

De novo generation of a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy by mouse transgenesis

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Communicated by Charles Weissmann, Scripps Florida, Jupiter, FL, October 23, 2008 (received for review August 4, 2008)

Most transmissible spongiform encephalopathies arise either spontaneously or by infection. Mutations of *PRNP*, which encodes the prion protein, PrP, segregate with phenotypically similar diseases. Here we report that moderate overexpression in transgenic mice of mPrP(170N,174T), a mouse PrP with two point mutations that subtly affect the structure of its globular domain, causes a fully penetrant lethal spongiform encephalopathy with cerebral PrP plaques. This genetic disease was reproduced with 100% attack rate by intracerebral inoculation of brain homogenate to *tga20* mice overexpressing WT PrP, and from the latter to WT mice, but not to PrP-deficient mice. Upon successive transmissions, the incubation periods decreased and PrP became more protease-resistant, indicating the presence of a strain barrier that was gradually overcome by repeated passaging. This shows that expression of a subtly altered prion protein, with known 3D structure, efficiently generates a prion disease.

amyloid | neurodegeneration | prion | species barrier | transgenic mice

Prions cause fatal neurodegenerative disorders termed transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). The prion contains a misfolded and aggregated form, PrP^{Sc}, of the host cellular prion protein, PrP^C (1). Accordingly, *Prnp*^{0/0} mice that lack the gene encoding PrP^C resist prion infection (2).

Human familial TSEs co-segregate with more than 20 mutations in the prion gene, *PRNP* (3–5). Some of these genetic diseases have been transmitted to primates or mice (6, 7). De novo production of infectious prions from *PRNP* with point mutations would represent a useful tool for elucidating the origin of prion infectivity in genetic TSEs. Transgenic mice expressing *Prnp* with point mutations, insertions, or deletions develop a spectrum of neurological diseases with clinical or histological features reminiscent of TSEs (8–11). However, de novo infectivity was claimed only for mice expressing *Prnp*^{P101L}, which mimics the Gerstmann–Sträussler–Scheinker-associated P102L point mutation of human *PRNP*. *Prnp*^{P101L} mice were reported to transmit disease to nine of 148 (6%) hamsters (10) but not to mice expressing WT PrP (10, 12). Transgenic mice expressing high amounts of *Prnp*^{P101L} were thought to transmit spongiform encephalopathy to mice expressing lower amounts of *Prnp*^{P101L} (10, 12), yet further studies led to the re-interpretation of this phenomenon as disease acceleration rather than bona fide transmission (13). A further set of transgenic mice expressing *Prnp*^{P101L} produced by targeted gene substitution did not develop a neurological disease (6).

Mammalian PrP^C consists of a flexibly disordered N-terminal segment and a globular C-terminal domain containing three α -helices and two short antiparallel β -strands (14). However, the loop linking the β 2 strand with the α 2 helix displays remarkable species-specific variations. The β 2– α 2 loop region of human, cattle, mouse, dog, and cat is disordered, whereas that of elk is precisely defined (15–18). This feature is caused by S170N/N174T substitutions (numbering according to ref. 19), as documented by studies of variant mouse PrP containing the two residues 170N and 174T (16).

To probe the pathogenic impact of the well structured loop observed by NMR (16), we expressed in vivo a murine *Prnp* mini-gene with the S170N and N174T exchanges. This mouse-elk PrP chimeric molecule, henceforth termed RL-PrP for “rigid loop PrP,” accumulated in detergent-resistant membranes similarly to WT PrP. Surprisingly, RL-PrP transgenic mice developed a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy. The novel variety of prions produced by RL-PrP transgenic mice was distinct from other commonly used laboratory prion strains.

Results

mPrP(170N,174T) Expression in Transgenic Mice. Two point mutations, G \rightarrow A and A \rightarrow C, were introduced at nucleotide positions 506 and 518 of the *Prnp* ORF within the pHGPrP vector (20), causing it to encode RL-PrP [supporting information (SI) Fig. S1 A, B, E and F] embedded in a “half-genomic” *Prnp* minigene. Linearized constructs were microinjected into B6;129S5-*Prnp*^{+/-} zygotic pronuclei and founders were bred to B6;129S5-*Prnp*^{0/0} mice. Transgene copy numbers and brain protein expression levels were determined by quantitative Southern and Western blotting of hemizygous mice. Line *tg1020* mice had \approx 45 copies of the transgene (Fig. S1C) and expressed approximately two- to threefold WT PrP levels in brain (Fig. S1D). PrP expression in *tg1020* mice was higher than in most corresponding WT tissues (Fig. S2). In the *tg1020* mouse line, RL-PrP^C glycosylation patterns, presence in detergent-resistant membranes, and functionality as shown by rescue of Shmerling disease (Fig. S2) (11) were indistinguishable from those of PrP^C (Figs. S2 and S3).

