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Hypoxia – as a possible regulator of the activity of epicardial mesothelial cells after myocardial infarction

Aim	To study the effect of hypoxia on the activity of epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) in epicardial cells, which provides formation of a specialized microenvironment.
Material and methods	This study used a model of experimental myocardial infarction created by ligation of the anterior descendent coronary artery. The activity of epicardial cells after a hypoxic exposure was studied with the hypoxia marker, pimonidazole, bromodeoxyuridine, immunofluorescent staining of heart cryosections, and in vitro mesothelial cell culture.
Results	The undamaged heart maintained the quiescent condition of mesothelial cells and low levels of their proliferation, extracellular matrix protein production, and of the EMT activity. Acute ischemic injury induced moderate hypoxia in the epicardial/subepicardial region. This caused a global rearrangement of this region due to the initiation of EMT in cells, changes in the cell composition, and accumulation of extracellular matrix proteins. We found that the initiation of EMT in mesothelial cells may result in the formation of smooth muscle cell precursors, fibroblasts, and a population of Sca-1+ cardiac progenitor cells, which may both participate in construction of new blood vessels and serve as a mesenchymal link for the paracrine support of microenvironmental cells. In in vitro experiments, we showed that 72-h hypoxia facilitated activation of EMT regulatory genes, induced dissembling of intercellular contacts, cell uncoupling, and increased cell plasticity.
Conclusion	The epicardium of an adult heart serves as a "reparative reserve" that can be reactivated by a hypoxic exposure. This creates a basis for an approach to influence the epicardium to modulate its activity for regulating reparative processes.
Keywords	Epicardial cells; hypoxia; myocardial infarction; epithelial-mesenchymal transition; cardiac reparation
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Introduction

For several decades, chronic heart failure (CHF) has held one of the leading positions in the list of urgent medical and social problems. [1] Despite the high prevalence of the disease (2% in Western Europe and US, 7% in Russia), annual progressive increases in the number of cases, and a number of recent large-scale studies, the molecular and physiological mechanisms of this disease are still not entirely understood. Thus, there has been increased interest in studying the mechanisms for maintaining cardiac cellular homeostasis and regulating reparative regeneration to find new target areas in the prevention and treatment of CHF [2–4].

The epicardium, an outer layer of the heart wall closely adjacent to the myocardium and formed by epicardial mesothelial cells, collagen, and elastic fibers, is essential for coordinating physiological/reparative processes occurring in the heart [5]. During embryogenesis, epicardial cells undergo epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT), leading to the formation of endocardial progenitor cells having a prominent secretory capacity [6, 7], migratory properties, as well as the ability to differentiate into smooth muscle and endothelial cells of coronary vessels, perivascular fibroblasts, primordial mesenchymal cells of future heart valves and interstitial fibroblasts [8–11]. Mesothelial cell failure leads to serious defects in the



development of the myocardium, coronary arteries, cardiac conduction system and valves [12–16].

Although epicardial mesothelial cells gradually lose their ability to proliferate during the second half of pregnancy, transforming into a layer of resting epicardial cells and remaining so in the postnatal period [17], in acute ischemic myocardial damage, the fetal gene expression program (Wt1, Raldh² and Tbx18) is partially reactivated in the epicardial cells [18-20], which launches the proliferation of epicardial cells that undergo EMT and participate in the repair [21, 22]. This activation is regulated by transforming growth factor-beta, platelet-derived growth factor, retinoic acid, fibroblast growth factor, Hippo/Yap and Sonic Hedgehog signaling pathways, as well as extracellular matrix proteins [23-32], which implement cellular response to injury in combination with hypoxia. While several published works confirm the involvement of hypoxia and hypoxia-induced factors (HIF) [33, 34] in the regulation of EMT and embryonic epicardial cell differentiation, the regulation mechanisms of postnatal epicardial mesothelial cells remain little understood.

We hypothesized that the occurrence of hypoxia in epicardium/subepicardium after transmural myocardial infarction (MI) could constitute a stimulus for the activation of epicardial cells associated with the entry into EMT, switch to glycolytic metabolism, alteration of the expression profile and proliferative activity.

Objective

To study the effect of hypoxia on EMT activity in the epicardial cells contributing to the formation of a special microenvironment.

