

# A cascading activity-based probe sequentially targets E1-E2-E3 ubiquitin enzymes

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**Post-translational modifications of proteins with ubiquitin (Ub) and ubiquitin-like modifiers (Ubls), orchestrated by a cascade of specialized E1, E2 and E3 enzymes, control a wide range of cellular processes. To monitor catalysis along these complex reaction pathways, we developed a cascading activity-based probe, UbDha. Similarly to the native Ub, upon ATP-dependent activation by the E1, UbDha can travel downstream to the E2 (and subsequently E3) enzymes through sequential trans-thioesterifications. Unlike the native Ub, at each step along the cascade, UbDha has the option to react irreversibly with active site cysteine residues of target enzymes, thus enabling their detection. We show that our cascading probe 'hops' and 'traps' catalytically active Ub-modifying enzymes (but not their substrates) by a mechanism diversifiable to Ubls. Our founder methodology, amenable to structural studies, proteome-wide profiling and monitoring of enzymatic activity in living cells, presents novel and versatile tools to interrogate Ub and Ubl cascades.**

Post-translational modifications of cellular targets with Ub or Ubl modules are potent regulators of protein function and thus govern a wide range of biological processes<sup>1</sup>. Although the general biochemical logistics of Ub and Ubl (Ub/Ubl) activation, conjugation and ligation, which are orchestrated sequentially by E1, E2 and E3 enzymes, are highly conserved among eukaryotes, the number and 'flavor' of individual players in each organism's relevant enzymatic repertoire can differ widely<sup>1</sup>. Humans are known to harbor two E1, ~30 E2 and ~600 E3 enzymes in the Ub conjugation cascade, and although some are highly specific for certain targets, others seem to be relatively promiscuous. The complexity of such enzymatic networks, further inundated by ~80 specific proteases responsible for removal of these modifications<sup>1</sup>, enables highly specialized and sensitive modes of regulation necessary to accommodate dynamic cellular events. On the flip side, deregulation of these pathways is a common feature in cancer and neurodegenerative and inflammatory diseases. Similarly, some pathogens have evolved to perturb or exploit host Ub/Ubl conjugation cascades to their advantage<sup>2</sup>. The lack of comprehensive tools to assess the enzymology of these processes has posed a longstanding roadblock in the field.

Activity-based probes (ABPs) constitute an important class of reagents used to study enzymatic activity, structure and substrate specificity within the Ub/Ubl modification system<sup>3,4</sup>. In the last decade, researchers have developed various ABPs for deubiquitinating enzymes (DUBs) and Ubl-specific proteases<sup>5-7</sup>. Among the advantages of such probes is their ability to report on DUB activity in cellular extracts and intact cells, thus facilitating study of these enzymes in their biological context<sup>8</sup>. Development of analogous tools for the ligation machinery has proven challenging. Unlike DUBs, which contain highly reactive cysteine nucleophiles, ligases have less nucleophilic active site cysteine residues, rendering them more difficult to trap with electrophiles. Recently, Ubl-AMP probes were reported to selectively label cognate activating enzymes<sup>9-12</sup>. However, because ligation requires transfer of Ub/Ubl between

enzymes, the challenge of monitoring reactions throughout the cascade remained. To address this, we developed a mechanism-based ligase probe that undergoes sequential trans-thioesterification reactions as it cascades from the E1 to the E2 and then to the E3 stage. In addition, at each step of the cascade our probe has the option to irreversibly trap the active site cysteine residues of the enzymes in question. This methodology, implemented and characterized with Ub-specific conjugation machinery, is further extended to the NEDD8 enzyme family, demonstrating general applicability of our probe design to Ubls.

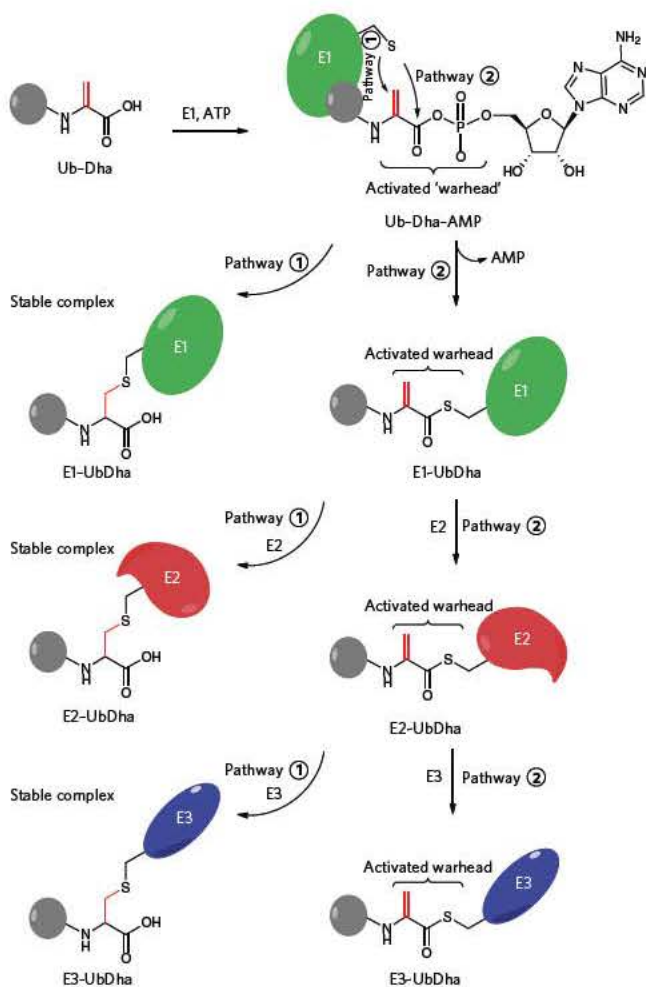
The unique properties of our cascading probe enable direct monitoring of sequential E1, E2 and homologous to E6-AP C terminus (HECT)-type E3 activity in a wide variety of experimental settings. Given the ATP dependence of its reactivity against ligases and lack of transfer to substrates, our probe is well suited for proteome-wide profiling of relevant enzymatic cascades. Furthermore, upon introduction into living cells, our probe monitors enzymatic activity of interest and reports on changes in response to chemical or genetic inhibition. From a structural perspective, the probe's stable mechanism-based trapping of catalytic cysteine residues circumvents potential disadvantages incurred by traditional methods of stable E2-Ub conjugate preparation requiring active site mutagenesis<sup>13-17</sup>. Collectively, these features of our ABP tool present previously inaccessible avenues for targeting and monitoring enzymatic activity along the Ub/Ubl conjugation cascades, with implications for drug discovery and for cell and structural biology of these pathways.

