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► To cite this version:

Armando Andres Roca Suarez, Thomas Baumert, J Lupberger. Beyond viral dependence: The pathological consequences of HCV-induced EGF signaling. *Journal of Hepatology*, 2018, 69 (3), pp.564-566. 10.1016/j.jhep.2018.05.033 . hal-02385646

HAL Id: hal-02385646

<https://hal.science/hal-02385646>

Submitted on 28 Nov 2019

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Hepatology

Elsevier Editorial System(tm) for Journal of
Manuscript Draft

Manuscript Number:

Title: Beyond viral dependence: the pathological consequences of HCV-induced EGF signaling

Article Type: Invited Editorial

Section/Category: Clinical hepatitis C virus (HCV)

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Title: Beyond viral dependence: the pathological consequences of HCV-induced EGF signaling

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Keywords: EGF, HCV, TC-PTP, chemokines, virus-host interaction.

Electronic word count: 1057 **Number of figures:** 1

Conflict of interest statement: The authors declare that they do not have anything to disclose regarding conflict of interest with respect to this manuscript.

Acknowledgements: TFB acknowledges support by the European Union Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (ERC AdG HEPCIR – No. 667273; H2020 HEP-CAR – No. 667273; ERC POC PRELICAN – No. 755460), the NCI of the National Institutes of Health (1R21CA209940-01A1), the French National Research Agency (LABEX ANR-10-LABX-0028 HEPSYS) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs (No. W81XWH-16-1-0363). JL and AARS acknowledge the French *Agence Nationale de Recherche sur le Sida et les Hépatites Virales* (ANRS) (ECTZ4236; ECTZ4446). All authors thank Atish Mukherji (Inserm U1110, Strasbourg, France) for critical reading of the manuscript.

Authors contributions: All authors conceived, wrote and reviewed the manuscript.

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4 Comment on: “HCV modifies EGF signaling and upregulates production of CXCR2 ligands: role
5 in inflammation and antiviral immune response” by Christina Groepper, Kerstin Ruffinatscha,
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7 Nadja Schröder, Sabine Stindt, Christian Ehling, Ute Albrecht, Hans H. Bock, Ralf
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9 Bartenschlager, Dieter Häussinger and Johannes G. Bode, published in *Journal of Hepatology*
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14 2018.

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19 Chronic hepatitis C virus infection (HCV) affects approximately 71 million individuals
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21 worldwide [1], being a major etiological factor for the development of liver cirrhosis and
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23 hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Acute HCV infection often progresses to chronicity and is
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25 characterized by a non-resolving liver inflammation leading to a broad range of alterations in the
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27 tissue microenvironment. About ninety percent of HCC cases arise in the context of chronic liver
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29 inflammation, highlighting the central role of this persistent immune response in disease
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31 pathogenesis [2]. Despite efficient antiviral therapy by direct acting antivirals (DAA), the risk of
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33 HCC development cannot be fully eliminated in patients with advanced liver disease [3]. In this
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35 regard, accumulating evidence suggests a potentially persisting proto-oncogenic environment
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37 created by virus-induced changes in the cell signaling [4-7]. Therefore, even in the DAA era, the
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39 understanding of virus-host interactions during chronic HCV-associated inflammation is key to
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41 identify and treat patients at high risk to develop HCC.
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48 In this context, a recent article in *Journal of Hepatology* by Johannes G. Bode’s
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50 laboratory at the Heinrich-Heine University in Germany provides a novel mechanism by which
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52 HCV infection contributes to this pathologic inflammatory response [8]. Aiming to identify
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54 chemokines regulated by HCV, the authors performed a functional screen using an HCV
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56 subgenomic replicon system and identified an HCV-induced upregulation of C-X-C motif
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4 chemokine receptor 2 (CXCR2) ligands (CXCLs) 1, 2, 3 and 8. Consistently, similar results were
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6 obtained upon HCV infection using the cell culture-derived strain JC1. Having previously shown
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8 that HCV infection enhances epidermal growth factor (EGF) signaling, the authors next explored
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10 the possible involvement of this pathway on CXCR2 ligand expression. EGFR perturbation
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12 studies combining RNAi knockdown of EGF and the use of MAPK inhibitors, confirmed an
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14 HCV-induced upregulation of *CXCL8* via EGFR and the MAP kinase kinase MEK1.
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16 Additionally, knockdown of the p65 subunit of the NF- κ B complex was sufficient to abrogate
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18 basal and EGF-induced *CXCL8* expression in replicon-expressing cells, while in HCV-infected
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20 cells this mainly affected basal *CXCL8* levels. This suggests that the observed enhancement of
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22 chemokine expression during HCV infection not only depends on the EGFR pathway but also on
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24 the activation of additional transcription factors such as NF- κ B. The *in vivo* relevance of the data
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26 is emphasized by an association of HCV viral load with *CXCL8* serum levels in chronically
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28 infected patients. Similarly, serum levels of EGF and *CXCL8* tend to positively correlate
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30 although this did not reach statistical significance in their study cohort.

