

# Nodal regulates bladder cancer cell migration and invasion via the ALK/Smad signaling pathway

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**Background:** Bladder cancer is the most common malignant tumor of the urinary tract. We aimed to explore the biological role and molecular mechanism of Nodal in bladder cancer.

**Materials and methods:** The expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues and cells was determined by quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction. The effect of silencing of Nodal on cell proliferation, clone formation, and migration and invasion was evaluated by MTT cell proliferation assay, colony formation, and transwell assays, respectively. Western blot analysis was employed to detect the expression of proliferation- and invasion-related proteins and proteins involved in ALK/Smad signaling.

**Results:** We found that the expression of Nodal was significantly increased in bladder cancer tissues and cell lines. Downregulation of Nodal effectively weakened cell proliferation, clone formation, and cell migration and invasion abilities. The protein expression levels of CDC6, E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9 were also altered by downregulation of Nodal. Knockdown of Nodal also blocked the expression of ALK4, ALK7, Smad2, and Smad4, which are involved in ALK/Smad signaling. Additionally, the ALK4/7 receptor blocker SB431542 reversed the promotive effects of Nodal overexpression on bladder cancer cell proliferation, migration, and invasion.

**Conclusion:** Our study indicated that Nodal functions as an oncogene by regulating cell proliferation, migration, and invasion in bladder cancer via the ALK/Smad signaling pathway, thereby providing novel insights into its role in bladder cancer treatment.

**Keywords:** bladder cancer, Nodal, migration, invasion, ALK4, Smad2

## Introduction

Bladder cancer is a malignant tumor that occurs on the mucous membrane of the urinary bladder.<sup>1,2</sup> It is the most common malignancy involving the urinary system and one of the ten most common cancers affecting the whole body.<sup>3</sup> Bladder cancer can occur at any age, even in children. The incidence of this disease increases with age, with a high incidence at 50–70 years of age.<sup>4</sup> The incidence of bladder cancer in men is reported to be three times higher than that in women. Surgical resection and chemotherapy are the main treatment options for bladder cancer; however, their side effects are inevitable and cannot be ignored.<sup>5</sup> Metastasis and recurrence of advanced bladder cancer are the main causes of death, and identifying the mechanism of occurrence and development of bladder cancer is of vital importance.

Nodal is a member of the TGF- $\beta$  superfamily.<sup>6</sup> As a key factor essential for the induction of early embryonic development, Nodal participates in the formation of mesoderm, endoderm, and anterior–posterior axis; the establishment of left–right asymmetry; and so on.<sup>7,8</sup> Nodal expression was found to be high in the early stage of embryonic development, but decreased gradually in the later stage. Nodal expression is difficult to detect in adult tissues, except for reproductive tissues, such as the

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endometrium.<sup>9,10</sup> In recent years, more and more studies have reported that the expression of Nodal in malignant tumors, such as melanoma, breast cancer, endometrial carcinoma, and prostate cancer, is significantly increased,<sup>11–13</sup> which is closely associated with the occurrence and development of malignant tumors. The biological role of Nodal in bladder cancer remains unclear.

In the present study, we analyzed the expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues and cell lines. Increased expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues and cell lines was observed. Furthermore, the effect of Nodal on bladder cancer cell proliferation, migration, and invasion and its underlying mechanisms were also investigated.

## Materials and methods

### Tissue samples

In this study, 63 paired bladder cancer and noncancerous tissues from patients at Jingzhou Central Hospital and The Second Clinical Medical College were collected. After resection, all the samples were immediately immersed in TRIzol reagent (Takara, Kusatsu, People's Republic of China), shattered by an efficient tissue sample processor, and stored at  $-80^{\circ}\text{C}$  in order to avoid RNA degradation. The tumor grade and stage were available for these samples. Written informed consent was obtained from all subjects before the use of their clinical samples, and the study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of Jingzhou Central Hospital and The Second Clinical Medical College.

### Immunohistochemistry

Bladder tumor specimens were fixed by 10% v/v formalin solution and embedded in paraffin. Paraffin-embedded tissues were sliced into 4  $\mu\text{m}$  sections and baked at  $65^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 30 minutes. Then, the sections were performed with EDTA (pH = 8.0) and 3%  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  in methanol. The tissue sections were cultured with anti-Nodal antibodies (rabbit; 1:200; Sigma-Aldrich, St Louis, MO, USA) overnight at  $4^{\circ}\text{C}$  in a moist chamber. Then, the second antibody was added and incubated at room temperature for 1 hour. The sections were counterstained using hematoxylin and incubated with streptavidin-horseradish peroxidase complex.