## RESULTS

### Design and synthesis of the cascading ABP

To initiate the Ub/Ubl modification cascade, the E1 activating enzyme adenylates the C terminus of Ub at the expense of ATP, which results in a high-energy E1-Ub thioester formed upon an intramolecular reaction of the intermediate adenylate with the E1 active site cysteine nucleophile. Next, a trans-thioesterification reaction transfers

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**Figure 1 | Mechanism of the ABP UbDha.** *In situ* activation of UbDha with E1 and ATP results in a mechanism-based ABP for E1, E2 and cysteine-dependent E3 enzymes. Pathway (1) describes the covalent trapping of the enzyme (E-UbDha, thioether-linked adduct), and pathway (2) depicts the native trans-thioesterification processing of the probe (E-UbDha, thioester intermediate of conjugate) by the cascade.

the activated Ub to a conserved E2 cysteine, thus forming an E2~Ub thioester intermediate, which subsequently enables transfer of Ub onto a substrate with the help of an E3 (ref. 18). A G76A variant of Ub (Ub-G76A) can also be processed by the E1-E2-E3 cascade but its efficacy is lower<sup>19,20</sup>. We reasoned that replacing the C-terminal alanine by a latent and electrophilic dehydroalanine (Dha) moiety would retain recognition by the E1-E2-E3 enzymes, allowing the Ub-G76Dha (UbDha) to traverse the cascade (Fig. 1). Similarly to Ub, UbDha is activated by the E1 enzyme through the formation of an adenylate intermediate, which strongly increases the electrophilic character of the Michael acceptor (Dha moiety). The activated methylene group of the Dha moiety is now poised to either covalently trap the enzyme as an E1~UbDha thioether adduct (Fig. 1, pathway (1)) or follow the native ligation route resulting in an E1~UbDha thioester (Fig. 1, pathway (2)).

In the second scenario, UbDha is available for transfer to an E2 enzyme, during which the same two events can take place: covalent thioether adduct formation with the probe or a native trans-thioesterification reaction. Lastly, the same is true for the subsequent transfer of UbDha from the E2 to an active site cysteine-dependent E3 (i.e., from the HECT or RING-between-RING (RBR) family of E3 ligases)<sup>21</sup>.

UbDha was synthesized starting from Ub(1-75) (Supplementary Results, Supplementary Fig. 1) using a previously reported linear

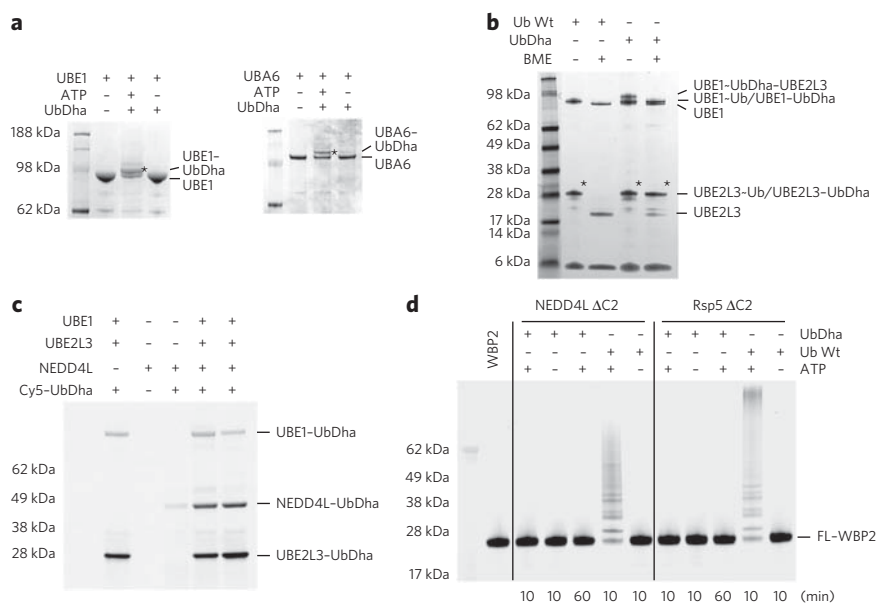
Fmoc-based solid phase synthesis (SPSS) of Ub<sup>22</sup>, where coupling *S*-benzyl-L-cysteine methyl ester (Cys(Bn)-OMe) to the C-terminal carboxyl group of protected Ub(1-75) afforded Ub(1-75)-Cys(Bn)-OMe. After global deprotection with TFA, this was subsequently transformed into UbDha-OMe by oxidative elimination with *O*-mesitylenesulfonylhydroxylamine (MSH)<sup>23</sup>. The methyl ester was then hydrolyzed to generate the UbDha probe. We also used the recently reported 2,5-dibromohexanediamide reagent to convert a cysteine into a Dha moiety<sup>23,24</sup> (Supplementary Fig. 1). Notably, in contrast to MSH, 2,5-dibromohexanediamide reacts with a C-terminal cysteine residue and thus allows the use of recombinant Ubl-G76C mutants to prepare probes.

