LETTERS

A single type of progenitor cell maintains normal epidermis

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According to the current model of adult epidermal homeostasis, skin tissue is maintained by two discrete populations of progenitor cells: self-renewing stem cells; and their progeny, known as transit amplifying cells, which differentiate after several rounds of cell division[1–3]. By making use of inducible genetic labelling, we have tracked the fate of a representative sample of progenitor cells in mouse tail epidermis at single-cell resolution *in vivo* at time intervals up to one year. Here we show that clone-size distributions are consistent with a new model of homeostasis involving only one type of progenitor cell. These cells are found to undergo both symmetric and asymmetric division at rates that ensure epidermal homeostasis. The results raise important questions about the potential role of stem cells on tissue maintenance *in vivo*.

The mammalian epidermis is organized into hair follicles interspersed with interfollicular epidermis (IFE), which consists of layers of keratinocytes (Fig. 1a)[4]. In IFE, proliferating epidermal progenitor cells (EPCs) are found in the basal cell layer. On commitment to terminal differentiation, basal cells exit the cell cycle and subsequently migrate into the suprabasal cell layers. Progenitors capable of generating both hair follicles and IFE lie in the hair-follicle bulge, but these cells appear to play no part in maintaining normal interfollicular epidermis[5–9]. Label-retaining studies show that IFE contains slowly cycling basal cells, which have been interpreted as stem cells that support clonal units of transit amplifying (TA) and differentiated cells[10,11], according to the stem/TA cell hypothesis. However, these studies are unable to reveal the dynamics of EPC behaviour during epidermal homeostasis. Previous genetic labelling studies to track the fate of proliferating cells have either required epidermal injury or have yielded too few labelled clones to permit quantitative analysis[12–15].

To track EPC fate in normal epidermis we have used inducible genetic marking to label a sample of cells and their progeny in adult mice. Animals transgenic for the tamoxifen-regulated mutant of *cre* recombinase (Ah*cre*^{ERT}), expressed from the inducible CYP1A1 promoter, were crossed onto the R26$^{EYFP/EYFP}$ reporter strain, in which a conditional allele of enhanced yellow fluorescent protein (EYFP) is targeted to the Rosa26 locus (Supplementary Fig. S1a; refs 16, 17). In the resultant Ah*cre*^{ERT} R26$^{EYFP/wt}$ heterozygotes, EYFP is expressed in a dose-dependent manner following transient expression of *cre* induced by a treatment with βNF and tamoxifen at 6–9 weeks of age (Supplementary Fig. S1). Cohorts of mice were culled for analysis at intervals after a single injection of the inducing drugs. Cells expressing EYFP and their labelled progeny were detected by confocal microscopy of wholemount epidermis[18]. At 2 days post-induction, only singly labelled cells were seen, at a frequency of 1 in 600 cells in the basal layer, indicating that the clusters of cells encountered at later time points are clones, each derived from a single progenitor cell (Fig. 1b and data not shown). Analysis of subsequent cohorts of mice demonstrated clones that remained cohesive and expanded progressively in size (Fig. 1b, Supplementary Fig. S2). We scored clones that contained one or more basal cells; the observed clone-size distribution (that is, the total number of nucleated cells per clone) up to 6 weeks post-labelling, and the basal-layer clone-size distribution up to one year (see Methods) are shown in Fig. 2.

The density of labelled clones containing at least one basal-layer cell in tail epidermis rose from 2 days to a peak at 2 weeks after induction, as EYFP levels accumulated to detectable levels in all labelled cells. Clone numbers then fell to 7 ± 2% (mean ± s.d.) of the peak value by 3 months, and 3 ± 2% at one year; similar results were seen in back skin (data not shown). This decline was accompanied by the appearance of multi-cellular clones containing only suprabasal cells, consistent with clonal loss through differentiation (Supplementary Fig. S4). Analysis of the spatial distribution of IFE clones indicates that labelled clones are not replaced by unlabelled