Spontaneous Neurodegenerative Disease in *tg1020* Mice. Clinical monitoring of aging *tg1020* mice revealed a progressive neurological illness with ataxia, hind limb paresis, weight loss, lethargy, kyphosis, and occasionally pruritus, which slowly progressed in severity over 1 to 3 months (Fig. 1A). Onset occurred at 145 to 637 days of age (50% incidence by 364 days; $n = 47$; Fig. 1B). Footprint tracks demonstrated circling movements of *tg1020* mice indicative of ataxia (Fig. S4).

Brains of clinically diseased *tg1020* mice contained multicentric

Author contributions: C.J.S., M.H., K.W., and A.A. designed research; C.J.S., K.P.R.N., S.H., M.H., G.M., P.S., D.O., T.R., P.P.L., C.J., J.F., and L.S. performed research; K.P.R.N. contributed new reagents/analytic tools; C.J.S., K.P.R.N., S.H., M.H., P.P.L., C.J., J.F., K.W., and A.A. analyzed data; and C.J.S., S.H., K.W., and A.A. wrote the paper.

Conflict of interest statement: K.P.R.N. has interest in BioChromix AB (Linköping, Sweden), which owns some intellectual property in the amyloid binding luminescent conjugated polymers, PTAA and PTMI, described. The other authors declare no conflict of interest.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/0810680105/DCSupplemental.

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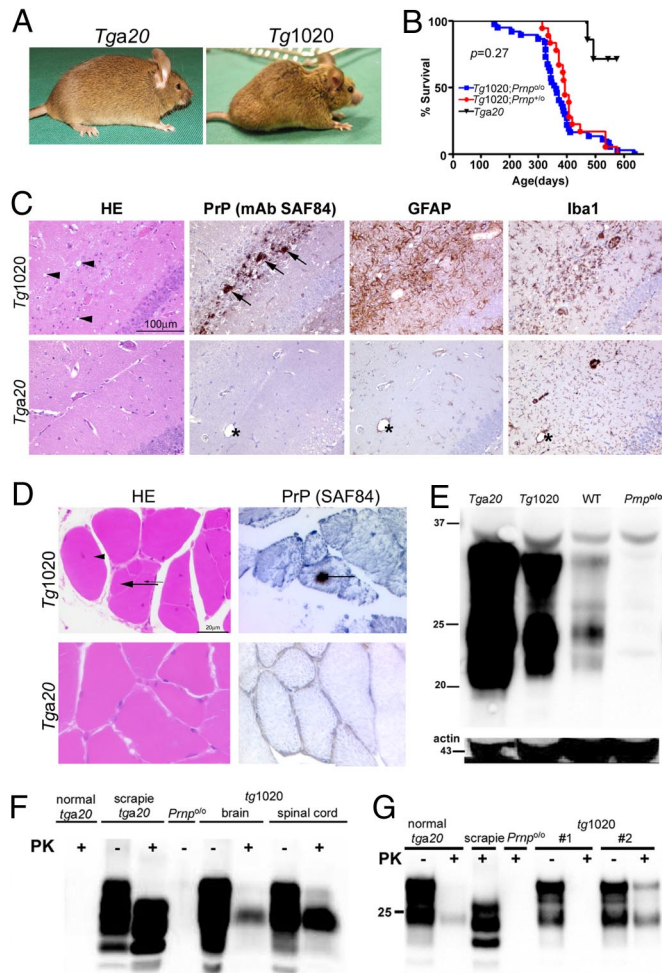