### Covalent bond formation with conjugating enzymes

To evaluate the ability of our probe to travel the cascade, we began by subjecting the Ub-activating UBE1 enzyme to UbDha *in vitro*. SDS-PAGE analysis of the reaction revealed formation of an UBE1~UbDha adduct (Fig. 2a), consistent with a thioether linkage due to its stability under reducing conditions. ATP dependence of the reaction indicated that the ligation proceeds through the adenylate intermediate (Fig. 1). We made similar observations for UBA6 (Fig. 2a), the second Ub E1 enzyme to be discovered, which also activates the Ubl modifier FAT10 (ref. 25). To test whether the E1~UbDha thioester can transfer UbDha to the E2 stage, we added UBE2L3 to the reaction. Whereas SDS-PAGE analysis under nonreducing conditions facilitated labeling with both native Ub and UbDha (Fig. 2b), only the UbDha probe was able to form a stable adduct with the E2 enzyme under reducing conditions. As expected, we did not observe labeling in the absence of ATP (Supplementary Fig. 2). Notably, the double-UbDha-loaded UBE1 intermediate<sup>26</sup> (Supplementary Figs. 2 and 3) observed in the absence of an E2 was sensitive to coinubation with UBE2L3 (Supplementary Fig. 4), whereas addition of UBE2L3 after UBE1 labeling with UbDha had no effect. This may indicate a transfer of Ub from the adenylation active site to a nearby cysteine in the adenylation domain of UBE1, which does not occur when UbDha is quickly transferred to the next step (here, transfer to E2) in the cascade (ref. 27). In addition to UBE2L3, UbDha showed labeling of 26 other Ub E2s (Supplementary Fig. 5) but remained unreactive against Ubl E2s (UBE2E, UBE2I, UBE2L6 and UBE2M). UbDha was also unable to label the Ub E2 UBE2Z downstream of UBE1 owing to the enzyme's selectivity for UBA6 (ref. 25). Noncanonical catalytically inactive E2s UBE2V1 and UBE2V2 (ref. 28) also failed to react with the probe (Supplementary Fig. 5). Collectively, these results demonstrate broad utility of the UbDha probe in monitoring mechanism-based transfer of activated Ub from the E1 to a wide range of cognate E2s.

Under nonreducing conditions (Fig. 2b and Supplementary Fig. 6), a ternary complex of E1~UbDha-E2 was revealed. In this case, the acceptor E2 enzyme reacts directly with the Michael acceptor on the probe-donating E1-thioester adduct. This third pathway of probe action (Supplementary Fig. 6) was further confirmed by the stable oxyester linked E1-O~UbDha adduct (Supplementary Fig. 6).

Next, we investigated whether UbDha could be further delivered to an E3, bearing an active site cysteine. The family of E3 ligases is subdivided into three major classes according to their mechanism of action<sup>21</sup>. In humans, the known thioester-forming E3s, which harbor catalytic cysteine residues loaded with Ub by a mechanism analogous to the E1 and E2 enzymes, fall into the HECT (28 family members in humans) and RBR (13 members in humans) classes. In contrast, the RING E3 ligases act as scaffolds between the E2~Ub thioester and the substrate protein but do not themselves form thioesters<sup>21</sup>. We therefore examined the well-characterized HECT E3 ligase NEDD4L<sup>14</sup>. As expected, we observed a Cy5~UbDha-NEDD4L thioether adduct downstream of UBE1 and UBE2L3 (Fig. 2c). Similarly, a panel of nine other HECT E3s also reacted with the probe (Supplementary Fig. 7). Because NEDD4L initially showed



**Figure 2 | Covalent thioether bond formation of UbDha with conjugating enzymes.** (a) ATP-dependent labeling of UBE1 (left) and UBA6 (right). (b) Reactivity of UBE2L3 toward Ub and UbDha under reducing and nonreducing conditions. (c) Fluorescence scan showing NEDD4L HECT labeling with Cy5-UbDha. (d) Multiple-turnover ubiquitination on substrate WBP2 does not occur with UbDha. Asterisks in **a** and **b** indicate modified forms of UBE1, UBA6, UBE2L3 and NEDD4L (full gels are presented in **Supplementary Fig. 19**).

reactivity without ATP (**Supplementary Fig. 7**), we repeated the experiment with an active site Cys-to-Ala mutant and a mutant in which the four noncatalytic cysteine residues were mutated to alanine (4x Cys-to-Ala mutant) (**Supplementary Fig. 8**). Labeling was clearly visible under standard assay conditions, whereas omission of ATP alone or in combination with UBE1 and UBE2D2 resulted in virtually no labeling. Notably, the catalytic Cys-to-Ala mutant showed some labeling albeit less than the wild-type NEDD4L. A similar observation was made for the noncatalytic 4x Cys-to-Ala mutant, suggesting that NEDD4L has at least two cysteines competent to receive an activated UbDha. Not all HECT E3s have a cysteine adjacent to a noncovalent Ub-binding site. For example, the HECT domain of Smurf2 (54% identical to NEDD4L) lacks the candidate cysteine in the noncovalent Ub binding site and showed no alternative labeling of any of its six noncatalytic cysteine residues with our probe (**Supplementary Fig. 9**).

For a native Ub, the next step in the cascade after reactivity with an E3 would result in ligation to a target substrate. To test whether our probe behaves similarly, we chose WBP2 (ref. 29) a known substrate for the UbDha-reactive E3 HECT ligases NEDD4L, Rsp5, WWP1 and WWP2. Although incubation with Ub showed multiple-turnover ubiquitination on WBP2, no ubiquitination was observed with UbDha even with prolonged reaction times (**Fig. 2d** and **Supplementary Fig. 10**). This feature makes UbDha particularly advantageous for enzymatic profiling in cellular systems, where it will remain on the active enzymes irrespectively of the presence of substrates.

