E morphogenesis begins in intact zebrafish embryos<sup>22</sup>. Explants cut from *MZoep*<sup>-/-</sup> embryos, which lack the essential *tdgf1* Nodal co-receptor<sup>23</sup>, failed to extend in response to *ndr2* injection (**Figure 2E**), demonstrating that Nodal activity is critical for this *ex vivo* morphogenesis. In addition, whole-mount *in situ* hybridization has shown further that *ndr2*-expressing explants express markers of neuroectoderm (*sox2*) and several mesoderm sub-types (*tbxta*, *noto*, *tbx16*) (**Figure 2G**), as well as endoderm and the embryonic organizer<sup>20</sup>.

### Nodal signaling is not required for neuroectoderm induction by mesoderm

Nodal signaling activity is essential for induction of endoderm and most mesoderm but is dispensable for neuroectoderm specification within zebrafish gastrulae<sup>23,24</sup>. While uninjected zebrafish blastoderm explants did not differentiate into neuroectoderm (**Figure 3C**)<sup>18</sup>, explants from embryos injected with 10 pg *ndr2* exhibited robust expression of the neuroectoderm marker *sox2* in distinct stripes along the long axis of the explant (**Figure 2G**), indicating that Nodal activity is required for neuroectoderm formation *ex vivo*. It has long been known that mesodermal tissues can induce neural tissue<sup>25–29</sup>, including zebrafish blastoderm explants<sup>17</sup>. However, it is unclear whether neuroectoderm formation in this explant system requires Nodal signaling directly or whether exogenous Nodal ligands induce mesoderm that then causes neural tissues secondarily.

Chimeric explants comprising prospective mesoderm and neuroectoderm portions from two different embryos were generated to test whether Nodal signaling is required tissue-autonomously for neuroectoderm specification *ex vivo*. The mesoderm portion of each explant was cut from an otherwise WT embryo expressing a mesoderm-specific transgenic GFP reporter, *Tg[lhx1a:eGFP]*<sup>30</sup>, injected with a high dose (100 pg) of *ndr2* (**Figure 3A**). The putative neuroectoderm portion of each explant was cut from either a control WT embryo or Nodal signaling deficient *MZoep*<sup>-/-</sup> embryo injected only with mRNA encoding the fluorescent nuclear marker H2B-RFP (**Figure 3A**). Each chimeric explant was generated by combining one blastoderm

from each of these two conditions, which were assayed to express tissue-specific markers by whole-mount *in situ* hybridization at 12 hpf.

The majority of single-embryo explants from embryos injected with 100 pg *ndr2* expressed little or no *sox2*, and expressed markers of mesoderm, including *tbxta* and the *lhx1a:gfp* reporter—throughout the explant (**Figure 3B,G**). Uninjected WT blastoderm (of the type that comprises the prospective neuroectoderm portion of chimeric explants) expressed neither mesoderm markers nor *sox2* when cultured as a single explant, indicating a lack of neuroectoderm and mesoderm specification (**Figure 3C,H**). Single-embryo explants from MZ*oep*<sup>-/-</sup> embryos similarly lacked expression of both neuroectoderm and mesoderm markers, even when injected with *ndr2* (**Figure 3D**). However, when uninjected WT blastoderms were combined with mesoderm induced by high doses of Nodal ligands, these chimeric explants expressed both mesoderm markers and *sox2* robustly (**Figure 3E,I**). These results demonstrate that, as previously observed<sup>17,26,27,29</sup>, mesoderm can induce neural fate in cells that would otherwise become non-neural ectoderm. To test whether Nodal signaling is required directly within the prospective neuroectoderm portion of these explants for their neural induction, chimeric explants were created. WT blastoderms converted to mesoderm by injection of 100 pg *ndr2* were combined with blastoderms from MZ*oep*<sup>-/-</sup> embryos (**Figure 3J**). Despite their inability to receive Nodal signals from the neighboring mesodermal portion, these explants expressed *sox2* to a similar degree as WT control chimeras (**Figure 3F**). This result demonstrates that consistent with intact embryos in which neural tissues are specified in the absence of Nodal activity, Nodal signaling is not required for neuroectoderm induction *ex vivo*.

#### FIGURE LEGENDS:

**Figure 1: Procedure for zebrafish blastoderm explantation (step 4.3).** (A) Hold the forceps in the non-dominant hand (orange) closed against the yolk to stabilize the embryo while pinching the blastoderm at approximately ½ of its height using the forceps in the dominant hand (blue). (B) Run the orange forceps along the edge of the blue forceps gripping the embryo to slice through the blastoderm so that the first cut reaches approximately halfway across the blastoderm. (C) Rotate the embryo 90°, then place the blue forceps inside (but orthogonal to) the original cut and pinch to sever the remaining blastoderm. (D) Allow explanted blastoderm cells to heal in 3x Danieau's solution for approximately 5 min before transferring into explant media.

**Figure 2 (modified from<sup>20</sup>): Nodal ligands promote C&E morphogenesis and germ layer formation in zebrafish blastoderm explants.** (A) Diagram of injection and explantation of zebrafish embryos. (B–E) Representative bright-field images of live blastoderm explants of the indicated conditions/genotypes are equivalent to the 2–4 somite stage. N = number of explants from two to four independent trials. (F) Time-lapse DIC series of a representative explant from a WT embryo injected with 10 pg *ndr2* RNA. (G) Representative images of the whole-mount *in situ* hybridization for the transcripts indicated in explants from WT embryos injected with 10 pg *ndr2* RNA. Scale bars are 200 µm.

**Figure 3** (Modified from<sup>31</sup>): **Chimeric explants reveal that neuroectoderm specification does not require tissue-autonomous Nodal signaling *ex vivo*.** (A) Diagram of the procedure to generate chimeric zebrafish explants. (B–F) Whole-mount *in situ* hybridization for the mesoderm marker *tbxta* (top) and neuroectoderm marker *sox2* (bottom) in explants from WT embryos injected with 100 pg *ndr2* RNA (B), uninjected WT controls (C), MZ*oep*<sup>-/-</sup> injected with 10 pg *ndr2* (D), and chimeric explants containing neuroectoderm portions from WT (E) or MZ*oep*<sup>-/-</sup> (F) embryos at the equivalent of the 2–4 somite stage. Fractions indicate the number of explants with the phenotype shown over the total number of explants examined. (G–J) Representative images of live Tg[*lhx1a:gfp*] explants from a single embryo (G–H) or combined with H2B-expressing blastoderms (I–J, magenta) of the conditions indicated at the equivalent of the 2–4 somite stage. N = number of explants from three independent trials. Scale bars are 200 µm.

## DISCUSSION:

This article has described how to generate zebrafish blastoderm explants and discussed two practical applications of these explants in addressing the role of Nodal morphogen signaling in gastrulation. This method of cutting and culturing explants provides a blank slate of naïve cells that can be manipulated using RNA injections and treatment with small molecule compounds to investigate a molecular pathway of interest.

## Critical steps

There are four steps in this protocol that are particularly critical for its success. The first is injecting the embryos with the appropriate amount of Nodal. This protocol recommends 10 pg of *ndr2* RNA, and although a range of doses promotes extension, too much or too little Nodal will prevent optimal explant extension<sup>20</sup>. The second step is dechorionating the embryos. If the embryos remain in pronase for too long, the yolks will burst, and the embryos will not be viable to cut. If they are not in the pronase long enough, the chorions will not be loosened by washing and will instead require time-consuming manual dechoriation. The third critical step is cutting the explants. Cutting in 3x Danieau's solution is recommended, as the lower salt content of 0.3x Danieau's solution or egg water does not promote healing and survival of explants.

Additionally, the explants must be cut at approximately half the height of the blastoderm to ensure the naivety of the cells. If they are cut too close to the yolk, they will contain signals from the margin (including endogenous Nodal) that promote tissue specification and morphogenesis. The fourth and final critical step is in the healing of chimeric explants. Two explants will not fuse to form chimeras unless their cut edges are gently pressed together immediately after they are cut.

