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Research Status and Development Prospects of Osteocyte Microenvironment Regulating Bone Regeneration After Fracture

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ABSTRACT

Osteocytes, the most prolific and longest lived resident cell population embedded in the mineralised skeletal matrix, have evolved from putative passive placeholders to active conductors of skeletal metabolism and regeneration. After bone fracture, the local osteocyte microenvironment, comprising the complex lacuno-canalicular fluid network, pericellular matrix, mechanical stress distribution, metabolic gradients and inflammatory signalling, is radically remodelled, in space and time. This research summarises the available data for the structural and functional mechanisms by which the osteocyte microenvironment may influence bone healing following fracture. We address the function of osteocytes in the translation of physical and chemical stimuli into particular bone repair, integrating classical concepts of mechanotransduction, apoptotic cascades of osteocytes, vascular-osteogenic link and immune-inflammatory control. Moreover, this paper highlights recent experimental and technological approaches developed to mimic or modulate the osteocyte niche, including mechanobiological stimulation, microfluidic platforms, and biomimetic scaffolds. Finally, we discuss in depth the significant translational restrictions and planned research paths in targeted treatments and multi-cellular regenerative systems.

KEYWORDS

Osteocyte microenvironment; Bone fracture; Bone regeneration; Mechanotransduction; Lacuno-canalicular network; Targeted bone remodeling

1. INTRODUCTION

Bone fracture is one of the most common and disabling musculoskeletal injuries in the world caused by high-energy traumatic impact, fatigue overload, or pathological fragility linked with skeletal ageing and metabolic illnesses. Unlike other adult tissues, which heal primarily by fibrotic scarring, bone is unique in its remarkable intrinsic ability to regenerate its structure and function. Successful fracture healing is a multistep biological cascade that begins with an initial haematoma and inflammatory phase and is followed by intramembranous and endochondral ossification and culminates in prolonged remodelling of the hard callus and reestablishment of the cortical architecture. Clinical issues such as delayed union and permanent non-union with substantial physical restrictions and healthcare expenditures to the affected patients arise when this regeneration cascade is disturbed due to biomechanical instability, impaired vascular supply or systemic metabolic abnormalities.

Mechanistic studies of fracture healing historically have concentrated on surface osteoblasts, bone-resorbing osteoclasts and recruited mesenchymal stem cells. Conversely, osteocytes, the most abundant resident cells of adult bone, were traditionally thought of as relatively quiescent cells entrenched inside the mineralised matrix. This paradigm has been considerably altered over the last

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two decades by conceptual and technological developments, and osteocytes are now increasingly recognised as major regulators of skeletal homeostasis, mechanosensation, and bone remodelling.

The osteocyte microenvironment is a highly specialised 3D niche comprising of the large lacuno-canalicular network, fluid shear stress dynamics, pericellular matrix components, hypoxia gradients and local paracrine variables. This milieu is substantially changed after traumatic fracture: mechanical continuity is broken, interstitial fluid flow is disrupted, microvascular supply is cut off, and necrotic damage causes localised cell death and the release of inflammatory mediators. Osteocytes surviving near to the fracture gap perceive these multimodal cues and actively orchestrate downstream recruitment, differentiation, and spatial alignment of reparative immune and skeletal progenitor cells.

This work systematically investigated the research status and future development direction of the potential significance of the osteocyte microenvironment throughout the process of fracture bone regeneration. In this study, mechanotransduction principles, spatial apoptotic signalling, vascular connections, and immune regulation are integrated into a biological framework. It explores how the osteocyte network could respond to biophysical and biochemical microenvironmental cues during skeletal regeneration and reviews novel experimental and therapeutic approaches for studying or influencing osteocyte function in fracture healing.

2. STRUCTURAL FEATURES AND MECHANOSENSORY BASIS OF THE OSTEOCYTE MICROENVIRONMENT

The ubiquitous three-dimensional labyrinth of the lacuno-canalicular network pervading cortical and trabecular bone compartments is the biological architecture which governs osteocyte function. In their basic physiological formulation, Burger and Klein-Nulend derived that the deformation of the bone matrix under physical stress produces interstitial fluid flow through the limited pericellular space of the canalicular channels [1]. Interstitial fluid flow around osteocyte cell bodies and their slender dendritic processes creates fluid shear stress, drag pressures on the pericellular glycocalyx and streaming electrical potentials. Such fluid mobility offers the method for transport of necessary oxygen and nutrients across mineralised barriers. Such fluid mobility is also the major physical mechanism for translating mechanical stresses into intra-cellular biochemical signals.