Fig. 1. RL-PrP mice (*tg1020*) develop a lethal neurologic disease with lesions in brain and muscle. (A) Clinically healthy *tga20* mouse (Left) and *tg1020* mouse showing kyphosis and paraparesis, with hind legs tucked under the body. (B) Survival plots of *tg1020;Prnp^{0/0}*, *tg1020;Prnp^{+/-}*, and *tga20* mice. *Tga20* mice showed the typical life expectancy of C57BL/6 mice (41) held in specified pathogen-free environments, whereas *tg1020;Prnp^{0/0}* and *tg1020;Prnp^{+/-}* mice displayed median survival times of 363 and 394 days, respectively. (C) Hippocampi of *tg1020* and *tga20* mice. Arrows indicate spongiform change. Linear arrays of PrP aggregates were accompanied by severe gliosis and microglial activation, as detected by antibodies to PrP, GFAP, and Iba1, respectively. Asterisk indicates a small vessel in a section of a *tga20* brain. (D) Myopathy in *tg1020* but not *tga20* mice, with centralized nuclei (arrowhead), split fibers (arrow), and hypervariable fiber calibers. PrP immunostains show deposits (arrow) in affected *tg1020* muscles. (E) Muscle PrP expression in *tg1020* mice is higher than in WT but lower than in *tga20* mice. (F) PK-resistant PrP in *tg1020* brains revealed by immunoblotting. There is no shift in the electrophoretic mobility, indicating lack of amino terminal cleavage of PrP. (G) Some young *tg1020* mice (60 days old) also show PK-resistant PrP (mouse 2). Mouse 1 does not have PK-resistant PrP.

PrP deposits in the stratum lacunosum-moleculare of the hippocampus, within the corpus callosum, and in the cingulum. Deposits were sometimes surrounded by vacuoles as in florid plaques of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (Fig. 1C and Fig. S4). Individual PrP deposits were 1 to 3 μm in diameter and often arranged in clusters of 25 to 50 particles. The density of PrP deposits varied from isolated clusters to widespread zones of diffuse aggregates (Fig. 1C). Spongiform change, astrogliosis, and microgliosis were also evident (Fig. 1C).

Peripheral nerves and skeletal muscle of RL-PrP mice developed pathologic changes similar to those reported in mice overexpressing

WT or mutant PrP (12, 21). Sciatic nerves displayed “onion bulbs” indicative of cycles of active demyelination and re-myelination, as well as macrophages and Schwann cells with myelin-filled vacuoles (Fig. S5). Myofibers displayed degeneration and regeneration, varied markedly in size, and contained angular and split fibers as well as centralized nuclei (Fig. 1D). PrP immunohistochemistry revealed large, coarse PrP aggregates in *tg1020* myofibers, whereas very few aggregates (≤ 2 per muscle section) were observed in myofibers of *tga20* mice, which over-express WT *Prnp* (20) (Fig. 1D). PrP expression in muscle of *tg1020* mice was higher than in WT mice, but lower than in *tga20* mice (Fig. 1E).

Although expression in *tga20* brain was consistently twofold higher than in *tg1020* mice, and the PrP distribution in *tg1020* brains was similar to that of *tga20* mice (Fig. S2), *tga20* mice did not spontaneously develop neurological disease, spongiform encephalopathy, or brain plaques during lifetimes up to 900 days.

Certain pathologies induced by PrP mutants are partially or fully suppressed by co-expression of WT-PrP (11, 22), whereas others are unaffected (23). To investigate the influence of WT-PrP on the RL-PrP disease, we bred *tg1020* to WT mice. The clinical course of spontaneous disease and the median survival time were unaffected by WT PrP co-expression ($P = 0.27$, log-rank test; Fig. 1B). We also did not identify any influence of WT-PrP co-expression on the severity of spongiosis and the occurrence of PrP-immunoreactive plaques (data not shown). We then assessed the resistance of RL-PrP to proteolysis. After stringent digestion (50 or 100 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ proteinase K [PK], 37 $^{\circ}\text{C}$, 30 min), we detected PrP with a mobility corresponding to ≈ 25 kDa in a clinically sick 145-day-old *tg1020* mouse and in a clinically healthy 60-day-old *tg1020* mouse, whereas some young *tg1020* mice had PK-sensitive PrP. PK digestion did not induce the typical electrophoretic mobility shift to PrP^{27–30}, suggesting that the amino terminus of RL-PrP was not cleaved (Fig. 1F–G), similarly to patients with Gerstmann-Sträussler-Scheinker syndrome (24).