## Modifications and troubleshooting

The critical steps described above provide opportunities for troubleshooting. Some common issues and proposed solutions are presented below.

If explants are not extending in the presence of Nodal signaling, there are some possible solutions. (A) Inject embryos at the single-cell stage to ensure that RNA is evenly dispersed throughout the entire embryo. (B) Avoid injecting too much *nodal* RNA by providing that the

injected volume is correct using a micrometer to measure the injection bolus. (C) Avoid injecting too little *nodal* RNA by measuring its concentration to ensure it has not degraded. (D) Keep some age-matched intact siblings to infer the equivalent stage of the explants. Explants achieve maximum extension when intact siblings reach the 2–5 somite stage. If the explants are collected too early, then the optimal extension will not be reached.

If the yolks are bursting after dechoriation, and the embryos are not viable to cut, remove the embryos from pronase solution once the chorions begin to crinkle and 1-2 embryos shed their chorion. Then, rinse immediately in egg water.

If the explants appear bubbly around the edges, there are some solutions. (A) Cut explants only within a specific timeframe of development. Although explants cut at any stage from 128- to 1000-cell stages can survive and extend in culture, those cut at 256- to 512-cell stages tend to be the most robust. (B) Ensure that explants are cut in 3x Danieau's solution to ensure proper healing. (C) Cut explants cleanly but gently. Avoid stretching or pulling the cells apart during the cutting process.

If the uninjected control explants are extending, explants are likely to cut too close to the yolk. For explants to be naïve, ensure that the cuts are made halfway between the yolk and the top of the blastoderm.

If the chimeric explants fail to fuse, the tendency of explants in 3x Danieau's solution once cut is to round up and heal over the cut edge. To ensure that the two blastoderms heal to each other rather than themselves, press them together immediately after cutting. Use forceps to apply gentle pressure to the newly joined blastoderms within the agarose well to encourage them to heal together.

## Limitations

While these explants are a valuable tool to study the role of a given morphogen (or another molecule of interest) in relative isolation, observations made in any *ex vivo* model must be interpreted with care. Explants exhibit C&E morphogenesis that is very similar to that observed *in vivo*<sup>20</sup>, but they do not recapitulate all aspects of gastrulation, for example, epiboly movements. They also lack many other regulatory factors and signaling molecules that are present within an intact embryo. While this is a significant experimental advantage of explants, it can also lead to conclusions that do not hold *in vivo*. For example, since explants that do not receive exogenous Nodal ligands fail to express neuroectoderm markers, one might conclude from explants alone that Nodal signaling is required for neuroectoderm specification. However, neuroectoderm is formed within intact embryos lacking all Nodal signaling<sup>23,24</sup>, demonstrating the vital role of other signaling molecules in neural specification<sup>32</sup>. Explants can tell us what a morphogen can be in an isolated environment. Still, all such findings should be confirmed in/compared with intact embryos for results to be interpreted thoroughly. In other words, explants cannot take the place of a developing embryo. Instead, they are a supplementary tool to identify the role and relationship with the surroundings. With these limitations in mind, zebrafish blastoderm explants are a valuable tool for many research questions.

### **Significance with respect to existing methods**

Several *ex vivo* and *in vitro* approaches are regularly employed to model aspects of embryonic development with renewed interest in synthetic embryology. For example, 2- and 3-dimensional gastruloids composed of mouse or human embryonic / induced pluripotent stem cells can be coaxed, through the application of exogenous signaling molecules, to recapitulate some of the patternings and/or morphogenetic events of gastrulation, segmentation, and neurulation<sup>33–37</sup>. Although powerful, these methods require laborious and prolonged culture methods to both continuously maintain pluripotent stem cells and to grow gastruloids, which take many days to reach gastrulation stages. By contrast, zebrafish explants require no maintenance of stem cell cultures, as embryos are simply collected as needed. They are relatively simple to generate and reach gastrulation stages within hours, the same as zebrafish embryos. This highlights another advantage of zebrafish explants, their intact developmental clock. Because the developmental age of embryonic and induced pluripotent stem cells can be variable and highly debated, embryonic explants are perhaps better suited to investigate temporal regulation of development. Finally, while pescoid zebrafish explants (which contain the embryonic margin) similarly extend in culture<sup>12,13</sup>, they do so in response to endogenous signaling centers. Instead, the explants described here enable researchers to investigate molecules of interest with relatively little interference from such embryonic signals.

### **Potential future applications**

Here, explants were used to demonstrate that Nodal signaling is necessary and sufficient for C&E morphogenesis. Still, it is anticipated that they can and will be used to discern the role of many different molecules in many other developmental processes, for example, regulation of gene expression, signaling gradients, and additional morphogenetic programs. Additionally, because these explants are viable until at least 24 hpf<sup>19</sup>, it can be expected that their utility will extend beyond gastrulation into processes such as segmentation and organogenesis, any process in which researchers desire a developmental blank slate.

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### **DISCLOSURE:**

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests.

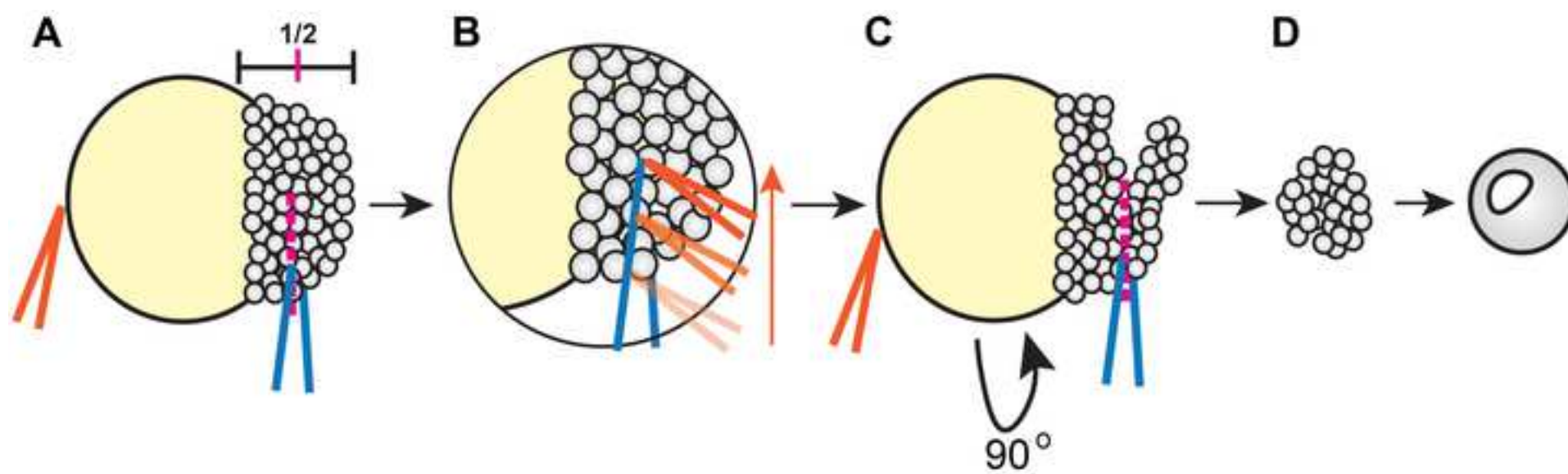
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Figure 1