### Generalizing the cascading ABP methodology to UbLs

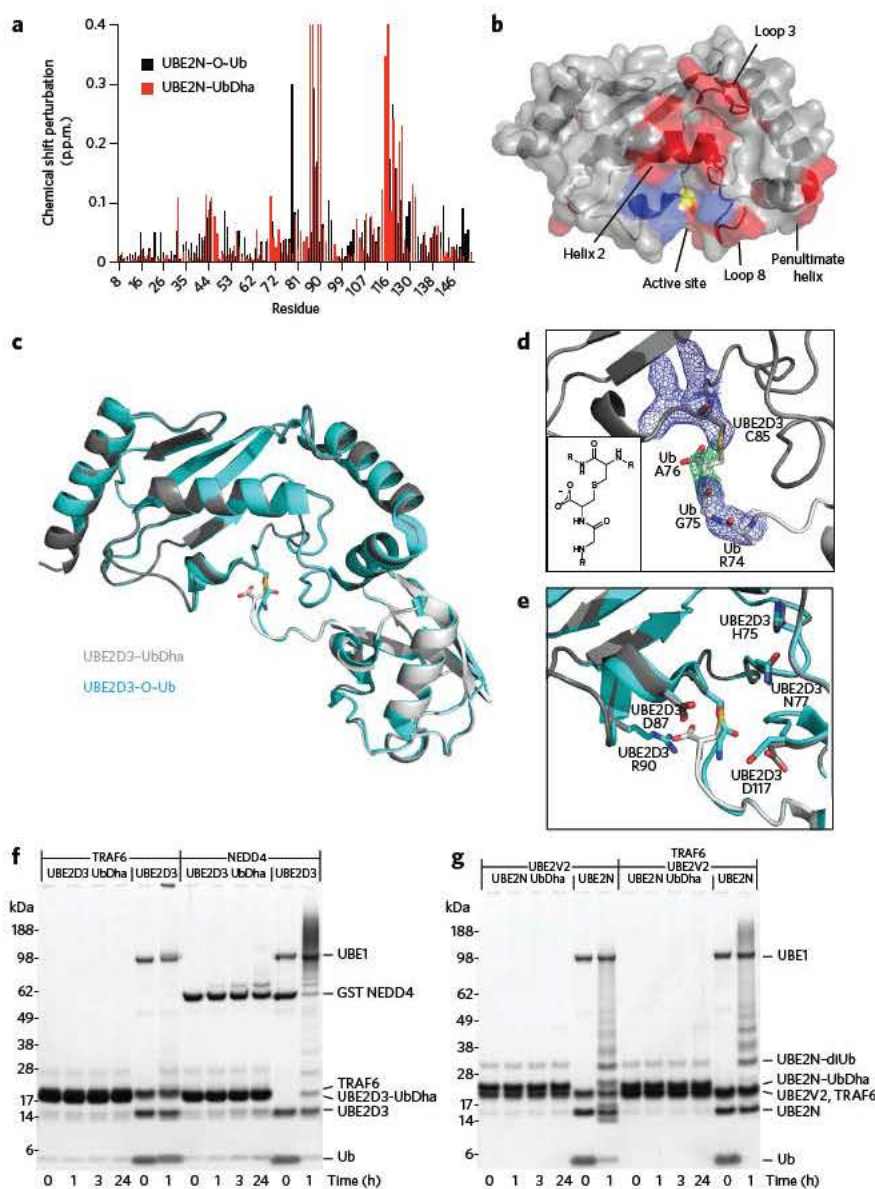
To show that our probe design is applicable beyond the Ub cascade, we synthesized an NEDD8-G76C mutant by linear Fmoc-based SPPS<sup>30</sup> and transformed the cysteine into Dha by overnight incubation with 2,5-dibromohexanediamide. After incubation of NEDD8Dha with UBA3-NAE1, SDS-PAGE analysis revealed formation of the expected UBA3-NEDD8 thioether adduct and a double-NEDD8-loaded UBA3 adduct<sup>31</sup> (**Supplementary Figs. 11**

and **12**). Coincubation with UBE2M resulted in the formation of a NEDD8-UbE2M thioether adduct (**Supplementary Fig. 11**). As with UBE1, formation of double-NEDD8Dha-linked UBA3 was suppressed when UBE2M was present during E1 labeling. Similarly, treatment with 2-mercaptoethanol had no effect on adduct formation, and labeling with NEDD8Dha failed in the absence of ATP (**Supplementary Fig. 11**). These experiments demonstrate that our cascading ABP design can be extended to other UbL modification cascades.

### E2-Ub thioether adduct structure

To evaluate the structural integrity of our thioether-linked adducts we performed both solution-based and crystallographic studies. Solution properties of the oxyester-linked UBE2N-O~Ub conjugate (in which the active site cysteine has been mutated to serine) have been thoroughly characterized by NMR spectroscopy and small-angle X-ray scattering<sup>32</sup>, allowing us to validate the analogous thioether linkage as a suitable mimic. Analysis of chemical shift perturbations in the <sup>1</sup>H,<sup>15</sup>N HSQC spectrum of UBE2N (**Supplementary Fig. 13**) arising from conjugation with Ub revealed several regions affected in both the thioether- and oxyester-linked samples (**Fig. 3a**) localized primarily to loop 3, helix 2, loop 8, and the penultimate C-terminal helix (**Fig. 3b**). These perturbed regions can be attributed to the 'closed' conformation of the UBE2N-UbDha thioether adduct, which is predominant in solution<sup>32</sup> and indicates the overall behavior of the thioether-linked adduct to be similar to the oxyester linkage. Certain resonances in the UBE2N-UbDha HSQC spectrum showed markedly different characteristics from that of the oxyester-linked sample (**Fig. 3a**) mapped to the region directly surrounding the active site (**Fig. 3b**). Given the high sensitivity of amide resonances to the local chemical environment, such differences between linkage types are probably due to their differing chemical properties and not to a larger structural change.

Solution studies indicate normal interdomain behavior within the thioether-linked adduct, but they lack the atomic resolution of the linkage and surrounding active site residues. To remedy this, we crystallized the UBE2D3-UbDha adduct under conditions published for the oxyester-linked UBE2D3-O~Ub conjugate<sup>33</sup>. The 2.2-Å UBE2D3-UbDha thioether structure was notably similar to the published oxyester structure (PDB 3UGB), with  $\alpha$  r.m.s. deviation values of 0.23 and 0.35Å for UBE2D3 and Ub, respectively (**Fig. 3c** and **Supplementary Table 1**). The only substantial deviation between the structures was in the Ub C terminus near the linkage itself, manifested in an r.m.s. deviation of 1.13Å for Ub residues 73–76. The thioether linkage was readily revealed in the corresponding electron density (**Fig. 3d**), although detailed features of the omit map were hampered by high B factors in the flexible Ub C terminus (average B-factor of 105.7 for Ub residues 75–76, compared with 49.4 for all protein). Nearby residues within the UBE2D3 active site were found to adopt nearly identical conformations, with the exception of R90, which was missing from the electron density (**Fig. 3e**). An overlay of the oxyester and thioether structures suggests that the additional carboxylate group of the thioether linkage could displace the arginine side chain from the E2 active site cleft, although to our knowledge there is currently no known role for this residue in E2 catalysis.