### Cell culture and transfection

The human urothelial cell line (SV-HUC-1) and human bladder cancer cell lines (J82, SW780, 5637, T24, KMBC2, and RT4) were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (Manassas, VA, USA). SV-HUC-1 cells were cultured in F-12K medium (Gibco, Waltham, MA, USA), while other

cell lines were cultured in Roswell Park Memorial Institute-1640 medium (Gibco) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS; Gibco) and penicillin/streptomycin (100 U/mL and 100  $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$ , respectively; HyClone, Logan, UT, USA) at  $37^{\circ}\text{C}$  in an atmosphere of 5%  $\text{CO}_2$ . siNodal was purchased from GenePharma (Shanghai, People's Republic of China). Cells were cultured in complete medium without antibiotics at least 24 hours prior to transfection, then washed with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), and transiently transfected with 50 nmol/L siNodal or siNC using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, USA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. To overexpress Nodal, KMBC2 and RT4 cells were transfected with Nodal-overexpressing plasmid using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen). After transfection for 24 hours, the expression of Nodal was validated by quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR) and Western blot.

### RNA isolation and qRT-PCR

Total RNA from clinical samples and cultured cell lines was extracted using TRIzol (Takara), and then reverse transcribed using PrimeScript<sup>TM</sup> RT Master Mix (Takara) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The levels of linc00511, miR-15-a-3p, cyclin D1, c-myc,  $\beta$ -catenin, and GAPDH were assessed using SYBR<sup>®</sup> Premix Ex Taq<sup>TM</sup> (Takara) on an Applied Biosystems Prism 7500 Fast Sequence Detection System (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA). GAPDH was used as the quantitative control. Quantitative PCR parameters for cycling were as follows:  $95^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 5 minutes, followed by 40 cycles of PCR at  $95^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 3 seconds,  $60^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 30 seconds, and  $72^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 30 seconds. The primer sequences for qRT-PCR were as follows: Nodal, sense: 5'-TGCTCCTTATGCTCTACTCCAA-3', antisense: 5'-TGACCTTCCGACACAGTTGA-3'; GAPDH, sense: 5'-CTCTGCTCCTCCTGTTCGAC-3', antisense: 5'-ACCAAATCCGTTGACTCCGA-3'. The experiments were repeated at least three times, and each sample was tested in triplicate. The formula and its derivations were obtained from the ABI Prism 7500 sequence detection system user guide.

### MTT cell proliferation assay

The effect of Nodal on cell growth in T24 and KMBC2 cells was analyzed using MTT Cell Proliferation Assay Kit (Sigma-Aldrich). Cells (1,000 cells/well) were seeded in 96-well plates and transfected with si-linc00511 or si-NC. MTT was added to the three repeat wells and the absorbance at 490 nm was measured every 24 hours for 4 days. The absorbance values were the ordinate of cell growth curves, while times were the  $x$ -coordinate.

## Colony formation assay

Cells were plated at a density of 400 cells/well in a 6-well plate (Corning, Corning, NY, USA), and then cultured in medium supplemented with 10% FBS, which was refreshed every 3 days. Cell colonies were allowed to grow for 7 days before staining with 0.1% crystal violet solution (Sigma-Aldrich). The experiments were repeated at least three times.

## Cell migration and invasion assay

The invasion and migration activities of RT4 and KMBC2 cells were determined using a 24-well transwell chamber coated with or without Matrigel (BD Biosciences, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA) on the upper surface of the membrane filter (8  $\mu$ m pore size; Sigma-Aldrich). Briefly, transfected cells ( $1 \times 10^4$  cells/well) were seeded in 100  $\mu$ L serum-free medium in the upper transwell chamber. The lower chamber was filled with medium containing 10% FBS. After 24 hours of incubation, the cells that had invaded or migrated to the lower surface of the filter were counted visually under a microscope (Olympus, Tokyo, Japan).