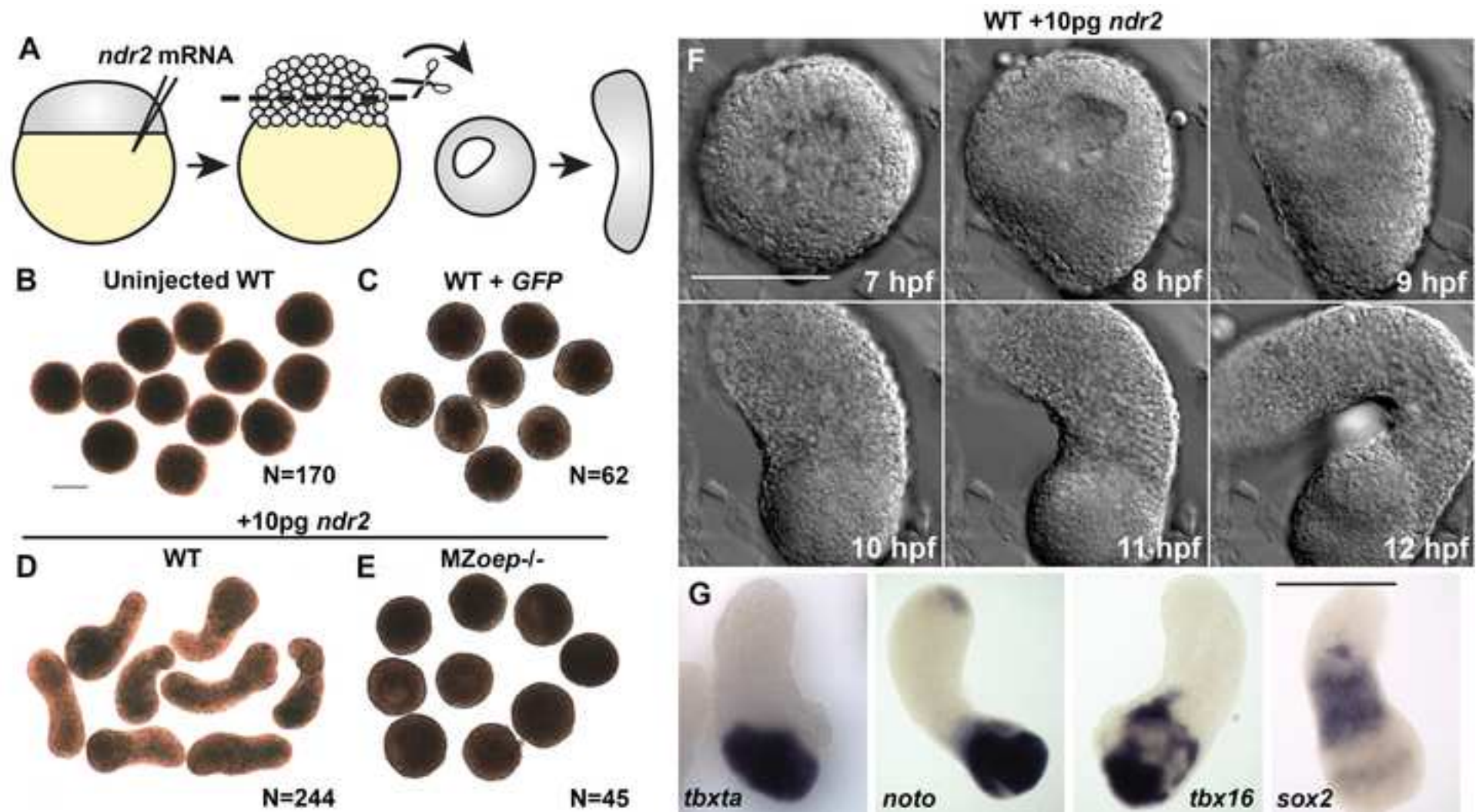
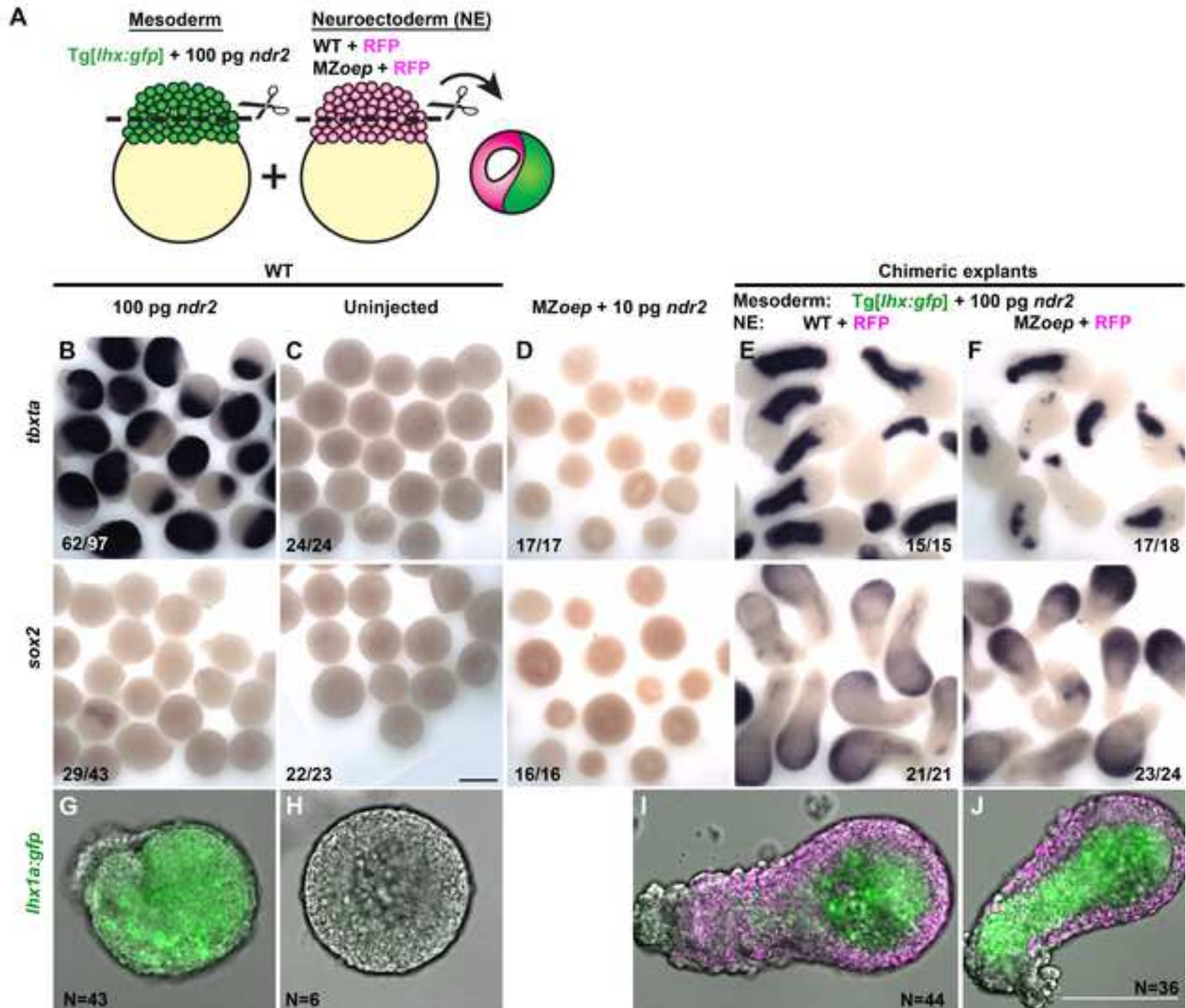


Figure 3



	Solution 1	Solution 2
Solution	3x Danieau's	Egg Water
Ingredients	174 mM NaCl 2.1 mM KCl 1.2 mM MgSO <sub>4</sub> .7H <sub>2</sub> O 1.8 mM Ca(NO <sub>3</sub> ) <sub>2</sub> .4H <sub>2</sub> O 15 mM HEPES Distilled water	60 µg/mL sea salts 1 L distilled water

### **Solution 3**

#### Explant Media

DMEM/F12 + 2.5 mM L-Glutamine and 15 mM HEPES  
3% total volume of Newborn Calf Serum or Fetal Bovine Serum  
1:200 Penicillin (50 units/mL)-Streptomycin (50 µg/mL)

Example:

