

## REVIEW ARTICLE

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## Subchondral bone sclerosis in osteoarthritis: not just an innocent bystander

**Abstract** Osteoarthritis (OA) is considered to be a complex illness in which the tissues of the joint play a significant role in the initiation and/or progression of the pathophysiology. We still do not completely understand what initiates the degradation and loss of cartilage. However, it has been suggested that increased catabolism due to elevated cytokines and growth factors in OA joints plays a significant role. Recent evidence suggests a key role for the subchondral bone tissue in the progression and/or initiation of OA. Indeed, the subchondral bone tissue produces a number of similar proinflammatory cytokines, and growth factors are involved in cartilage tissue remodeling. Interestingly, studies have shown the presence of clefts or channels in the tidemark that appears early in OA, indicating a possible way to traffic cytokines and growth factors from the subchondral compartment to the overlying cartilage. Therefore, it is possible that certain bone-derived products drive cartilage metabolism. Potential candidates include insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1), transforming growth factor- $\beta$  (TGF- $\beta$ ), interleukin 1 $\beta$  (IL-1 $\beta$ ), and interleukin-6 (IL-6). Demonstrating that the subchondral bone plays a role in the initiation of OA would greatly contribute to furthering our knowledge of this pathology and provide new insights for therapeutic approaches.

**Key words** Cytokines · Insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1) · Osteoarthritis (OA) · Subchondral bone sclerosis · Transforming growth factor- $\beta$  (TGF- $\beta$ )

### Introduction

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a chronic disorder of the skeleton involving joint structural changes in the cartilage, synovial membrane, and subchondral bone. Although OA is a complex disease of multifactorial origin involving many tissues of the joint, a subgroup of OA patients shows a genetic predisposition to the disease.<sup>1–3</sup> Numerous studies have focused on determining whether an abnormal metabolism of OA chondrocytes could play a role in the deterioration and loss of cartilage in this disease. Several processes are altered in OA cartilage, but no single mechanism is presently considered as the initiating event. In contrast, recent data indicate that subchondral bone may possibly play a role in the onset and/or progression of this disease.<sup>4–9</sup> Some, but not all, bone parameters, such as abnormal bone mineral density, osteoid volume, and bone mechanical parameters or indicators of bone turnover are altered in OA patients compared with normal individuals or osteoporotic patients. Moreover, patients with knee OA are associated with a specific type of vitamin D receptor<sup>10</sup> and collagen type II genotype.<sup>11</sup> Increased bone mineral density is always observed in OA subchondral bone tissue, yet this tissue is undermineralized,<sup>7,12,13</sup> indicating that bone remodeling could be altered in these patients. As the loss of cartilage in OA can be attributed to a deficient repair/remodeling mechanism(s), the question arises as to whether products (growth factors, degradative enzymes, cytokines) from the subchondral bone may seep through clefts or channels present in the tidemark<sup>14–17</sup> to invade the overlying cartilage and promote its degradation.

### Pathophysiology of osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is characterized by progressive articular cartilage loss, appositional new bone formation and sclerosis of the subchondral trabeculae and growth plate, the formation of osteophytes, and an imbalance between loss of cartilage

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(due to matrix degradation) and an attempt to repair this matrix.<sup>18–20</sup> Synovitis is often observed, and is considered to be secondary to the changes in hard tissues within the joint. However, despite major progress in the last few years, we still have a great deal to learn about the etiology, pathogenesis, and progression of this disease.<sup>21–23</sup> The slowly progressive loss of cartilage, the multifactorial nature of the disease, and the cyclical course with periods of active disease, possibly due to flares of inflammation followed by remission, have limited our comprehension of OA. Risks factors for this disease in humans include age, gender, genetic predisposition, mechanical stress and/or joint trauma, and obesity.<sup>22,24–26</sup> Dieppe et al.<sup>27</sup> reported that increased subchondral bone activity, as judged by enhanced uptake of technetium-labelled diphosphonate, predicts cartilage loss, while cartilage lesions do not progress in the absence of significant subchondral activity. Moreover, alterations of the bony bed precede cartilage changes in the *Macaca fascicularis* primate model of OA,<sup>28,29</sup> as in the Dunkin–Hartley guinea pig model.<sup>30</sup> Evidence for and against this hypothesis from both animal model studies<sup>31–37</sup> and clinical trials<sup>38–44</sup> has been obtained. However, trabecular thickening of the subchondral bone reflects osteoid volume increases and not always increased bone mineralization.<sup>38,43</sup> This alteration in bone tissue is an indication of abnormal mineralization and/or remodeling.<sup>45</sup> About 40 years ago, Johnson<sup>46</sup> suggested that changes in bone remodeling might be responsible for the loss of cartilage. Moreover, Sokoloff<sup>47</sup> proposed that bony changes in the human hip could not be dissociated from cartilage fibrillation, even in early disease. Likewise, stiffening of the subchondral bone, attributed to the healing of microfractures, preceded cartilage damage in guinea pigs.<sup>48</sup> The healing of microfractures due to increased subchondral bone stiffness was also reported to be the primary cause of OA in humans. Together, these data would support the concept that a bone cell defect in this disease may be a more generalized bone metabolic disease, as suggested by Dequeker's group.<sup>49,50</sup>

