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**Regulation of Aquaporin 3 expression by the AhR pathway  
is critical to cell migration**

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3 **Title Page**  
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7 **Title: Regulation of Aquaporin 3 expression by the AhR pathway is critical to**  
8 **cell migration**  
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54 **Running title:** AQP3, a transcriptional AhR target, regulates cell migration  
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**Abstract**

The regulation of cell migration is a key factor for the dissemination of metastatic cells during tumor progression. Aquaporins are membrane channels which allow transmembrane fluxes of water and glycerol in cells in a variety of mammalian tissues. Here, we show that AQP3, which has been incriminated in cancer progression, is regulated by the AhR, or dioxin receptor. AhR is a transcription factor which is triggered in response to environmental pollutants and it has been shown to regulate several cellular processes including cell migration and plasticity. *In vivo*, upon exposure to the AhR ligand, 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD), the expression of AQP3 is increased significantly in several murine tissues including the liver. *In vitro*, treatment of human HepG2 cells with TCDD also increased the expression of AQP3 mRNA and protein. These effects resulted from the activation of AhR as shown by RNA interference, chromatin immunoprecipitation and the use of several AhR ligands. Immunofluorescence and real-time analysis of cell migration (XCelligence) demonstrated that knockdown of AQP3 mRNA using small interfering RNA impairs the remodeling of cell shape and the triggering of cell migration that is induced by TCDD. Our work reveals, for the first time, a link between exposure to pollutant and the induction of an aquaporin which has been suspected to play a role during metastasis.

**Keywords:** Aryl hydrocarbon Receptor; PAHs; Aquaporin; cell migration ; transcription; dioxin; AQP3

## Introduction

The aryl hydrocarbon receptor (AhR) is a member of the Per-ARNT-Sim family of proteins and has been described primarily as a sensor of xenobiotics which include dioxins, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and polychlorinated biphenyls. It is a transcription factor which positively regulates the expression of xenobiotic metabolism enzymes which allow for the detoxication of AhR ligands (Coumoul et al., 2001). Although this elegant mechanism has been characterized extensively, other functions of the AhR have subsequently emerged during the last decade due to large-scale studies or the use of knock-out models (Barouki et al., 2007; Ma et al., 2009).

Recently, we and others have shown that the AhR regulates cell migration and invasion (Carvajal-Gonzalez et al., 2009; Barouki and Coumoul, 2010; Rico-Leo et al., 2013; Rey-Barroso et al., 2014). Interestingly, altered migration is observed not only upon treatment of primary cells or cell lines with AhR ligands but also in knockout cell lines as the result of the absence of the receptor. *In vivo* studies also suggest that the AhR is a critical regulator of cell migration and invasion (Carvajal-Gonzalez et al., 2009; Pierre et al., 2014). We have identified several of the cellular targets of the AhR pathway which are involved in this regulation. Some of them are critical mainly for cell proliferation (Son of Sevenless 1 or Sos1) whereas others affect cell migration (Human Enhancer of Filamentation 1 or HEF1, also known as Cas-L or NEDD9) (Bui et al., 2009; Pierre et al., 2011). In addition to the well described genomic pathway, AhR may act via non-genomic pathways involving Src and Focal Adhesion Kinase (FAK) to regulate cell morphology and migration. The genomic and non-genomic pathways could converge functionally since they have common targets such as the Hef1 protein, which is part of the integrin/FAK signaling

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3 pathway. However, although this pathway appears to be necessary, there is no  
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5 evidence to show that it is sufficient by itself to mediate the effects of dioxin.  
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8 Our whole genome transcriptome analyses also have demonstrated that the  
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10 expression of aquaporin 3 (AQP3) is increased significantly in HepG2 cells following  
11  
12 their exposure to dioxin. Aquaporins are a family of membrane water/glycerol  
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14 channels which are involved in physiology and pathophysiology (Verkman et al.,  
15  
16 2014). Their structures allow fast transfer of water and small molecules (including  
17  
18 glycerol for some members of the family) across biological membranes. In  
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20 microorganisms, these proteins regulate the adaptation to osmotic shock and rapid  
21  
22 freezing. In mammals, which are the organisms the most studied, they regulate cell  
23  
24 behavior (migration, proliferation), metabolism and transport (Verkman et al., 2014).  
25  
26 Indeed, recently, a role *in vivo* was demonstrated for AQP in cell migration and,  
27  
28 potentially, in cell metastasis (Verkman et al., 2014).  
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32 In this article, we show that AQP3 is a transcriptional target of the AhR and its  
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34 ligands both *in vivo* in mice *and in vitro*, in human cells. Moreover, we show that the  
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36 induction of AQP3 is critical for TCDD-induced morphological and migratory changes.  
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## Materials and methods

### Cell culture

Human hepatoblastoma HepG2 and mammary MDA-MB-231 cells were cultured at 37°C in Dulbecco's minimal essential medium (DMEM) complemented with nonessential amino acids, supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 200 U/ml penicillin, 50 mg/ml streptomycin (Invitrogen, Cergy-Pontoise, France) and 0.5 mg/ml amphotericin B (Bristol-Myers Squibb Co., Stamford, CT, USA) in a humidified atmosphere in 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. One day before exposure to various concentrations of TCDD, the cells were cultivated in DMEM without phenol red supplemented with 3% charcoal-treated (desteroidized) calf serum and maintained in this medium during all treatments. The human epidermal keratinocytes YF23 were cultured according to Vanhoutteghem A. *et al* (Vanhoutteghem and Djian, 2004).

TCDD was purchased from LCG Promochem (Molsheim, France). Benzo(a)pyrene, 3-methylcholanthrene, resveratrol and quercetin were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St Louis, MO, US).