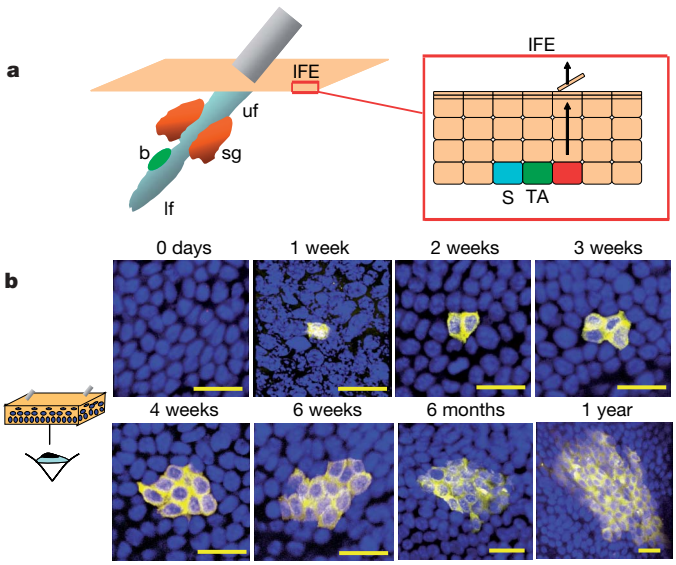

Figure 1 | *In vivo* clonal labelling of epidermal progenitor cells. **a**, Organization of the epidermis. Hair follicles contain stem cells located in the bulge (b, green), with the potential to generate lower hair follicle (lf), sebaceous gland (sg, orange) upper follicle (uf) and interfollicular epidermis (IFE, beige). The schematic shows the organization of keratinocytes in the IFE, as proposed by the stem/TA cell hypothesis. The basal layer comprises stem cells (S, blue), transit amplifying cells (TA, dark green), and post-mitotic basal cells (red), which migrate out of the basal layer as they differentiate (arrows). **b**, Projected *Z*-stack confocal images of IFE wholemounts from Ah*cre*^{ERT} R26$^{EYFP/wt}$ mice viewed from the basal surface at the times shown following induction. Yellow, EYFP; blue, DAPI nuclear stain. Scale bar, 20 μm.

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clones migrating from hair follicles (Supplementary Fig. S5). Moreover, none of the labelled clones can derive from bulge stem cells because this region is not labelled (Supplementary Fig. S1 and Supplementary results).

Before attempting to interpret the clone fate data, it is necessary to assess the extent to which they are influenced by tissue growth or apoptosis. First, the rate of increase in epidermal surface area due to growth was low (estimated at less than 3.5% per month over the time course of the experiment), whereas apoptosis was undetectable in basal-layer cells (see Supplementary results and Supplementary Fig. S6). Furthermore, the number of basal-layer cells per unit area and the proportion of cycling cells (as assessed both by Ki67 and cdc6 immunostaining) showed no significant difference between 2-week and one-year samples. Both techniques of assessing the proportion of cycling cells gave similar results, as did flow cytometry: $22 \pm 3\%$ (mean $\pm$ s.d.) for Ki67; $24 \pm 4\%$ for cdc6; and $22 \pm 1\%$ for flow cytometry (see Supplementary Fig. S7)[19,20]. Finally, there was no significant difference between the proportion of cycling cells in the labelled and unlabelled cell populations, either at 5 days or one year post-induction (see Supplementary results and Supplementary Fig. S2). We therefore conclude that basal-layer cells labelled at induction are typical of the entire basal cell population, and that the observed clonal evolution is representative of the adult system in a state of homeostasis.

According to the stem/TA cell hypothesis, TA cells undergo a limited number of cell divisions followed by differentiation[21]. To test this prediction, we examined clones at 3 weeks, over 90% of which are lost by 12 weeks post-induction. Significantly, clones comprising three or more cells contained both basal and suprabasal cells, indicative of asynchronous terminal differentiation (Fig. 3a). Furthermore, the immunostaining of clones consisting of two basal cells reveals that a single cell division may generate either one cycling and one non-cycling daughter, or two cycling daughters, or two non-cycling daughters (Fig. 3b). This raises the question of whether there is asymmetric cell division within the basal plane as described in the *Drosophila* peripheral nervous system and zebrafish retinal precursors[22,23]. Three-dimensional imaging of wholemount epidermis revealed that only 3% of mitotic spindles lie perpendicular to the basal layer, indicating that, in contrast to embryonic epidermis, the vast majority of EPC divisions generate two basal-layer cells (Supplementary Fig. S8; refs 24, 25). The observation of asymmetric partitioning of numb protein (which marks asymmetric division in neural and myogenic precursors) in clones consisting of two basal cells suggests that planar-orientated asymmetric division also occurs in the epidermis (Fig. 3c)[26,27]. EPC behaviour thus differs substantially from that observed in committed precursors in other systems[28,29].

