

## Cellular senescence: defining a path forward

Vassilis Gorgoulis<sup>1\*</sup>, Peter D. Adams<sup>2</sup>, Andrea Alimonti<sup>3</sup>, Dorothy C. Bennett<sup>4</sup>, Oliver Bischof<sup>5</sup>, Cleo Bishop<sup>6</sup>, Judith Campisi<sup>7</sup>, Manuel Collado<sup>8</sup>, Konstantinos Evangelou<sup>9</sup>, Gerardo Ferbeyre<sup>10</sup>, Jesús Gil<sup>11</sup>, Eiji Hara<sup>12</sup>, Valery Krizhanovsky<sup>13</sup>, Diana Jurk<sup>14</sup>, Andrea B. Maier<sup>15</sup>, Masashi Narita<sup>16</sup>, Laura Niedernhofer<sup>17</sup>, João F. Passos<sup>14</sup>, Paul D. Robbins<sup>17</sup>, Clemens A. Schmitt<sup>18</sup>, John Sedivy<sup>19</sup>, Konstantinos Vougas<sup>20</sup>, Thomas von Zglinicki<sup>21</sup>, Daohong Zhou<sup>22</sup>, Manuel Serrano<sup>23\*</sup>, Marco Demaria<sup>24\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Molecular Carcinogenesis Group, Department of Histology and Embryology, Medical School, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece; Faculty Institute for Cancer Sciences, Manchester Academic Health Sciences Centre, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; Biomedical Research Foundation, Academy of Athens, Athens, Greece; Center for New Biotechnologies and Precision Medicine, Medical School, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Cancer Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G61 1BD, UK; CRUK Beatson Institute, Glasgow G61 1BD, UK; Sanford Burnham Prebys Medical Discovery Institute, La Jolla, CA 92037, USA

<sup>3</sup>Institute of Oncology Research (IOR), Oncology Institute of Southern Switzerland, Bellinzona, Switzerland; Università della Svizzera Italiana, Faculty of Biomedical Sciences, Lugano, Switzerland; Department of Medicine, University of Padova, Padova, Italy; Veneto Institute of Molecular Medicine, Padova, Italy;

<sup>4</sup>Molecular and Clinical Sciences Research Institute, St. George's, University of London, London SW17 0RE, UK

<sup>5</sup>Laboratory of Nuclear Organization and Oncogenesis, Department of Cell Biology and Infection, INSERM U.993, Institute Pasteur, Paris, France

<sup>6</sup>Centre for Cell Biology and Cutaneous Research, Blizard Institute, Barts & The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, 4 Newark St, London, E1 2AT

<sup>7</sup>Buck Institute for Research on Aging, Novato CA, USA

<sup>8</sup>Health Research Institute of Santiago de Compostela (IDIS), Clinical University Hospital (CHUS), Santiago de Compostela, Spain

<sup>9</sup>Molecular Carcinogenesis Group, Department of Histology and Embryology, Medical School, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece;

<sup>10</sup>Faculty of Medicine, Department of Biochemistry, Université de Montréal and CRCHUM, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

<sup>11</sup>MRC London Institute of Medical Sciences (LMS), Du Cane Road, London, UK; Institute of Clinical Sciences (ICS), Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College London, Du Cane Road, London, UK

37 <sup>12</sup>Department of Molecular Microbiology, Research Institute for Microbial Diseases, Osaka  
38 University, Osaka, Japan

39 <sup>13</sup>Department of Molecular Cell Biology, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel

40 <sup>14</sup>Robert and Arlene Kogod Center on Aging, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

41 <sup>15</sup>Department of Human Movement Sciences, Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences,  
42 Amsterdam Movement Sciences, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Department  
43 of Medicine and Aged Care, The Royal Melbourne Hospital, The University of Melbourne,  
44 Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

45 <sup>16</sup>Cancer Research UK Cambridge Institute, Li Ka Shing Centre, University of Cambridge,  
46 Cambridge CB2 0RE, United Kingdom

47 <sup>17</sup>Institute on the Biology of Aging and Metabolism, University of Minnesota

48 <sup>18</sup>Charité - University Medical Center, Department of Hematology, Oncology and Tumor  
49 Immunology, Virchow Campus, and Molekulares Krebsforschungszentrum, Berlin, Germany;  
50 Max-Delbrück-Center for Molecular Medicine in the Helmholtz Association, Berlin, Germany;  
51 Kepler University Hospital, Department of Hematology and Oncology, Johannes Kepler  
52 University, Linz, Austria