4 mL/condition x 9 Conditions = 36 mL

1.08 mL

0.18 mL

35 mL

Newborn Calf Serum (NCS, aliquoted in -20 °C (3%))

200x Pen-Strep (PS, aliquoted in -20 °C) (1:200)

DMEM/F12

### **Solution 4**

#### 0.3x Danieau's

17.4 mM NaCl

0.21 mM KCl

0.12 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O

0.18 mM Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>·4H<sub>2</sub>O

1.5 mM HEPES

Distilled water



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**Table of Materials**

Table of Materials.xls



MARGOT KOSSMANN WILLIAMS, PH.D.  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

CENTER FOR PRECISION ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH  
ONE BAYLOR PLAZA  
HOUSTON, TEXAS 77030-3411

P: 713.798.5614  
MARGOT.WILLIAMS@BCM.EDU

Vidhya Iyer, Ph.D.  
Reviewing Editor  
*JoVE*  
May 24, 2021

Dear Dr. Iyer,

We would like to thank yourself and the anonymous Reviewers for the thoughtful evaluation of our manuscript entitled "*Generation of naïve blastoderm explants from zebrafish embryos*" (JoVE62797). We found the Reviewers' critiques to be both thorough and fair, and we have done our very best to revise our article in accordance with both Reviewer and Editorial comments. On the next page, we provide a point-by-point response to these comments and describe the steps we have taken to address them.

We were pleased that the Reviewers feel our protocol will be of great utility to the Developmental Biology community, and we are especially grateful for their eagle-eyed proof-reading that identified typographic errors and improper font conversions that altered our units as presented. Notably, we also added sample numbers to our figure panels and included two new data panels demonstrating that Nodal-deficient explants – like uninjected WT explants – fail to express markers of mesoderm or neuroectoderm tissues. We feel these revisions have improved the quality of our manuscript and enhanced the clarity of our protocol. We anticipate that these changes will satisfy the concerns of both the Reviewers and Editors, and we look forward to your decision.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

With warm regards,



Margot Kossmann Williams, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Dept. of Molecular & Cellular Biology  
Center for Precision Environmental Health  
Baylor College of Medicine



We thank the Editor and Reviewers again for their careful review of our manuscript. Below, we detail our responses to their comments, and hope that we have addressed these concerns to the satisfaction of all Reviewers and Editors. Original comments are shown in blue, our responses below in black.

### Response to Editorial comments

1. Thoroughly proofread the manuscript to ensure that there are no spelling or grammar issues. Please define all abbreviations at first use.

Both authors proofread the manuscript to ensure that spelling and grammar issues are addressed as well as abbreviations defined upon first use.

2. For in-text formatting, corresponding reference numbers should appear as numbered superscripts after the appropriate statement(s), but before punctuation.

And

13. Please ensure that the references appear as the following: [Lastname, F.I., LastName, F.I., LastName, F.I. Article Title. Source (ITALICS). Volume (BOLD) (Issue), FirstPage–LastPage (YEAR).] For 6 and more than 6 authors, list only the first author then et al. Please include volume and issue numbers for all references, and do not abbreviate the journal names.

We have revised the reference style, including in-text citations and bibliography, in accordance with these requirements.

3. Please consider providing solution composition as Tables in separate .xls or .xlsx files uploaded to your Editorial Manager account. These tables can then be referenced in the protocol text.

An .xls file has been created entitled “Solution Composition table”. These solution recipes are referenced in the protocol as follows: (Solution Composition: **Solution #**)

4. Please revise the following lines to avoid overlap with previously published work: 377-380

These lines comprise the legend of Figure 2, which was modified from Williams and Solnica-Krezel, *eLife*, 2020. The source publication was cited in the title of this figure, but it is now revised to: “Figure and legend modified from [Williams and Solnica-Krezel, *eLife*, 2020]”.

5. JoVE cannot publish manuscripts containing commercial language. Please remove all commercial language from your manuscript and use generic terms instead. All commercial products should be sufficiently referenced in the Table of Materials, e.g., Instant Ocean sea salts; MilliQ; Pico-pump; pronase etc

To our knowledge, all commercial language has been removed. However, it was our impression that “pronase” is the name of an enzyme rather than a commercial name. If we are mistaken, we will gladly make this change.

6. Please adjust the numbering of the Protocol to follow the JoVE Instructions for Authors. For example, 1 should be followed by 1.1 and then 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 if necessary. Please refrain from using bullets or dashes.

Numbering in the protocol has been revised.

7. Please revise the text, especially in the protocol, to avoid the use of any personal pronouns (e.g., “we”, “you”, “our” etc.).

Personal pronouns have been removed from the manuscript.

8. Please ensure that all text in the protocol section is written in the imperative tense as if telling someone how to do the technique (e.g., “Do this,” “Ensure that,” etc.).

The manuscript has been edited to use the imperative tense throughout the protocol.

10. After including a one line space between each protocol step, highlight up to 3 pages of protocol text for inclusion in the protocol section of the video. This will clarify what needs to be filmed.

We have highlighted the portions of the protocol to be included in the corresponding video.

11. As we are a methods journal, please revise the Discussion to explicitly cover the following in detail in 3-6 paragraphs with citations:

- a) Critical steps within the protocol
- b) Any modifications and troubleshooting of the technique (the troubleshooting section of the protocol can be moved here with appropriate adjustments)
- c) Any limitations of the technique (discussed well)
- d) The significance with respect to existing methods
- e) Any future applications of the technique

We have modified our Discussion section to explicitly cover these areas.

12. Please include a Disclosures section, providing information regarding the authors’ competing financial interests or other conflicts of interest. If authors have no competing financial interests, then a statement indicating no competing financial interests must be included.

We have added a Disclosure section stating that the authors declare no competing financial interests.

14. Please sort the Materials Table alphabetically by the name of the material.

We have reorganized the Materials Table in alphabetical order.

### Response to Reviewer comments

We have corrected many small errors in our manuscript, including spaces between numbers and units and typographical errors. We thank the Reviewers for catching these, particularly the issues with units (mg vs.  $\mu$ g, for example) which resulted from improper conversions of fonts between Word and PDF formats. These have been corrected, and we have included a PDF version of the manuscript as well in the event of further issues with converted file formats.

Reviewer #3:

1. The authors described that explants are viable until at least 24 hours post fertilization (hpf), but maximum extension is usually achieved by 12-14 hpf. How did the authors know these explants are viable or not?

Our explant methods are largely based on those described in Xu et al, *Science*, 2014, in which the authors demonstrate viability of explants for up to 24 hours. We have now cited this article in our reference to explant viability at 24 hpf (in the Discussion section, page 11).

2. For explant media, why did the authors use DMEM/F12 and Newborn Calf Serum? Since the explants can only survive for 24 hours, I am wondering whether this medium can be improved. For example, Calf serum can be replaced by FBS or fish serum. DMEM/F12 can be replaced by L15.



A very similar media recipe was described in Xu et al, *Science*, 2014. Because it has suited our lab's needs well, we have made only minor modifications. For example, we have made our explant media with either FBS or NCS and found that it made no difference in explant growth or viability. We therefore continued to use the less expensive option: NCS. It is our impression that failure of explant viability after 24 hpf is likely not the result of suboptimal culture conditions, but rather a limit of the explants themselves (likely due to their lack of yolk). While it certainly may be possible to extend their viability by altering media composition, we feel that testing this is outside the scope of this article.

3. In this manuscript, the authors only test the utility of explants by studying the Nodal signaling. Is it possible to use other signaling to confirm such utility?

Xu and colleagues (*Science*, 2014) generated similar explants from embryos injected with RNAs encoding both Nodal and BMP to demonstrate that this combination of molecules is sufficient to recapitulate much of zebrafish axis formation. It is our sincerest hope that members of the developmental biology community will use these methods to test a variety of additional signaling molecules!