We next considered the behaviour of the long-lived clones that persist for over 3 months. Within the stem/TA cell hypothesis, the epidermis is organized into epidermal proliferative units comprising about ten basal cells supported by a single self-renewing stem cell[11]. If individual stem cells retain their self-renewal capacity, the stem/TA cell model predicts that the basal-layer clone-size distribution must become time-independent and characteristic of a single epidermal proliferative unit (see Supplementary theory[21]). Such behaviour is in stark contrast to the progressive increase in average clone size observed in the epidermis (Fig. 2).

Faced with this apparent contradiction, one could attempt to revise the stem cell/TA cell model, but staying within the general paradigm. This might include introducing the capacity for stem-cell ageing and/or migration[15]. Alternatively, one could try to exploit the range of experimental data to seek evidence for a new paradigm for epidermal homeostasis. Intriguingly, such evidence is found in the scaling properties of the observed clone-size distribution. Here we argue that the clone fate data are compatible with a model in which IFE is maintained by only one compartment of proliferating cells.

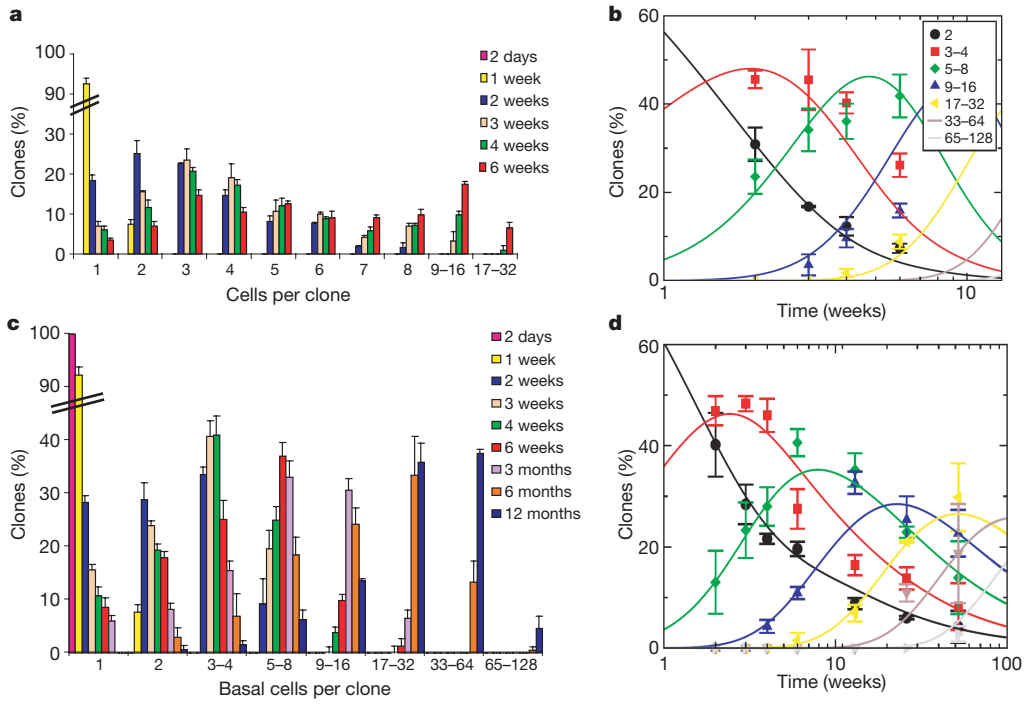

Figure 2 | Clone fate data. a, Distribution of clone size (total cells per clone) as a function of cell number, as measured at 2 days, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 weeks post-induction (error bars indicate s.e.m.). **c**, Distribution of basal cells per clone as a function of basal cell number, as measured at 2 days, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 weeks, 3, 6 and 12 months post-induction (error bars indicate s.e.m.). **b**, **d**, Distribution of clone size (total cells per clone) (**b**) and basal cells per clone (**d**) as a function of time for different values of cell number (error bars indicate s.e.m.). Here we have aggregated clone sizes in ranges increasing in size in powers of two (see legend within figure). To eliminate possible ambiguities due to labelling efficiency, single cell clones are eliminated from the distribution in **b** and **d**, thereby removing the population of post-mitotic cells labelled at induction. We focus on time points of 2 weeks or more post-induction when EYFP levels have stabilized. Continuous curves show the behaviour of the proposed one-progenitor-cell model with a cell division rate of $\lambda = 1.1$ per week and a symmetric division ratio of $r = 0.08$ (see main text for details).