Prion Strain Barriers Between Mice Expressing RL-PrP or WT PrP. Local structural variations (16) imposed by the RL-PrP mutations may create transmission barriers to prion infection. We tested this possibility by intracerebrally inoculating groups ($n = 4$) of *tg1020* and *tga20* mice with 10^4 logLD₅₀ of mouse-adapted Rocky Mountain Laboratory (RML) prions. Whereas *tga20* mice developed scrapie after 74 ± 6 days, *tg1020* mice developed scrapie only after 323 ± 92 days, which decreased to 171 ± 11 days upon second passage to *tg1020* mice (Fig. 2A, panel vii). The lower PrP^C expression levels in *tg1020* mice does not account for the prolonged and broadened incubation time, as 10^3 logLD₅₀ of the same inoculum produced disease within 170 ± 12 days in WT mice, which express even lower levels of PrP^C. Therefore, expression of RL-PrP created a transmission barrier for RML prions.

Transmissibility of RL-PrP-Induced Disease. We then asked whether *tg1020* mice spontaneously generate prions. To minimize all risks of laboratory prion contamination, *tg1020* mice were housed in a room that had never hosted prion-infected animals, factory-new instruments were used for tissue collection, and all working surfaces for harvesting and processing tissues were protected with disposable covers. We inoculated *tg1020* brain homogenate into *tga20* mice, as RL-PrP displays a prion conversion barrier for WT-adapted inoculum and *tga20* mice are permissive for xenogeneic strains such as chronic wasting disease (CWD) (25). After inoculation with brain homogenates derived from six terminally sick *tg1020* mice, all 28 inoculated *tga20* mice ($n = 4$ –6 per group, 100% attack rate) developed neurologic signs (e.g., kyphosis, hind leg clasp, paraparesis, ataxia, and pruritus) by 481 ± 59 days after inoculation (Fig. 2A, panels i–vi; Table S1). When inoculated into further *tga20* mice, brain homogenates from *tg1020*-infected *tga20* mice caused similar neurologic signs in all recipients ($n = 35$), but with a shorter incubation period (343 ± 122 days) suggestive of strain adaptation