### Animals, treatments, and tissue extraction

Male C57BL/6J mice (Janvier, France) were housed in temperature and humidity-controlled rooms, kept on a 12-hour light-dark cycle, and provided unrestricted amounts of food and water chow diet (V153x R/M-H, Ssniff GmbH). The animal treatment protocol was approved by the bioethics committee of Paris Descartes University (authorization no. CEEA34.MA.003.12.) and all animals received humane care according to the Guide for the Care and the Use of Laboratory Animals (NIH publication 86-23 revised 1985).

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3 Male mice (7 weeks old, n=5) were injected IP with 200  $\mu$ l of either TCDD (25  $\mu$ g/kg  
4 body weight) or the vehicle (corn oil). This amount of TCDD leads, after 48h, to a  
5 blood concentration of TCDD ranging from 100 to 1000 ppt according to Emond's  
6 physiologically based pharmacokinetic model. Those concentrations mimic a high  
7 TCDD contamination. The treatment consisted of injections of TCDD or corn oil on  
8 day 0 and 7 and the mice were sacrificed on day 14. The tissues (skin, liver, kidney,  
9 heart, lung, cerebellum, cortex) were removed immediately and frozen in liquid  
10 nitrogen.  
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### 23 **Chromatin Immunoprecipitation (ChIP)**

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25 HepG2 cells were seeded in 150-mm-diameter dishes 48h before being processed  
26 for ChIP (approximately  $20 \times 10^6$  cells per dish). Cells were exposed to TCDD (25nM)  
27 for 15 or 45 minutes in DMEM without phenol red supplemented with 3% charcoal-  
28 treated calf serum (see above). The cells were rinsed with 37°C phosphate-buffered  
29 saline (PBS) and nuclear proteins were cross-linked to DNA by adding formaldehyde  
30 to a final concentration of 1% for 10 min at 37°C. Cross-linking was stopped by  
31 adding glycine to a final concentration of 0.125M for 5 min on ice. The cells were  
32 collected in ice cold PBS supplemented with complete protease inhibitor tablets (Cat.  
33 1873580, Roche, Mannheim, Germany) and pelleted. Pellets were lysed in 500 $\mu$ l of  
34 lysis buffer (1% SDS, 10mM EDTA, 50mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.1, and protease inhibitors)  
35 for 10 min on ice. This solution was sonicated 10 times for 30s each at the high  
36 position with a Dismembrator 300 (Fisher). The soluble chromatin was then  
37 centrifuged at 12000 rpm for 15 min at 4°C and was diluted 1:10 in ChIP dilution  
38 buffer (0.01% SDS, 1.1% Triton X-100, 1.2mM EDTA, 16.7mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.1,  
39 167mM NaCl, and protease inhibitors). An aliquot of the soluble chromatin was set  
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3 aside as the input fraction. Diluted chromatin was pre-cleared with protein A/G Plus  
4 agarose (Cat Sc-2003, Santa Cruz) at 4°C for 2h with rotation. Protein A/G agarose  
5 beads were pelleted, the supernatant was transferred to a new tube and incubated  
6  
7  
8 with 5 µg of anti-AhR antibody (Cat SA-210, BioMol) or 5 µg of normal rabbit IgG  
9  
10  
11 (negative control, Cat Sc-2027, Santa Cruz) for immunoprecipitation overnight at 4°C  
12  
13  
14 with rotation. After immunoprecipitation, fresh protein A/G agarose beads were  
15  
16  
17 added and incubated for 1h at 4°C with rotation. Agarose beads were pelleted and  
18  
19  
20 washed sequentially for 5 min with the following buffers: once with Buffer I (0.1%  
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22 SDS, 1% Triton X-100, 2mM EDTA, 200mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.1, 150mM NaCl, and  
23  
24 protease inhibitors), twice with Buffer II (0.1% SDS, 1% Triton X-100, 2mM EDTA,  
25  
26 200mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.1, 500mM NaCl, and protease inhibitors) and twice with Buffer  
27  
28 III (0.25M LiCl, 1% NP-40, 1% deoxycholate, 1mM EDTA, 10mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.1).  
29  
30 Protein-DNA complexes were eluted by adding 400µl of elution buffer (1% SDS,  
31  
32 0.1M NaHCO<sub>3</sub>, protease inhibitors), 20min at room temperature with rotation (input  
33  
34 samples were included). The cross-linking was reversed by adding NaCl to a final  
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36 concentration of 0.2M and incubating overnight at 65°C. The DNA was purified using  
37  
38 a PCR purification kit (Cat 28106, Qiagen) and eluted in 25µl.

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40 We used the UCSC Genome Bioinformatics site (<http://genome.ucsc.edu>) and the  
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42 MatInspector software ([http://www.genomatix.de/online\\_help/help\\_matinspector/](http://www.genomatix.de/online_help/help_matinspector/)) to  
43  
44 characterize a potential XRE inside the human AQP3 promoter sequence:  
45

46  
47 A potential XRE site was located in the region (-1052/-887:  
48  
49 TGGGCATGGTGGTGTGCACCTGTAATCCCAGCTAATCGGGAGGCTGAAGCAGG  
50  
51 AGAATCACTTGAACCTGGGAGGTGGAGGTTGCAGGGAGCCGAGAT**CACGCCAT**  
52  
53 TGCACTCCACCTAGGCGACAGAGAGAGACTCCGTCTAAAAAAAAAAAAAGAGACA  
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56 GACTC) and is represented in **bold** and *italics* (-954/-950)  
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ChIP DNA was analyzed by quantitative PCR using the specific primers covering the region -1052-887 bp of the human AQP3 promoter (forward primer: 5'GGCTGAAGCAGGAGAATCAC3' and reverse primer 5'GCTGAGTCCCAGCTGTTTTT3'. For each condition (Input, AhR ChIP and Mock ChIP), a non-treated control sample was used as a reference. The amount of the target gene (AQP3) in TCDD-treated cells, relative to the reference (NT sample), was calculated by the equation  $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$  where  $\Delta Ct = (Ct \text{ TCDD sample} - Ct \text{ reference NT sample})$ . The equation thus represents the expression of the target gene in the TCDD-treated sample relative to its expression in the NT sample.

