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Shuye Zhang

*University of Massachusetts Medical School, shuye.zhang@umassmed.edu*

Karen Kodys

*University of Massachusetts Medical School, Karen.Kodys@umassmed.edu*

Gyongyi Szabo

*University of Massachusetts Medical School, gyongyi.szabo@umassmed.edu*

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## CD81/CD9 TETRASPANINS AID PLASMACYTOID DENDRITIC CELLS IN RECOGNITION OF HCV-INFECTED CELLS AND INDUCTION OF IFN $\alpha$

Shuye Zhang, Karen Kodys, Gyongyi Szabo

University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA

Contact: [Shuye.zhang@umassmed.edu](mailto:Shuye.zhang@umassmed.edu)

Recognition of hepatitis C virus (HCV)-infected hepatocytes and interferon (IFN) induction are critical in antiviral immune response. We hypothesized that cell-cell contact between pDCs and HCV-infected cells was required for IFN $\alpha$  induction via involvement of cell surface molecules. Co-culture of human peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) with genotype 1a full length HCV genomic replicon cells (FL) or genotype 2a JFH-1 virus infected hepatoma cells (JFH-1), not with uninfected hepatoma cells (Huh7.5), induced IFN $\alpha$  production. Depletion of pDCs from PBMCs attenuated IFN $\alpha$  release and purified pDCs produced high levels of IFN $\alpha$  after co-culture with FL replicons or JFH-1 infected cells. IFN $\alpha$  induction by HCV-containing hepatoma cells required viral replication, direct cell-cell contact with pDCs, and receptor-mediated endocytosis. We determined that the tetraspanin proteins, CD81 and CD9 and not other HCV entry receptors were required for IFN $\alpha$  induction in pDCs by HCV infected hepatoma cells. Disruption of cholesterol-rich membrane microdomains, the localization site of CD81 or inhibition of CD81 downstream molecule, Rac GTPase, inhibited IFN $\alpha$  production from co-cultures. IFN $\alpha$  production by HCV infected hepatoma cells was decreased in pDCs from HCV infected patients compared to normal controls. We found that pre-exposure of normal PBMCs to HCV viral particles attenuated IFN $\alpha$  induction by HCV infected hepatoma cells or TLR ligands and this inhibitory effect could be prevented by an anti-HCV E2 blocking antibody. **In conclusion**, our novel data show that recognition of HCV-infected hepatoma cells by pDCs involves CD81/CD9-associated membrane microdomains and induces potent IFN $\alpha$  production.