**Figure 3 | Structural studies of thioether-linked E2-Ub adducts.** (a) UBE2N chemical shift perturbations upon Ub activation for oxyester (black) and thioether (red) linkages. Resonances perturbed beyond facile reassignment were plotted using maximum perturbation value. (b) Changes from a mapped onto the UBE2N structure (PDB 1J7D) (similarities are shown in red; differences in blue). Active site cysteine is shown in yellow. (c) Superposition of thioether-linked UBE2D3-UbDha conjugate (gray) over the oxyester-linked form (cyan, PDB 3UGB). (d) Simulated annealing omit map of electron density surrounding the thioether linkage.  $2|F_o| - |F_c|$  electron density (blue) contoured at  $1\sigma$ ,  $|F_o| - |F_c|$  density (green) contoured at  $3\sigma$ . Inset, structure of the thioether linkage. (e) Overlay of E2 active site residues in thioether (gray) and oxyester (cyan) structures. (f,g) Stability of the thioether-linked UBE2D3- and UBE2N-UbDha adducts, incubated with TRAF6 or NEDD4 (f) or UBE2V2 (g) alone or in combination with TRAF6.

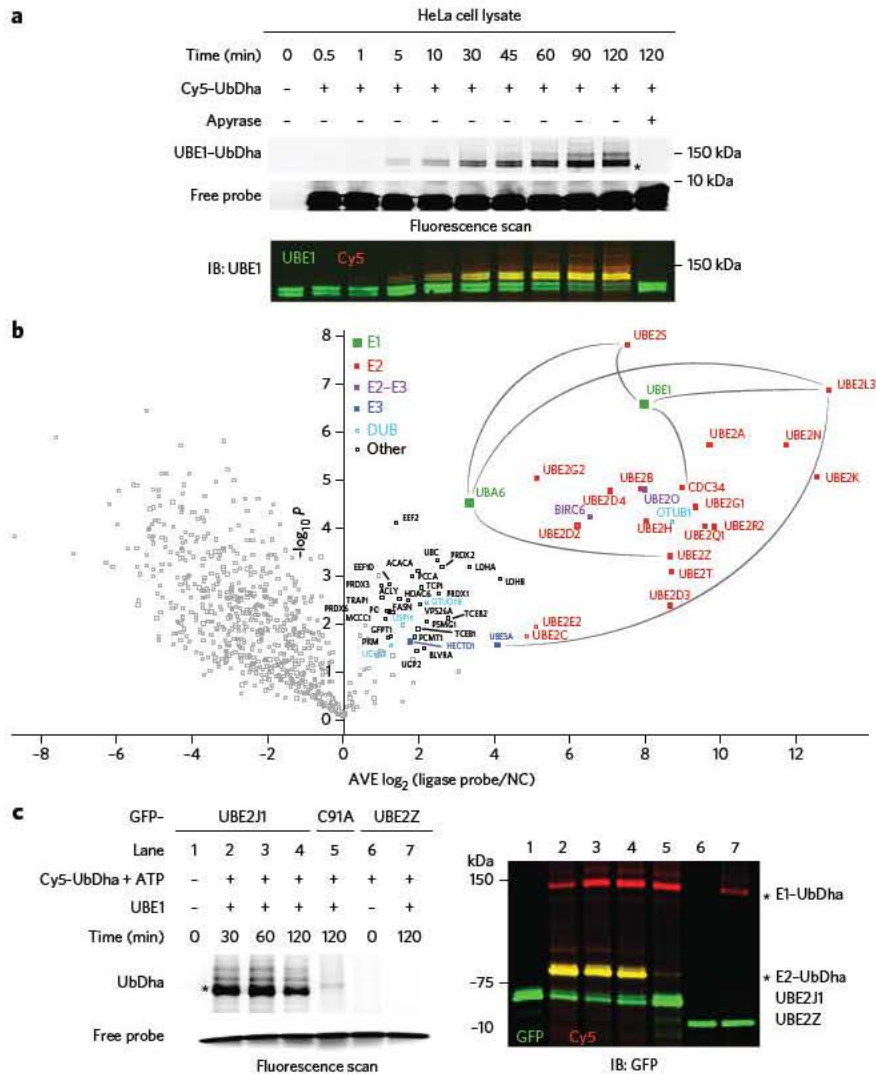
Preparation of stable E2-Ub conjugates has in the past relied on the dichloroacetone method<sup>13</sup> and oxyester<sup>14-16</sup> and isopeptide<sup>17</sup> bonds, all necessitating mutations to the enzyme's active site. Furthermore, oxyester-linked E2~O-Ub or E2~O-Ubl conjugates are susceptible to hydrolysis, particularly in the presence of an active E3 ligase<sup>14-16</sup>, thereby limiting their use in structural applications and preventing any potential utility in cell-based studies. In contrast, UBE2D3-UbDha and UBE2N-UbDha thioether-linked adducts remained inert in the presence of activating factors such as the E3 ligases TRAF6 (RING-type) or NEDD4L (HECT-type)

or the accessory E2 variant UBE2V2, with or without TRAF6, respectively (Fig. 3f,g). As a catalytically inert mimic of native thioester-linked conjugates, the thioether-linked adduct behaved as a competitive inhibitor of the ligation machinery in single-turnover assays monitoring diubiquitin (diUb) formation by UBE2N, UBE2V2 and the E3 ligase cIAP (Supplementary Fig. 14). Combined with solution and crystallographic data, these functional assays support the utility of thioether-linked E2-UbDha adducts as stable mimics in both structural and functional studies.

### UbDha probe as a proteomics tool

Having validated the activity and structural integrity of the UbDha probe, we turned to enzymatic cascade profiling in biological samples. Incubation of cell extracts with Cy5-UbDha revealed robust labeling of UBE1 (Fig. 4a) and UBA6 that was abrogated by apyrase treatment (Supplementary Fig. 15). We also detected additional ATP-dependent bands on the same timescale (Supplementary Fig. 15), supporting *in vitro* data showing that the probe is passed downstream. To identify these proteins, we used a biotin-labeled probe variant for affinity-based proteomic profiling<sup>3</sup> of human cervical cancer (HeLa) (Fig. 4b) and melanoma (MelJuSo) (Supplementary Fig. 16) cell extracts. We took advantage of the ATP-dependent reactivity of our probe and conducted affinity-based proteomic profiling in the presence of ATP and with apyrase-mediated ATP depletion. Mass spectrometric analysis of proteins associated with the probe in an ATP-dependent manner retrieved both Ub E1 enzymes and numerous downstream E2 enzymes. Specifically, roughly half of known human E2 enzymes<sup>34</sup> charged by UBE1 (as well as UBE2Z, charged specifically by UBA6) were identified with high confidence in both cell lines. Among the most enriched proteins were UBE2L3, UBE2S and UBE2K, all of which can readily accept Ub from UBE1 and UBA6 (ref. 25). Notably, we recovered three members of the E2D subfamily—UBE2D2, UBE2D3 and UBE2D4—and the largely uncharacterized UBE2D4 was the top hit in HeLa cells (Fig. 4b). By contrast, we did not recover UBE2D4 in MelJuSo cells, exemplifying how the UbDha probe can facilitate unbiased proteome-wide comparisons of enzymatic reactivities. In addition to canonical E2s, we detected atypical E2-E3 hybrid enzymes (UBE2O and BIRC6) as well as HECT E3s. Whereas the E3 ligases UBE3A and HECTD1 were found in both cell