#### Preparation of RNA and Reverse Transcription quantitative PCR

For most experiments, 0.2 million cells were seeded into 6-well plates and treated, or not, 2 days later with the compounds indicated in the figures (TCDD, Benzo(a)pyrene, 3-methylcholanthrene, resveratrol and quercetin). RNA was prepared using the RNeasy mini kit from Qiagen (France). Reverse transcription was performed using the High Capacity cDNA Reverse Transcription Kit (Life technology, France) as described. Then quantitative PCR was performed with 40 ng of cDNA as described previously, with duplicates for each experiment. The human primers were: RPL13A forward 5'-AAGGTCGTGCGTCTGAAG-3' and reverse 5'-GAGTCCGTGGGTCTTGAG-3', AQP3 forward 5'-GCAGCCTGTCCATCTGTG-3' and reverse 5'-ACCCTACTTCCCAAAGCC-3'. The mouse primers were: AQP3 forward 5'-AACCCCTGCTGTGACCTTTG-3' and reverse 5'-GCTGCTGTGCCTATGAACTG-3', CYP1A1 forward 5'-CCGTATTCTGCCTTGGATTC-3' and reverse 5'-CCTGCTTGATGGTGTTTCAG-3' and GAPDH forward 5'-AACGACCCCTTCATTGAC-3' and reverse 5'-

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3 TCCACGACATACTCAGCAC-3'. The relative amounts of mRNA were estimated  
4  
5 using the delta-delta Ct method with RPL13A as the reference for human samples  
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7 and glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) for the murine samples.  
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### 10 11 **Western blot.**

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14 Cells were scraped into M-PER® Mammalian Protein Extraction Reagent containing  
15  
16 a protease and phosphatase inhibitor cocktail (Sigma) and clarified by centrifugation.  
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18 For western blots, equal amounts of total protein were separated by SDS-PAGE and  
19  
20 transferred onto nitrocellulose membranes. Blocking of the membrane was done in  
21  
22 0.2% I-Block (life technologies) solution containing 0.1% Tween-20 for 1 h at room  
23  
24 temperature followed by incubation overnight at 4°C with primary antibodies AQP3  
25  
26 (Ab125219, Abcam Paris, France) and actin (loading control, ab8226, Abcam Paris,  
27  
28 France). After 3 washes with 0.1% Tween-20 PBS, the membrane was incubated  
29  
30 with the corresponding alkaline phosphatase-conjugated secondary antibody or  
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32 IRdye 800 and IRdye 680 (Sciencetec). After the final washes, signals were  
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34 assessed using the Odyssey® Infrared Imager (LI-COR).  
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### 40 41 **Transfection with siRNA**

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43 One day before transfection, HepG2 cells ( $4 \cdot 10^5$  cells per well) were seeded into 6-  
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45 well plates. Twenty-four hours later, the medium was replaced by DMEM without  
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47 phenol red supplemented with 3% charcoal-treated (deteroidized) calf serum and  
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49 cells were then transfected with 5 nM siRNA, using the HiPerfect transfection reagent  
50  
51 (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer's protocol. For experiments involving AQP3,  
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53 after 8 h of incubation at 37°C, the medium was replaced and the cells were treated  
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55 or not with 25 nM TCDD. Seventy-two hours after transfection, purification of RNA  
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3 and examination of the cellular immunofluorescence were carried out. SiRNA  
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5 references (Qiagen) are: Hs\_AQP3\_5\_HP Validated siRNA (ref: SI02776900) and  
6  
7 Hs\_AQP3\_6\_HP Validated siRNA (ref: SI02780295).  
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### 10 11 **Immunofluorescence**

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14 Cells were seeded onto glass coverslips in 6-well plates at a concentration of  
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16 approximately  $5 \times 10^5$  cells per well. Cells were exposed to TCDD (25 nM) for 48 h in  
17  
18 DMEM without phenol red supplemented with 3% charcoal-treated calf serum. For  
19  
20 immunofluorescence, all steps were carried out at room temperature.  
21

22  
23 The coverslips were washed twice with 1 X PBS and then fixed with 4%  
24  
25 paraformaldehyde for 20 min. The cells were permeabilized for 3 min with 0.3%  
26  
27 Triton- PBS- and then incubated with 1% bovine serum albumin-PBS-, 0.3M glycine  
28  
29 for 30 min. Incubation with the primary antibody to AQP3 (Ab125219, Abcam Paris,  
30  
31 France) was performed for 1 h at room temperature in 1% bovine serum albumin-  
32  
33 PBS. For staining of actin and the nucleus, FITC-conjugated phalloidin and TO-PRO-  
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35 3 (Invitrogen) were included during the incubation with the secondary antibody. The  
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37 coverslips were sealed with Dako Faramount Aqueous Mounting Medium Ready-to-  
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39 use (Invitrogen). Mounted cells were observed and images recorded using a Zeiss  
40  
41 LSM 510 confocal microscope (Carl Zeiss Meditec France SAS, Le Pecq, France)  
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43 with a Zeiss 63x Plan-Apochromat O.N. = 1,4 / Oil / DIC objective and LSM Image  
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45 Browser.  
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### 49 50 51 **xCELLigence Real-Time Cell Analysis (RTCA) of Migration**