## Protein extraction and Western blotting

RT4 and KMBC2 cells transfected with siNC and siNodal were washed three times with cold PBS and then lysed using RIPA buffer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) containing phenylmethane sulfonyl fluoride. Proteins (40  $\mu$ g per sample) were separated on 10% sodium dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gels and then transferred electrophoretically onto a PVDF membrane. The membranes were blocked with 5% bovine serum albumin diluted in TBST and then incubated with appropriate antibodies against Nodal, CDC6, E-cadherin, MMP-2, MMP-9, ALK4, ALK7, Smad2, Smad4, and GAPDH (1:1,000; Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA) overnight at 4°C. The membranes were then washed three times with TBST, immediately followed by incubation with horseradish peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-rabbit secondary antibody (1:1,000; Cell Signaling Technology) for 1 hour at room temperature. GAPDH was used as the internal control. Protein bands were detected using an enhanced chemiluminescence kit (ECL kit, New York, NY, USA) and visualized by autoradiography on an X-ray film.

## Statistical analysis

All results are presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation (SD) of three independent experiments. Data for multiple comparisons were subjected to one-way analysis of variance using SPSS version 17.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA),

followed by Dunnett's test.  $P < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## Results

### Nodal expression was increased in bladder cancer tissues and cell lines

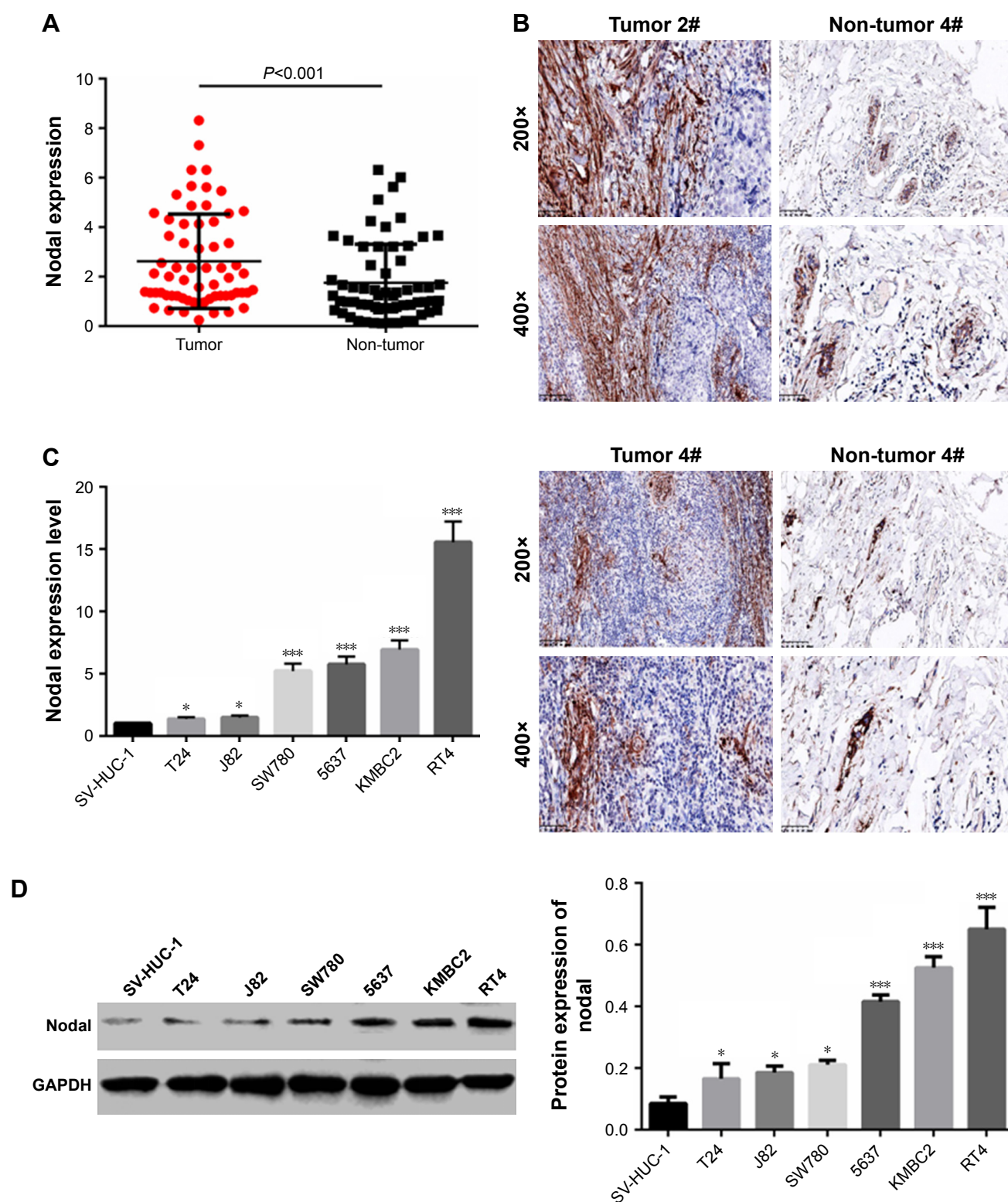
To examine the biological role of Nodal in bladder cancer, the expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues and adjacent normal tissues was analyzed. As shown in Figure 1A, the expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues was increased significantly compared with that in normal tissues ( $P < 0.001$ ). Immunohistochemistry analysis also confirmed the abnormal extracellular expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues (Figure 1B). We then analyzed mRNA expression of Nodal in bladder cancer cell lines (J82, SW780, 5637, T24, KMBC2, and RT4) and a human urothelial cell line (SV-HUC-1) by qRT-PCR. The expression of Nodal was increased significantly in bladder cancer cell lines ( $P < 0.05$ , Figure 1C). The protein level of Nodal in bladder cancer cell lines and a human urothelial cell line was also identified by Western blot analysis, and Nodal was overexpressed in bladder cancer cell lines ( $P < 0.05$ , Figure 1D). KMBC2 and RT4 cell lines displayed the highest Nodal expression, and they were selected for all further experiments.