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### What are the possible causes of subchondral bone sclerosis?

The progression of joint cartilage degeneration is associated with intensified remodeling of the subchondral bone and increased bone stiffness.<sup>40</sup> The healing of trabecular microfractures in OA subchondral bone could generate a stiffer bone, which is no longer an effective shock absorber.<sup>51,52</sup> Conversely, subchondral bone stiffness may be part of a more generalized bone alteration leading to an apparent increased bone mineral density/volume. OA patients have a better-preserved bone mass,<sup>53–56</sup> independently of body weight,<sup>57–60</sup> and primary OA and osteoporosis rarely coexist.<sup>61–63</sup> The association between osteophytes and femoral bone mineral density indicates that a primary attribute of bone formation may underlie the pathophysiology of OA.<sup>64</sup> In animal models of spontaneous OA, increased bone density and osteoid volume are often more severe than

cartilage changes.<sup>28,29,32–36</sup> Moreover, Carlson et al.<sup>29</sup> clearly demonstrated that thickening of the subchondral bone occurred prior to fibrillation of the articular cartilage in cynomolgus macaques. Bone remodeling is a tightly controlled mechanism that involves coupling between a mineralized collagen type I bone matrix, laid down by osteoblasts, and osteoclasts chewing up this matrix. Although OA is associated with a thickening of subchondral bone, explants of the femoral head of OA patients at autopsy showed a low mineralization pattern compared with normal.<sup>7,12,44</sup> Indicators of bone remodeling are also increased in OA patients.<sup>13,65,66</sup> The increase in indices of both bone formation and resorption in OA patients could explain abnormal remodeling and low mineralization. This apparent increase in bone mineral density in OA may be due to an increase in material density and not to an increased osteoid collagen matrix that is undermineralized.<sup>6,7,67</sup> Such a situation would retard normal remodeling by uncoupling bone formation and resorption. Abnormal mineralization in OA may then be viewed as an osteoblast problem.

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### Possible relationship between bone sclerosis and cartilage degradation

High body mass index and increased bone density suggest that new bone synthesis exceeds degradation in OA. In support of this hypothesis, osteocalcin (a marker of bone formation) in synovial fluid and serum osteopontin (a bone-specific matrix protein) were significantly higher in patients with knee-scan abnormalities.<sup>68</sup> Since serum osteopontin levels increase quickly following trauma, this implies that alterations in bone cell activity may occur quite early in the disease. Gevers and Dequeker<sup>69</sup> showed elevated serum osteocalcin levels in women with hand osteoarthritis, and elevated osteocalcin in cortical bone explants. An imbalance between collagen and noncollagen protein synthesis, such as osteocalcin by OA osteoblasts, could lead to an increase in bone volume, due to an increase in the extracellular matrix, without a concomitant increase in the bone mineralization pattern. An abnormal collagen content may also lead to abnormal mineralization, as only native collagen type I fibrils can mineralize. This is intriguing, since collagen type I is elevated in trabecular bone of femoral heads of OA patients, which in theory should lead to an increase in mineralization.<sup>6,7</sup> Collagen type I is composed of a heterotrimer of  $\alpha 1$  and  $\alpha 2$  chains at an average ratio of 2.4:1 in normal bone; however, this ratio varied between 4:1 and 17:1 in OA bone tissue.<sup>67</sup> Such an increase in  $\alpha 1$  homotrimers caused a 50% reduction in bone strength in  $\alpha 2$  knockout mice.<sup>70</sup> In fact, a reduction in  $\alpha 2$  chains may lead to a tighter packing of collagen fibers and, coupled with the reduction in cross-links observed in OA bone tissue<sup>7</sup> and the overhydroxylation of lysine in collagen fibrils,<sup>67</sup> may explain the reduction in bone mineralization. As OA subchondral osteoblasts show increased osteocalcin and alkaline phosphatase levels in vitro<sup>4,5,71</sup> and in bone in vivo,<sup>69</sup> this implies that the in vivo alterations are due to abnormal