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53 Cell migration was carried out using an xCELLigence RTCA DP instrument (ACEA  
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55 Biosciences) which was placed in a humidified incubator at 37 °C and 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. The  
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3 experiments were performed using modified 16-well plates (CIM-16) with each well  
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5 consisting of an upper and a lower chamber separated by a microporous membrane.  
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7 Microelectrodes were attached to the underside of the membrane for impedance-  
8  
9 based detection of migrated cells.  
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11 HepG2 cells (50.000 cells per well) were seeded into CIM-16 plates (which are  
12  
13 specifically used to measure cell migration) in DMEM without phenol red  
14  
15 supplemented with 3% charcoal-treated (deteroidized) calf serum and were  
16  
17 transfected with the siControl (siC) or the siAQP3 using the RNAi Max transfection  
18  
19 reagent according to the protocol provided by the supplier (Life  
20  
21 Technologies, Rockville, MD, USA). The lower chambers contained media with 10%  
22  
23 FBS in order to assess chemotactic migration. After 24 h of incubation at 37 °C, the  
24  
25 medium was replaced and the cells were treated, or not, with 25 nM TCDD. The  
26  
27 impedance value of each well was automatically monitored by the xCELLigence  
28  
29 system and expressed as a cell index value (CI). Higher CI values equate to more  
30  
31 migration; the cells migrate from the upper chamber towards the lower chamber. The  
32  
33 migration curves were monitored online of every 5 min during the 160 h of incubation  
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35 and the slope of the migration curve was calculated using the RTCA 1.2 software.  
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37 Each experiment was performed in triplicates.  
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### 45 **Statistical analysis**

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47 The results arising from three independent experiments are expressed as the  
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49 mean  $\pm$  SD (standard deviations). Statistical analysis was performed using  
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51 successively the U Mann-Whitney's test (nonparametric comparison of 2  
52  
53 independent series) or H Kruskal-Wallis's test (nonparametric comparison of k  
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3 independent series) followed by a 1-factor ANOVA test (parametric comparison of k  
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5 independent series). A value of  $p < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.  
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## Results

### **The expression of AQP3 in mice is up regulated following exposure to TCDD exposure**

Our previous studies showed that TCDD and the AhR triggered cell migration (Bui et al., 2009). In order to identify putative targets involved in this process, we screened available microarray data (from our laboratory) for changes in gene expression following treatment of cell lines with dioxin (Diry et al., 2006). The expression of AQP3 was found to be increased. Since aquaporins have been described as critical regulators of cell migration and potentially metastasis, we examined whether the expression of AQP3 is regulated by TCDD in several murine tissues. Figure 1 shows that whereas CYP1A1 (a TCDD target) expression is increased in all the organs examined (Figure 1A), the levels of AQP3 mRNA are significantly up-regulated only in skin and in liver (Figure 1B).

### **AQP3 mRNA and protein levels are increased by TCDD**

To decipher the mechanisms involved in this regulation, we examined the kinetics and dose-response characteristics following treatment with TCDD of HepG2 cells, which express the Aryl hydrocarbon Receptor (AhR). We found an increase in AQP3 mRNA expression that was significant after 8h of exposure of cells to 25 nM TCDD treatment. This increase remained significant for longest periods of time tested (48 hours, Figure 2A) indicating that the AQP3 gene is a transcriptional target of dioxin. A significant induction of AQP3 expression was observed following exposure of cells, for either 24 or 48 hours, to concentrations of TCDD in the range of 1-100 nM (Figures 2B and 2C). The amount of AQP3 protein was significantly increased

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3 following treatment for 24 or 48 hours with 25 nM TCDD (Figure 2D and  
4  
5 supplementary figure 1). We demonstrated that AQP3 mRNA is increased in liver but  
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7 also in skin in TCDD-exposed mice; we then checked the expression of AQP3 mRNA  
8  
9 in the human epidermal keratinocytes derived from the foreskin of a newborn (strain  
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11 YF23) (Vanhoutteghem and Djian, 2004) and demonstrated that it was significantly  
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13 increased following treatment for 48 hours with 25 nM TCDD (Supplementary Figure  
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### 20 **The induction of AQP3 expression depends upon the AhR**

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22 We next investigated the involvement of the AhR in the induction of AQP3  
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24 expression. Three other AhR ligands (3MC, BaP and quercetine) were able to  
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26 significantly increase the AQP3 mRNA expression albeit to different extents (Figure  
27  
28 3A). Resveratrol increases the level of AQP3 and blocks the effects of TCDD.  
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31  
32 In a cell line which does not express a optimal AhR pathway (MDA-MB-231), AQP3  
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34 is not induced following exposure of cells for 48 hours to 25 nM dioxin (Figure 3B).  
35  
36 We then used RNA interference to decrease the levels of AhR in the HepG2 cells  
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38 exposed or not to TCDD (Figure 3C). Following AhR knockdown, the increase in  
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40 expression of both CYP1A1 (Figure 3D) and AQP3 (Figure 3E) are significantly  
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42 reduced following exposure of cells to TCDD. These results strongly suggest that the  
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44 AhR is involved in mediating the effects of TCDD. Finally, using analysis by  
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46 chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChIP), we found that AhR binds to the AQP3  
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48 promoter (which contains a potential XRE as identified by the MatInspector software  
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50 located in -954/-950) of HepG2 cells exposed to 25nM TCDD (Figure 3F).  
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3 We then investigated the function of AQP3 in HepG2 cells, specifically when its  
4 expression is triggered by TCDD. We used RNA interference to knockdown AQP3  
5 mRNA levels by more than 60% (Figure 4A, 75% with TCDD). The level of CYP1A1  
6 mRNA was not modified which suggests that this knockdown is specific (Figure 4B).  
7 Immunofluorescence was then used to investigate the morphological changes  
8 induced by exposure of cells to TCDD. Antibodies to actin and paxillin were used to  
9 examine, respectively, the cytoskeleton and focal adhesion sites. Cells exposed to  
10 TCDD had dramatically altered morphologies as seen previously (cell spreading,  
11 formation of focal adhesion sites). Remarkably, transfection of cells with siAQP3  
12 blunted this effect (Figure 4C). Finally, we investigated global cellular attributes in  
13 another way. We used the xCELLigence system with specific plates (CIM plates) to  
14 measure cell invasion and migration. Cells exposed to TCDD had CI values that  
15 significantly increased over time, which suggests that cell invasion/migration was  
16 increased (Figure 4D). The use of RNA interference to reduce the induction, by  
17 TCDD, of expression of AQP3 impairs this effect. These results suggest that the  
18 induction of AQP3 is a required step in a molecular pathway that leads to changes in  
19 liver cell morphology and migration following exposure to TCDD.  
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## Discussion