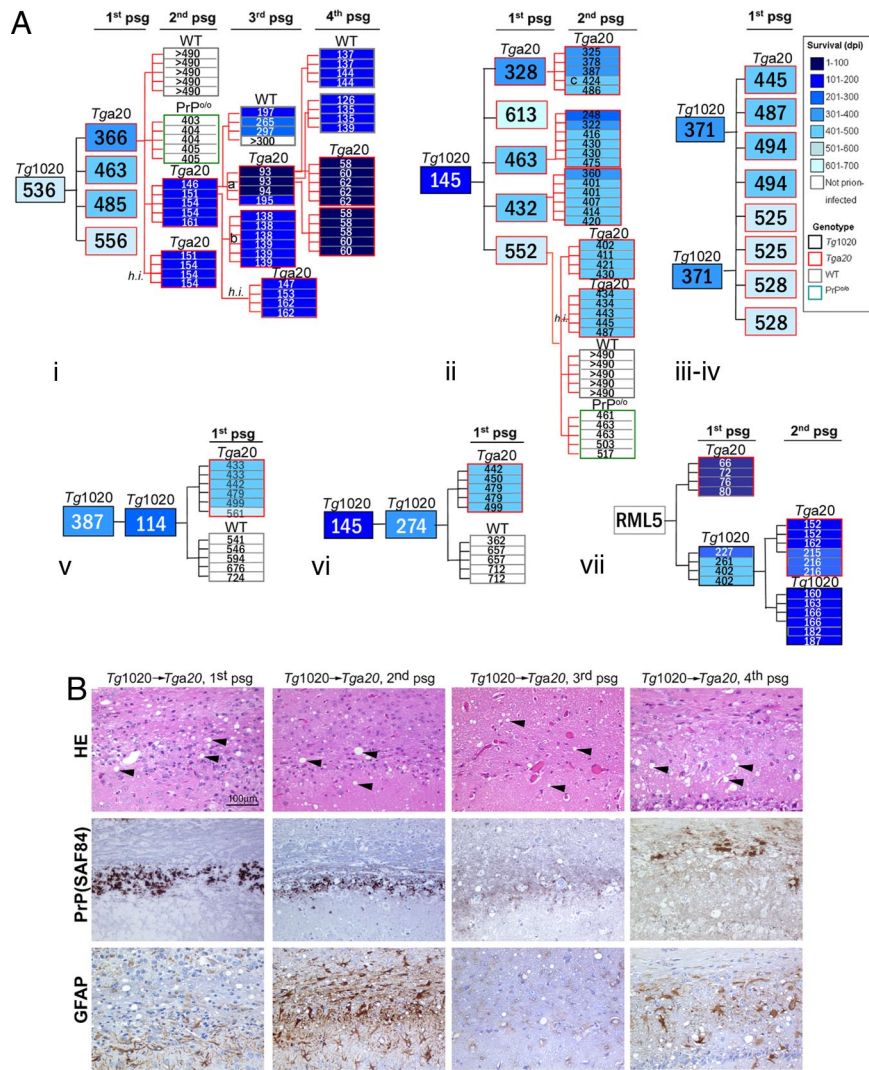


Fig. 2. *Tg1020* prion infection transmits to *tga20* mice, but not to *Prnp*^{0/0} mice. (A) Survival of mice inoculated with *Tg1020* brain homogenate (groups i–vi). Box outline colors denote mouse genotypes and fill colors indicate survival times as in the legend. For the first passage, only mice with incubation times more than 300 days are shown. (*h.i.* = heat inactivated.) Group vii shows RML5 passaged into *tga20* and *Tg1020* mice, and the second passage from RML-infected *Tg1020* mice. (B) Histopathology from transverse brain sections at the level of the hippocampus and the corpus callosum, all from group i (A). Sections from first to fourth passages of *Tg1020* to *tga20* mice reveal consistent spongiform changes (arrowheads). PrP deposits and astrocyte reactivity, as indicated by SAF84 and GFAP antibody staining, were apparent in all passages in *tga20* mice. PrP immunostain reveals that PrP deposit sizes decreased progressively, with granular aggregates in the fourth passage. Mock-inoculated mice did not show spongiform change or PrP staining, and gliosis was minimal (data not shown).

(Fig. 2A, panels i–vi; Table S2). Further serial passages to *tga20* led to even shorter incubation periods, and *tga20*-adapted prions were also transmissible to WT mice (Fig. 2A and B and Fig. S6; Table S2 and Movie S1).

Brain homogenates recovered from *Tg1020*-inoculated *tga20* mice were heat-inactivated at 60 °C for 20 min and inoculated into further *tga20* mice. The recipient *tga20* mice developed neurologic disease, spongiform encephalopathy, and plaques with the same incubation period (153 ± 2 days) as in the corresponding experiment without heat inactivation (153 ± 5 days). In a subsequent passage, brain homogenate was heat-inactivated at 80 °C for 25 min and was again infectious, showing that the infectious agent was highly heat-resistant (Fig. 2A, panel i).

Because *tga20* mice over-express PrP, and PrP nucleation may be concentration-dependent, we systematically tested whether serial inoculation of brain homogenate among *tga20* mice may uncover any spontaneous transmissible pathology. Brain homogenates from 30 young and old *tga20* mice (including four mice 450–900 days old) were inoculated into 16 mice. After 250 days, the latter mice were killed, and four groups of pooled brain homogenates were inoculated into 17 further *tga20* mice. After 250 more days, pooled brain homogenates from the latter mice were further inoculated into eight *tga20* mice (Fig. S7). In a further series, brain homogenate from healthy *tga20* and WT mice was inoculated into five *tga20* mice that were killed at 563 days after inoculation (Fig. S7). None of these transmission attempts resulted in neurologic disease of re-

cipients, even after the third serial passage. We never detected spontaneous neurologic disease or PrP plaques in *tga20* mice aged up to 30 months.

Because nucleation may be time-dependent, extremely aged *tga20* mice might develop subclinical levels of prion infectivity even if clinically healthy at 900 days or older. Although no infectivity was detectable in the experiments described earlier, we again attempted transmission from brain homogenates of two 600- and 900-day-old *tga20* mice. Three of six *tga20* recipient mice developed neurologic disease and brain PrP aggregates at 422 ± 50 days post-inoculation. This suggests that low levels (≈ 1 ID₅₀/3 mg tissue) of prion infectivity may sporadically arise in very old *tga20* mice. The apparent occurrence of prion infectivity in some *tga20* mice is different from the prion generation in RL-PrP mice, as the former were four to six times older than the youngest *Tg1020* mice containing infectivity, and approached the natural murine lifespan, whereas the latter elicited 100% attack rates, even when inocula were prepared from 145-day-old *Tg1020* mice.

