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Letter to the editor

Genes encoding ACE2, TMPRSS2 and related proteins mediating SARS-CoV-2 viral entry are upregulated with age in human cardiomyocytes

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Introduction

Age (> 70 years), case fatality rate (CFR,10.2%) and coexisting conditions, particularly cardiovascular disease (CFR,10.5%) and hypertension (CFR,6.0%), are independent predictors of adverse outcome for 45,000 COVID-19 patients in China [1]. A consensus has emerged that SARS-CoV-2 uses the same ‘receptor’ as SARS-CoV, the angiotensin converting enzyme 2 (ACE2), for initial binding to the host cell. This must be co-expressed with the serine protease TMPRSS2, that primes the spike protein S1 for endocytosis-mediated internalization of virus, employing the S2 domain for fusion to the host membrane (Fig. 1[A]) [2–4]. A key difference in SARS-CoV-2 is a spike protein second site employing the S2 domain for fusion to the host membrane (Fig. 1[A]). The key finding (Fig. 1[B,C]) is that expression of genes encoding SARS-CoV-2, a complex predicted not to internalize, and therefore circulating ACE2 could be exploited as a beneficial viral decoy substrate. Intriguingly, ACE2 is highly expressed in the GI tract where it is present in cardiomyocytes. ACE2 normally functions as a carboxypeptidase cleaving single C-terminal amino acids thus hydrolysing Pro-Phe in Ang-II to Ang1–7, [Pyr1]-apelin-13 to [Pyr1]-apelin(1−12) and des-Arg9-bradykinin to inactive bradykinin (1–8) [4]. Internalization of ACE2 by virus potentially reduces the beneficial counter regulatory function of these peptide products to the RAAS pathway [2,4]. Conversely, the serine protease ADAM17 cleaves ACE2 to release its ectodomain and this is stimulated by Ang-II and, potentially, apelin acting via their respective G-protein coupled receptors [7]. Shed ACE2 binds SARS-CoV-2, a complex predicted not to internalize, and therefore circulating ACE2 could be exploited as a beneficial viral decoy substrate. Intriguingly, ACE2 is highly expressed in the GI tract where it is associated with B0AT1 (SLC6A19) that actively transports most neutral amino acids across the apical membrane of epithelial cells [4,8]. It is not yet known if B0AT1 and ACE2 are co-expressed in cardiomyocytes and represent an important mechanism of viral entry, but they can form a heterodimer, with the ACE2 capable of binding the spike protein S1 [8]. Interleukin 6 (IL-6), normally transiently produced, is elevated in serum and positively correlated with disease severity in COVID-19 patients [9].

We hypothesised that differential expression of genes encoding proteins in these pathways in aged cardiomyocytes could explain why the myocardium of older patients might be particularly vulnerable to the virus, manifesting as cardiovascular complications such as myocarditis. To selectively analyse cardiomyocyte gene expression, we generated strand-specific RNA-sequencing libraries from RNA isolated from flow-sorted cardiomyocyte nuclei from left ventricular tissue [10]. RNAseq data were compared between five young (19-25 yr) and five older (63-78 yr) Caucasian males, not on medication, with no evidence of cardiovascular disease post-mortem.

Viral entry, membrane fusion and endocytosis

The key finding (Fig. 1[B,C]) is that expression of genes encoding proteins hypothesised as important for viral entry, crucially including ACE2 and TMPRSS2, were upregulated in aged cardiomyocytes, as well as TMPRSS11E and TMPRSS11D, (where function is less well established), FURIN and cathepsins CTSL and CTSB. Importantly, while B0AT1/SLC6A19 was minimally expressed in young cardiomyocytes it was upregulated in aged cardiomyocytes. Moreover, combined relative cardiomyocyte expression of these genes correlated positively with age (Fig. 1[D]).

Abbreviations: ACE, angiotensin I converting enzyme; ACE2, angiotensin I converting enzyme 2; ADAM17, ADAM metallopeptidase domain 17; AGTR1, angiotensin II receptor type 1; APLNR, apelin receptor; BDKRB1, bradykinin receptor B1; BDKRB2, bradykinin receptor B2; CTSH, cathepsin B; CTSL, cathepsin L; FURIN, furin (paired basic amino acid cleaving enzyme); IFNAR1, interferon (alpha beta and omega) receptor 1; IFNAR2, interferon (alpha beta and omega) receptor 2 (IFNAR1 and 2 form chains for interferons alpha and beta); IL6R, Interleukin 6 receptor; IRF1, interferon regulatory factor 1 (regulates transcription of interferons); MAS1, MAS1 proto-oncogene G protein-coupled receptor; SLC6A19, solute carrier family 6 (neutral amino acid transporter) member 19 (aka B0AT1); TMPRSS2, transmembrane protease serine 2; TMPRSS11D, transmembrane protease serine 11D; TMPRSS11E, transmembrane protease serine 11E.