In this study, we show that the expression of AQP3 can be regulated by the Ah Receptor (AhR), which, in turn, is activated by numerous exogenous and endogenous ligands. In line with our previous studies on Hef1 and Sos1 (Bui et al., 2009; Pierre et al., 2011; Tomkiewicz et al., 2013), this regulation of AQP3 appears also critical for the migration of cancer cells exposed to AhR ligands, suggesting that several participants in the epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) are concomitantly up-regulated or activated, which leads to cellular remodeling of focal adhesion sites (HEF1, FAK, Src), cell proliferation (SOS1) and migration (AQP3) (Bui et al., 2009; Pierre et al., 2011; Tomkiewicz et al., 2013). An epithelial cell undergoes EMT when it loses its epithelial markers and acquires mesenchymal markers; as a consequence, adhesion and migration properties are changed. EMT has been described in physiological (gastrulation) and pathological (fibrosis) processes and is suspected to be involved in the formation of metastatic cells.

AQP3 is expressed in epithelia (oral, mammary gland) (Poveda et al., 2014; Mobasher and Barrett-Jolley, 2014). Its expression has been shown to be regulated not only by a number of physiological stimuli including Epidermal Growth Factor (EGF) or Hepatocyte Growth Factor (HGF) but also by cellular regulatory processes such as miRNA production (miR-874) (Jiang et al., 2014; Zhi et al., 2014). The up-regulation of AQP3 may be also related to epithelial-mesenchymal transition since AQP3 modulates cell migration and invasion and decreases the expression of E-Cadherin through activation of the PI3K (phosphoinositide 3-kinase)/AKT/SNAIL pathway (Chen et al., 2015). The mechanism linking AQP3 to the PI3K pathway remains to be characterized.

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3 AQP3 has been implicated in the regulation of cell migration in other systems. For  
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5 example, a recent study using human skin samples showed that the expression of  
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7 AQP3 increased following burn injury, specifically along the burn edge and that this  
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9 expression contributes to burn healing (Sebastian et al., 2015). Interestingly, it might  
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11 be possible that a burn injury produces locally some polycyclic aromatic  
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13 hydrocarbons which could activate the AhR and then induce AQP3. Peritoneal  
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15 wound healing also depends on the expression of AQP3 which is, in this specific  
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17 case, stimulated by transforming growth factor beta 1 (TGF- $\beta$ 1), whose expression is  
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19 also stimulated upon TCDD exposure in mice (Ryu et al., 2012; Pierre et al., 2014).  
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23 The regulation of cell migration is also a critical process in the appearance of  
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25 metastatic cells and AQP3 has been implicated in the migration of cancer cells using  
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27 different models. This is the case for human mammary (stimulated by fibroblast  
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29 growth factor 2) (Cao et al., 2013), gastric (stimulated by c-Met or EGD) (Wang et al.,  
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31 2012; Xu et al., 2011; Huang et al., 2010) colon and pancreatic cell lines (stimulated  
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33 by EGF). These studies have been helpful showing that the PI3K/AKT and ERK  
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35 (Extracellular signal-Regulated Kinase 1/2) pathways are involved in the up-  
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37 regulation of the expression of AQP3. For example, the knockdown of AQP3 mRNA  
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39 and protein in prostate cancer cell lines leads to a reduction of ERK1/2 signaling and  
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41 MMP3 (Matrix Metalloprotease 3) secretion (Chen et al., 2015).  
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45 Taking into consideration the diverse physiological and pathophysiological processes  
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47 involving AQP3, we hypothesize that the regulation of this protein by the Aryl  
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49 hydrocarbon Receptor (AhR) might be critical for AhR ligand-related pathologies  
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51 including chloracne (a skin disease highly related to dioxin exposure), metabolic  
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53 disorders (due to its expression in adipose tissues) and cancer. In particular, we  
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55 hypothesize that AQP3 increases water transport at the proximity of the cell  
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3 membrane thus allowing a reshaping of cellular protrusions, which are essential for  
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5 cell migration. Ji C. et al (Ji et al., 2008), showed that curcumin, an AhR ligand,  
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7 impairs both the induction of AQP3 and cell migration in human ovarian CaOV3 cells.  
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9 This is coherent with our hypothesis that each AhR ligand acts differently on the AhR;  
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11 although the authors demonstrated that curcumin blocks the EGF pathway, it is also  
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13 possible that it inhibits AhR signaling as this polyphenol is described as an antagonist  
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15 of TCDD (Gouédard et al., 2003, 2004; Guyot et al., 2012, 2013; Juricek et al., 2014).  
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17 The regulation of AQP3 by the AhR might be even more complex, while taking in  
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19 account the interplay between the receptor and the estrogen pathway. Indeed,  
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21 Boverhof et al., studied the inhibition of estrogen-mediated uterine gene expression  
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23 responses by TCDD and show that ethinyl estradiol (EE) blocks Aqp3 mRNA  
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25 expression in mice in the uterus (Boverhof et al., 2008). Moreover, Burns et al,  
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27 showed that exposure to TCDD during gestation, also blunted the adult uterine  
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29 response to estradiol in mice; as a consequence, E2-induction of Aqp3 mRNA is also  
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31 decreased by TCDD (Burns et al., 2013). Both studies strongly suggest that AQP3 is  
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33 a target gene of the estrogen receptors (ER) and the aryl hydrocarbon receptor  
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35 pathways. Interestingly, TCDD has been shown to display both pro-estrogenic or  
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37 anti-estrogenic properties according to the presence of estradiol, the tissue and the  
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39 context (ex: pro-estrogenic in case of an unbound state) (Ohtake et al., 2003). One  
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41 hypothesis would be that estrogen-responsive tissues positively responds to estradiol  
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43 and negatively to TCDD regarding AQP3 (and probably other genes), while tissues  
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45 such as skin or liver only respond to TCDD (but possibly in a complex involving the  
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47 unbound ER).  
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3 Cancer phenotypes are dependent on the inflammatory and hypoxic characteristics  
4 of the tumor which also have been associated with the expression of AQP3. A recent  
5 study showed that AQP3 might be important in the regulation of inflammation: AQP3  
6 is transcriptionally regulated by Notch signaling in keratinocytes. The Notch-AQP3  
7 pathway (which involves a negative feedback loop) triggers the production of pro-  
8 inflammatory cytokines and its dysregulation is associated with the development of  
9 skin cancers (Guo et al., 2013). Moreover, the overexpression of several AQPs in  
10 PC12 cells (rat pheochromocytoma) leads to the stabilization of Hypoxia Induced  
11 Factor-2 alpha (HIF-2 alpha), a transcription factor which positively regulates  
12 angiogenesis, glucose metabolism and the acquisition of invasive properties (Galán-  
13 Cobo et al., 2013). HIF-2 alpha acts through binding to ARNT, the transcriptional  
14 partner of the AhR.  
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30 In conclusion, we provide here the first evidence for a link between an environmental  
31 insult and the up-regulation of expression of AQP3. While important from a  
32 toxicological point of view, there also may be pharmacological implications.  
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In conclusion, we provide here the first evidence for a link between an environmental insult and the up-regulation of expression of AQP3. While important from a toxicological point of view, there also may be pharmacological implications. Manipulation of the AhR pathway (using agonists or antagonists of the receptor) to increase or decrease the expression of AQP3 may be useful for skin (re)-hydration, wound healing and for regulating cancer progression.