### Downregulation of Nodal inhibited cell proliferation, migration, and invasion

To explore the effect of Nodal on cell functions, KMBC2 and RT4 cells were transfected with siNodal plasmid and the transfection efficiency was evaluated by qRT-PCR and Western blot (Figure 2A and B). Cell viability was then determined by MTT assay. Transfection with siNodal significantly suppressed the proliferation of both KMBC2 and RT4 cells at 48 and 72 hours post transfection, as compared with the relative control cells ( $P < 0.01$ , Figure 2C). Downregulation of Nodal also effectively inhibited clone formation in KMBC2 and RT4 cells ( $P < 0.001$ , Figure 2D). Cell migration and invasion were also examined by transwell assay. As shown in Figure 2E and F, cell migration and invasion were notably weakened by siNodal treatment as compared with siNC treatment ( $P < 0.001$ ).

The expression of cell proliferation-, migration-, and invasion-related proteins (CDC6, E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9) was also determined by Western blot analysis. CDC6, MMP-2, and MMP-9 expression levels were significantly decreased in siNodal group, while E-cadherin expression was remarkably increased in siNodal group ( $P < 0.01$ , Figure 2G). These data indicated that silencing of Nodal significantly suppressed cell proliferation, migration,

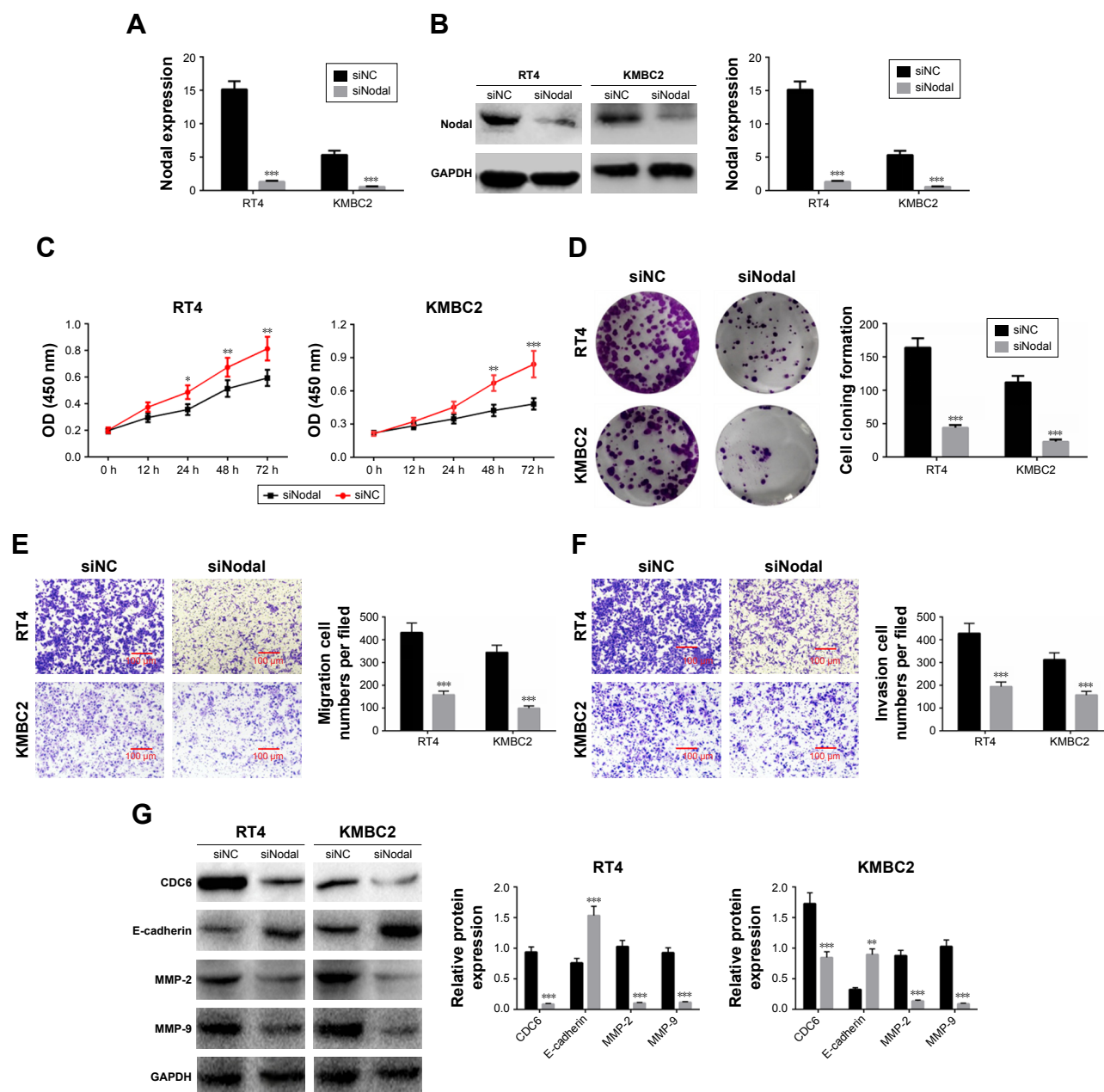




**Figure 1** Expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues and cell lines.