53 <sup>19</sup>Department of Molecular Biology, Cell Biology and Biochemistry, and Center for the Biology  
54 of Aging, Brown University, Providence RI, USA

55 <sup>20</sup>Biomedical Research Foundation, Academy of Athens, Athens, Greece

56 <sup>21</sup>Newcastle University Institute for Ageing, Institute for Cell and Molecular Biology, Campus  
57 for Ageing and Vitality, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE4 5PL, UK

58 <sup>22</sup>Department of Pharmacodynamics, College of Pharmacy, University of Florida, Gainesville  
59 FL, USA

60 <sup>23</sup>Institute for Research in Biomedicine (IRB Barcelona), Barcelona Institute of Science and  
61 Technology (BIST), Barcelona, Spain; Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies  
62 (ICREA), Barcelona, Spain.

63 <sup>24</sup>University of Groningen (RUG), European Research Institute for the Biology of Aging  
64 (ERIBA), University Medical Center Groningen (UMCG)

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66

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68 *\*correspondence to: Vassilis Gorgoulis: [vgorg@med.uoa.gr](mailto:vgorg@med.uoa.gr); Manuel Serrano:*

69 *[manuel.serrano@irbbarcelona.org](mailto:manuel.serrano@irbbarcelona.org); Marco Demaria: [m.demaria@umcg.nl](mailto:m.demaria@umcg.nl)*

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74 **ABSTRACT**

75 Cellular senescence is a cell state implicated in various physiological processes and a wide  
76 spectrum of age-related diseases. Recently, interest in therapeutically targeting senescence to  
77 improve healthy aging and age-related disease (senotherapeutics) has been growing rapidly.  
78 Thus, the accurate detection of senescent cells, especially *in vivo*, is essential. Here, we present a  
79 consensus from the International Cell Senescence Association (ICSA), defining and discussing  
80 key cellular and molecular features of senescence and offering recommendations on how to use  
81 them as biomarkers. We also present a resource tool to facilitate the identification of genes  
82 linked with senescence (SeneQuest, available at <http://Senequest.net>). Lastly, we propose an  
83 algorithm to accurately assess and quantify senescence, both in cultured cells and *in vivo*.

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86 **MAIN TEXT**

87 **Cellular senescence: walking a line between life and death**

88 Cell states link both physiological and stress signals to tissue homeostasis and organismal  
89 health. In both cases, the outcomes vary and are determined by the signal characteristics (*type*,  
90 *magnitude* and *duration*), spatiotemporal parameters (*where* and *when*) and cellular capacity to  
91 respond (Gorgoulis et al., 2018). In the case of potentially damaging stress, damage can be  
92 reversed and cells restored structural and functional integrity. Alternatively, damage can be  
93 irreversible and cells activate death mechanisms mainly to restrict the impact on tissue  
94 degeneration. Between these extremes, cells can acquire other states, often associated with  
95 survival, but also with permanent structural and functional changes. An example is the non-  
96 proliferative but viable state, distinct from G0 quiescence and terminal differentiation, termed  
97 cellular senescence (Rodier and Campisi, 2011). Formally described in 1961 by Hayflick and  
98 colleagues, cellular *senescence* derived from the latin word “*senex*” meaning “old” (Hayflick  
99 and Moorhead, 1961), was originally observed in normal diploid cells that ceased to proliferate  
100 after a finite number of divisions (*Hayflick limit*), later attributed to telomere shortening (see  
101 section “*Cell cycle withdrawal*”).

102 Cellular senescence has since been identified as a response to numerous stressors,  
103 including exposure to genotoxic agents, nutrient deprivation, hypoxia, mitochondrial dysfunction  
104 and oncogene activation (**Table 1: Senescence inducers**). Over the last decade, improved  
105 experimental tools and the development of reporter/ablation mouse models have significantly  
106 advanced our knowledge about causes and phenotypic consequences of senescent cells.  
107 However, specific markers and a consensus definition of what constitutes senescent cells are  
108 lacking. Further, although a link to organismal aging is clear, aging and senescence are not