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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## Figures legends

### Figure 1: Dioxin treatment increases the level AQP3 mRNA *in vivo* in the skin and the liver

Wild-type mice were treated on days 0 and 7, with either TCDD (25 µg/kg) or corn oil (control) and sacrificed on day 14. CYP1A1 (A) and AQP3 (B) mRNA levels were measured by quantitative real time PCR (qRT-PCR). The single and triple asterisks indicate  $P < 0.05$  and  $P < 0.001$ , respectively, as compared to controls.

### Figure 2: Dioxin treatment increases the levels of AQP3 mRNA and protein *in vitro* in HepG2 cells.

The levels of AQP3 mRNA and protein were measured by quantitative real-time PCR (A, B, C) and Western blot (D) in time-course (A, D) and dose-response (B, C) studies of dioxin-treated cells. The single and double asterisks indicate  $P < 0.05$  and  $P < 0.01$ , respectively, as compared to the control condition.

### Figure 3: The AhR regulates the transcription of AQP3

(A) Quantitative real-time PCR measurement of the level of AQP3 mRNA following 48 h of exposure of HepG2 cells to AhR ligands (3MC: 3-methylcholanthrene; BaP: benzo(a)pyrene). (B) Quantitative real-time PCR measurement of the level of AQP3 mRNA following exposure to ligands for 48 h of MDA-MB-231 AhR deficient cells. (C-E) Quantitative real-time PCR measurement of the levels of AhR (C), CYP1A1 (D) and AQP3 (E) mRNA in AhR small-interfering RNA (siRNA)-transfected HepG2 cells. (F) Chromatin immunoprecipitation carried out on the AQP3 promoter XRE region. Values are expressed as the mean  $\pm$  s.e.m. The single, double and triple asterisks

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3 indicate  $P < 0.05$ ,  $P < 0.01$  and  $P < 0.001$ , respectively, as compared to the control  
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5 condition.  
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10 **Figure 4: AQP3 is involved in dioxin-induced changes of cell morphology and**  
11 **migration**

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14 (A-B) Quantitative real-time PCR measurement of the levels of AQP3 (A) and  
15 CYP1A1 (B) mRNA in AQP3 small interfering RNA (siRNA)-transfected HepG2 cells.  
16 Control siRNA (siC) was used as control and dioxin (25 nM) was used to induce  
17 AQP3. The results expressed are the mean  $\pm$  s.e.m of at least three different  
18 experiments. The double and triple asterisks indicate  $P < 0.01$  and  $P < 0.001$ ,  
19 respectively, as compared to the controls. (C) Immunofluorescence microscopy  
20 showing the fluorescence of actin (green, upper part of the panel) or paxillin (red,  
21 middle part of the panel) of siRNA-transfected HepG2 cells treated or not with dioxin  
22 (25nM). The merged images are shown in the lower panel. siAQP3 transfection  
23 significantly reduces the morphological changes (cell spreading and formation of  
24 focal adhesion sites) observed following exposure of the cells to dioxin. Scale bar, 10  
25  $\mu$ m. (D) Assessment of global cell parameters (cell invasion and migration) in AQP3  
26 small interfering RNA (siRNA)-transfected HepG2 cells following exposure of cells to  
27 dioxin made with the xCelligence system (CIM plate). The slope, represents the rate  
28 of change of the cell index as a function of time between 76h and 96h. Higher CI  
29 values equate to more migration. The results are expressed as the mean $\pm$ s.e.m of at  
30 least three different experiments. The single and double asterisks indicate  $P < 0.05$   
31 and  $P < 0.01$ , respectively, as compared to the controls.  
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3 **Supplementary Figure 1: Dioxin treatment increases the levels of AQP3 protein**  
4 ***in vitro* in HepG2 cells.** A representative Western blot of AQP3 protein induction  
5 (time-course studies of dioxin-treated cells) is shown.  
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11 **Supplementary Figure 2: Dioxin treatment increases the levels of AQP3 mRNA**  
12 ***in vitro* in the human epidermal keratinocytes YF23.** The levels of AQP3 mRNA  
13 were measured by quantitative real-time PCR of dioxin-treated cells. The single  
14 asterisk indicates  $P < 0.05$  as compared to the control condition.  
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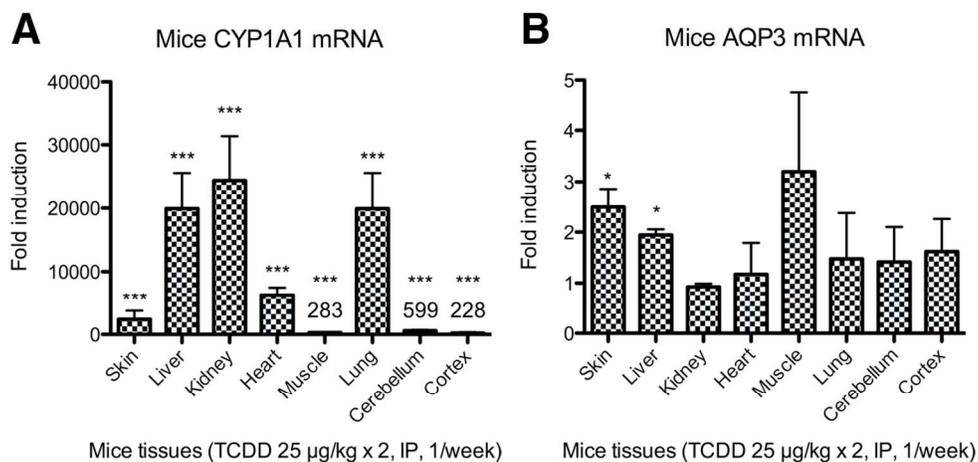