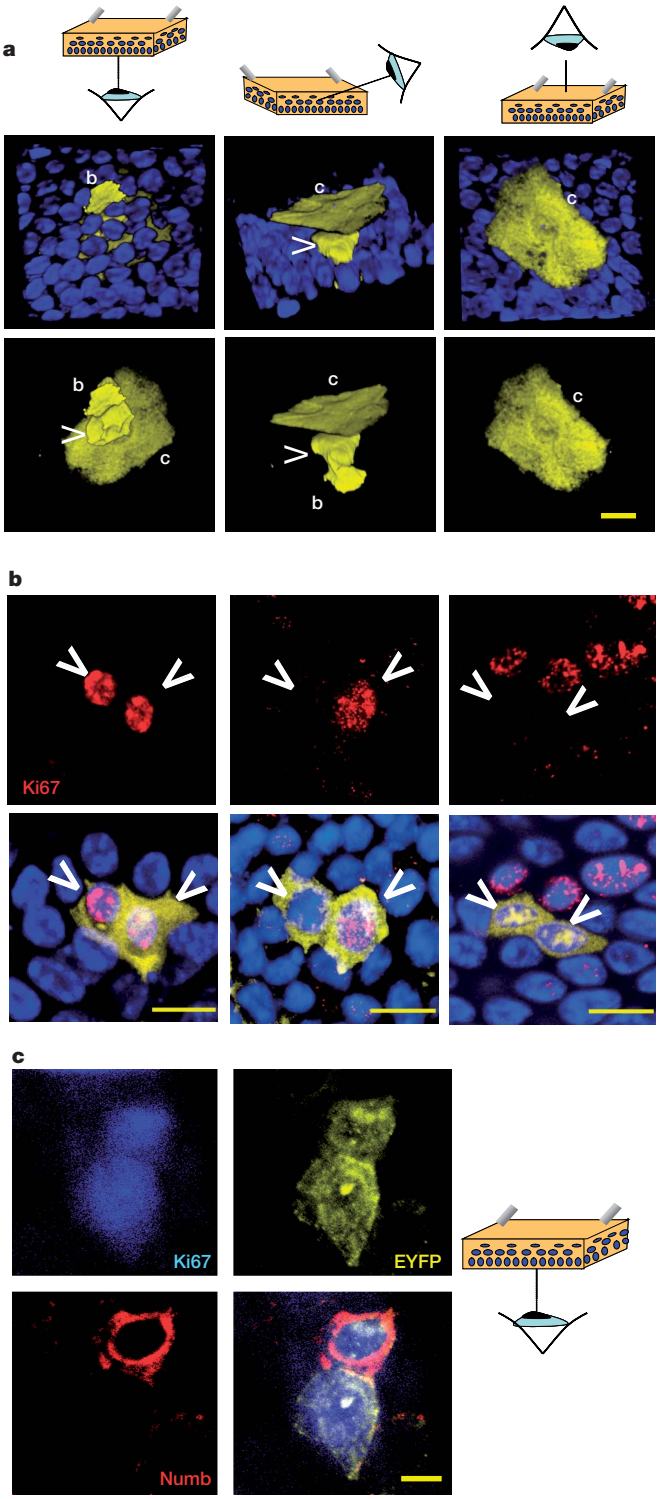

Figure 3 | Asymmetric cell fate in epidermal progenitors. a, Visualization of a three-cell clone exhibiting asynchronous terminal differentiation. Projected *Z*-stack images show one basal cell (labelled b), and two suprabasal cells: a cornified layer cell (labelled c), and a second suprabasal cell indicated by the arrowhead. Cartoon shows the angle of view. Upper panels: EYFP, yellow and DAPI, blue; lower panels are corresponding images with only EYFP shown. Scale bar, 20 μm. **b**, Visualization of two-cell clones (both cells basal, 3 weeks post-recombination), showing the different proliferative fates of the daughter cells of a single division, providing evidence for symmetric and asymmetric cell fate. Clones are viewed from the basal epidermal surface, stained for the proliferation marker Ki67 (red), DAPI (blue), and EYFP (yellow); arrowheads indicate position of EYFP-labelled cells. Three types of clone are shown, with two, one and zero Ki67 positive cells. Scale bar, 10 μm. **c**, Two-cell clone (both cells basal, 3 weeks post-recombination, viewed from the basal epidermal surface,) stained for the proliferation marker Ki67 (blue), numb (red) and EYFP (yellow), showing asymmetric distribution of numb, providing evidence for asymmetric cell fate resulting from a planar division. Scale bar, 5 μm.

Whether this model should be considered as an extreme variant of the stem/TA cell hypothesis or a new concept is arguably a matter of semantics, a point we will return to later.

To identify the scaling behaviour, we define the clone-size distribution $P_n(t)$, describing the probability that a labelled progenitor cell develops into a clone with a total of n basal-layer cells at time t after induction. From this we can define the distribution of 'persisting' clones, that is, the distribution of labelled clones containing at least one basal-layer cell:

$$P^{\mathrm{pers}}_{n>0}(t) \equiv \frac{P_n(t)}{1-P_0(t)}$$