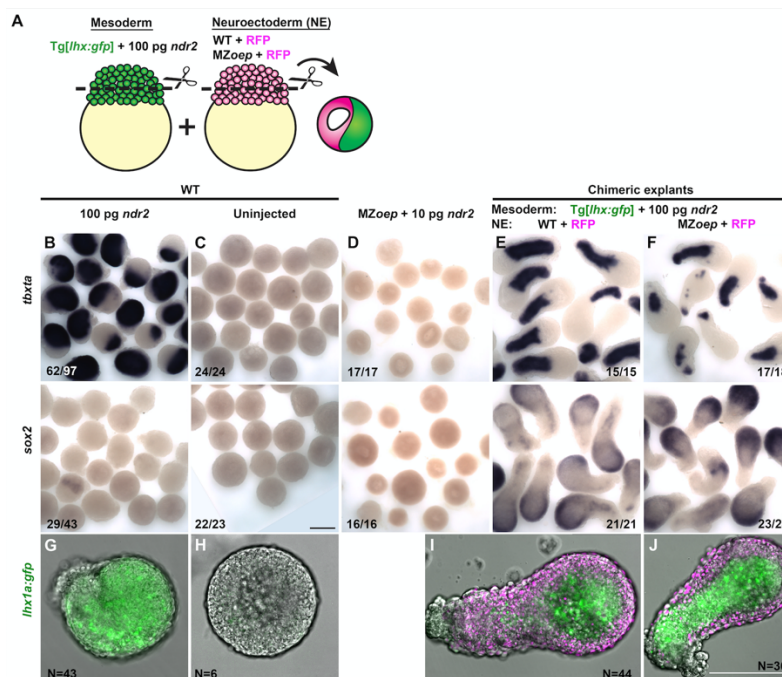
Reviewer #4:

First, I would like to see numbers for the data shown in Figures 2 and 3.

We have modified Figures 2 and 3 (and their legends) to depict sample numbers for the explants shown.

Second, the authors should show whether the MZoepl mutant explants express Sox2 (and tbxta) alone, or in combination with wildtype, uninjected explants.

We added two new panels to Figure 3 (see the new panel D, below) depicting single-embryo explants from MZoepl<sup>-/-</sup> embryos injected with *ndr2* RNA to demonstrate that, even upon exposure to Nodal ligands, they express markers of neither mesoderm nor neuroectoderm.



## **Title**

Generation of naïve blastoderm explants from zebrafish embryos

## **Authors and affiliations**

Alyssa Alaniz Emig and Margot L. K. Williams\*

Center for Precision Environmental Health and Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology,  
Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX

\*Author for correspondence

\*margot.williams@bcm.edu, aalaniz@bcm.edu

## **Summary**

Zebrafish blastoderm explants are generated by isolating embryonic cells from endogenous signaling centers within the early embryo, producing relatively naïve cell clusters that are easily manipulated and cultured *ex vivo*. This article provides instructions for making such explants and demonstrates their utility by interrogating roles for Nodal signaling during gastrulation.

## **Abstract**

Due to their optical clarity and rapid development, zebrafish embryos are an advantageous system in which to examine cell behaviors and developmental processes. However, because of the complexity and redundancy of embryonic signals, it can be challenging to discern the complete role of any one signal during early embryogenesis. By explanting the animal region of the zebrafish blastoderm, relatively naïve clusters of embryonic cells are generated that can be easily cultured and manipulated *ex vivo*. By introducing a gene of interest by RNA injection prior to explantation, one can assess the effect of this molecule on gene expression, cell behaviors, and other developmental processes in relative isolation. Furthermore, cells from embryos of different genotypes or conditions can be combined in a single chimeric explant to examine cell/tissue interactions and tissue-specific gene functions. This article provides instructions for generating zebrafish blastoderm explants and demonstrates that a single signaling molecule - a Nodal ligand - is sufficient to induce germ layer formation and extension morphogenesis in otherwise naïve embryonic tissues. Given their ability to recapitulate embryonic cell behaviors, morphogen gradients, and gene expression patterns in a simplified *ex vivo* system, these explants are anticipated to be of great utility to many zebrafish researchers.

## **Introduction**

A perennial goal of the developmental biology field is to unravel the complexity of developing embryos to better understand the origins of animal form and function. Even early embryos contain a complex medley of signaling molecules, cell and tissue interactions, and mechanical forces, all subject to strict spatial and temporal regulation. For this reason, it is often challenging to pinpoint the precise role of any one signal in a developmental process of interest. By removing embryonic tissues from their endogenous environment, embryo explantation creates a simplified platform in which to discern the developmental roles of individual tissues and

molecules in relative isolation. Explantation techniques are perhaps best known in *Xenopus laevis*, where they have been used to study tissue induction, cell signaling, cell adhesion, and morphogenesis, among other processes<sup>1-4</sup>. So-called animal cap explants, in which the animal-most region of blastula stage *Xenopus* embryos is isolated prior to inductive interactions<sup>5-7</sup>, are a particularly common and powerful explant technique. Unmanipulated animal caps are fated to become ectoderm<sup>7,8</sup>, but are competent to respond to a number of inductive factors, allowing them to form tissues of all 3 germ layers and undergo tissue-appropriate morphogenetic movements<sup>9-11</sup>. However, limited genetic tools and sub-optimal suitability for live imaging prevent the use of *Xenopus* animal cap explants for many developmental biologists. By explanting blastoderm cells from zebrafish embryos, researchers can combine the utility of the animal cap assay with the optical clarity, abundance of genetic tools, and other experimental advantages of the zebrafish model system.

To date, researchers have made use of two ‘flavors’ of zebrafish explants: so-called “pescoids” and blastoderm explants. In the pescoid model, the entire blastoderm - including the marginal zone - is isolated from the yolk and allowed to develop *ex vivo* in the absence of the extraembryonic yolk syncytial layer (YSL)<sup>12,13</sup>. In this way, pescoids bear a notable resemblance to the *Fundulus* explants generated decades ago by Jane Oppenheimer and John Trinkaus<sup>14,15</sup>. These explants recapitulate many aspects of embryonic patterning and morphogenesis<sup>12,13</sup>. However, because these isolates contain endogenous signaling centers (the embryonic margin), they are not simplified with respect to their molecular milieu. Alternatively, researchers can generate relatively naïve zebrafish blastoderm explants by excluding the marginal zone<sup>16-21</sup>. Unmanipulated zebrafish blastoderm explants express high levels of bone morphogenetic protein (BMP) morphogens<sup>19</sup> and give rise to non-neural ectoderm and enveloping layer (EVL) when cultured *ex vivo*<sup>18</sup>. However, they recapitulate many aspects of axial patterning and morphogenesis in response to exogenous signaling gradients<sup>19-21</sup>, similar to *Xenopus* animal caps. For this reason, blastoderm explants are an advantageous model to study the role of a given morphogen (or morphogens) in germ layer specification, morphogenetic cell movements, and signaling gradients within a simplified signaling environment. Furthermore, blastoderms from embryos of different genotypes or conditions can be combined in a single chimeric explant<sup>19,21</sup> to investigate cell/tissue autonomy and inductive interactions.

Zebrafish blastoderm explants can be used to investigate the role of embryonic signals (for example, Nodal) in morphogenesis and tissue specification during gastrulation. By injecting synthetic *ndr2* RNA (encoding a Nodal ligand) at the single-cell stage, Nodal signaling is activated throughout the blastoderm of the embryo. Explants from these embryos generate Nodal signaling gradients, form all three germ layers, and undergo convergence and extension (C&E) gastrulation movements as seen in intact embryos<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, chimeric explants are used to further illustrate the ability of mesoderm tissues to induce neuroectoderm from uninjected (naïve) blastoderm. This protocol provides instructions for creating zebrafish blastoderm explants and demonstrates their utility in defining the role of Nodal signaling in tissue induction and morphogenesis.

## **Protocol**

### **1. Prepare reagents and supplies**

#### **1.1. Prepare reagents**

- 1.1.1 Prepare 500 mL of **3X** Danieau’s solution (Solution Composition table: **Solution 1**).