**Notes:** (A) mRNA expression of Nodal in 63 paired bladder cancer tissue samples was analyzed by qRT-PCR. (B) IHC was employed to evaluate the expression of Nodal in bladder cancer tissues and adjacent normal tissues. Magnification: 200 $\times$  and 400 $\times$ . (C) Expression of Nodal in the human urothelial cell line (SV-HUC-1) and human bladder cancer cell lines (J82, SW780, 5637, T24, KMBC2, and RT4) was determined by qRT-PCR. (D) Protein expression of Nodal in the human urothelial cell line (SV-HUC-1) and human bladder cancer cell lines (J82, SW780, 5637, T24, KMBC2, and RT4) was tested by Western blot analysis. Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD. \* $P$ <0.05 vs SV-HUC-1 cell line. \*\*\* $P$ <0.001 vs normal tissue or SV-HUC-1 cell line. Scale bar: 100  $\mu$ m for 200 $\times$ , 50  $\mu$ m for 400 $\times$ .

**Abbreviations:** IHC, immunohistochemistry; qRT-PCR, quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction.



**Figure 2** Downregulation of Nodal inhibited cell proliferation, migration, and invasion in bladder cancer cells.

**Notes:** (A and B) KMBC2 and RT4 cells were transfected with siNodal or siNC plasmids, and transfection efficiencies were determined by qRT-PCR and Western blot. (C) Cell proliferation was evaluated by MTT assay after transfection for 12, 24, 48, and 72 hours. (D) Cell cloning ability of KMBC2 and RT4 cells transfected with siNodal or siNC was determined by colony formation assay. (E and F) Cell migration and invasion were evaluated by transwell assay. Magnification: 200×. (G) Protein expression of CDC6, E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9 was examined by Western blot analysis. Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD. \* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$  vs siNC group.