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A

B

C

D

E

(caption on next page)
ACE/ACE2 regulation

The expression of Ang-II synthetic enzyme ACE and cognate receptor gene AGTR1 together with BDKRB1 increased with age, the latter normally not expressed in myocytes until induced by inflammation and selectively activated by des-Arg⁹-bradykinin (Fig. 1B, E) [9]. Both are potentially deleterious peptides, that we hypothesise would be increased by loss of cell surface ACE2 caused by viral internalization or ADAM17-mediated shedding. Expression of genes encoding receptors for peptides that normally mediate beneficial counter-regulatory effects to Ang-II in the heart, MAS1/Ag₂, APLN/apelin and BDKRB2/bradykinin were both up and downregulated.

Inflammatory mediators and endogenous antiviral strategies

Penetration of SARS-CoV-2 into lung alveoli, resulting in the ‘cytokine storm’ is a major determinant for COVID-19 patient intubation and mortality. IL-6 is a key mediator [4]: its receptor (IL6R) is expressed on cardiomyocytes, with a modest increase with age suggesting anti-IL-6R monoclonal antibodies, currently in trials [9] may prove cardioprotective.

Unlike most other cells, cardiomyocyte numbers remain stable, regenerating slowly. Although particularly vulnerable to viral infection they have evolved intrinsic mechanisms to combat cytotoxic effects and viral replication mainly by generating type 1 interferon responses. SARS-CoV-2 counterattacks by producing proteins that interfere with interferon pathways. While interferon receptor genes (IFNAR1/IFNAR2) were expressed in cardiomyocytes, no pattern emerged with age.

Our objective is to highlight SARS-CoV-2 related genes that have higher expression in aged compared with young adult cardiomyocytes. Nuclear RNA-seq measures transcriptional activity and therefore future studies will be needed to test the consequences of the detected changes in gene expression for cardiomyocyte function. In particular, it is not established whether direct viral infection results in injury to cardiomyocytes or if cardiac complications are predominantly mediated by cytokines. While older individuals have a worse outcome, it is not yet established if they are more vulnerable to viral infection. Selective enzyme inhibitors/antagonists are available as experimental compounds or clinically approved drugs to dissect these pathways (https://www.guidetopharmacology.org/coronavirus.jsp). Drugs to treat both acute and long-term effects of SARS-CoV-2 will need to focus on these three key stages of infection: preventing the virus entering cells, stopping viral replication and reducing resulting tissue damage, particularly in the hearts of aged individuals that are the most vulnerable members of society to COVID-19.

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Disclosures

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Emma L. Robinson⁎, Kanar Alkass⁎, Olaf Bergmann⁎, Janet J. Maguire⁎, H. Llewelyn Roderick⁎, Anthony P. Davenport⁎•, 1
⁎ Department of Cardiology, Cardiovascular Research Institute Maastricht University, The Netherlands and Laboratory of Experimental Cardiology, Dept. of Cardiovascular Sciences, KU Leuven, Campus Gasthuisberg, Herestraat 49, Leuven B-3000, Belgium
• Karolinska Institutet, BioClinicum, Oncology and Pathology, The National Board of Forensic Medicine, SE-17177 Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden
1 Center for Regenerative Therapies Dresden, TU-Dresden, Fetscherstrasse 105, Dresden 01307, Germany.
2 Karolinska Institutet, Biomedicum, Cell and Molecular Biology, SE-17177, Stockholm, Sweden.
3 Experimental Medicine and Immunotherapeutics, University of Cambridge, Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge, UK
4 KU Leuven, Department of Cardiovascular Sciences, Laboratory of Experimental Cardiology, Belgium and K.G. Jebsen Center for Cardiac Research, University of Oslo, 3000 Leuven, Oslo, Norway
E-mail address: apd10@medschl.cam.ac.uk (A.P. Davenport).

Corresponding author at: Experimental Medicine and Immunotherapeutics, University of Cambridge, Level 6, Addenbrooke’s Centre for Clinical Investigation (ACCI), Box 110, Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge CB2 0QQ, United Kingdom.
1 joint senior authors.

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