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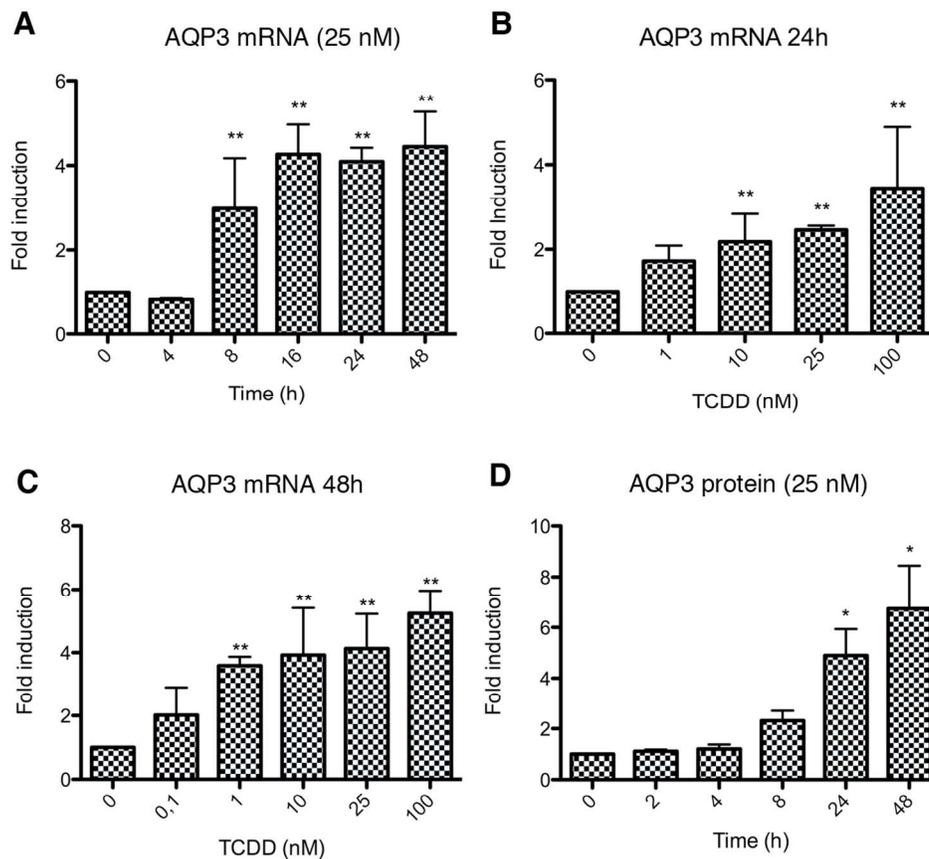


Figure 2: Dioxin treatment increases the levels of AQP3 mRNA and protein in vitro in HepG2 cells. The levels of AQP3 mRNA and protein were measured by quantitative real-time PCR (A, B, C) and Western blot (D) in time-course (A, D) and dose-response (B, C) studies of dioxin-treated cells. The single and double asterisks indicate  $P < 0.05$  and  $P < 0.01$ , respectively, as compared to the control condition.