lines, TRIP12 was observed only in MelJuSo cells. UBE3A prefers to accept Ub from UBE2L3 (ref. 35), which was recovered in high abundance from both cell lines, indicating isolation of a full E1-E2-E3 cascade. Enzymes of interest immunoprecipitated directly from cells can be investigated with the UbDha probe in the presence of supplemented reaction components of choice. This was demonstrated by the ability of GFP-UBE2J1 but not GFP-UBE2Z to accept activated Cy5-UbDha from UBE1 (Fig. 4c). As expected, mutation of active site C91 of GFP-UBE2J1 to alanine (C91A) abrogated labeling, demonstrating suitability of UbDha for mutational studies.



**Figure 4 | Proteome-wide activity profiling of Ub-conjugation machinery.** (a) Time course of UBE1 labeling in HeLa cell extracts with Cy5-UbDha in the absence (-) or presence (+) of ATP scavenger apyrase. IB, immunoblot. (b) Proteomic profiling of the Ub activation, conjugation and ligation machineries in HeLa cells. Volcano plot of pairwise comparison of proteins bound to the biotin-UbDha probe relative to apyrase treatment ( $-\log_{10} P$  value) as a function of fold enrichment (average  $\log_2$ ) from three technical replicates. Confidently identified proteins (average  $\log_2$  ratio  $>1$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) are marked as follows: E1, green; E2, red; HECT E3, blue; hybrid E2-E3, purple; DUBs, light blue. Proteins unrelated to the Ub cycle are shown in black, and those falling below the threshold are shown in gray. Gray lines indicate known cascade connections. (c) Labeling of GFP-tagged enzymes isolated from HeLa cells (UBE2J1 or its catalytic mutant C91A versus GFP-UBE2Z) with Cy5-UbDha downstream of purified UBE1. A representative experiment is shown ( $n = 2$ ). Asterisks in **a** and **c** indicate modified forms of E1 and E2 enzymes (full-length gels are shown in **Supplementary Fig. 20**).

We also identified four DUBs (OTUB1, OTUD7B, UCHL3 and USP15) in pull-down experiments with the ligase probe (Fig. 4b and **Supplementary Fig. 16**). Because DUBs harbor highly reactive active site cysteine residues, we assessed potential cross-reactivity by incubating the Cy5-UbDha probe with cell lysates ectopically expressing various GFP- or FLAG-tagged DUBs (**Supplementary Fig. 17a**) alongside the recently reported DUB-specific ABP, Cy5-UbPA<sup>30</sup>. Whereas Cy5-UbPA readily modified all the active DUBs tested, only incubation with excessive amounts of UbDha resulted in (often marginal) DUB labeling. Moreover, Cy5-UbDha labeling of even highly reactive DUBs such as OTUB1 and OTUB2 was readily abolished by pretreatment with UbPA (**Supplementary Fig. 17b**). Of note, the DUBs recovered with UbDha in our proteomic

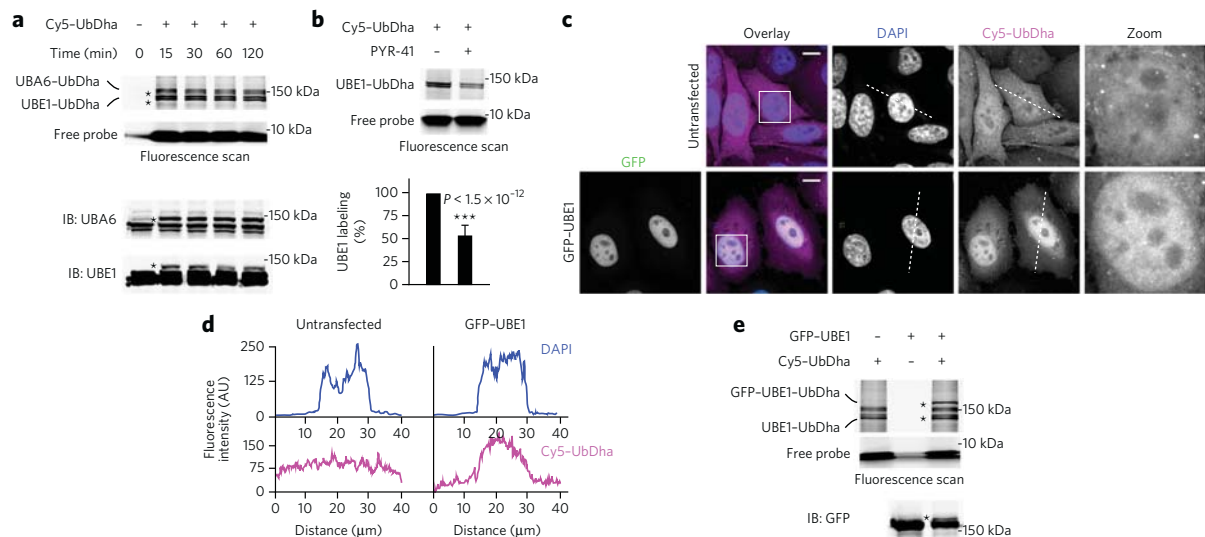
experiment (particularly OTUB1) can interact with E2 enzymes<sup>36</sup>. As DUB-mediated catalysis proceeds independently of ATP, recovery of these DUBs in the ATP-dependent setting can be a result of isolation together with their active partner ligases.

### Activity-based protein profiling in cells

To address the efficacy of UbDha in monitoring the Ub-conjugation cascade in the cellular context, we next introduced Cy5-UbDha into HeLa cells by electroporation. In-gel fluorescence analysis followed by immunoblotting revealed engagement of both UBA6 and UBE1 (Fig. 5a) on a timescale similar to or faster than that observed in lysate labeling experiments (Fig. 4a). Furthermore, treatment of cells with the UBE1 inhibitor PYR-41 (ref. 37) before introduction of the probe reduced detectable UBE1 activity (Fig. 5b), indicating that the probe can be used to monitor enzymatic inhibition in living cells.