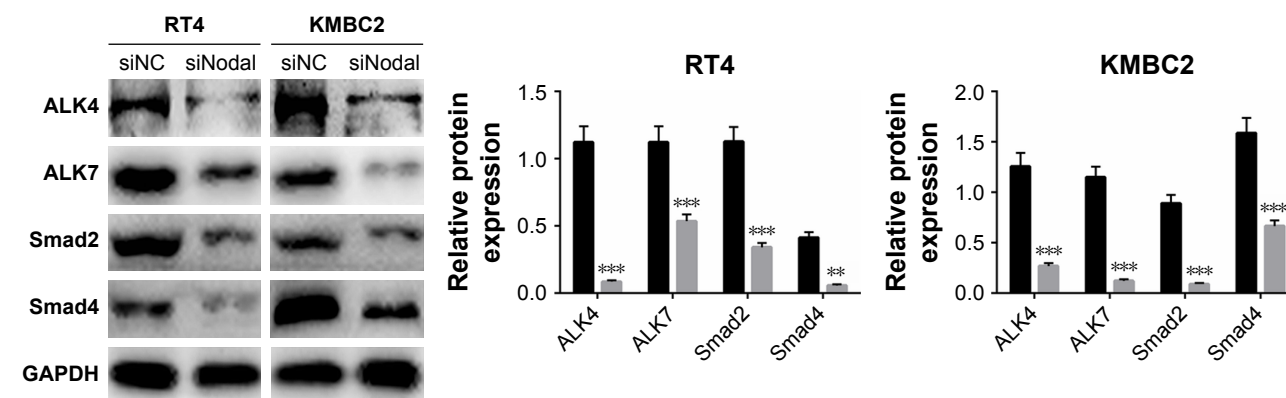
**Abbreviation:** qRT-PCR, quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction.

and invasion through regulation of CDC6, E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9 expression.

## Downregulation of Nodal blocked ALK/Smad signaling

To explore the mechanism by which Nodal affects cellular functions in bladder cancer, we then examined the effect of

siNodal on ALK/Smad signaling. ALK4, ALK7, Smad2, and Smad4 expression in siNodal and siNC groups was evaluated by Western blot analysis. As shown in Figure 3, ALK4, ALK7, Smad2, and Smad4 expression in KMBC2 and RT4 cells transfected with siNodal was significantly suppressed compared with that in cells transfected with siNC ( $P < 0.01$ , Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Silencing of Nodal blocked ALK/Smad signaling.

**Notes:** ALK4, ALK7, Smad2, and Smad4 expression in KMBC2 and RT4 cells transfected with siNodal or siNC was determined by Western blot analysis. Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD. \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.001$  vs siNC group.

## Nodal regulated cell proliferation, migration, and invasion through the ALK/Smad signaling pathway

To further verify whether Nodal regulated cell proliferation, migration, and invasion through the ALK/Smad signaling pathway, KMBC2 and RT4 cells were transfected with Nodal overexpression plasmid and then treated with ALK4/5/7 receptor blocker (SB431542).<sup>14</sup> qRT-PCR and Western blot analysis revealed that Nodal expression was significantly increased in Nodal group compared with that in the NC group ( $P < 0.001$ , Figure 4A and B). Cell proliferation, clone formation, and cell migration and invasion were then evaluated. Cell proliferation and clone formation were notably enhanced in the Nodal overexpression group as compared with the NC group ( $P < 0.001$ , Figure 4C and D). Nevertheless, cell proliferation and clone formation were remarkably decreased in Nodal-overexpressing cells treated with SB431542 compared with untreated Nodal-overexpressing cells ( $P < 0.001$ , Figure 4E and F). Cell migration and invasion were also promoted by Nodal overexpression in KMBC2 and RT4 cells, but were weakened by SB431542 treatment ( $P < 0.001$ , Figure 4E and F). These results demonstrated that Nodal could alter cell viability, migration, and invasion by regulating ALK/Smad signaling.