Material and methods Animals

We used male C57BL/6 mice (12 weeks old) and Wistar rats (13 weeks old) kept in the laboratory animal breeding nursery of the Russian National Medical Research Center for Cardiology. The experiments were approved by the ethics committee of the Russian National Medical Research Center for Cardiology and carried out in accordance with the current regulations on animal testing and husbandry [Declaration of Helsinki, 2000; Order of the Ministry of Health of the USSR No. 755 «On measures on further improvements of works involving the use of experimental animals» dated 08/12/1977; Good Clinical Trial Practice in the Russian Federation (approved by the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation on 29/12/1998)].

MI simulation and sample preparation

According to the previously described procedures, experimental MI was simulated by ligating the left anterior artery [35]. Experimental animals were eliminated (euthanasia) on days 3, 5, 7, and 14 following MI simulation, which corresponded to the different periods of reparative regeneration. Each group, including the control group undergoing placebo surgery, included from 3 to 5 animals.

Estimation of the thickness of epicardial/subepicardial area of the distribution of the derived epicardial Wt1+ cells and extracellular matrix proteins

Cryosections of the heart stained with hematoxylin and eosin were used to investigate the distribution of epicardial cells and subepicardial thickness. Cryosections were fixed for 20 minutes in 96% ethyl alcohol, washed in distilled water and stained with hematoxylin for 5 minutes. After staining, the sections were washed in running water, differentiated in 1% hydrochloric acid in alcohol and again washed in running water (10 times for 5 minutes). The sections were then placed for 5 minutes in distilled water and stained with 1% aqueous solution of eosin for 1 minute. After staining, slides were rinsed with distilled water dehydrated, and mounted in a xylene-based medium. The quantitative analysis of the subendocardial thickness was performed using the Image J software.

Immunofluorescent staining of cryosections of the heart wall was used to view extracellular matrix proteins, Wt1+ epicardial cell, and their derivatives. Frozen cryosections were fixed with 3.7% paraformaldehyde (20 minutes) or ice-cold acetone (depending on antibody specifications) and washed with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) for 5 minutes. To assess intracellular markers, the sections were further treated with 0.1% Triton X100 solution (5 minutes). Myocardial sections were blocked with a solution containing 1% bovine serum albumin (BSA), 10% serum of the second antibody donor in PBS (30 minutes) to inhibit nonspecific binding of antibodies. Then, cryosections were stained with anti-Wt1+ and anti-fibulin activated epicardium marker antibodies, anti-extracellular matrix protein (fibronectin, collagen I, collagen III) antibodies, anti-fibroblast marker (CD90, vimentin) antibodies, anti-progenitor cell (SCA-1) antibodies, anti-endothelial cell (Pecam, von Willebrand factor) antibodies, anti-smooth muscle cell (SMA, calponin) antibodies for 1 hour, then washed in PBS, and stained with antibodies conjugated with Alexa Fluor 488/594. The cell nuclei were stained with DAPI (4', 6 diamidino-2 phenylindole).



Evaluation of proliferative cell activity in the epicardial/subepicardial area

Bromodeoxyuridine (BrdU), a synthetic nucleoside analog of thymidine, which enables the visualization of proliferating cells in the myocardial sections stained with antibodies, was used to evaluate the proliferative activity of epicardial cells following ischemic damage. BrdU was injected intraperitoneally (once a day, 100 mg/kg body weight, for 5 days before euthanasia). The insertion of BrdU into the DNA of dividing cells (its presence in the cell nuclei) was determined by immunofluorescent staining with anti-BrdU antibodies and anti-Alexa Fluor 488 secondary antibodies. Before staining, sections were fixed in formalin. Nonspecific antibody binding was inhibited with a solution containing 1% of BSA and 10% of second antibody donor serum in PBS (30 minutes). Additional sections were treated with 2N hydrochloric acid for 30 minutes (37°C) to denature DNA. The acid was neutralized with 0.1 M borate buffer (2 times for 5 minutes). Activated epicardial cells were visualized using anti-fibulin-5 antibodies and anti-Alexa Fluor 488 secondary antibodies.