cellular metabolism and not to alterations in systemic regulation. Both calcitriol ( $1,25(\text{OH})_2\text{D}_3$ ) and parathyroid hormone (PTH) levels are normal in OA patients,<sup>10,72</sup> and they both inhibit collagen synthesis *in vivo* in bone.<sup>73-75</sup> However, OA subchondral osteoblasts are partially resistant to PTH stimulation *in vitro*<sup>4</sup> due to a decreased expression of PTH receptors,<sup>76</sup> a situation that could favor collagen synthesis.

### **Role of abnormal subchondral bone metabolism in osteoarthritis**

Elevated bone density may be due to an increased activity of growth factors present locally in bone, to a generalized elevation of their production by bone cells or release of latent forms via enhanced remodeling, or both. That IGF-I and -II and TGF- $\beta$  levels are higher in samples of iliac crest bone of patients with OA,<sup>77</sup> and hence at a site distant from weight-bearing joints, also suggests a generalized bone metabolic dysfunction. IGFs are among the most important growth factors regulating bone formation.<sup>78</sup> IGF-I is important in the changes observed in subchondral bone and cartilage in OA. OA subchondral osteoblasts produce variable total IGF-1 levels and less IGFBPs compared with normal,<sup>4,79</sup> leading to enhanced free-IGF-1 levels. Enhanced free IGF-I in OA subchondral bone could promote bone remodeling,<sup>4,80</sup> possibly increasing bone stiffness, a situation that exacerbates cartilage matrix degradation.<sup>81</sup> TGF- $\beta$  and IGF-1 are also involved in matrix deposition and turnover. TGF- $\beta$  stimulates matrix synthesis<sup>82</sup> and collagenase activity, while IGF-1 inhibits some matrix metalloproteases (MMPs) in bone cells.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the increase in both growth factors could favor matrix deposition in bone and overall limit degradation. However, TGF- $\beta$  addition to joints more directly mimics OA progression,<sup>84</sup> and we showed that all OA subchondral osteoblasts produced elevated levels of TGF- $\beta$ 1 regardless of the group of patients from which they were isolated.<sup>85</sup>

This elevation of TGF- $\beta$ 1 may be linked to abnormal metalloprotease (MMP) activity, as observed in OA cartilage. Indeed, two main metalloproteases, MMP-1 and MMP-13, are produced in OA cartilage and are preferentially distributed within the articular cartilage. Collagenase-1 (MMP-1) is preferentially localized in the superficial and upper intermediate layers of OA cartilage, whereas collagenase-3 (MMP-13) is found in the lower intermediate and deep layers.<sup>86,87</sup> Interestingly, TGF- $\beta$ , but not IL-1 $\beta$ , upregulates collagenase-3 in normal cartilage, as found in OA cartilage.<sup>88</sup> Whereas TGF- $\beta$  and its receptor levels are increased in the low intermediate and deep zone of OA cartilage,<sup>87,88</sup> we also found an important increase in the synthesis of TGF- $\beta$ 1 in OA subchondral osteoblasts.<sup>85</sup> This particular distribution of TGF- $\beta$  and its receptors therefore suggests that bone-derived TGF- $\beta$  could be responsible, at least in part, for collagenase-3 upregulation in OA cartilage. This also applies to hepatocyte growth factor (HGF). Indeed, HGF also stimulates collagenase-3 expression in

chondrocytes,<sup>89</sup> and this factor is more elevated in OA than in normal cartilage.<sup>90,91</sup>