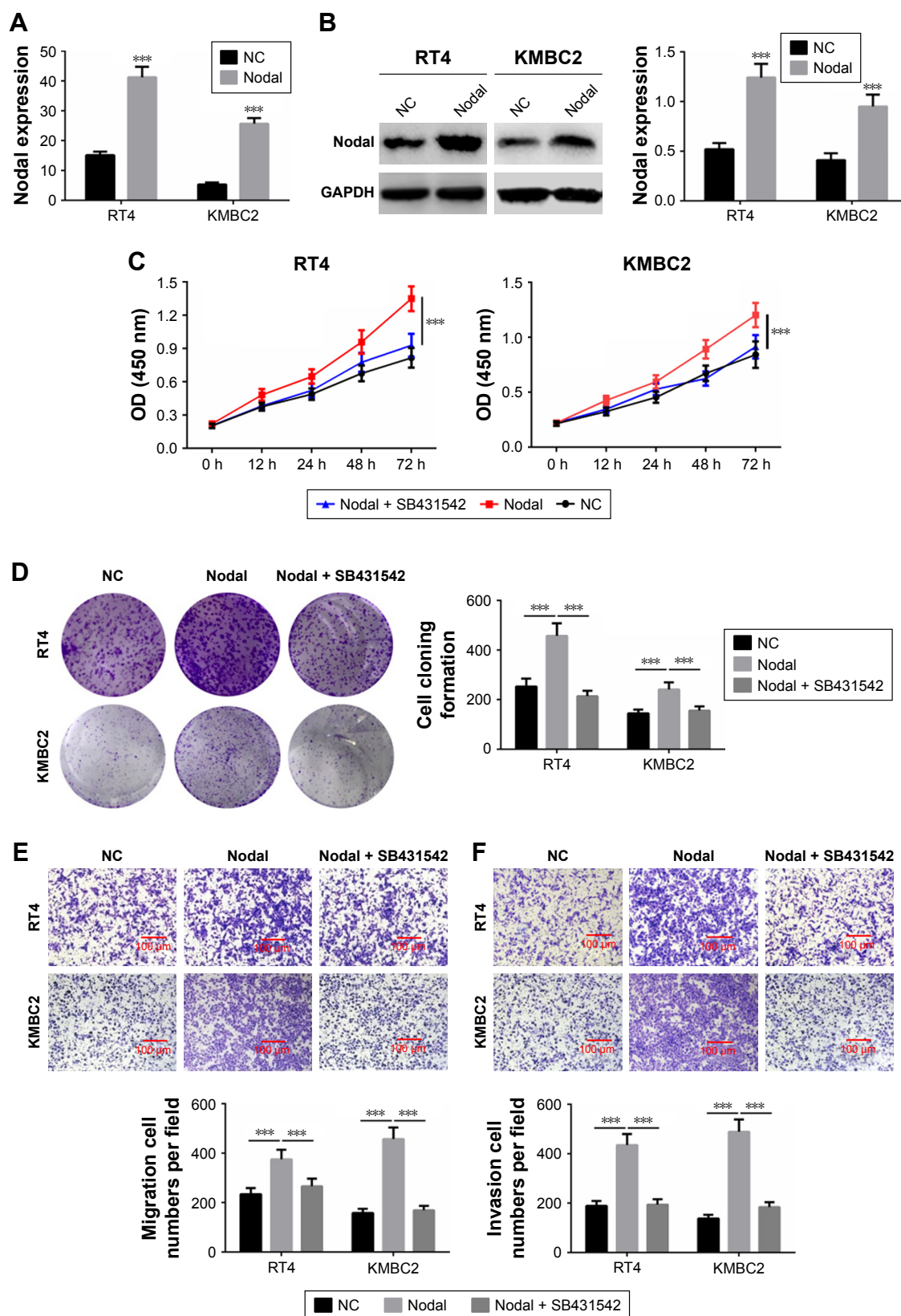
## Discussion

Several studies have indicated that Nodal exerts oncogenic function in many cancers. Topczewska et al<sup>15</sup> reported that Nodal was expressed in human metastatic tumors and that inhibition of Nodal signaling inhibited melanoma cell invasion, colony formation, and tumorigenicity. Gong et al<sup>16</sup> indicated that Nodal overexpression in breast cancer was

correlated with cancer progression, metastasis, and poor prognosis, and Nodal signaling could activate the Smad2/3 pathway to regulate stem cell-like properties in breast cancer cells. Lawrence et al<sup>17</sup> demonstrated that reactivation of Nodal signaling was associated with tumor progression and promoted the growth of prostate cancer cells. In the present study, we first identified the expression of Nodal in 63 paired bladder cancer tissue samples and bladder cancer cell lines. The results showed that Nodal expression was significantly increased in bladder cancer tissues and cell lines compared with that in normal tissues or the urothelial cell line (SV-HUC-1), revealing that Nodal might function as an oncogene in bladder cancer.