- 1.1.2 Prepare 1 L of egg water (Solution Composition table: **Solution 3**).
- 1.1.3 Prepare a 1.2% solution of agarose in egg water. Melt agarose completely in microwave, then allow to cool to 55°C in a water bath.
- 1.1.4 Prepare 4 mL explant media (modified slightly from<sup>19,21</sup>) per experimental condition.
  - \*Note:** Remember to account for at least 1 well of explants from uninjected (or control injected) embryos when calculating required volume.
  - 1.1.4.1 Sanitize the workspace with 70% ethanol.
  - 1.1.4.2 Remove cell culture media from 4°C and spray/wipe with 70% ethanol.
  - 1.1.4.3 Make explant media (Solution Composition table: **Solution 4**) and place in the 28.5°C incubator to warm while the embryos are injected.
    - \*Note:** Always include age-matched, intact sibling embryos for staging purposes. Dechorionate these embryos and culture them on agarose-coated plates in **0.3X** Danieau's solution (Solution Composition table: **Solution 2**).
- 1.1.5 Remove pronase aliquots (1 mL at 20 mg/mL) from -20°C and allow to thaw on ice. Thaw one 1 mL aliquot for every 3 experimental conditions.
- 1.2 Prepare agarose plates
  - 1.2.1 Make the injection plates.
    - 1.2.1.1 Fill a 100 mm X 15 mm plastic Petri dish half-full with molten agarose in egg water.
    - 1.2.1.2 Gently place the injection mold on top of the molten agarose at a 45° angle and lower it gradually into the agarose, ensuring that no bubbles are trapped underneath. Let cool completely.
    - 1.2.1.3 Remove mold. Use plate immediately or save for later by adding 2 mL of egg water, wrapping the plate, and storing it at 4°C. 15-30 minutes before injection, warm the plate in the 28.5°C incubator.
  - 1.2.2 Make explant cutting plates.
    - 1.2.2.1 Add 3 mL of molten 1.2% agarose in egg water to a 60 mm X 15 mm Petri dish, ensuring the entire bottom of the well is coated. Let cool completely.
  - 1.2.3 Coat culture plates with agarose.
    - 1.2.3.1 For each experimental condition, dispense 1 mL of molten 1.2% agarose in egg water into 1 well of a 6-well plate, ensuring the entire bottom of the well is coated. Let cool completely.

- 1.2.4 If making chimeric explants, create an explant cutting dish with small wells by adding 12 - 1 mm glass beads to molten agarose in a 60 mm x 15 mm Petri dish. Remove the beads with forceps once the agarose has cooled completely.

## 2 Inject embryos with RNA

- 2.1 Handling with gloves, remove an aliquot of synthetic *ndr2* mRNA from storage at -80°C and immediately place on ice.

### 2.2 Prepare the injection needle.

- 2.2.1 Fill a pulled glass capillary needle with RNA. Place the filled needle into a micro-manipulator and break the tip of the needle with #5 watch makers forceps.

- 2.2.2 Calibrate injection volume using a micrometer with a drop of mineral oil, adjusting injection time and pressure on the pneumatic injector as necessary. The volume of the bolus will depend on the concentration of the RNA and the desired dose per embryo. For example, if RNA is aliquoted at 10 ng/μL, inject 1 nL to achieve a final dose of 10 pg.

#### 2.2.2.1 Keep RNA needle tip submerged in the oil until ready to inject.

- 2.3 Load the embryos and begin injections.

- 2.3.1 Pull dividers in breeding tanks, allow fish to spawn for 10-15 minutes, and collect the embryos using a tea strainer.

- 2.3.2 Load embryos into the injection plate using a Pasteur pipet and pipet pump, then use a gloved finger to gently press the eggs into the troughs.

- 2.3.3 Inject 10 pg *ndr2* RNA into the yolk of single-cell embryos until the desired number of embryos is reached or until embryos begin to divide.

**\*Note:** Do not inject after the single-cell stage to ensure even distribution of the RNA throughout the embryo.

- 2.3.4 Wash the embryos out of the injection plate into a labeled 100 mm x 15 mm Petri dish with a gentle stream of egg water from a squeeze bottle.

**\*Note:** Always keep a group of age-matched, uninjected siblings as controls.

- 2.3.5 Place embryos into the 28.5°C incubator until they reach the 128-cell stage. Remove unfertilized eggs and dead embryos from the dish.

## 3 Dechorionate embryos

- 3.1 Once the embryos have reached 128-cell stage, place them into labeled glass Petri dishes and decant as much egg water as possible from them.

3.2 Label glass crystalizing dishes with lab tape (corresponding to small dish names) and fill 2/3 of the way with egg water. Place these dishes next to the dissecting microscope for quick accessibility.

3.3 Add 1 mL pronase stock (20 mg/mL, thawed on ice) to 15 mL **3X** Danieau in a 50 mL conical tube. This is sufficient for up to 3 experimental conditions. Increase volume of pronase and **3X** Danieau's for additional explant conditions.

**CAUTION:** Pronase is an irritant. Wear gloves when handling.

3.4 Add at least 5 mL of pronase solution to each glass Petri dish containing embryos.

3.5 Agitate the glass dishes in a circular motion, monitoring the progress of dechoriation consistently under a dissecting microscope.

3.6 Once the chorions begin to wrinkle and 1-2 embryos are out of their chorions, carefully dunk the glass Petri dish containing pronase and embryos into the corresponding glass crystalizing dish containing egg water.

3.7 Wash the dechorionated embryos.

3.7.1 Wash the embryos 3 times with egg water by gently adding and then decanting egg water from the dish.

3.7.2 The third and final wash is with **0.3X** Danieau's solution.

**\*Note:** If the embryos still have chorions after washing, gently pipet the embryos until the chorions are removed or let them sit in wash (egg water or **0.3X** Danieau's) for a minute or two and gently agitate with circular motions.

3.8 Cover dechorionated embryos with a Petri dish lid and return them to the incubator until they reach 256-cell stage.

#### 4 Cut explants

4.1 Fill agarose-coated 60 mm x 15 mm Petri dish with **3X** Danieau's solution.

4.2 Once the embryos are at 256-cell stage, transfer them into the agarose-coated plate containing **3X** Danieau's, lining them up along the center of the dish.

4.3 Cut the explants using #5 watch makers forceps (**Figure 1**).

4.3.1 Use one pair of forceps, held closed, to stabilize the embryo and use the other to make a cut through the blastoderm at approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$  of its height (from margin to animal pole) (**Figure 1A**).

4.3.2 To make the cut, gently squeeze the blastoderm cells with one pair of forceps, then take the stabilizing forceps and run them along the other forceps to slice approximately halfway across the blastoderm (**Figure 1B**).

4.3.3 Rotate the embryo, placing the forceps into the existing cut, then sever the remaining blastoderm orthogonal to the first cut (**Figure 1C**).

4.4 Keep explants in **3X** Danieau's for at least 5 minutes to heal, then transfer them to the well of a 6-well plate coated with agarose and filled with 4 mL of explant media.

**\*Note:** Cut explants from uninjected (or control injected) siblings as negative controls. If explants are performed correctly, these explants will neither extend nor express markers of endoderm, mesoderm, or neuroectoderm.

4.5 Place the explant culture plates into the 28.5°C incubator until desired timepoint/stage (determined from intact siblings) is reached.

**\*Note:** To treat explants with compounds, such as small molecule inhibitors, the desired concentration can be added directly to the explant media within the wells at desired time points. Remember to include the volume of agarose when calculating concentrations. Example: 1 mL agarose + 4 mL explant media = 5 mL total volume per well).

## 5 Chimeric Explants

5.1 In place of a regular agarose coated plate, cut chimeric explants in a dish with agarose molded into 12 small, shallow wells using 1 mm glass beads (See section 1.2.4). Fill this plate with **3X** Danieau's solution.

