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Communiqué de presse – Oesophageal cancer: discovery of the mechanisms involved

Brussels, April 13th, 2021

EMBARGO until April 20 2021-1800 London time / 1300 US Eastern Time

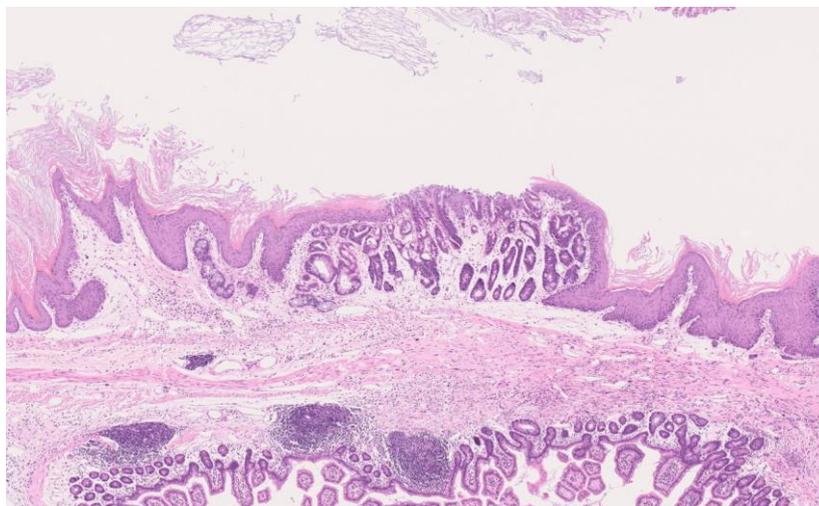


Fig.1. intestinal metaplasia of the oesophagus induced by chronic reflux in mice

Publication in *Cell Stem Cell*: Researchers at the Université libre de Bruxelles, ULB uncover a new mechanism involved in the development of metaplasia in the oesophagus.

Metaplasia is defined as the replacement of a fully differentiated cell type by another. There are several classical examples of metaplasia, one of the most frequent is called Barrett's oesophagus. Barrett's oesophagus is characterized by the replacement of the keratinocytes by columnar cells in the lower oesophagus upon chronic acid reflux. This metaplasia is considered a precancerous lesion that increases by around 50 times the risk of this oesophageal adenocarcinoma. Nonetheless, the mechanisms involved in the development of metaplasia in the oesophagus are still partially unknown.

In a new study published in *Cell Stem Cell*, researchers led by Mr. *Benjamin Beck*, (FNRS research associate and WELBIO investigator at the IRIBHM, Université libre de

Bruxelles, Belgium), report the mechanisms involved in the transdifferentiation of oesophageal keratinocytes into columnar cells.

Alizée Vercauteren Drubbel and colleagues used state-of-the-art genetic tools and mouse models to dissect the molecular mechanisms by which cells from the oesophagus can participate to metaplasia. In collaboration with Prof. *Sachiyo Nomura* (Tokyo Medical University, Japan), they demonstrated that the reactivation of the Hedgehog pathway occurs in epithelial cells upon chronic acid reflux. The sole reactivation of this pathway in normal oesophageal cells changes them and make them look like embryonic oesophageal cells. Subsequently, a subset of these cells is converted into columnar cells. “It was really surprising to see the cells from the oesophagus slowly changing over time and getting features of other tissues just by activating a signaling pathway *in vivo*” comments **Alizée Vercauteren Drubbel**, the first author of this study.

The authors demonstrate that the hedgehog pathway alters the squamous differentiation program in virtually all the oesophageal cells but induces a full squamous-to-columnar conversion in a subset of progenitors only. Interestingly, an embryonic-like epigenetic and transcriptomic program precedes the columnar conversion, suggesting that keratinocytes need to be dedifferentiated before activating another differentiation program. Conditional knockout *in vivo* demonstrates that the transcription factor Sox9 plays a pivotal role in the process of columnar conversion.

In conclusion, this work highlights mechanisms modulating cellular plasticity that may constitute the very first step of transdifferentiation and metaplasia development in the oesophagus. Oesophageal adenocarcinoma incidence has dramatically increased over the past decades. This increase appears to be a result of the increased prevalence of Barrett’s oesophagus. Hence, “we hope that a better understanding of the processes involved in the development of metaplasia and their progression into cancer will help detecting people with a high risk of developing cancer.” comments *Benjamin Beck*, the last and corresponding author of this study.

This work was supported by the *FNRS*, the *Worldwide cancer research*, *Fondation Contre le Cancer* and the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*. **Alizée Vercauteren Drubbel** was supported by the *Télévie* and **Benjamin Beck** is an investigator of WELBIO at Université libre de Bruxelles.

Journalists should seek to credit **Cell Stem Cell** as the source of the covered story:

Alizée Vercauteren Drubbel, Sheleya Pirard, Simon Kin, Benjamin Dassy, Anne Lefort, Frédéric Libert, Sachiyo Nomura & Benjamin Beck. *Reactivation of the Hedgehog*

pathway in esophageal progenitors turns on an embryonic-like program to initiate columnar metaplasia

Cell Stem Cell 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stem.2021.03.019>

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