Insulin-like growth factors, or somatomedins, are families of growth stimulatory peptides that have important biological activities in bone.<sup>92</sup> They are single-chain polypeptides containing three intrachain disulfide bridges. IGF-I and IGF-II consist of 70 and 67 amino acid residues with molecular weights of 7649 and 7471 Da,<sup>93,94</sup> respectively. IGFs are among the most important growth factors regulating bone formation, an effect only partially dependent on cell replication.<sup>78</sup> A 12-year follow-up clinical study of patients with radiological OA of the knee showed a positive correlation between circulating IGF-I levels and osteophyte growth and overall progression of their condition, whereas no clear evidence could be found for a preventive effect of IGF-I on cartilage loss.<sup>95</sup> In this respect, the observation of elevated IGF-1 levels in the cortical bone from the iliac crest of OA patients<sup>77</sup> and in osteoblast cell cultures<sup>4</sup> suggests that IGF-1 may promote the formation of osteophytes. IGF-I initially produced by abnormal subchondral bone cells could infiltrate the cartilage via the vascular channels present in subchondral bone, which reach the deeper zones of articular cartilage.<sup>14-17</sup> It could also promote the PA/plasmin system and initiate cartilage breakdown, while stimulating other protease systems such as MMPs. As in the cartilage, in subchondral bone IGF-I may stimulate the plasminogen activator (PA)/plasmin system and promote IGFBPs turnover, increasing further bone formation/mineralization in this area, *i.e.*, promoting an increase in bone stiffness. We showed an altered regulation of uPA in OA osteoblasts by IGF-1,<sup>5</sup> a situation that could lead to abnormal bone turnover via reduced local availability of other growth factors, such as TGF- $\beta$ , that are derived from latent propeptides. Mechanical stresses may amplify this first local biochemical stress, with the thickening of the underlying subchondral bone reducing the shock-absorbing qualities of this tissue. The initial cartilage breakdown could stimulate local production of IGF-I by chondrocytes to limit degradation and promote matrix formation. This increase in IGF-I could then further activate the PA/plasmin system in the cartilage, causing progressive degradation. Concurrently, the increase in IGF-I and its stimulation of IGFBPs turnover would create an imbalance between IGF and IGFBPs, which would be enhanced by abnormal PA/plasmin activity in the cartilage, and prevent an adequate response to IGF-I. Secondarily, this would trigger the synthesis of more IGF-receptors in chondrocytes to translate IGF signals; hence a resistance to IGF-I could be in place at this stage of disease progression.

Recent data show a fundamental role of the PA/plasmin system in the local regulation of IGF bioavailability in bone.<sup>96</sup> Hormones and local growth factors, including IGFs and IGFBPs,<sup>97-100</sup> closely regulate bone formation and resorption, the two major processes in bone remodeling. Bone resorption involves a well-characterized protease system; this comprises PA and their inhibitors, the equilibrium of which controls the formation of plasmin.<sup>101,102</sup> Plasmin is one of the factors capable of activating the latent form of TGF- $\beta$ .<sup>103,104</sup> The PA/plasmin system can also produce

variable proteolysis at different sites on the IGF-I-IGFBP complex, resulting in peptides of variable sizes, and promoting the dissociation of IGFs bound to IGFBPs.<sup>96,105,106</sup> This generates free IGF-1, which is then available to exert its biological function(s). PA/plasmin-dependent proteolysis of IGFBPs has also been observed in the human osteosarcoma cell line MG-63,<sup>107,108</sup> a situation somewhat similar to that which takes place in human primary bone cell cultures,<sup>109</sup> while local regulation of the PA/plasmin system is slightly different in osteosarcoma cells. Moreover, TGF- $\beta$  can reduce IGFBP-4 mRNA expression and enhance IGFBP-4 proteolysis in human primary bone cell cultures,<sup>110</sup> thus increasing free IGF-1 levels. Lastly, urokinase (uPA), and more specifically its amino-terminal fragment, stimulates mitogenic activity and proliferation in a human osteoblast-like cell line and in rat primary calvaria osteoblast-like cells.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, this suggests that, at least in bone cells, uPA could stimulate cell proliferation via proteolytic activation of local growth factor as well as directly. In this manner, this alteration in uPA could also contribute to couple bone resorption and formation (remodeling) by the PA/plasmin system.<sup>112</sup>