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33 In a previous study, the authors demonstrated that HCV enhances EGFR signaling via NS3/4A-
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35 mediated proteolytic cleavage of T-cell protein tyrosine phosphatase (TC-PTP), one of the major
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37 negative regulators of EGFR tyrosine-kinase activity [9]. Indeed, here they demonstrate that
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39 NS3/4A expression alone enhances EGF-inducible *CXCL8* expression, an effect that can be
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41 mimicked by knocking down TC-PTP. As the major role of chemokines is the recruitment of
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43 immune cells to the site of inflammation, the authors next evaluated if in the context of HCV
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45 replication EGF-induced release of chemokines influences leukocyte migration. Remarkably, the
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47 authors demonstrate that media from EGF-treated cell lines expressing the HCV subgenomic
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49 replicon enhances the migration of neutrophils, an effect that was not observed with EGF-
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4 conditioned media alone. This suggests that HCV infection modulates chemoattraction of
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6 immune cells to the liver via EGF-regulated chemokine secretion.
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9 The findings of Christina Groepper and co-workers are not just relevant for our
10 understanding of HCV-EGFR interaction but most importantly provide insight into the
11 pathologic consequences of derailed EGF signaling for liver inflammation and HCC
12 development (Fig. 1). EGFR is a host factor for HCV by facilitating the assembly of the host
13 entry complex, viral glycoprotein-dependent membrane fusion and cell-to-cell transmission of
14 the virus [7]. HCV requires EGFR signaling to maintain its life cycle but also induces these
15 signals itself during binding to the receptor complex [6, 10]. Moreover, during HCV infection
16 the non-structural protein NS5A prolongs EGFR signaling by perturbing its internalization and
17 subsequent degradation [11, 12]. This leads to a persistent EGFR activation during chronic HCV
18 infection that potentially contributes to an impaired antiviral response by modulating interferon
19 alpha signaling via STAT3 [13].
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36 Their finding that HCV replication promotes EGF expression is highly relevant in the study of
37 HCV-induced chronic liver disease, as the EGF pathway is a key driver associated with
38 progression towards cirrhosis [14] and HCC development [15]. Equally interesting is the
39 observation that HCV-induced EGF expression is a regulator of CXCR2 ligands. For example,
40 HCV infection has been previously described to promote CXCL8 expression, which inhibits
41 interferon antiviral activity and facilitates viral infection [16]. Hepatic CXCL8 is detected at low
42 maintenance levels during acute HCV infection, although marked increases in serum and hepatic
43 levels have been observed in HCV-infected patients with progressive inflammation and cirrhosis
44 [17]. Indeed, CXCL8, which is associated with poor outcome in HCC patients, has been
45 suggested as HCC biomarker [18]. Here, Groepper and co-workers validated a mechanistic
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4 concept between EGFR signaling and CXCL8 during HCV infection, that has been previously
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6 proposed for hepatomas [19]. Moreover, they provide a previously undescribed mechanism
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8 linking EGFR signaling to chemoattraction of immune cells. In macrophages EGFR knockout
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10 attenuates HCC development in mice [20]. EGF-mediated recruitment of neutrophils during
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12 HCV infection is potentially relevant for liver pathobiology, since it has detrimental effects on
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14 the host by contributing to the necro-inflammatory process [21].
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19 Although further studies in larger patient cohorts are needed to consolidate the model
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21 proposed by Groepper and co-workers, the impact of their findings for liver disease and its
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23 association to EGF signaling is evident [22]. In future studies, it would be very interesting and
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25 potentially relevant to follow up HCV-induced EGF expression pattern in liver tissue and blood
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27 samples before and after sustained viral response and to compare them to liver fibrosis scores.
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29 Furthermore, does HCV genotype influences EGF and chemokine expression profiles since
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31 genotype 3 is associated with more severe liver disease manifestations? Taken together, this
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33 paper represents a further corroboration for the clinical potential of HCC chemo-preventive
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35 strategies based on regulators of signal transduction. Indeed, EGFR which is phosphorylated in
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37 hepatic stellate cells (HSCs) has been successfully targeted by the clinical EGFR inhibitor
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39 erlotinib in animal models, demonstrating proof of concept that EGF-based therapies attenuates
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41 chemically induced liver fibrosis and HCC nodules [14]. Therefore, EGFR or MAPK modulators
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43 could be part of a personalized immuno-therapeutic strategy modulating chemokine profiles and
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45 inflammatory responses associated with liver disease progression.
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4 **Figure 1: Refined model of HCV-EGFR modulation and its impact on liver disease**
5 **development.** HCV binding to the HCV entry receptor complex (i.e. CD81, CLDN1) at the cell
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7 surface induces EGFR phosphorylation and downstream signaling. EGFR activity is prolonged
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9 by the NS5A-mediated perturbation of EGFR internalization and degradation. As a consequence,
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11 prolonged EGFR activity is associated with an increased hepatocyte proliferation, HSCs
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13 activation, fibrogenesis and a dampened antiviral response via modulation of STAT3. Groepper
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15 *et al.*, (colored pathway) demonstrated that HCV replication enhances the expression of CXCR2
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17 ligands (e.g. *CXCL8*) by intermediary of an EGF-dependent mechanism and activation of the
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19 NF- κ B signaling pathway. This is further favored via the proteolytic cleavage of TC-PTP by
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21 NS3/4A, resulting in increased EGFR activation. Upon EGF stimulation, the production of
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23 CXCL8 during HCV replication promotes the recruitment of neutrophils.
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Figure 1: Refined model of HCV-EGFR modulation
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