Evaluation of cell hypoxia in the epicardial/subepicardial area

Pimonidazol, which is a part of the commercial Hypoxyprobe[™] Kit, was used to assess the hypoxic status of myocardial cells. Pimonidazol was injected intraperitoneally (60 mg/kg of body weight) into Wistar rats two hours before euthanasia. Pimonidazol was injected into intact animals and rats after MI simulation (5 and 14 days after surgery); the animals were divided into groups of three individuals. After the elimination of animals from the experiment, hearts were removed from the chest cavity, washed with PBS, then immersed in a cuvette with a freezing medium and frozen in liquid nitrogen vapor. Serial 7 μm microns sections were made in every 250 μm on a cryostat. Heart sections were fixed in formalin, washed with PBS and incubated in 1% BSA solution with 10% second antibody donor serum for 30 minutes. Antipimonidazole antibodies diluted by 1:100 were applied on the sections, which were incubated at 4°C for 8 hours. The sections were washed in the PBS solution 3 times for 5 minutes, then stained with anti-Alexa Fluor 594 secondary antibodies.

Isolation of mouse epicardial cells and hypoxia simulation

To obtain epicardial cells, hearts of mice (2-3 days old) were removed from the chest cavities and

washed in heparinized Krebs-Ringer solution, than transferred into 5 ml of trypsin solution (for 6 hearts) and incubated three times for 5 minutes at 37°C in a Hybaid incubator shaker. After that, the hearts were removed. 5 ml of an enzyme inactivation medium (IMDM medium containing 20% fetal bovine serum (FBS)) was added to the resulting cells suspension and centrifuged at 300g for 10 minutes. After resuspending the sediment in the IMDM medium for epicardial cells, containing 1% FBS, 10 µM SB431542 inhibitor and antibiotics, it was transferred to gelatin-coated plates. The medium was changed every two days. Epicardial cell clones obtained using cloning cylinders and having confirmed morphology and immunophenotype were used for the experiments. A New Brunswick Scientific™ incubator was used to simulate hypoxia. Epicardial cell culture with 21% and 3% oxygen was carried out for 24 and 72 hours.

Evaluation of morphology and tight junctions in epicardial cells cultured with 21% and 3% oxygen

The morphology of cells was determined using phase-contrast microscopy. Tight junctions in epicardial cells cultured with 21% and 3% oxygen were examined using immunocytochemistry. Cells were permeabilized with 0.1% Triton X-100 solution (5 minutes) and stained with anti-ZO-1 marker antibodies for 1 hour. The cells were then washed and stained with antibodies conjugated with Alexa Fluor 488 (1:800, at 37°C for 60 minutes). The cell nuclei were stained with DAPI.

Microscopy and image analysis

Cells and myocardial cryosections were analyzed using an Axiovert 200 M fluorescence microscope and AxioVision 4.7 software.

Sample preparation and real-time polymerase chain reaction

Ribonucleic acids were isolated from the cells using a Qiagen kit. The reverse transcription reaction was performed using a Maxima First Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit reagents. The real-time polymerase chain reaction was performed in a Step One Plus Real-Time PCR System amplifier under the standard protocol using the following primers: SNA11 (for: ACATCCGAAGCCACA-CG; rev: GTCAGCAAAAGCACGGTTG), SNAI2 (for: ACACATTAGAACTCACACTGGG; rev: TGGAGAAGGTTTTGGAGCAG), Wt1 (for: AGCACGGTCACTTTC-GACG; rev: GTTTGAAGGAATGGTTGGGGAA), Ly6a (Sca-1) (for: GAGGCAGCAGTTATTGTGGAT; rev: CGTTGACCTTAGTACCCAGGA).



The data obtained were analyzed using the Statistica 8.0 suite. The data are expressed as mean and standard deviation (M±SD). The comparisons were made using the Mann–Whitney U-test and Wilcoxon test. The differences were statistically significant with p<0.05.

Results

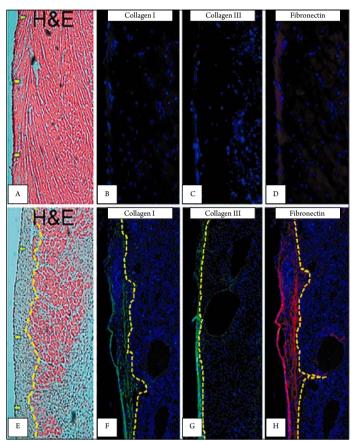
A key pathophysiological component of MI, hypoxia activates the HIF signaling pathway [36] and launches a wide range of cellular responses, including regulation of gene expression and post-translational modification of proteins. Animal heart sections obtained after MI simulation were examined to study the effect of tissue hypoxia on the activity of epicardial cells. Comparative histological analysis of intact rat heart sections and post-MI heart sections showed significant differences in the organization of the epicardial microenvironment. Epicardium of the intact heart is a thin layer composed of 2-4 layers of cells (Figure 1, A – D), which is located on the basal membrane consisting of extracellular matrix proteins. In acute ischemic damage to the heart, the thickness of the epicardial area, which is structurally divided into two parts (epicardium with high cell density and less compact subepicardium) increases 8–12 fold (Figure 1, E). After MI, a significant amount of extracellular matrix proteins, collagen I, III and fibronectin are visualized in the subepicardium (Figure 1, F-H), which may be due to the EMT activation in the epicardial cells and the formation of the mesenchymal derivatives actively producing extracellular matrix proteins.