Conflicting reports exist on the local regulation of the PA/plasmin system in osteoblasts. In normal osteoblast-like cells, TGF- $\beta$ 1 stimulates, whereas IL-1 $\beta$  does not change, PA activity. In contrast, in the human MG-63 osteosarcoma cell line, TGF- $\beta$ 1 inhibits, while IL-1 $\beta$  stimulates, PA activity.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, in MG-63 cells, IGF-I stimulates IGFBPs synthesis, while it inhibits PA/plasmin activity.<sup>108</sup> Our own data indicate an increase of uPA abundance and activity (hydrolysis of a specific substrate coupled to p-nitroanilide), but not of its inhibitor PAI-1, in OA subchondral bone explants and in primary osteoblast cell cultures.<sup>5</sup> IGF-1 directly stimulated the PA/plasmin system in OA primary osteoblast cell cultures under basal conditions *in vitro*, whereas the addition of plasminogen to the system, to reproduce the *in vivo* situation, led to an inhibition of uPA activity.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, IGF-I does not modify PA activity in fetal rat osteoblast-enriched calvarial cells.<sup>113</sup> Regardless of this diversity, IGF-I can regulate its own activity via IGFBPs production in human normal and osteosarcoma bone cells.<sup>108,109</sup> IGF-I under these conditions can regulate its own bioavailability by regulating both IGFBPs production and the PA/PAI system, which regulates IGFBPs proteolysis. In addition, plasmin activates latent TGF- $\beta$ 1 in bone, and frees IGF-I from IGFBPs.<sup>107</sup> This suggests that autocontrol of PA/plasmin activity due to TGF- $\beta$ 1 produced locally by bone cells is plausible, while IGF-I availability could also be controlled via this loop. Recent data indicate that TGF- $\beta$  is a chemoattractant for osteoblasts and for osteoblast precursors,<sup>114</sup> which means that it may draw mesenchymal cells to sites of new bone formation after local release and activation of matrix-bound TGF- $\beta$  that could occur during resorption<sup>115</sup> or in the course of fracture healing. TGF- $\beta$  could also act in addition to other cytokines/growth factors to promote IGF-1 synthesis in osteoblasts. PGE<sub>2</sub> alone also stimulates IGF-1 synthesis in osteoblasts.<sup>85,116–118</sup> Since PGE<sub>2</sub> levels are elevated in OA subchondral bone osteoblasts,<sup>85</sup> this could therefore lead to

an upregulation of IGF-1 levels in bone tissue in OA patients.

The PA/plasmin protease system promotes the activation of MMPs such as collagenase-1, and thereby participates in cartilage breakdown. Its increase in OA osteoblast cell cultures,<sup>4,5</sup> if it reflects the *in vivo* situation, would then promote cartilage breakdown. The action of the PA/plasmin system might be limited, as some studies have indicated that other proteases, such as stromelysin (MMP-3), might be needed to promote cartilage breakdown fully.<sup>119</sup> The PA/plasmin system is stimulated by IL-1,<sup>120</sup> which is increased locally in the synovial fluid bathing OA cartilage. IL-1 also increases the synthesis of MMPs directly,<sup>121</sup> hence offering a converging pathway for cartilage degradation together with the PA/plasmin system. In contrast, TGF- $\beta$  may contribute to stop the progression of cartilage degradation by promoting PAI-1 synthesis and mRNA increases in culture fluid and chondrocyte extracts, while IL-1 $\alpha$  inhibits this activity.<sup>122</sup>

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### Phenotypic alterations of the subchondral bone compartment in osteoarthritis

Changes in OA subchondral bone may be due to alterations in bone collagen production and/or deterioration, noncollagenous protein production, alkaline phosphatase (ALPase) activity, and osteoblast metabolism.<sup>4–7</sup> OA osteoblasts from subchondral bone display a unique metabolic behavior *in vitro*<sup>4,5</sup> and *in vivo*.<sup>6,7</sup> These cells are characterized by high alkaline phosphatase and uPA activities,<sup>4,5</sup> elevated collagen production,<sup>6,7</sup> increased release of osteocalcin, and production of IGF-1<sup>4</sup> compared with normal cells. All these factors are involved in bone remodeling, suggesting that OA osteoblasts could have a very high metabolism. These factors are regulated in bone tissue by cytokines produced locally, and it is now well recognized that proinflammatory cytokines such as IL-1 $\beta$  and TNF- $\alpha$ , as well as prostaglandins, and especially PGE<sub>2</sub>, are involved in the inflammatory process of OA.

Abnormal collagen production or content in OA subchondral bone may be related to altered collagen synthesis or reduced degradation.<sup>7</sup> Collagen production, collagen breakdown via collagenase production, and IGF-1/IGFBPs synthesis are regulated by parathyroid hormone (PTH) in osteoblasts.<sup>123–125</sup> As these effects of PTH are driven by protein kinase A (PKA), the observed reduction in cyclic AMP (cAMP) formation by OA osteoblasts in response to PTH stimulation (while OA osteoblasts are totally resistant to PGE<sub>2</sub> stimulation<sup>4</sup>) would suggest a specific inhibition of the PKA pathway in OA osteoblasts, and of downstream events. Since bone remodeling involves a tight coupling between bone resorption and bone formation, abnormal PTH signaling may lead to an imbalance in bone remodeling favoring bone formation.