With this definition, we show that (Fig. 4a and below), after an initial transient behaviour, the observed clone-size distributions are compatible with the simple scaling form:

$$P^{\mathrm{pers}}_{n>0}(t) = \frac{\tau}{t} f(n\tau/t) \qquad (1)$$

where τ denotes some constant timescale. From this striking observation, we deduce that, at long times, the average number of basal-layer cells within a persisting clone increases linearly with time, a behaviour inconsistent with the existence of long-lived cycling stem cells (see Supplementary theory). More significantly, the scaling indicates that long-time properties of clonal evolution are dictated by only one characteristic timescale τ, consistent with a simple model of clonal fate in which external factors, such as stem-cell ageing or skin injury, do not have a significant impact.

Taken together, all of our experimental observations and the scaling behaviour are consistent with a model of clonal fate involving only one type of EPC and just three adjustable parameters: the overall division rate λ of proliferating (labelled A-type) EPCs; the proportion of cell divisions that are asymmetric, $(1-2r)$; and the rate of transfer Γ of non proliferating (B-type) cells from the basal to the suprabasal layer (see schematic in Fig. 4b). To maintain a steady-state EPC population, the rates of symmetric cell division, A→A + A and A→B + B, must be identical and equal to r. Finally, the observation that the basal-layer cell density remains constant leads to the additional constraint $\Gamma = \lambda\rho/(1-\rho)$, where ρ denotes the proportion of proliferating cells in the basal layer, reducing the number of adjustable parameters to just two.

Defining $P_{n_A,n_B}(t)$ as the probability that a labelled clone involves n_{A} A-type and n_{B} B-type EPCs at time t after induction, its time-evolution is governed by the Master equation :

$$\frac{dP_{n_A,n_B}}{dt} = \lambda\Big\{ r\Big[(n_A-1)P_{n_A-1,n_B} + (n_A+1)P_{n_A+1,n_B-2}\Big] + (1-2r)n_A P_{n_A,n_B-1} - n_A P_{n_A,n_B}\Big\} + \Gamma\Big[(n_B+1)P_{n_A,n_B+1} - n_B P_{n_A,n_B}\Big]$$