The effect of Nodal on bladder cancer cell proliferation was then examined. Our results showed that downregulation of Nodal significantly suppressed cell proliferation and clone formation. CDC6 is reported to play a crucial role in DNA replication, which is a critical step in cell proliferation.<sup>18</sup> Silencing of Nodal also inhibited CDC6 expression in bladder cancer cells, which indicated that Nodal could promote cell viability via regulating CDC6 expression. Excessive migration and invasion of tumor cells is recognized as the first step of neoplasm metastasis.<sup>19,20</sup> The effect of decreased Nodal expression on cell migration and invasion was determined by transwell assay. Our results demonstrated that downregulation of Nodal significantly inhibited the cell migration and invasion capabilities of bladder cancer cells. Decreased expression of E-cadherin in bladder cancer tissues mediates cell migration and invasion.<sup>21</sup> MMP-2 and MMP-9 are important factors responsible for cancer cell migration and invasion.<sup>22,23</sup> In our study, the expression of E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9 was detected by Western blotting. Knockdown of Nodal effectively regulated the expression of





**Figure 4** Nodal regulated cell proliferation, migration, and invasion via the ALK/Smad signaling pathway.

**Notes:** (A and B) Overexpression of Nodal in KMBC2 and RT4 cells was examined by qRT-PCR and Western blot. (C) The proliferation of cells subjected to NC transfection, Nodal overexpression transfection, and Nodal overexpression transfection + SB431542 was evaluated by MTT. (D) Clone formation ability was determined by colony formation assay. (E and F) Cell migration and invasion were evaluated by transwell assay. Data are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD. \*\*\* $P < 0.001$  vs NC group.

**Abbreviations:** NC, negative control; qRT-PCR, quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction.

E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9. These data indicated that Nodal might accelerate cell migration and invasion through regulating E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9 expression.

Emerging evidence shows that TGF- $\beta$ /ALK/Smad signaling plays a role in carcinogenesis in many cancer types.<sup>24–26</sup> TGF- $\beta$  signaling is reported to facilitate tumor growth and metastasis in advanced cancer, and blocking TGF- $\beta$ /ALK/Smad signaling could suppress the process of epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition.<sup>27</sup> Geng et al<sup>28</sup> demonstrated that downregulation of PPM1A expression could promote invasion and epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition in bladder cancer by activating the TGF- $\beta$ /Smad signaling pathway. It has been reported that Nodal, one of the TGF- $\beta$  superfamily members, is secreted into the extracellular matrix, where it combines with Cripto-1 and then binds with ActrIIb and ALK4/7 to induce the phosphorylation of ALK4/7.<sup>29,30</sup> The Smads (Smad2/3) in the cytoplasm are then activated by the phosphorylation of ALK4/7, following which they combine with Smad4 and are then transported into the nucleus to participate in the regulation of target gene transcription.<sup>31</sup> In our study, the expression of ALK4/7 and Smad2/4 was significantly decreased in bladder cells transfected with siNodal compared to that in cells transfected with siNC. ALK/Smad signaling was then blocked using the ALK4/5/7 receptor blocker (SB431542), and the effect of Nodal overexpression and ALK4/5/7 receptor blocker on bladder cancer cell proliferation, migration, and invasion was determined. Overexpression of Nodal significantly promoted cell proliferation, migration, and invasion, while SB431542 treatment effectively reversed the carcinogenic effect of Nodal on bladder cancer cells. Overall, our results indicated that Nodal could enhance cell proliferation, migration, and invasion via the ALK/Smad signaling pathway.

In conclusion, Nodal was highly expressed in bladder cancer tissues and cell lines. Downregulation of Nodal inhibited cell proliferation, migration, and invasion by regulating the expression of CDC6, E-cadherin, MMP-2, and MMP-9, which in turn regulate ALK/Smad signaling in bladder cancer cells. Therefore, our findings provide novel insights into the role of Nodal in bladder cancer therapy.

## Acknowledgment

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## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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