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Editorial

Leader Cells and COVID-19: The Hidden Key to Tissue Damage and Recovery

***Ali A. Alhusayni*[1], *Falah Hasan Obayes AL-Khikani**[1,2]**
1. Department of Microbiology, Al-shomali general hospital, Babylon Health directorate, Babylon, Iraq.
2. Department of Medical Microbiology, College of Dentistry, University of Cordoba, Najaf, Iraq.

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* Corresponding author:
Falah Hasan AL-Khikani
E-mail address:
falahgh38@gmail.com

Leader cells, specialized cells that guide collective cell migration and coordinate tissue function, have been increasingly recognized for their role in maintaining tissue integrity. However, emerging evidence suggests that these cells may also serve as key targets for pathogenic invasion, particularly during viral infections such as COVID-19. The SARS-CoV-2 virus, responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, has been shown to cause severe tissue damage, particularly in the respiratory system. Understanding the role of leader cells in this process could offer new insights into disease pathogenesis and potential therapeutic interventions.

The respiratory epithelium serves as the first line of defense against airborne pathogens, and its integrity is essential for normal pulmonary function. Leader cells within the respiratory epithelium coordinate tissue repair and cellular responses to environmental stressors. However, during SARS-CoV-2 infection, these cells may be preferentially targeted, leading to widespread tissue dysfunction. Studies have shown that SARS-CoV-2 enters cells via the ACE2 receptor, which is highly expressed in respiratory epithelial cells, including leader cells [1]. When these critical coordinators are impaired or destroyed, the ability of the epithelium to mount an effective regenerative response is compromised, potentially exacerbating lung injury and respiratory failure.

SARS-CoV-2 infection triggers a cascade of inflammatory and immune responses that may disproportionately affect leader cells. One proposed mechanism is that infected leader cells produce excessive pro-inflammatory cytokines, contributing to the cytokine storm observed in severe COVID-19 cases [2]. This over activation leads to increased apoptosis and necrosis within the respiratory epithelium, further weakening tissue integrity. Additionally, viral replication within leader cells may disrupt their signaling functions, preventing coordinated repair processes and exacerbating fibrosis and long-term lung damage [3].

Given the crucial role of leader cells in maintaining tissue homeostasis, their dysfunction may explain why certain individuals experience severe COVID-19 symptoms while others have mild or asymptomatic cases. If leader cells are preferentially destroyed in some patients, it could lead to prolonged lung inflammation, impaired alveolar repair, and a higher likelihood of developing post-acute sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection, commonly known as long COVID [4].

Targeting leader cells for therapeutic intervention could be a promising approach to mitigating severe respiratory damage. Strategies such as promoting regenerative signals via stem cell-derived exosomes, enhancing epithelial repair through growth factors, or modulating the inflammatory response to protect leader cells could improve patient outcomes [5]. Additionally, understanding how SARS-CoV-2 exploits leader cells may inform the development of antiviral therapies aimed at preventing viral entry into these

critical cells.

Recent hypotheses suggest that leader cells may play an even more complex role in viral pathogenesis. One innovative idea is that SARS-CoV-2 might hijack leader cells to act as viral dissemination hubs, facilitating the rapid spread of infection across epithelial layers. Additionally, leader cells might undergo epigenetic modifications upon infection, altering their regenerative potential and making tissues more susceptible to long-term dysfunction. Another hypothesis is that the selective targeting of leader cells could lead to tissue remodeling patterns that predispose individuals to chronic respiratory conditions post-infection. Investigating these novel possibilities could help refine our understanding of COVID-19 pathology and reveal new therapeutic targets.

Conclusion

The role of leader cells in COVID-19 pathogenesis underscores their importance in tissue function and disease progression. By further investigating how SARS-CoV-2 targets and disrupts leader cell function, researchers may uncover novel therapeutic targets that could prevent severe lung damage and improve recovery for COVID-19 patients. Future studies should focus on identifying specific molecular pathways involved in leader cell infection and exploring interventions to preserve their function during viral attacks.

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