subject to the initial condition $P_{n_A,n_B}(0) = \rho\,\delta_{n_A,1}\delta_{n_B,0} + (1-\rho)\,\delta_{n_A,0}\delta_{n_B,1}$. Although an exact analytical solution to this equation is unavailable, at times $t > 1/r\lambda$ the system enters an asymptotic regime where, defining $n = n_{\mathrm{A}} + n_{\mathrm{B}}$, we may show that the basal-layer clone-size distribution for persisting clones acquires the observed scaling form in equation (1) with $f(x) = e^{-x}$ and $\tau = \rho/r\lambda$; that is, the long-time properties of clonal evolution are dictated by the symmetric division rate, $r\lambda$. When combined with the experimentally inferred value for the fraction of proliferating basal-layer cells $\rho = 0.22$, a fit of the data to the asymptotic distribution (Fig. 4a, inset) identifies $r\lambda = 0.088 \pm 0.004$ per week.

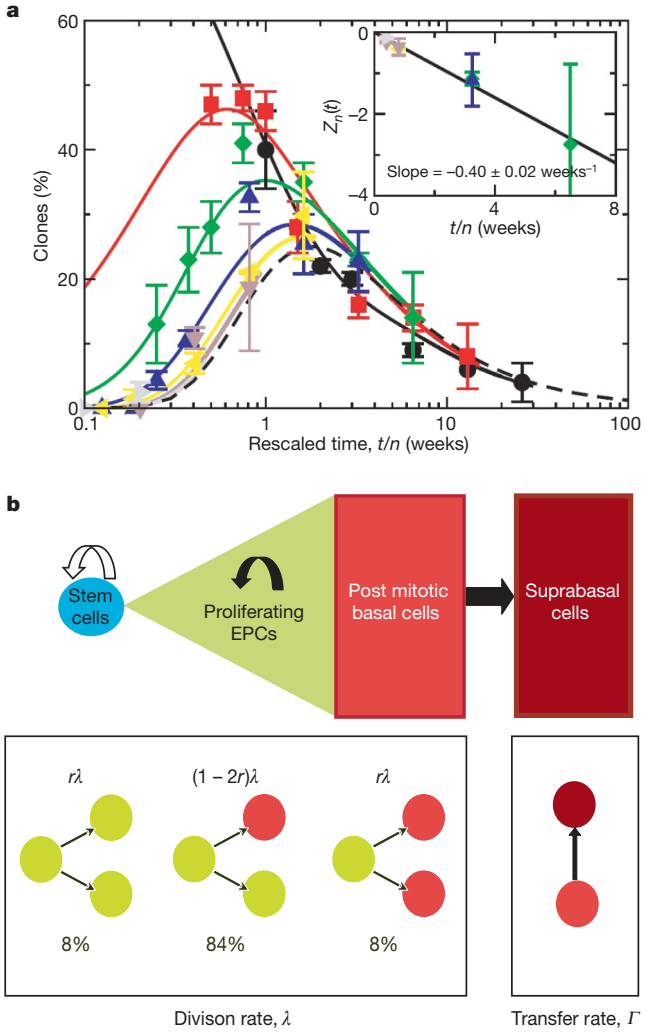

Figure 4 | Scaling and model of epidermal progenitor cell fate. a, The basal-layer clone-size distributions (see Fig. 2d legend for key) are replotted against the rescaled time coordinate, t/n (where n is taken as the upper limit for each distribution; for example, $n = 4$ for the range 3 to 4, and so on). We note that at long time points (>6 weeks), the data sets for different values of n converge onto a single curve (dashed line); that is, the probability of finding a labelled clone with a basal cell number in the range $n/2$ to n at time t post-induction is equal to that of finding a clone with a size in the range n to $2n$ at time $2t$. At shorter timescales, the transient behaviour dominates the distribution leading to a departure from simple scaling. This transient behaviour is very well described by the one progenitor cell compartment model (see Fig. 2 caption and main text). Making use of equation (1), we can identify the universal scaling curve for the grouped data as $G_n(t) \equiv \sum_{m>n/2}^{n} P_m^{\mathrm{pers}}(t) = e^{-n\tau/2t} - e^{-n\tau/t}$, where $\tau = \rho/r\lambda$; that is, $G_n(t/n)$ is independent of n. Therefore, by plotting $Z_n(t) = 1/(2\ln[(1-(1-G_n(t))^{1/2})/2])$ against t/n (inset) at long times (>13 weeks) and large n (>4), the resulting slope may be used to infer $-1/\tau$. **b**, The single progenitor compartment model of epidermal homeostasis. A single population of EPCs (green triangle), with unlimited self renewal potential (filled arrow) maintain the epidermis. Post-mitotic cells in the basal layer (light red) transfer at a steady rate to the suprabasal compartment (dark red). The model proposes no role for stem cells (blue) in the steady state, but a quiescent population may play a role in growth or regeneration following injury (unfilled arrow). The left-hand box shows the proliferative characteristics of EPCs. Cycling cells are shown in green, post-mitotic basal cells in light red. The right-hand box shows the transfer of basal post-mitotic cells to the suprabasal layers (dark red). Taken together, these processes with their respective rates summarize the one-compartment model of homeostasis discussed in the text.