109 synonymous (Rodier and Campisi, 2011). Indeed, cells can undergo senescence, regardless of  
110 organismal age, due to myriad signals, including those independent of telomere shortening.  
111 Consequently, senescent cells are detected at any life stage, from embryogenesis, where they  
112 contribute to tissue development, to adulthood, where they prevent the propagation of damaged  
113 cells and contribute to tissue repair and tumor suppression. Thus, cellular senescence might be  
114 an example of evolutionary antagonistic pleiotropy or an abortive cellular program with  
115 detrimental effects. Here, we clarify the nature of cellular senescence by: **i)** presenting key  
116 features of senescent cells; **ii)** providing a comprehensive definition of senescence, **iii)**  
117 suggesting means to identify senescent cells; and **iv)** delineating the role of senescent cells in  
118 physiological and pathological processes, that altogether/overall pave the way for developing new  
119 therapeutic strategies. paving the way for new therapeutic strategies.

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## 121 **Definition and characteristics of cellular senescence**

122 Cellular senescence is a cell state triggered by stressful insults and certain physiological  
123 processes, characterized by a prolonged and generally irreversible- cell-cycle arrest with  
124 secretory features, macromolecular damage and altered metabolism (**Figure 1**). These features  
125 can be inter-dependent (Figure 1) but for clarity are described here separately.

### 126 *Cell cycle arrest*

127 One common feature of senescent cells is an essentially irreversible cell cycle arrest  
128 which can be an alarm-response instigated by deleterious stimuli or aberrant proliferation. This  
129 cell cycle withdrawal differs from quiescence and terminal differentiation (He and Sharpless,  
130 2017). Quiescence is a temporary arrest state, with proliferation re-instated by appropriate  
131 stimuli; terminal differentiation is the acquisition of specific cellular functions, accompanied by

132 a durable cell cycle arrest mediated by pathways distinct from those of cellular senescence  
133 (**Figure 2**). In turn, senescent cells acquire a new phenotype, which can lead to an abortive  
134 differentiation program. Although the senescence cell cycle arrest is generally irreversible, cell  
135 cycle re-entry can occur under certain circumstances, particularly in tumor cells (Galanos et al.,  
136 2016; Milanovic et al., 2018; Patel et al., 2016; Saleh et al., 2019) (**Figure 2**).

137 In mammalian cells, the retinoblastoma (RB) family and p53 protein are important for  
138 establishing senescent cell cycle arrest (Rodier and Campisi, 2011). RB1 and its family  
139 members p107 (RBL1) and p130 (RBL2) are phosphorylated by specific CDKs (CDK4, CDK6,  
140 CDK2). This phosphorylation reduces the ability of RB family members to repress E2F-family  
141 transcription factor activity, which is required for cell cycle progression (Sharpless and Sherr,  
142 2015). In senescent cells, however, the CDK2 inhibitor p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup> (CDKN1A) and CDK4/6  
143 inhibitor p16<sup>INK4A</sup> (CDKN2A) accumulate. This accumulation results in persistent activation of  
144 RB-family proteins, inhibition of E2F transactivation and consequent cell cycle arrest, which, in  
145 time, cannot be reversed by subsequent inactivation of RB-family proteins or p53 (Beausejour et  
146 al., 2003). This persistence is enforced by heterochromatinization of E2F target genes (Salama  
147 et al., 2014), the effects of cytokines secreted by senescent cells (Rodier and Campisi, 2011),  
148 and/or enduring ROS production (Takahashi et al., 2006). Notably, in senescent murine cells,  
149 ARF, an alternate reading frame protein of the *p16<sup>INK4a</sup>* gene locus that activates p53, also has an  
150 important role in regulating cell cycle arrest (Sharpless and Sherr, 2015).

151 Additional features of the senescent cell-cycle arrest include ribosome biogenesis defects  
152 and derepression of retrotransposons (De Cecco et al., 2019; Lessard et al., 2018). However,  
153 currently no specific marker of the senescent cell-cycle arrest has been identified (Hernandez-  
154 Segura et al., 2017). For example, RB and p53 activation also occurs in other forms of cell-cycle

155 arrest (Rodier and Campisi, 2011). Even p16<sup>INK4A</sup>, which is considered more specific to  
156 senescence, is expressed in certain non-senescent cells (Sharpless and Sherr, 2015), and is not  
157 expressed by all senescent cells (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2017). Thus, detecting a senescence-  
158 associated cell cycle arrest requires quantification of multiple factors/features.