Cells harboring Cy5-UbDha showed normal morphology, and the probe was evenly distributed throughout the nuclear and cytoplasmic space, as expected when small molecules such as Ub move unrestricted across the nuclear membrane<sup>38</sup> (Fig. 5c, top). Of note, cells undergoing late stages of cell division showed accumulation of Cy5-UbDha at the cytokinetic bridge (**Supplementary Fig. 18**), consistent with the site of BIRC6 activity at this point in the cell cycle<sup>39</sup>. Given that we detected BIRC6 in high abundance in the proteome-wide active ligase analysis (Fig. 4b), these observations suggest that our probe could be used to study spatial and/or temporal aspects of relevant enzymatic cascades. For example, introduction of Cy5-UbDha into HeLa cells ectopically expressing predominantly nuclear GFP-UBE1 resulted in the corresponding nuclear accumulation of the probe (Fig. 5c,d) relative to untransfected cells. In-gel fluorescence analysis and immunoblot analysis of the corresponding lysates confirmed formation of a GFP-UBE1-UbDha adduct (Fig. 5e).

To investigate whether the probe can be passed downstream of the E1 while inside the cell, we introduced Cy5-UbDha into cells expressing UBE2J1 or its catalytically inactive C91A or C91S mutants. We observed catalysis-dependent modification of the E2 with the probe (Fig. 6a,b) that was sensitive to inhibition of the upstream UBE1 (Fig. 6b). UBE2J1, which we isolated with UbDha from MelJuSo cell lysates (**Supplementary Fig. 16**), localizes to the endoplasmic reticulum (ER), where it functions in ER-associated degradation (ERAD)<sup>40</sup>. In cells, Cy5-UbDha colocalized with wild-type but not catalytically dead UBE2J1 (Fig. 6c,d). Notably, this colocalization was sensitive to inhibition of the upstream E1 (Fig. 6c,d), indicating that imaging of intact cells harboring fluorescently labeled UbDha can report on relevant enzymatic cascades. Collectively, these experiments illustrate a wide range of utilities for UbDha in the study of Ub ligase activity in cells. To our knowledge, UbDha is the first probe that allows cascade-dependent profiling of Ub-conjugating enzymes in a physiologically relevant setting.



**Figure 5 | Activation of UbDha *in vivo*.** (a) *In vivo* labeling of endogenous E1 enzymes with Cy5-UbDha. Fluorescence scanning and immunoblotting of HeLa cell lysates harvested at indicated time intervals after electroporation of cells with the probe. A representative experiment is shown ( $n = 3$ ). (b) Fluorescence scan (top) and quantification (bottom) of *in vivo* labeling of UBE1 with Cy5-UbDha after treatment with PYR-41 (50  $\mu$ M). Quantification is shown as percentage of labeling in the absence of PYR-41; error bars indicate mean  $\pm$  s.d. ( $n = 3$ ); significance ( $P$  value) was assessed by two-sided  $t$ -test. (c) Distribution of Cy5-UbDha (magenta) in cells ectopically expressing GFP-UBE1 (green) and in untransfected cells. Representative 3D confocal compilations of fixed cells treated as indicated are shown with DAPI (blue) overlays and nuclear insets ( $n = 2$ ); scale bars, 10  $\mu$ m. (d) Pixel traces of DAPI and Cy5-UbDha (marked with dotted lines in c) plotted as fluorescence over distance. AU, arbitrary units. (e) Formation of the GFP-UBE1-UbDha adduct in cells. Asterisks in a and e indicate modified forms of E1 enzymes (full-length gels are shown in **Supplementary Fig. 21**).

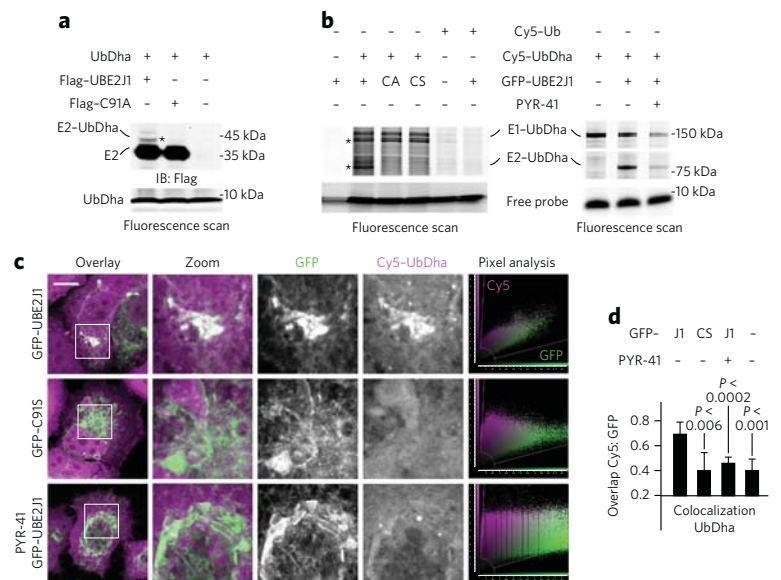
## DISCUSSION

Given the critical roles of E1, E2 and E3 enzymes in a wide range of biological processes and their resulting emergence as drug targets<sup>41,42</sup>, there is a need for suitable assay reagents to study their function. The pyramidal structure of the Ub/Ubl conjugation systems, their complex cross-reactivities and the reactive nature of the E2~Ub and E3~Ub thioester intermediates present practical challenges in dissecting interactions between Ub-loaded partner enzymes. To monitor these enzymatic cascades, we present a unique probe designed to hop from one active site to the next, leaving a detectable covalent mark at each step.

Relatively inert on its own, our cascading probe (UbDha) requires ATP-dependent activation by the E1 enzyme, which increases the electrophilic character of the Dha moiety, making it suitable to follow the cascade of trans-thioesterification reactions downstream. The key conceptual advantage of Dha-based methodology lies in its ability to 'choose' at any point along the cascade between a native-like thioester and irreversible thioether bond formation. We show that UbDha readily labels active site cysteine residues of E1, E2 and HECT E3 enzymes. Notably, UbDha is not transferred to substrates. This feature endows the cascade probe with advantages over the native Ub, particularly in complex biological settings, where enzymes are present together with their substrates. Under such circumstances, UbDha enables direct measure of enzyme activity rather than merely detecting consequences thereof.