Staining of heart sections with anti-Wt1+ activated epicardium marker antibodies showed that cells expressing this transcription factor are formed in the epicardium and subepicardium after MI. Most of such cells are formed on days 7–14 after MI (Figure 2). Wt1+ cells were not detected in the intact heart epicardium (Figure 2, A), which suggests that their appearance is an important indicator of the epicardial activation.

Experimental tests were performed using pimonidazole [37], which was administered intraperitoneally both to control specimens and rats after MI simulation, to assess epicardial cell activation and epicardial/subepicardial hypoxia. Pimonidazol is metabolized by cells in the state of hypoxia; its metabolites can be identified using specific antibodies (Figure 3) [38, 39].

Histological analysis showed that specific staining for pimonidazole metabolites, which is present only in samples taken from animals with MI, is localized mainly in the myocardium and only in single epicardial cells. As shown in Figure 3, the area of

Figure 1. Representative images of histological and immunofluorescent staining of intact heart sections (A–D) and in 7 days (G–H) after myocardial infarction simulation. Photos of heart tissue



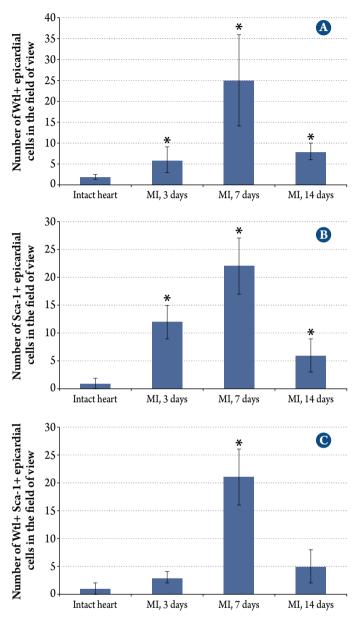
A, G – hematoxylin and eosin staining; staining with anti-collagen I antibodies (B, F – green), anti-collagen III antibodies (C, G – green); anti-fibronectin antibodies (D, H – red). Cell nuclei are stained with DAPI (blue). Yellow arrows show the epicardial line. The yellow dotted line separates the epicardial/subepicardial area from the muscle tissue.

positive staining for pimonidazole metabolites travels from the epicardium deeper into the heart wall on day 14 after MI compared with day 5. Given that pimonidazole allows registering metabolic activity of cells subjected to high-degree hypoxia (O_2 <1%), it can be assumed that severe hypoxia develops in the event of transmural MI in only a small part of cells, while the overwhelming majority exists in the area of moderate oxygen deficiency.

The in vitro experiments were carried out by the simulation of moderate hypoxia (O₂ 3%) to confirm that hypoxia is engaged in the regulation of epicardial activity (Figure 4). It was shown that 24-hour hypoxic epicardial cell culture was not accompanied by the increased expression of EMT regulator genes (SNAI1, SNAI2, Wt1). A longer (72 hours) culture in a hypoxic environment showed changes in the morphology of epicardial cells, which was manifested by a loss of cubical form, ZO1+ intercellular contact destruction, and



Figure 2. Diagrams of quantitative evaluation of epicardial cells expressing Wt1+ and Sca-1+ in the intact heart at different time points after MI (days 3, 7, and 14): the number of cells in the field of view in the epicardial/subepicardial area



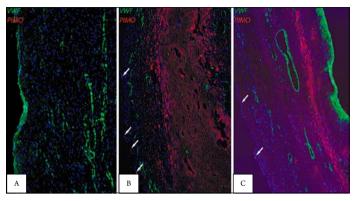
A – Wt1+ cells; B – Sca1+ cells;

C – Wt1+Sca1+ cells; MI – myocardial infarction.

adopting a fibroblast-like phenotype. Those changes were combined with the increased expression of EMT and Ly6a regulator genes (Sca-1), indicating the signs of epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition.

