Primary open-angle glaucoma is a leading cause of visual impairment that is characterized by cupping of the optic disc and stereotypical patterns of visual field loss. Although high intraocular pressure (IOP) is a risk factor for developing disease, glaucoma can occur at any pressure. Glaucoma that occurs with maximum IOPs of less than 21 mmHg has been termed “normal-tension glaucoma” (NTG). Glaucoma is highly heritable, and many genes that contribute to the pathogenesis of NTG have been discovered. Mutations in optineurin (OPTN),1 TANK-binding kinase 1 (TBK1),2 or myocilin (MYOC) are each capable of causing glaucoma with little influence from other genetic or environmental factors. Mutations in these genes are responsible for approximately 3% of NTG.1-3 TBK1-associated NTG is caused by duplication or triplication of the normal TBK1 gene sequence. These TBK1 gene-dosage mutations have been detected in African American,2 white,2,4,5 and Asian6,7 patients with NTG and have not been identified in the genomes of more than 10,000 individuals in a large public database (gnomAD.broadinstitute.org). TBK1 gene duplication and triplication mutations are associated with early-onset glaucoma that frequently presents with large cup-to-disc ratios and maximum IOPs of <21 mmHg.2 Prior studies of TBK1-associated NTG have reported a mean age at diagnosis of 29 to 36 years, mean cup-to-disc ratio of 0.85 to 0.93 at first examination, and mean maximum IOP of 18 to 19 mmHg.2 Some patients with NTG with TBK1 mutations have thin central corneas; however, a broad range of corneal thickness has been observed in this patient population.2,5 Typical glaucomatous visual fields have been detected in patients with TBK1-associated glaucoma, including arcuate defects, nasal steps, central defects, and generalized constriction.2 Although many key features of the clinical phenotype of TBK1-associated glaucoma have been described, studies of disease progression for this molecularly defined type of NTG have not been reported.

In this case report, we present genetic testing results for a woman with familial NTG and a retrospective 20-year review of her clinical course. Written informed consent was obtained from study participants, and research was conducted with the approval and ethical review by the University of Iowa’s Internal Review Board and adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

The patient, her mother, and her maternal aunt all have been diagnosed with NTG. Given our patient’s strong family history of NTG, we tested her DNA for the most commonly observed NTG mutations: Glu50Lys in OPTN, a gene duplication of TBK1, and Gln368Ter in MYOC using real-time polymerase chain reaction assays as previously described.2,3 Although the OPTN and MYOC tests showed negative results, we did detect a TBK1 gene duplication. We subsequently confirmed the TBK1 gene duplication and determined the precise location of its borders on chromosome 12q14 (64 681 095–65 187 566) using chromosome microarray analysis. This TBK1 gene duplication has novel borders when compared with prior reports.2,5

The patient is a Hispanic white woman with a complex ophthalmic history. She was initially evaluated by an
ophthalmologist at age 3 years for anisocoria. At age 10 years, she developed esotropia. She was determined to have a slowly progressive right third nerve palsy that spared her levator. Multiple magnetic resonance imaging scans and angiography failed to determine an etiology, and a diagnosis of a schwannoma was considered. She has myopia with anisometropia (−1.50 +1.50 × 90 right eye and −5.75 sphere left eye) and has required 3 strabismus surgeries.

At age 17 years, during one of her many neuro-ophthalmology examinations, she was noted to have cup-to-disc asymmetry. By age 33 years, she had documented increased cupping (Fig 1) with thinning of the retinal nerve fiber layer on OCT (Fig S1, available at www.ophthalmologyglaucoma.org). Her IOPs were 12 mmHg in both eyes. Central corneal thickness was 546 μm in both eyes. Her Humphrey visual fields were normal (Fig S2, available at www.ophthalmologyglaucoma.org). Diurnal measurements of IOP were 9 to 14 mmHg in the right eye and 9 to 13 mmHg in the left eye. She was diagnosed with preperimetric NTG. The patient had symptoms of orthostatic hypotension and typically maintained a blood pressure (BP) in the range of 90/55 mmHg. A 24-hour BP study revealed a minimum nocturnal BP of 80/46 mmHg. She was treated with a high salt diet. At age 34 years, a disc hemorrhage was detected in the right eye (Fig 1) when her IOP was 12 mmHg. OCT at this time demonstrated thinning of the retinal nerve fiber layer and marked ganglion cell loss (Fig S1, available at www.ophthalmologyglaucoma.org). Latanoprost was begun with no significant change in her IOP. With or without treatment, her IOP was between 10 and 12 mmHg in both eyes. It was determined that no medication would lower her IOP from this range and that the next step in treatment would be a trabeculectomy.

Over the course of the next 6 years of follow-up examinations, the patient’s IOP remained at <12 mmHg in both eyes and no obvious glaucomatosus visual field changes were observed. Mild, nonspecific reductions in visual field sensitivity were detected (left eye > right eye) that might represent early functional damage from glaucoma (Fig S2, available at www.ophthalmologyglaucoma.org).

We present a patient with a duplication in TBK1 who demonstrates progressive optic nerve cupping with low IOP at a young age that is consistent with preperimetric NTG. Her right third nerve palsy is most likely unrelated to the bilateral cupping and glaucoma. To our knowledge, TBK1 gene duplications have not been detected in other patients with third nerve palsy. Her complex ophthalmic history brought her to the attention of ophthalmologists who could document her progressive cupping at low-normal IOPs. One should consider testing for mutations in TBK1 in young patients with progressive optic nerve cupping at normal IOPs, and those patients with NTG with TBK1 mutations may require very low target IOP to limit progression (i.e., <10–12 mmHg).

NATHAN C. SEARS, MD1,2
BENJAMIN W. DARBRO, MD3
WALLACE L.M. ALWARD, MD1,2
JOHN H. FINGERT, MD, PhD1,2
1Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Carver College of Medicine, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa; 2Institute for Vision Research, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa; 3Department of Pediatrics, Carver College of Medicine, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa

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Author Contributions:
Conception and design: Sears, Darbro, Alward, Fingert
Data collection: Sears, Darbro, Alward, Fingert
Analysis and interpretation: Sears, Darbro, Alward, Fingert
Obtained funding: N/A
Overall responsibility: Sears, Darbro, Alward, Fingert

Correspondence:
John H. Fingert, MD, PhD, 3111B Medical Education Research Facility, Carver College of Medicine, University of Iowa, 375 Newton Road, Iowa City, IA 52242. E-mail: john-fingert@uiowa.edu.

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