Because entry of UbDha (or UblDha) into its cognate enzymatic cascade requires ATP, much of the background binding to the probe can be easily discriminated by eliminating ATP with apyrase. This simple feature makes UbDha suitable for activity-based profiling of Ub/Ubl cascades not only *in vitro* but also in complex biological circumstances, as demonstrated by the proteome-wide analysis of Ub conjugation machineries

isolated from two different cancer cell lines. The straightforward nature of the experimental setup is likely to be readily adaptable to comparative profiling of E1, E2 (and some E3 enzymes) as a function



**Figure 6 | Probing *in vivo* E1-E2 cascade with UbDha.** (a) Flag-specific immunoblot (IB) analysis of *in vivo* UbDha adduct formation with Flag-tagged UBE2J1 (Flag-UBE2J1) or its catalytic mutant C91A (Flag-C91A) (CA) or C91S (CS, left) or as a function of UBE1 inhibition (50  $\mu$ M PYR-41, right) with Cy5-UbDha or Cy5-Ub electroporated into HeLa cells. A representative experiment is shown ( $n = 2$ ). Asterisks in a and b indicate modified forms of E1 and E2 enzymes. (c) Representative 3D confocal compilations of fixed cells (from b) treated as indicated. Overlays of GFP (green) with Cy5-UbDha (purple) and corresponding pixel plots are shown ( $n = 2$ ); scale bars, 10  $\mu$ m. (d) Colocalization (Mander's overlap coefficient) of Cy5-UbDha with GFP-tagged wild-type (J1) or mutant (C91S) UBE2J1 ( $n = 2$ ; 10 cells per condition), error bars represent mean  $\pm$  s.d.; significance ( $P$ ) assessed by two-sided  $t$ -test; full-length gels are shown in **Supplementary Fig. 22**.

of various biological perturbations (such as stimulation, starvation or infection). The same reagent can subsequently be used to study the effects of mutations in enzymes isolated directly from organisms of interest as well as test for relevant factors upstream or downstream in the cascade. At present, standard biochemical techniques for such studies typically involve laborious expression and purification protocols. Furthermore, a lack of observable reactivity in such preparations may be attributable to misfolding or lack of necessary modifications acquired in the carrier organism. Our methodology bypasses these difficulties by offering a relatively quick and easy way to assess reactivity of enzymes isolated directly from cells using simple immunoprecipitation. Then, taking cellular enzymology one step further, UbDha can be introduced into living cells to directly monitor enzymatic activities in their natural context. In this way, the versatility of the UbDha cascade probe may prove invaluable in dissecting how aberrant activities of E1–E2–E3 cascades contribute to pathogenesis<sup>41,42</sup> and for diagnosis and monitoring efficacy of UPS-targeting therapy. Furthermore, by generating a NEDD8-based counterpart of the UbDha probe capable of labeling the NEDD8 conjugating machinery, we show our method to be diversifiable toward Ubls. As such, the technology described here may be used to help interrogate Ubl ligation machineries that are not yet well defined.

In addition to cell-based applications, UbDha (and UblDha) may prove useful *in vitro*, particularly for structure determination. The thioether adducts described here bypass the need for active site mutagenesis<sup>13–17</sup>, thus avoiding potential disturbances to catalytic properties of enzymes in question. Stability of our thioether adducts under reducing conditions in the presence of an activating E3 ligase and in functional assays allowed us to perform NMR and X-ray crystallography studies. A high degree of similarity to the published oxyester-linked structure supports their utility as stable mimics in structural and functional studies. We expect that UbDha could be used to expedite generation of crystal structures of E1, E2 or E3 enzymes and their complexes<sup>27</sup>. In addition, we hypothesize that the stability of E2–UbDha adducts immobilized on affinity beads could enable proteomic profiling of cognate RING E3 enzymes, which cannot be directly trapped in a mechanism-dependent manner<sup>43</sup>. On the basis of the proof-of-concept studies described here, we anticipate that our cascading probe reagents will facilitate future discoveries on Ub/Ubl conjugation.

## METHODS

Methods and any associated references are available in the [online version of the paper](#).

**Accession codes.** The structure of the thioether-linked UBE2D3–UbDha adduct has been deposited under accession code [5IFR](#).

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## Acknowledgments

We thank members of H.O.'s lab for helpful discussion and reagents, J. Brown and S. Armour (Ubiquigent) for providing the E2 scan kit and D. El Atmioui for solid phase peptide synthesis. We acknowledge beamline staff at Diamond I04-1 for expert help. Work was supported by a VICI grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific

Research (NWO) (724013002) to H.O., a Marie Curie ITN fellowship (290257) to K.W. and EMBO long-term fellowships to I.B. and J.N.P. Work in D.K.'s lab is funded by Medical Research Council (U105192732), the European Research Council (309756), and the Lister Institute for Preventive Medicine. Work in B.A.S.'s lab is funded by ALSAC, HHMI and NIH grant R37GM069530. Work in A.C.O.V.'s lab is funded by the NWO (93511037) and the European Research Council (310913). Work in M.G.'s lab is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) CRC969, project C01. J.B. received a stipend from the Graduate School Chemical Biology Ko-RSCB.

## Author contributions

M.P.C.M. and F.E.O. designed the study. M.P.C.M., K.W. and I.B. carried out all labeling experiments. I.B. and K.W. designed and executed in-cell labeling experiments with assistance from R.M., and I.B. collected and analyzed confocal microscopy data. Mass spectrometry and relevant data analysis were performed by J.-G.C. and A.C.O.V. on samples prepared by K.W. and I.B. J.N.P. and D.K. performed structural and competition studies and analyzed NMR and X-ray data. K.-P.W. and B.A.S. generated the panel of purified HECT and NEDD8 pathway enzymes and helped with data analysis. J.N. helped with data analysis and provided helpful discussions. J.B. and M.G. provided UBA6. M.P.C.M., F.E.O. and H.O. managed the study. M.P.C.M. and I.B. wrote the manuscript with input from other authors.