5.2 Chimeric explants are generated from blastoderm cells of 2 embryos of different genotypes or conditions. Ensure that these conditions can be distinguished from one another by expression of transgenic or injected fluorescent markers.

5.2.1 Prepare by adding 12 embryos of one genotype/condition to the left side of the plate and 12 embryos of the other genotype/condition to the right side of the plate.

5.2.2 Move one embryo of each condition into the center of the plate, near one of the 12 wells.

5.2.3 Using forceps, cut an explant from each embryo as described for single embryo explants (Step 4.3).

5.2.4 Quickly press the cut edges of the 2 explants together within the shallow well using forceps. This allows the two halves to heal together into a single explant.

5.2.5 Continue with the remaining 12 wells within the plate. Once explants are healed, transfer them to the well of a 6-well plate coated with agarose and filled with 4 mL of explant media. Repeat until the desired number of explants is achieved.

## 6 Culture, image, and/or fix explants

6.1 Culture explants in the 28.5°C incubator until intact sibling embryos reach the desired stage.

6.2 Live explants can be mounted for continuous time-lapse imaging, imaged periodically throughout the culture period, or imaged live at the experimental end point.

- 6.3 Fix explants if desired. Once the explants reach the desired endpoint, note the stage of intact embryo siblings and place explants into a glass scintillation vial with 1 mL of 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS. Fix overnight on a shaker at 4°C.

**CAUTION:** Paraformaldehyde is toxic. Wear gloves when handling this chemical and dispose of via methods approved by each institution.

- 6.3.1 After fixation, rinse explants 6 times, 15 minutes each with PBS + 0.1% Tween-20 and dehydrate gradually into methanol. Store explants at -20°C for later analysis by whole mount *in situ* hybridization, immunofluorescent staining, etc.

## **Representative results**

### *Nodal ligands drive germ layer formation and C&E of zebrafish blastoderm explants*

Control explants cut from uninjected wild-type (WT) embryos or those injected with 50 pg of mRNA encoding green fluorescent protein (GFP) remained rounded throughout the culture period (Figure 2A-C) and failed to express markers of mesoderm, endoderm, or neuroectoderm (Figure 3C)<sup>20</sup>. Together, these indicate an absence of the morphogenesis and germ layer formation that characterize vertebrate gastrulation. However, explants cut from embryos injected with 10 pg of *ndr2* mRNA became highly elongated after 8-9 hours in culture (Figure 2D). Live time-lapse imaging of these explants by differential interfering contrast (DIC) microscopy revealed that extension onsets at or around 8 hours post fertilization (hpf) (Figure 2F), the same time that C&E morphogenesis begins in intact zebrafish embryos<sup>22</sup>. Explants cut from MZ*oep*<sup>-/-</sup> embryos, which lack the essential *tdgf1* Nodal co-receptor<sup>23</sup>, failed to extend in response to *ndr2* injection (Figure 2E), demonstrating that Nodal activity is critical for this *ex vivo* morphogenesis. In addition, whole mount *in situ* hybridization further demonstrated that *ndr2*-expressing explants express markers of neuroectoderm (*sox2*) and several mesoderm sub-types (*tbxta*, *noto*, *tbx16*)(Figure 2G), as well as endoderm and the embryonic organizer<sup>20</sup>.

### *Nodal signaling is not required for neuroectoderm induction by mesoderm*

Nodal signaling activity is essential for induction of endoderm and most mesoderm but is dispensable for neuroectoderm specification within zebrafish gastrulae<sup>23,24</sup>. While uninjected zebrafish blastoderm explants did not differentiate into neuroectoderm (Figure 3C,<sup>18</sup>), explants from embryos injected with 10 pg *ndr2* exhibited robust expression of the neuroectoderm marker *sox2* in distinct stripes along the long axis of the explant (Figure 2G), indicating that Nodal activity is required for neuroectoderm formation *ex vivo*. It has long been known that mesodermal tissues can induce neural tissue<sup>25-29</sup>, including in zebrafish blastoderm explants<sup>17</sup>. However, it is unclear whether neuroectoderm formation in this explant system requires Nodal signaling directly, or whether exogenous Nodal ligands induce mesoderm that then induces neural tissues secondarily.

Chimeric explants comprised of prospective mesoderm and neuroectoderm portions from 2 different embryos were generated to test whether Nodal signaling is required tissue-autonomously for neuroectoderm specification *ex vivo*. The mesoderm portion of each explant was cut from an otherwise WT embryo expressing a mesoderm-specific transgenic GFP reporter, Tg[*lhx1a*:eGFP]<sup>30</sup>, injected with a high dose (100 pg) of *ndr2* (Figure 3A). The putative neuroectoderm portion of each explant was cut from either a control WT embryo or a Nodal signaling deficient MZ*oep*<sup>-/-</sup> embryo injected only with mRNA encoding the fluorescent nuclear marker H2B-RFP (Figure 3A). Each chimeric explant was generated by combining one



blastoderm from each of these two conditions, which were assayed for expression of tissue-specific markers by whole mount *in situ* hybridization at 12 hpf.

The majority of single-embryo explants from embryos injected with 100 pg *ndr2* expressed little or no *sox2*, and expressed markers of mesoderm – including *tbxta* and the *lhx1a:gfp* reporter - throughout the explant (Figure 3B, G). Uninjected WT blastoderm (of the type that comprise the prospective neuroectoderm portion of chimeric explants) expressed neither mesoderm markers nor *sox2* when cultured as a single explant, indicating a lack of neuroectoderm and mesoderm specification (Figure 3C, H). Single-embryo explants from MZ*oepl*<sup>-/-</sup> embryos similarly lacked expression of both neuroectoderm and mesoderm markers, even when injected with *ndr2* (Figure 3D). However, when uninjected WT blastoderms were combined with mesoderm induced by high doses of Nodal ligands, these chimeric explants expressed both mesoderm markers and *sox2* robustly (Figure 3E, I). These results demonstrate that, as previously observed<sup>17,26,27,29</sup>, mesoderm can induce neural fate in cells that would otherwise become non-neural ectoderm. To test whether Nodal signaling is required directly within the prospective neuroectoderm portion of these explants for their neural induction, chimeric explants were created in which WT blastoderms converted to mesoderm by injection of 100 pg *ndr2* were combined with blastoderms from MZ*oepl*<sup>-/-</sup> embryos (Figure 3J). Despite their inability to receive Nodal signals from the neighboring mesodermal portion, these explants expressed *sox2* to a similar degree as WT control chimeras (Figure 3F). This result demonstrates that, consistent with intact embryos in which neural tissues are specified in the absence of Nodal activity, Nodal signaling is not required tissue-autonomously for neuroectoderm induction *ex vivo*.

## **Figure Legends**

### **Figure 1: Procedure for zebrafish blastoderm explantation (as in Protocol section 4.3).**

**A)** Hold the forceps in the non-dominant hand (orange) closed against the yolk to stabilize the embryo while pinching the blastoderm at approximately ½ of its height using the forceps in the dominant hand (blue). **B)** Run the ‘orange’ forceps along the edge of the ‘blue’ forceps that are gripping the embryo to slice through the blastoderm so that the first cut reaches approximately halfway across the blastoderm. **C)** Rotate the embryo 90 degrees, then place the ‘blue’ forceps inside of (but orthogonal to) the original cut and pinch to sever the remaining blastoderm. **D)** Allow explanted blastoderm cells to heal in **3X** Danieau’s solution for approximately 5 minutes before transferring into explant media.

### **Figure 2 (Figure and legend modified from<sup>20</sup>): Nodal ligands promote C&E morphogenesis and germ layer formation in zebrafish blastoderm explants.**

**A)** Diagram of injection and explantation of zebrafish embryos. **B-E)** Representative bright field images of live blastoderm explants of the indicated conditions/genotypes at the equivalent of 2-4 somite stage. N= number of explants from two to four independent trials. **F)** Time-lapse DIC series of a representative explant from a WT embryo injected with 10 pg *ndr2* RNA. **G)** Representative images of whole mount *in situ* hybridization for the transcripts indicated in explants from WT embryos injected with 10 pg *ndr2* RNA. Scale bars are 200 µm.

