

New concepts in liver regeneration mechanisms in human severe alcoholic steatohepatitis

Adrienne Lejeune¹⁻², Peter Stärkel¹⁻², Alexandre Louvet³, Axel Hittélet⁴, Céline Bazille⁵, Boris Bastens⁶, Hans Orlent⁷, Luc Lasser⁸, Xavier Dekoninck⁹, Sergio Negrin Dastis¹⁰, Jean Delwaide¹¹, Anja Geerts¹², Chantal de Galocsy¹³, Virginie Putzeys¹⁴, Philippe Langlet¹⁵, Hendrik Reynaert¹⁶, Sven Francque¹⁷, Mina Komuta¹⁸, Nicolas Lanthier¹⁻²

On behalf of the Belgian Association for the Study of the Liver (BASL)

1. Department of Hepatogastroenterology, Cliniques universitaires Saint-Luc, Brussels, Belgium
2. Laboratory of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Institut de Recherche Expérimentale et Clinique, Université catholique de Louvain, Brussels, Belgium.
3. Service des Maladies de l'Appareil Digestif, Hôpital Huriez, Lille, France.
4. Department of Gastroenterology, Hôpital Ambroise Paré, Mons, Belgium.
5. Service d'Anatomie Pathologique, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Caen, Caen, France.
6. Department of Gastroenterology, Hôpital Saint-Joseph, Liège, Belgium
7. Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Academisch Ziekenhuis Sint Jan, Brugge, Belgium.
8. Department of Hepatogastroenterology, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Brugmann, Brussels, Belgium.
9. Department of Gastroenterology, Clinique Saint-Pierre, Ottignies, Belgium.
10. Department of Gastroenterology, Clinique Saint-Joseph, Mons, Belgium.
11. Department of Hepatogastroenterology, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Sart Tilman, University of Liège, Liège, Belgium.
12. Department of Hepatogastroenterology, Ghent University Hospital, Ghent, Belgium.
13. Department of Gastroenterology, Hôpitaux Iris Sud, Brussels, Belgium.
14. Department of Gastroenterology, CHR La Citadelle, Liège, Belgium.

15. Department of Gastroenterology, Centre Hospitalier Interrégional Edith Cavell, Brussels, Belgium.

16. Department of Hepatogastroenterology, Universitair Ziekenhuis Brussel, Brussels, Belgium.

17. Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Antwerp University Hospital, Edegem, Belgium.

18. Department of Pathology, Cliniques universitaires Saint-Luc, Brussels, Belgium

Background

Severe alcoholic steatohepatitis is a severe complication of alcoholic liver disease associated with high mortality. The prediction of patient's outcome remains challenging. Liver progenitor cells are usually considered to be activated in case of impaired hepatocyte replication and hence markers of disease severity. However, their exact role as well as their interaction with hepatocytes and macrophages also implicated in liver regeneration remain poorly characterized in humans.

Aim

The aim of this study is to characterize hepatocyte, liver progenitor cell and macrophage populations in severe alcoholic steatohepatitis and to link them with liver injury and patients' outcomes.

Methods

The material used for this study is derived from the recent trial on enteral nutrition in biopsy proven alcoholic steatohepatitis. Immunohistochemical and morphometric studies for total liver progenitor cells (keratin 7⁺ cells), macrophages (CD68⁺ cells), proliferative hepatocytes (Ki67⁺ hepatocytes) and proliferative liver progenitor cells (double keratin 7⁺ and Ki67⁺ cells) were performed on the admission biopsies of patients with severe alcoholic steatohepatitis recruited prospectively in several different centers in Belgium and France.

Patients were divided into improvers or non-improvers, according to MELD score change at 3 months and in responders or non-responders to corticosteroids, according to the Lille score at day 7.

Results

Liver biopsies were available for 68 patients with severe alcoholic steatohepatitis from 16 different centers. Eleven biopsies were excluded due to the poor quality of the remaining material. 57 cases were included for histological and morphometric assessment (mean age 50 years, mean Maddrey discriminant function 54 -range 43.2-71.5-).

The total amount of liver progenitor cells was positively correlated to the severity of the disease evaluated by the MELD score ($r=0.3416$, $p<0.01$). A higher number of macrophages was associated with a higher proliferation of both hepatocytes and liver progenitor cells ($r=0.3012$, $p=0.02$). Increased hepatocyte replication was also correlated to a higher proliferative liver progenitor cell count ($r=0.8112$, $p<0.0001$).

No difference of total liver progenitor cells, proliferative liver progenitor cells, proliferative hepatocytes or macrophages was observed between improvers ($n=26$) and non-improvers ($n=31$) nor between the favorable ($n=43$) and unfavorable ($n=14$) Lille score groups. A greater degree of steatosis was the only histological parameter associated with a better prognosis based on MELD score evolution at 3 months ($p=0.002$).

Conclusions

In human biopsy proven severe alcoholic steatohepatitis, the proliferation of hepatocytes and liver progenitor cells occurs in parallel, showing that liver progenitor cells start to replicate even in the absence of massive hepatocyte senescence in humans, which contrasts with data coming from animal experiments.

Liver macrophage expansion is correlated to the proliferation of both hepatocytes and liver progenitor cells suggesting a potential role for driving the regenerative response.