

## Fibroblasts: the missing link between fibrotic lung diseases of different etiologies?

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Bruno Crestani, Valerie Besnard, Laurent Plantier, Keren Borensztajn, Arnaud Mailleux. Fibroblasts: the missing link between fibrotic lung diseases of different etiologies?. Respiratory Research, 2013, 14 (1), pp.81. 10.1186/1465-9921-14-81. inserm-00850244

## HAL Id: inserm-00850244 https://inserm.hal.science/inserm-00850244

Submitted on 5 Aug 2013  $\,$ 

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#### COMMENTARY



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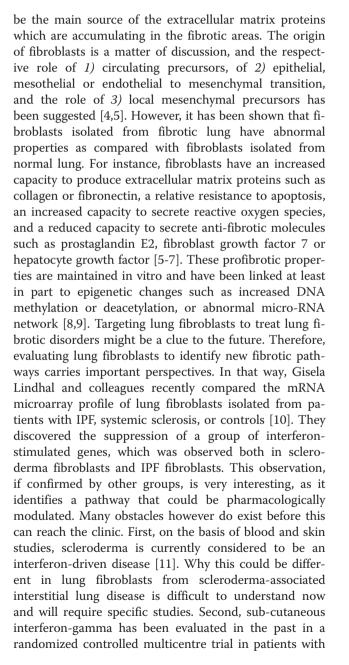
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Fibrotic lung disorders, either idiopathic, or associated with a specific etiology or a specific condition such as scleroderma, are increasingly recognized. As a whole they constitute a group of diseases characterized by the progressive destruction of the lung which ultimately leads to chronic respiratory failure and death. Improving the prognosis of these disorders requires the identification of drugs capable of inhibiting partially or totally the progression of lung fibrosis, and perhaps of reversing established fibrosis. This has been the focus of huge efforts from academic groups and pharma companies, and more than 20 different molecules are being investigated in clinical trials in idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF) a well defined and relatively frequent fibrotic lung disease of unknown etiology. However, until now, only one drug has been approved for lung fibrosis treatment. This drug, pirfenidone, has been shown to slow the decline of lung function in IPF, but no drug has demonstrated effects on survival in patients with lung fibrosis [1]. The effort must be prolonged and intensified.

Beside IPF, scleroderma-associated lung fibrosis is a well recognized fibrotic disorder. With pulmonary hypertension, lung fibrosis is now the main cause of death of patients with scleroderma [2]. The nature and pathophysiology of lung fibrosis in IPF and scleroderma are different. For instance, scleroderma affects mainly women, whereas IPF predominates in men; usual interstitial pneumonia is the pathological pattern of IPF, whereas non specific interstitial pneumonia is the main pattern in patients with scleroderma; the MUC5B promotor polymorphism is associated with IPF whereas it is not observed in patients with IPF [3]; IPF is rapidly progressive disorder as compared with the slowly moving scleroderma-associated lung fibrosis [2].

Fibrotic lung diseases are characterized by the pathological accumulation of fibroblasts, which are thought to

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scleroderma [12]. Tolerance was acceptable and there was a trend toward an improvement of skin sclerosis scores [12]. We also know from recent trials that systemic administration of interferon-beta [13] or interferon-gamma [14] does not influence the decline of lung function in patients with IPF. However some groups have suggested giving interferon through inhalation in order to increase the concentration in the lung and to somewhat reduce the systemic availability of the molecule [15]. Ten patients with IPF were prospectively treated with inhaled interferongamma for 80 weeks. The drug appeared to be safe [15]. Whether inhaled interferon-gamma could be useful in the long term in patients with IPF or scleroderma-associated interstitial lung disease deserves a rigorously evaluation in specific trials.

The results of Lindahl and colleagues point to an unexpected similarity of the microarray of IPF and scleroderma lung fibroblasts [10]. Although interesting, these results need to be confirmed as the number of IPF samples studied was small. However, such a similarity suggest that a drug targeting lung fibroblasts might work both in IPF and in scleroderma-associated lung fibrosis, and perhaps also in other fibrotic disorders.

Further studies are clearly needed, but this study illustrates the potential of modern screening methods to identify unexpected pathways in diseases [16].

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#### Received: 12 June 2013 Accepted: 25 July 2013 Published: 2 August 2013

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#### doi:10.1186/1465-9921-14-81

Cite this article as: Crestani et al.: Fibroblasts: the missing link between fibrotic lung diseases of different etiologies?. Respiratory Research 2013 14:81.

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