Molecular and structural tuning of this mechanosensory system regulates whole-bone remodelling processes. Robling, Castillo and Turner have also described the modulation of bone mass and architecture by cyclic mechanical loading and shown that osteocytes are the principal cellular mechanosensors that interpret the magnitude of mechanical strain and distribute regulatory signals to surface effector cells [2]. Mechanical strain triggers the osteocyte network to limit bone resorption and promote localised matrix formation to control bone modelling, ensuring the best structural rigidity and fatigue resistance.

Using a transgenic mouse model, Tatsumi and co-workers achieved targeted and inducible osteocyte ablation to demonstrate a significant role of live osteocytes in skeletal mechanosensation in vivo [3]. Following targeted ablation of ~70–80 % of the indigenous osteocyte population, the mice exhibited weak bone with intracortical porosity, microfractures, trabecular degeneration and increased marrow adiposity. Critically, the osteocyte-ablated mice were resistant to unloading-induced bone loss, giving strong genetic evidence that osteocytes play a critical role in skeletal mechanotransduction and adaptation.

The osteocyte is a multimodal signalling center, capable of remodelling its own perilacunar matrix as well as coordinating the activities of both osteoblasts and osteoclasts through soluble paracrine and systemic endocrine routes, Bonewald states [4]. Instead of being locked into a rigid mineralised vault, osteocytes alter the volume of their pericellular fluid, the diameter of their canaliculi, and the degree of matrix mineralisation, all of which directly alter the local interstitial fluid resistance and mechanosensory sensitivity.

Osteocytes translate mechanical shear stress into cascades of cellular signalling through a sophisticated array of mechanoreceptors in the membrane and cytoskeleton [5]. Osteocytes are mechanosensors, and Qin et al. [5] evaluated the molecular mechanisms of mechanotransduction, which include integrin-based focal adhesions, connexin 43 hemichannels, primary cilia, actomyosin cytoskeleton, and stretch-activated Piezo channels as the major features. Surface complexes are activated by mechanical deformation by physical stimulation. The rapid influx of calcium ions leads to the release of adenosine triphosphate and the creation of nitric oxide. These upstream biophysical cascades drive downstream transcriptional responses that govern bone repair and remodelling.

3. MECHANISMS OF THE OSTEOCYTE MICROENVIRONMENT REGULATING POST-FRACTURE BONE REGENERATION

Bone repair following a fracture occurs in three phases, inflammatory, reparative and remodelling, and is highly controlled by the local mechanical stability, the vascular supply and the inflammatory conditions [6]. The fracture induces tissue structure and blood supply disturbance, resulting in a rapidly changing local microenvironment surrounding the fracture site. In this situation, osteocyte damage and death may be involved in the subsequent remodelling responses. However, the time and causality of these osteocyte responses in acute traumatic fracture are not fully defined.

Kennedy and colleagues have shown osteocyte responses in an in vivo model of fatigue-microdamage to be spatially structured around injured bone [7]. Apoptotic caspase-3-positive osteocytes were localised around the microdamage site while neighbouring viable osteocytes 100–300 μm away expressed elevated RANKL and VEGF and decreased OPG. Data suggest that signalling of surrounding viable osteocytes and osteocyte death may contribute to focused remodelling in response to microdamage induced by fatigue. Though this spatial response requires further validation for direct applicability to acute traumatic fracture.

Dallas, Prideaux and Bonewald reviewed the endocrine and paracrine functions of osteocytes, including their role in FGF23 production, phosphate balance, calcium regulation and bone remodelling [8]. The results suggest that osteocytes participate in local skeletal regulation and in systemic mineral metabolism. Existing physiological responsibilities provide a platform from which to explore how osteocyte signalling may interact with the mineral demands of newly created bone during fracture repair, but this data alone does not permit us to infer a direct causative role in fracture callus mineralisation.

The role of osteocytes in the regulation of bone synthesis and resorption through mechanical and biochemical signals was investigated by Schaffler, Cheung, Majeska and Kennedy [9]. One of the main osteocyte-derived regulators is sclerostin, an inhibitor of canonical Wnt signalling that may influence bone-forming activity. These approaches demonstrate a biologically plausible link between osteocyte mechanosensation and control of bone formation. However, the amount and timing of sclerostin-mediated effects during traumatic fracture repair must be examined in a fracture-specific way.