RL-PrP Prion Strain Properties. Brain homogenates from *tga20* mice infected with RL-PrP (RL → *tga20*) were subjected to PK digestion and Western blotting. PrP from first- and second-passage RL → *tga20* mice was mostly PK-sensitive (Fig. 3A). Weak residual PrP bands of unchanged electrophoretic mobility were identified after PK digestion, similarly to the signal observed in *Tg1020* mice. However, by the third ($n = 3/4$) and fourth ($n = 5/5$) passage

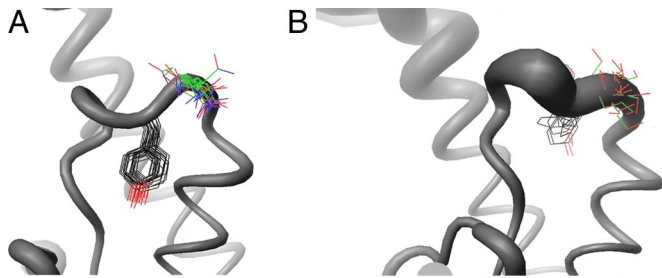


Fig. 5. The RL-PrP and WT-mPrP loop regions. (A) The 169Y and 170N side chains are quite precisely defined in the NMR structure of RL-PrP (16), and the side chain of 170N (green) protrudes from the core of the molecule. (B) The 169Y and 170S side chains in the NMR structure of WT-mPrP are disordered. The different features of the side chains of residues 169 and 170 in the two proteins are also predicted by molecular dynamic simulations (38).

38). Hence the N170 asparagine side chain might engage in long-range intermolecular hydrogen bonds with complementary sequences and initiate steric zippers (Fig. 5). Alternative mechanisms of amyloidogenesis are equally conceivable, including the disruption of interactions between the loop region and hypothetical anti-amyloidogenic chaperones.

If the RL substitutions are pathogenic for mice, why was no spontaneous prion disease observed in transgenic mice overexpressing cervid PrP^C (39, 40)? In addition to the two loop residues, cervid and mouse PrP^C differ at 11 further positions within their globular domains, seven of which are located near the C-terminal end of the α 3 helix. This site is thought to be important for species-specific molecular interactions in TSE transmission. Therefore, some of these substitutions may even have evolved to counteract enhanced aggregation tendencies. A comparison of the three-dimensional structures of elk PrP with murine PrP shows that

the orientation of the α 3 helix is closely similar in the two proteins (16). However, a change in the polarity and/or charge of specific amino acid side chains in this area might nonetheless modify the specificity of this surface area for intermolecular interactions. In view of these results, it will be interesting to assess the impact wrought by the structural features of the rigid loop onto the enigmatic pathogenesis and transmission barriers of cervid CWD. Further studies may help clarify the significance of the β 2— α 2 loop region on prion disease development and species barriers.

Materials and Methods

Refer to *SI Text* for detailed materials and methods and for a description of the transgene construct and mouse characterization.

Prion Inoculations. For detailed methods, refer to *SI Text*. Briefly, mice were intracerebrally inoculated into the left parietal cortex with 30 μ l of a 5% brain homogenate from an un-inoculated *tg1020* mouse, an un-inoculated *tga20* mouse, and subsequently from *tga20* mice infected with RL-PrP prions. Brains from terminal mice were collected using new instruments on new surface covers.

Histopathology and Immunohistochemical Stains. For detailed methods, refer to *SI Text*. Briefly, 2- μ m-thick sections were cut onto positively charged silanized glass slides and stained with hematoxylin and eosin, or immunostained using antibodies for PrP (SAF84), astrocytes (GFAP), or microglia (Iba1).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. We thank Frank Baumann, Jens Pahnke, Gino Miele, Sei-ichi Yusa, Kirsten Mertz, Amedeo Caffisch, and Pietro Alfarano for discussions; Petri Vilkman, Marianne König, and the animal care staff for technical support; and Michel Mittelbronn and Burkhard Seifert for help with statistics. This study was supported by the European Union TSEUR collaborative research project (A.A.) and Understanding Protein Misfolding and Aggregation by NMR program (K.W.), the Swiss National Science Foundation (A.A.), the National Competence Centers for Research on Neural Plasticity and Repair (A.A.) and on Structural Biology (K.W.), National Institutes of Health grants K08-AI01802 and 5R21NS055116 (to C.J.S.), the Foundation for Research at the University of Zürich (C.J.S.), the US National Prion Research Program (C.J.S. and A.A.), the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation (K.P.R.N.), the Max-Clöetta and Bonizzi-Theler Foundations (M.H.), Stambach Foundation (A.A.), and ETH Zürich (K.W.).

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