At times $t < 1/r\lambda \approx 11$ weeks, the transient behaviour of the basal-layer clone-size distribution dominates. In this regime, both the basal-layer and total clone-size distributions can be determined from a numerical integration of the corresponding Master equation. Taking $r\lambda$ from the asymptotic data dependence, a one-parameter fit of the basal-layer clone-size distribution to the experimental data obtains a good quantitative agreement over the entire one-year time course for $r = 0.08$ (Fig. 2d), that is, EPC division takes place at a rate of $\lambda = 1.1$ per week (a figure consistent with previous estimates[21]), with 84% of divisions resulting in asymmetric fate, while the cell transfer rate out of the basal layer takes place at a rate of $\Gamma = 0.31$ per week. With the same choice of parameters, the total clone-size distribution also shows a striking quantitative agreement with experiment (Fig. 2b). It should be noted that the slow accumulation of labelled clones over the 2 weeks following induction has no significant effect on the fit of the model (see Supplementary results and Supplementary Fig. S10.)

In conclusion, we have shown that the entire range of clonal fate data reported here is compatible with a model involving a single proliferating cell compartment in mouse tail skin epidermis. Technical limitations prevented us carrying out a similar quantitative analysis in back skin; although the changes in clone diameter observed at this site are in qualitative agreement with a single-compartment model, we cannot exclude alternative models with the available data. It is also important to note that, if present, a small quiescent population of stem cells would be undetectable in our analysis, but would be expected to be highly active in processes such as wound healing[8]. Previous models of epidermal homeostasis hypothesize the existence of a TA cell compartment, which undergoes a limited number of divisions. We show that tail epidermis is maintained by a single population of progenitor cells, which may undergo an unlimited number of divisions.

METHODS

Animals and sample preparation. All animal experiments were conducted as specified by Home Office Project Licence. The generation of Ah*cre*ERT and $R26^{EYFP/EYFP}$ mice has been described previously[16,17]. When $Ah cre^{ERT} R26^{EYFP/wt}$ mice are treated with multiple doses of βNF and tamoxifen, a high level of recombination was seen in the upper hair follicle and IFE (Supplementary Fig. S1). The drug doses were titrated down to produce low-frequency labelling; a single intraperitoneal injection of 80 mg per kg β-naphthoflavone (Sigma-Aldrich) and 1 mg tamoxifen-free base (MP Biomedicals) dissolved in corn oil resulted in EYFP expression in approximately 1 in 600 basal cells of tail IFE and in 1 in 40 basal cells of back IFE, at 2 weeks post-induction[17]. No labelling was detected in the bulge region of the hair follicle and there was no background labelling in untreated $Ah cre^{ERT} R26^{EYFP/wt}$ animals, even at 15 months of age (Supplementary Fig. S1c, d and data not shown). Epidermal wholemounts were prepared as described[18]. For analysis of back epidermis, 60-μm cryosections were used.