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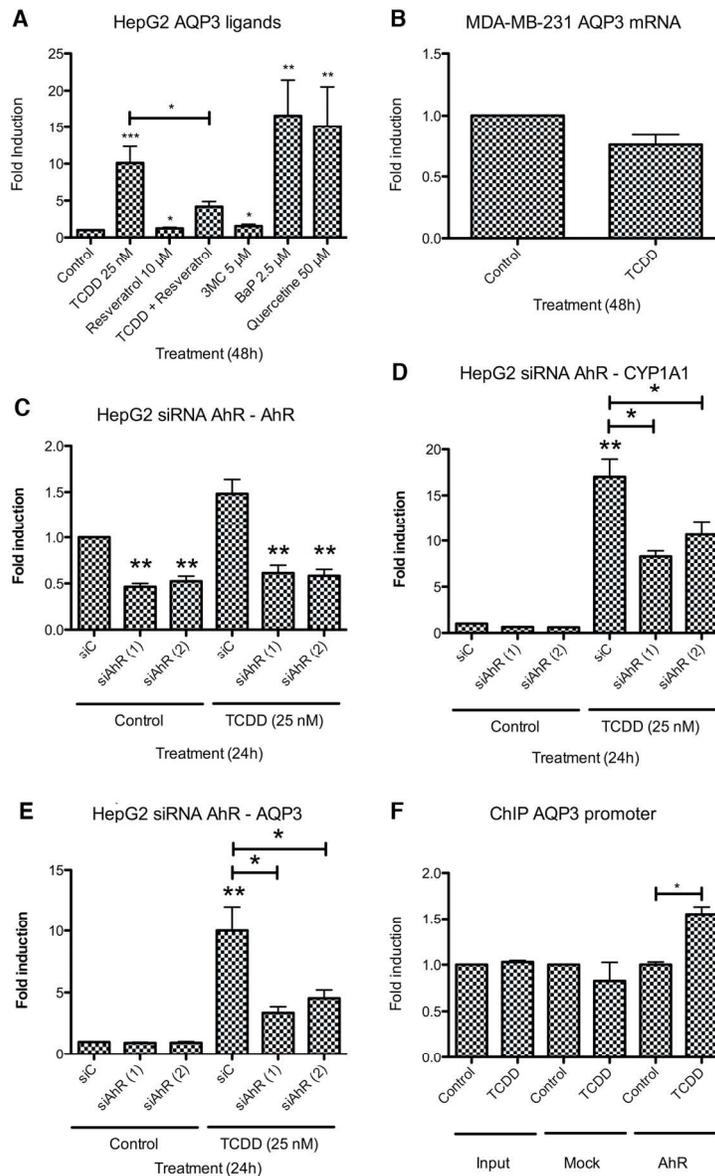


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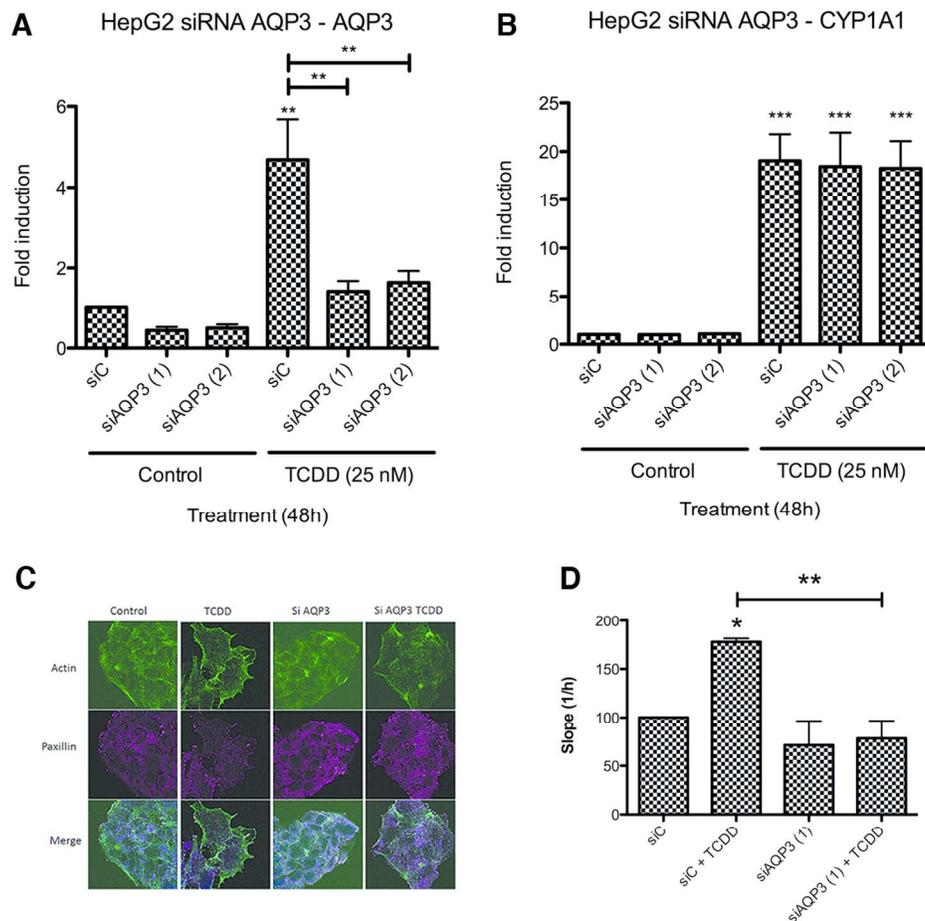


Figure 4: AQP3 is involved in dioxin-induced changes of cell morphology and migration (A-B) Quantitative real-time PCR measurement of the levels of AQP3 (A) and CYP1A1 (B) mRNA in AQP3 small interfering RNA (siRNA)-transfected HepG2 cells. Control siRNA (siC) was used as control and dioxin (25 nM) was used to induce AQP3. The results expressed are the mean  $\pm$  s.e.m. of at least three different experiments. The double and triple asterisks indicate  $P < 0.01$  and  $P < 0.001$ , respectively, as compared to the controls. (C) Immunofluorescence microscopy showing the fluorescence of actin (green, upper part of the panel) or paxillin (red, middle part of the panel) of siRNA-transfected HepG2 cells treated or not with dioxin (25nM). The merged images are shown in the lower panel. siAQP3 transfection significantly reduces the morphological changes (cell spreading and formation of focal adhesion sites) observed following exposure of the cells to dioxin. Scale bar, 10  $\mu$ m. (D) Assessment of global cell parameters (cell invasion and migration) in AQP3 small interfering RNA (siRNA)-transfected HepG2 cells following exposure of cells to dioxin made with the xCelligence system (CIM plate). The slope, represents the rate of change of the cell index as a function of time between 76h and 96h. Higher CI values equate to more migration. The results are expressed as the mean  $\pm$  s.e.m. of at least three different experiments. The single and double asterisks indicate  $P < 0.05$  and  $P < 0.01$ , respectively, as compared to the controls.

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