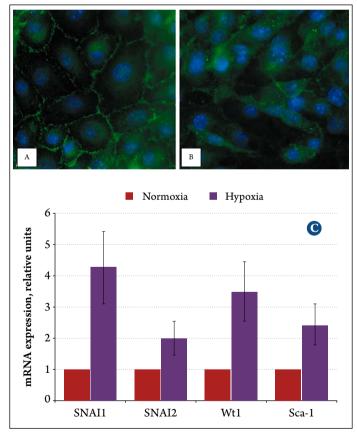
Given the increased EMT gene expression, greater number of Wt1+ cells and significant subepicardial thickening after ischemic damage, we studied the proliferative activity of epicardial cells. Epicardial activation is known to be accompanied by the increased proliferation activity of epicardial cells during embryogenesis [40]. BrdU was used to assess the level of epicardial cell proliferation and

Figure 3. Representative images of the vessels and pimonidazole metabolite distribution in the rat's intact myocardium sections (A) and after myocardial infarction (shown by arrows) on days 5 (B) and 14 (C)



Images of immunofluorescent staining of blood vessels (von Willebrand factor – green), pimonidazole, and metabolites (red) in the heart wall are presented.

Figure 4. Changes in the intercellular junctions and expression profile in the epicardial cells after exposure to hypoxia



Representative images of immunofluorescence staining of epicardial cells for the tight intercellular junction marker (ZO1 – green) after the culture under normoxia (A) and hypoxia (B) are presented; C – a diagram of the assessment of the regulator gene expression of epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition in the epicardial cells after culture under normoxia (red columns) and hypoxia (O2 3%; purple columns). The level of gene expression in cells cultured under normoxia is taken equal to one.



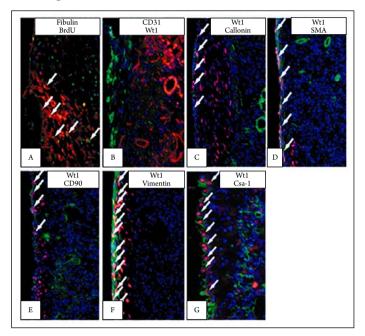
visualize the proliferating cells. It was found that the number of proliferating cells increases 8-fold in the epicardial/subepicardial 5 days after MI compared to their numbers in the intact heart (5±2 cells and 40±12 cells in the field of view, respectively). The number of proliferating cells continued to increase to reach 102±16 BrdU+ cells within the field of view, which corresponds to the changes in the subepicardial thickness after MI. We showed that the newly formed post-MI subepicardial microenvironment includes not only the extracellular matrix proteins (collagen and fibronectin), but also various types of cells. A significant accumulation of the activated epicardial cells and their derivatives (Wt1+ cells with smooth muscle cell markers and fibroblasts) was found in this area (Figure 5).

We also found an accumulation of Wt1+ cells coexpressing Sca-1 cardiac progenitor cells marker [41, 42] in the subepicardial area (see Figure 2, B, C; see Figure 5, G), which may indicate the origin of these epicardial cells by entering EMT. The intact subepicardial area contains single Sca-1+ cells in the field of view; their quantity increased significantly after IM (12±3 cells in the field of view on day 3, 22±5 cells in the field of view on day 7).

Discussion

These data indicate that low oxygen tension (hypoxia) in the heart is an important factor in post-MI remodeling of the epicardial microenvironment. Resting mesothelium cells, a low level of proliferation and the ability to produce extracellular matrix proteins are maintained in the intact heart along with EMT activity. Conversely, acute ischemic damage causes global epicardial remodeling and changes in the cellular composition. In the in vitro experiments, we showed that 72-hour hypoxia promotes the EMT regulator gene activation, causing intercellular junction disassembly, cell disintegration and increased cell flexibility. We found that the mesothelium cells entering EMT may result in the formation of the smooth muscle cell and fibroblast precursors, as well as the population of Sca-1+ cardiac progenitor cells that may participate in the construction of new vessels and serve as a mesenchymal link for the paracrine support of the microenvironment cells [43, 44]. The surprising accumulation of extracellular matrix proteins in the epicardial/subepicardial space creates unique conditions for the derived epicardial cells, providing isolation from the underlying tissue and inflammatory cells. However, epicardial cells are not subjected to severe hypoxic stress during the development of transmural MI. It can be assumed that pericardial fluid, a plasma ultrafiltrate that comprises