Immunostaining and imaging. Immunostaining of wholemounts was performed as described[18]. The following primary antibodies were used; anti-GFP conjugated to AlexaFluor488 or 555 (Molecular Probes), anti-Ki67 (Abcam), anti-numb (Abcam), anti-cleaved caspase 3 (Cell Signalling Technology) and anti-α-tubulin conjugated to FITC (Sigma). Secondary antibodies were from Molecular Probes. Confocal images are presented as *Z*-stack projections; 30–120 optical sections in 0.2–2 μm increments were rendered using Improvision Volocity software.

Analysis of clone size, number and proliferation. Data presented is a typical example of at least two experiments with at least three mice per time point.

Tail epidermis. The patterned organization of tail epidermis enabled definition of a unit area of tail IFE between adjacent rows of hair follicles, which measured 282,000 ± 2,300 μm^2 and contained 4,870 ± 400 (mean ± s.d.) basal-layer cells (Supplementary Fig. S5a). The mean number of labelled clones per unit area of tail IFE was assessed by counting all clones detected by confocal imaging of 50 unit areas in each of three mice at each time point, except at 6 and 12 months when 100 areas were counted. Clone size was determined by *Z*-stack confocal imaging of at least 50 clones containing at least one basal cell in each mouse at each time point. We note that after 6 weeks anucleate cornified layer cells appeared in labelled clones, making it impossible to count total cell numbers; hence, the total number of cells per clone was counted up to 6 weeks, while the total number of basal cells could be scored up to one year. The percentage of

Ki67-positive cells was determined by imaging at least 1,500 basal cells in multiple fields from at least three mice.

Back skin epidermis. 60-μm cryosections were analysed by optical sectioning. To determine clone number, all clones in three 10-mm lengths of epidermis were analysed in each mouse at time points up to 3 months; at 6- and 12-month time points at least 5 cm of epidermis was scored for each mouse. The maximum clone diameter, expressed as number of basal cells, was scored for at least 50 clones in each of three mice at each time point.

Apoptosis. Wholemounts of tail epidermis from 2 days, 1 week, 2 weeks, 3 weeks, 4 weeks and 6 weeks after induction were stained with an anti-cleaved caspase3/AlexaFluor488 conjugate; positive caspase 3 staining was confined to catagen hair follicles. In further experiments, staining for cleaved caspase 3 and apoptotic bodies, visualized by DAPI, was examined in the basal layer in wholemounts from mice at 3 weeks and 6 months post-induction. As a positive control, epidermal wholemounts were irradiated with 160 mJ cm^{-2} ultraviolet (UV)C and analysed after a 16-hour incubation at 37 °C.

Analysis of mitotic spindle orientation. Wholemounts of DAPI-stained tail IFE were analysed by acquiring *Z*-stacks of all nuclei containing condensed chromosomes, as revealed by uniform, intense DAPI staining. Images were rendered in three dimensions, as above, and spindle orientation of all mitotic figures from metaphase to telophase was scored as described[22].

Analysis of *cre* expression. cre^{ERt} messenger RNA levels after induction were analysed by quantitative polymerase chain reaction with reverse transcription (RT–PCR) of RNA prepared from tail epidermis using Trizol (Sigma). Primers used were 5′-CGTACTGACGGTGGGAGAAT and 5′-CCCGGCAAAACAGGTAGTTA, and the product was detected using SyBr Green. GAPDH mRNA was measured with a Taqman probe (Applied Biosystems).

Flow cytometry. A single-cell suspension was prepared from tail epidermis, using a 30 min incubation with Dispase II (Roche), followed by digestion with trypsin EDTA; this method separates the interfollicular epidermis from the dermis and lower hair follicles. After staining with biotin-conjugated anti-β1 integrin antibody (BD Biosciences/Pharmingen) and Alexa488-streptavidin (Molecular Probes), samples were fixed with paraformaldehyde, permeabilized with 0.1% saponin with 100 μg ml^{-1} RNase A and 50 μg ml^{-1} propidium iodide, and analysed on a BD Facscalibur flow cytometer, using propidium iodide channel pulse area/width gating to exclude cell doublets.

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Supplementary Information is linked to the online version of the paper at www.nature.com/nature.

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