Loi et al. explored the important but strictly regulated role of inflammation in fracture repair and the crosstalk between inflammatory cells, osteogenic cells and vascular components [10]. Acute inflammation is beneficial in initiating the repair process, but persistent or dysregulated inflammation can impair bone development and remodelling. In this complex setting, osteocytes may play a role in local signalling, yet their precise involvement in the direct control of macrophage polarisation from pro-inflammatory to pro-regenerative phenotypes is not well understood.

Bone remodelling is described by Bolamperti, Villa and Rubinacci [11] as a continuous operational process of the coordinated interactions between osteocytes, osteoclasts, osteoblasts, their progenitors and the surrounding matrix. Restoration of adult bone involves coordinated resorption and formation. This framework is critical to the remodelling phase of fracture repair. However, the specific role of

osteocytes in rebuilding the fracture callus should be distinguished from generic mechanisms of physiological bone remodelling outlined in this work.

4. CURRENT BIOENGINEERING AND THERAPEUTIC MODULATION STRATEGIES

The osteocyte microenvironment has been identified as a critical orchestrating component, catalysing the development of innovative bioengineering and medicinal approaches for improved post-fracture bone regeneration. Classical orthopaedic strategies concentrated mostly on structural fixing and exogenous introduction of osteogenic cells; contemporary efforts are more geared toward mimicking, protecting, or pharmacologically modulating the native osteocyte niche.

A possible approach is regulated mechanical stimulation directed toward activating osteocyte mechanotransduction. Foundational studies have demonstrated that osteocytes respond to interstitial fluid flow and mechanical loading and subsequently govern bone remodelling [1, 2]. These data give a physiologic foundation for exploring regulated biophysical stimulation during fracture repair. However, the evidence alone given does not demonstrate that certain modalities, such as vibration, shockwave therapy, or electromagnetic stimulation, speed fracture union. Their therapeutic effectiveness should therefore be assessed separately with intervention-specific evidence.

Another area of increasing research is the creation of experimental systems with improved reproduction of the osteocyte microenvironment. Considering the matrix confinement, intercellular communication, and mechanical sensing dependence of osteocyte function [4, 5], porous scaffolds, three-dimensional culture methods, and microfluidic platforms may provide helpful tools to examine osteocyte responses under well-controlled settings. These approaches should be viewed as experimental models at now rather than definitive treatments for fracture repair.

Sclerostin, an osteocyte-derived inhibitor of canonical Wnt signalling, is consequently a clinically relevant therapeutic target [9]. Fracture-healing efficacy, however, should not be overestimated. Anti-sclerostin treatment has anabolic effects on bone but in a randomised phase-2 investigation of individuals with tibial diaphyseal fractures, romosozumab did not significantly speed radiographic or clinical fracture healing [12]. Therefore, sclerostin inhibition may be considered an osteoanabolic strategy, although the particular benefit to increase the rate of fracture union remains unclear.

5. TRANSLATIONAL BOTTLENECKS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PROSPECTS

Although we have acquired a lot of knowledge about the osteocyte milieu, there are still major biological, technological and clinical obstacles to the translation of fundamental osteocyte research into standardised fracture therapy. A key scientific problem is the extreme difficulty to reach and manipulate osteocytes in vivo, since they are densely entrapped within a hard mineralised matrix. In vitro mono-culture models fail to reproduce the complex multi-dimensional architecture, spatial gradients of hypoxia and dynamic mechanical loading that osteocytes experience in native bone, while primary isolation of osteocytes is technically challenging and suffers from phenotype dedifferentiation [4, 8].

Second, the exact spatiotemporal interactions between osteocyte death, pro-osteoclastogenic signalling, and osteogenic activation in the different stages of fracture recovery are incompletely delineated. Fatigue-microdamage models imply that targeted remodelling involves localised osteocyte death [7]. Fracture healing reviews demonstrate that chronic or dysregulated inflammation might hinder bone repair [6, 10]. However, the connection between the degree of osteocyte mortality and clinical non-union has not been well established. Therefore, real-time, non-destructive imaging

of osteocyte viability, dendritic integrity, and pericellular fluid flow development would be useful for future fracture studies.