Figure 5. Representative images of immunofluorescent staining of the rat heart sections on day 7 after myocardial infarction simulation with antiepicardial mesothelial cell marker antibodies and antivascular pronunciation cell marker antibodies



A – staining with an anti-fibulin marker of activated epicardial cells antibodies (red) and BrdU (green, nuclear staining); B – staining with anti-Wt1 antibodies (green) and anti-Pecam antibodies (endothelial cells, red); C – staining with anti-Wt1 antibodies (red) and anticalponin antibodies (green); D – staining with anti-Wt1 antibodies (red) and anti-SMA antibodies (green); E – staining with anti-Wt1 antibodies (red) and anti-CD90 antibodies (green); F – staining with anti-Wt1 antibodies (red) and anti-vimentin antibodies (green); G – staining with anti-Wt1 antibodies (red) and anti-Sca-1 antibodies (green). The arrows show the colocalization of stain signals.

many different protein factors along with dissolved oxygen, produces a certain tissue-protecting effect on the epicardium. It was shown earlier that patients with cardiac tamponade had lower oxygen pressure in the pericardial fluid than in the venous bed, ranging between 5 to 24 mm Hg at an average of 14 mmHg [45]. In another study, oxygen pressure in the pericardial fluid and venous bed did not differ in dogs with pericardial exudate and was about 35 mm Hg [46]. These values were higher than in the hypoxic conditions (7 mm Hg in O_2 1%). Given that the blood is supplied to the pericardium (as opposed to the epicardium and myocardium) by the pericardiacophrenic artery and pericardial branches of the thoracic aorta, these data suggest that a relatively high concentration of oxygen remains in the pericardial fluid during MI. By preventing the development of severe hypoxic conditions, the diffusion of oxygen from the pericardial fluid into the epicardium/subepicardium may protect this area from damage and help to maintain the regenerative potential of epicardial cells. The formation of a zone of moderate



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hypoxia (2-3%) in the epicardial area contributes to the remodeling of the epicardial microenvironment. The results of numerous studies show that hypoxia can control the cellular microenvironment by activating the HIF (hypoxia-induced factor) signaling pathway [47]. In normoxic conditions, prolyl hydroxylase enzymes 1, 2, and 3 (PHD1/2/3) and Von Hippel-Lindau protein have a complex effect on HIF-1 and HIF-2 factors, causing their proteasomal degradation [48]. Under hypoxic conditions, HIF-1 and HIF-2 also stabilize and co-ordinate cellular responses to hypoxia by activating gene expression programs for cellular adaptation to oxygen deficiency [48]. This is achieved due to HIFmediated EMT by the increased secretion of TGFb and activation SNAIL1, SNAIL2, TWIST, SIP1 and ZEB1 transcription factors. This mechanism of EMT activity regulation was demonstrated in different cell lines following exposure to hypoxia or constitutive HIF expression. EMT induced by HIF may comprise a mechanism for the formation of an epicardial cellular niche by forming the original stem/progenitor cell Sca-1+, which mainly utilizes cytoplasmic glycolysis and resists hypoxic stress. However, hypoxia promotes the activation of the epicardial cell pool, with the formation of epicardial precursor cells providing cellular heterogeneity of the microenvironment. This may be necessary to provide various cells in the damaged area for the rapid scarring and the de novo blood vessel formation [49], as well as multidirectional repair paracrine signals. The follistatin-like protein (Fstl-1)

secreted by the epicardial cells is a perfect example of such regulation [50]. Although Fstl-1 production is maintained in embryonic hearts at a high level, it almost completely disappears in the adult heart. However, the activated myocardial cells begin to re-produce this protein in response to acute ischemic damage [51], which increases the survival of cardiomyocytes in the ischemic area, stimulating their entry into the cell cycle, activating arteriogenesis, as well as providing other cardioprotective effects.

Conclusion

The epicardium of the adult heart is shown to serve as a cell depot capable of reactivating its own repair potential under the influence of hypoxia. This provides the basis for the development of approaches to targeting the epicardium aimed at modulating its activity for the regulation of repair processes.

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No conflict of interest is reported.

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