Osteoblasts and stromal cells synthesize a number of cytokines that play crucial roles in skeletal cells via autocrine or paracrine pathways.<sup>126</sup> These include IL-1, -4,

-6, and -11, macrophage and granulocyte/macrophage colony-stimulating factors, and TNFs. All of these cytokines have important effects on bone remodeling, and they stimulate bone resorption via the recruitment/activation of osteoclasts. Two studies have reported data for cytokine production by osteoblasts prepared from femoral heads<sup>127</sup> or by subchondral trabecular bone from either hip or knee joints.<sup>8</sup> However, no clear trend has been established in these studies. This absence of a consensus may be linked to the cell culture conditions, time in culture, assay conditions, or the comparison between different bone sites. It is becoming recognized that bone cells from different locations show variable behavior, at least in *in vitro* culture.<sup>128,129</sup> Among cytokines and eicosanoids produced by bone cells, IL-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, PGE<sub>2</sub> and leukotriene B<sub>4</sub> (LTB<sub>4</sub>) are the most important regulators of the extracellular matrix. IL-1 $\beta$  and IL-6 can directly promote matrix degradation in both subchondral bone and cartilage owing to their action on selective MMPs in these tissues.<sup>130</sup> Our own studies have shown variations for IL-6, PGE<sub>2</sub>, TGF- $\beta$ , and LTB<sub>4</sub> in OA subchondral osteoblasts.<sup>85,131</sup> However, the variable and opposite PGE<sub>2</sub> and LTB<sub>4</sub> levels detected in OA subchondral osteoblasts compared with normal<sup>85,131</sup> could promote bone formation in OA and the deposition of a new matrix,<sup>132,133</sup> although this matrix may be undermineralized. Indeed, PGE<sub>2</sub> stimulates bone formation at low concentrations, but it may be inhibitory at high concentrations.<sup>134-136</sup> PGE<sub>2</sub> stimulates collagen synthesis and can promote the proliferation of osteoblasts. Conversely, leukotrienes stimulate osteoclast differentiation and bone resorption.<sup>137</sup>

### Role of bone-derived factors on cartilage degradation in osteoarthritis

The integrity of the overlying cartilage is maintained, at least in part, by a fine balance between anabolic/catabolic factors produced locally. As osteoblasts produce a number of cytokines/growth factors involved in tissue remodeling and OA subchondral bone is sclerotic, this could be explained by abnormal remodeling. The subchondral bone plate is of particular interest as it is in direct contact with the cartilage and could influence its degradation. Interestingly, osteoblasts with differing behavior in *in vitro* culture were obtained from either hip or knee joints of OA patients, and these cells showed a different capacity to degrade glycosaminoglycans.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, cocultures of OA osteoblasts with normal cartilage explants could initiate cartilage degradation, suggesting that OA osteoblasts may be releasing product(s) initiating the degradation of cartilage.<sup>8,9</sup> However, only about half of the conditioned media from OA osteoblast cell cultures could promote the degradation of glycosaminoglycans, and no key pathways or factors responsible for this process could be clearly identified at that time.<sup>8</sup> Potential players in this process, namely PGE<sub>2</sub> and IL-6,<sup>85,129</sup> and possibly IGF-1 and uPA,<sup>4,5</sup> are increased in OA osteoblasts. Interestingly, PGE<sub>2</sub> and IL-6 show very wide distribution levels in OA osteoblasts compatible with

different catabolic activities, and could be used to classify patients in one of two groups that otherwise showed no significant phenotypic features or metabolic capacities.<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, Tardif et al.<sup>138</sup> showed that chondrocytes from OA patients can also be classified in two groups, low or high, according to their basal levels of one metalloprotease, collagenase-3. These two groups of cells responded differently to cytokine/growth factor stimulation,<sup>85</sup> yet phenotypic characteristics were similar between the cells.

The sum of these results would therefore indicate that OA patients undergoing surgery, although clinically similar, may be showing different patterns of expression of MMP, growth factors, and cytokines in both cartilage and subchondral bone tissues. However, as animal models are now showing that subchondral bone changes may be preceding cartilage degradation/loss, it is becoming increasingly evident that subchondral bone changes in OA are not merely secondary manifestations of the disease, but may be part of a more active component of the initiation and/or progression of OA. Subchondral bone tissue in OA could provide growth factors, cytokines, and prostaglandins to the overlying cartilage and promote its abnormal remodeling/metabolism, leading to degradation and loss. Therefore, even though the initiating event/effector has still not been clearly identified, research can now focus on potential candidates.

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