Third, ageing, osteoporosis, diabetes, and chronic systemic inflammatory diseases are pathological states that can profoundly modify the mechanical and biochemical environment of bone. These circumstances are able to impact fracture healing and can also alter osteocyte mechanosensitivity and cell-to-cell signalling [5, 6, 10]. However, the specific osteocyte alterations related to these clinical conditions are not fully defined. Therefore, in the future it is important to identify changes in osteocyte function during fracture repair due to disease-specific microenvironments, rather than assuming the same pattern across patient populations.

A major future direction is to delineate evidence generated from intact-bone mechanobiology, fatigue microdamage and acute traumatic fracture. These experimental environments are comparable but not equivalent. Foundational investigations have shown that osteocytes respond to fluid flow and mechanical loading and osteocyte survival is important for appropriate skeletal mechanoadaptation [1, 2, 3, 5]. Kennedy et al further established that fatigue microdamage leads to spatially organised osteocyte death and pro-osteoclastogenic signalling in surrounding viable cells [7]. But the size, timing and cellular composition of a traumatic fracture environment is different from controlled fatigue loading models. Future investigations should thus clarify which osteocyte responses are conserved among injury models and which are particular to fracture-associated ischaemia, inflammation, and mechanical instability.

A second priority is to develop better experimental models of the osteocyte niche. Osteocyte biology reviews highlight that these cells work in a lacuno-canalicular network where matrix confinement, cell-cell communication, soluble substances and mechanical stimuli are all involved [4, 5, 8, 9]. All these properties cannot be reproduced concurrently by conventional monoculture systems. Future platforms could therefore integrate physiologically meaningful mechanical stress with multicellular co-culture, controlled gradients of oxygen and nutrients, and quantitative evaluation of osteocyte viability and signalling. Such models may help to separate direct impacts on osteocytes from indirect reactions mediated by osteoblasts, osteoclasts, endothelial cells and immune cells.

Finally, translational statements should be assessed by level of evidence. We have multiple layers of evidence: a mechanistic response in an osteocyte culture, an association in an animal microdamage model and an improvement in human fracture healing. This divergence is particularly significant for therapeutic targets like sclerostin, because biological plausibility does not necessarily translate to quicker clinical fracture union. Future studies should incorporate mechanistic investigations with carefully constructed animal fracture models and clinical outcomes before an osteocyte-targeted intervention can be deemed successful for fracture repair.

Some encouraging directions for future research horizons are:

First, combining single-cell spatial transcriptomics, high-resolution synchrotron radiation computed tomography, and deep learning-assisted computational fluid dynamics could provide a more detailed reconstruction of the osteocyte microenvironment over the fracture healing trajectory. These technologies may help to identify hitherto unresolved osteocyte populations, signalling patterns, and spatial linkages involved in regional tissue repair.

Secondly, stimuli-responsive biomaterials are a possible bioengineering path for engaging with the osteocyte mechanical environment. Osteocytes respond to fluid flow and mechanical stimuli [1, 5]. Materials having features such as mechanical responsiveness or piezoelectricity could be examined as experimental strategies to modulate local biophysical cues. However, their effects on osteocyte activity and fracture healing need to be directly validated in relevant experimental settings.

Third, techniques for the administration of functionalised nanoparticles or modified extracellular vesicles for precise targeting may be further studied for the localised modulation of osteocyte-related pathways such as Wnt and RANKL/OPG signalling. At the present time, they should be viewed as

possible research initiatives rather than recognised fracture remedies. Before the clinical benefit can be claimed, their targeted specificity, biological safety, dose needs and actual effects on fracture repair should be determined in future trials.

6. CONCLUSION

The osteocyte microenvironment is emerging as a key factor in bone repair after fracture. Osteocytes are not only passive matrix-resident cells, but also mechanosensors and signalling cells involved in the regulation of bone formation, resorption, mineral balance and local responses to tissue stress. The mechanobiology and bone remodelling research provides a good background to investigate the osteocytic mechanisms in fracture healing. However, the contribution of specific osteocyte pathways at various stages of traumatic fracture recovery remains unclear.

Further study is needed to elucidate the data obtained from physiological bone remodelling, fatigue-microdamage models, animal fracture models and human clinical trials. Further investigations in osteocyte mechanobiology, development of better experimental models, identification of biomaterials and clinical trials are hoped to demonstrate which osteocyte relevant mechanisms can be safely and successfully applied to fracture treatment techniques. Such an evidence-based approach is needed before specialised osteocyte targeted therapy may be considered as effective treatments for delayed or impaired fracture healing.

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