### **Figure 3 (Modified from<sup>31</sup>): Chimeric explants reveal that neuroectoderm specification does not require tissue-autonomous Nodal signaling *ex vivo*.**

**A)** Diagram of the procedure to generate chimeric zebrafish explants. **B-F)** Whole mount *in situ* hybridization for the mesoderm marker *tbxta* (top) and neuroectoderm marker *sox2* (bottom) in explants from WT embryos injected with 100 pg *ndr2* RNA (B), uninjected WT controls (C), MZ*oepl*<sup>-/-</sup> injected with 10 pg *ndr2* (D), and chimeric explants containing neuroectoderm portions

from WT (E) or MZ*oep*<sup>-/-</sup> (F) embryos at the equivalent of 2-4 somite stage. Fractions indicate the number of explants with the phenotype shown over the total number of explants examined. **G-J**) Representative images of live Tg[*lhx1a:gfp*] explants from a single embryo (G-H) or combined with H2B-expressing blastoderms (I-J, magenta) of the conditions indicated at the equivalent of 2-4 somite stage. N= number of explants from three independent trials. Scale bars are 200  $\mu$ m.

## **Discussion**

This article has described how to generate zebrafish blastoderm explants and discussed two practical applications of these explants in addressing the role of Nodal morphogen signaling in gastrulation. This method of cutting and culturing explants provides a “blank slate” of naïve cells that can be manipulated using RNA injections and/or treatment with small molecule compounds to investigate a molecular pathway of interest.

### *Critical steps*

There are four steps in this protocol that are particularly critical for its success. The first is injecting the embryos with the appropriate amount of Nodal. This protocol recommends 10 pg *ndr2* RNA, and although a range of doses promote extension, too much or too little Nodal will prevent optimal explant extension<sup>20</sup>. The second step is dechorionating the embryos. If the embryos remain in pronase for too long, the yolks will burst and the embryos will not be viable to cut. If they are not in the pronase long enough, the chorions will not be loosened by washing and will instead require time consuming manual dechoronation. The third critical step is cutting the explants. Cutting in **3X** Danieau is recommended, as the lower salt content of 0.3X Danieau or egg water does not promote healing and survival of explants. Additionally, the explants must be cut at approximately half the height of the blastoderm to ensure naivety of the cells. If they are cut too close to the yolk, they will contain signals from the margin (including endogenous Nodal) that promote tissue specification and morphogenesis. The fourth and final critical step is the healing of chimeric explants. Two explants will not fuse to form chimeras unless their cut edges are gently pressed together immediately after they are cut.

### *Modifications and troubleshooting*

The critical steps described above provide opportunities for troubleshooting. Some common issues and proposed solutions are presented below.

Problem: explants are not extending in the presence of Nodal signaling.

Possible solutions:

1. Inject embryos at the single-cell stage to ensure that RNA is evenly dispersed throughout the entire embryo.
2. Avoid injecting too much *nodal* RNA by ensuring that the injected volume is correct using a micrometer to measure the injection bolus.
3. Avoid injecting too little *nodal* RNA by measuring its concentration to ensure it has not degraded.
4. Keep some age-matched intact siblings to infer the equivalent stage of the explants. Explants achieve maximum extension when intact siblings reach 2-5 somite stage. If the explants are collected too early, then optimal extension will not be reached.

Problem: the yolks are bursting after dechoronation and the embryos are not viable to cut.

Possible solution: remove the embryos from pronase solution once the chorions begin to crinkle and 1-2 embryos shed their chorion, then rinse immediately in egg water.

Problem: the explants appear “bubbly” around the edges.

Possible solutions:

1. Cut explants only within a specific timeframe of development. Although explants cut at any stage from 128- to 1000-cell can survive and extend in culture, those cut at 256- to 512-cell stages tend to be the most robust.
2. Ensure that explants are cut in **3X** Danieau's to ensure proper healing.
3. Cut explants cleanly but gently. Avoid stretching or pulling the cells apart during the cutting process.

Problem: uninjected control explants are extending.

Possible solution: explants were likely cut too close to the yolk. For explants to be naïve, ensure that the cuts are made halfway between the yolk and the top of the blastoderm.

Problem: chimeric explants fail to fuse.

Possible solution: once cut, the tendency of explants in **3X** Danieau's solution is to round up and heal over the cut edge. To ensure that 2 blastoderms heal to each other rather than to themselves, press them together immediately after cutting. Use forceps to apply gentle pressure to the newly joined blastoderms within the agarose well to encourage them to heal together.

### *Limitations*

While these explants are an advantageous tool to study the role of a given morphogen (or other molecule of interest) in relative isolation, observations made in any *ex vivo* model must be interpreted with care. Explants exhibit C&E morphogenesis that is very similar to that observed *in vivo*<sup>20</sup>, but they do not recapitulate all aspects of gastrulation, for example: epiboly movements. They also lack many other regulatory factors and signaling molecules that are present within an intact embryo. While this is a major experimental advantage of explants, it can also lead to conclusions that do not hold true *in vivo*. For example, because explants that do not receive exogenous Nodal ligands fail to express neuroectoderm markers, one might conclude from explants alone that Nodal signaling is required for neuroectoderm specification. However, neuroectoderm is indeed formed within intact embryos lacking all Nodal signaling<sup>23,24</sup>, demonstrating the important role of other signaling molecules in neural specification<sup>32</sup>. Explants can tell us what a morphogen is capable of in an isolated environment, but all such findings should be confirmed in / compared with intact embryos for results to be interpreted fully. In other words, explants cannot take the place of a developing embryo, but rather, they are a supplementary tool to identify the role and relationship of a morphogen with the surroundings. With these limitations in mind, zebrafish blastoderm explants are a valuable tool for many research questions.

### *Significance with respect to existing methods*

With renewed interest in the field of synthetic embryology, a number of *ex vivo* and *in vitro* approaches are regularly employed to model aspects of embryonic development. For example, 2- and 3-dimensional “gastruloids” composed of mouse or human embryonic / induced pluripotent stem cells can be coaxed, through the application of exogenous signaling molecules, to recapitulate some of the patterning and/or morphogenetic events of gastrulation, segmentation, and neurulation<sup>33-37</sup>. Although powerful, these methods require laborious and prolonged culture methods to both continuously maintain pluripotent stem cells and to grow gastruloids, which take many days to reach ‘gastrulation stages’. By contrast, zebrafish explants require no maintenance of stem cells cultures, as embryos are simply collected as needed. They are relatively simple to generate and reach ‘gastrulation stages’ within hours, the same as zebrafish embryos. This highlights another advantage of zebrafish explants - their intact

'developmental clock'. Because the developmental age of embryonic and induced pluripotent stem cells can be variable and highly debated, embryonic explants are perhaps better suited to investigate temporal regulation of development. Finally, while "pescoïd" zebrafish explants (which contain the embryonic margin) similarly extend in culture<sup>12,13</sup>, they do so in response to endogenous signaling centers. The explants described here instead enable researchers to investigate molecules of interest with relatively little interference from such embryonic signals.

#### *Potential future applications*

Here, explants were used to demonstrate that Nodal signaling is necessary and sufficient for C&E morphogenesis, but it is anticipated that they can and will be used to discern the role of many different molecules in many different developmental processes. For example: regulation of gene expression, signaling gradients, and additional morphogenetic programs. Additionally, because these explants are viable until at least 24 hpf<sup>19</sup>, it can be expected that their utility will extend beyond gastrulation into processes such as segmentation and organogenesis – any process in which researchers desire a developmental "blank slate".

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#### **Disclosure**

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests.

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Nilanjana Saha &lt;nilanjana.saha@jove.com&gt;

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Center for Precision Environmental Health  
Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology  
Baylor College of Medicine  
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