### 159 *Secretion*

160 Senescent cells secrete a plethora of factors, including pro-inflammatory cytokines and  
161 chemokines, growth modulators, angiogenic factors and matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs),  
162 collectively termed the Senescent Associated Secretory Phenotype (SASP or Senescence  
163 Messaging Secretome (SMS) (**Figure 1, Table 2**) (Coppe et al., 2010; Kuilman and Peeper,  
164 2009). The SASP constitutes a hallmark of senescent cells and mediates many of their patho-  
165 physiological effects. For example, the SASP reinforces and spreads senescence in autocrine  
166 and paracrine fashions (Acosta et al., 2013; Coppe et al., 2010; Kuilman and Peeper, 2009), and  
167 activates immune responses that eliminate senescent cells (Krizhanovsky et al., 2008a; Munoz-  
168 Espin and Serrano, 2014). SASP factors mediate developmental senescence (Munoz-Espin et al.,  
169 2013; Storer et al., 2013), wound healing (Demaria et al., 2014) and tissue plasticity (Mosteiro et  
170 al., 2016), and contribute to persistent chronic inflammation (known as inflammaging)  
171 (Franceschi and Campisi, 2014). Thus, the SASP can explain some of the deleterious, pro-aging  
172 effects of senescent cells. Further, the SASP can recruit immature immune-suppressive myeloid  
173 cells to prostate and liver tumors (Di Mitri et al., 2014; Eggert et al., 2016) and stimulate  
174 tumorigenesis by driving angiogenesis and metastasis (Coppe et al., 2010).

175 While the senescent cell cycle arrest is regulated by the p53 and p16<sup>INK4A</sup>/Rb tumor  
176 suppressor pathways, the SASP is controlled by enhancer remodeling and activation of  
177 transcription factors such as NF- $\kappa$ B, C/EBP $\beta$  and GATA4 (Ito et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2015;

178 Kuilman and Peeper, 2009; Salama et al., 2014), and mTOR (mammalian target of rapamycin)  
179 and p38MAPK signaling pathways (Freund et al., 2011; Ito et al., 2017; Kuilman and Peeper,  
180 2009). Upstream signals triggering SASP activation are multiple, and differ depending on the  
181 senescence inducer, but include DNA damage, cytoplasmic chromatin fragments (CCFs) that  
182 trigger a type I interferon response, and damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs) that  
183 activate the inflammasome (Acosta et al., 2013; Davalos et al., 2013; Li and Chen, 2018).

184 The SASP composition and strength varies substantially, depending on the duration of  
185 senescence, origin of the pro-senescence stimulus and cell type (Childs et al., 2015). Further,  
186 single cell RNA-Seq reveals considerable cell-to-cell variability of SASP expression (Wiley et  
187 al., 2017b). For example, transition from an early TGF- $\beta$ -dependent to a pro-inflammatory  
188 secretome is governed by fluctuation of Notch1 activity (Ito et al., 2017). Moreover, an  
189 interferon type I response occurs as a later event, and is driven in part by derepression of LINE-1  
190 retrotransposable elements (De Cecco et al., 2019). Senescent cells also communicate with their  
191 microenvironment through juxtacrine NOTCH/JAG1 signalling (Ito et al., 2017), release of ROS  
192 (Kuilman et al., 2010), cytoplasmic bridges (**Suppl. Video 1**) (Biran et al., 2015) and  
193 extracellular vesicles, such as exosomes (Takasugi et al., 2017). Overall, defining the senescent  
194 secretome in each biological context will help identify senescence-based molecular signatures.

195 *Macromolecular damage*

196 *DNA damage*

197 The first molecular feature associated with senescence was telomere shortening, a result  
198 of the DNA end-replication problem, during serial passages (Shay and Wright, 2019). Telomeres  
199 are repetitive DNA structures, found in terminal loops at chromosomal ends, and stabilized by  
200 the Shelterin protein complex. This organization renders telomeres unrecognizable by the DDR



201 and DSB repair pathways (de Lange, 2018; Shay and Wright, 2019). Telomerase, the enzyme  
202 that maintains telomere length, is not expressed by most normal somatic (non-stem) cells, but is  
203 expressed by most cancer cells that have overcome senescence. Moreover, telomerase activity  
204 reconstitution in normal cells leads to telomere elongation, extending their replicative life-span  
205 in culture (Bodnar et al., 1998; Shay and Wright, 2019).

206 Telomere shortening during proliferation culminates in telomeric DNA loop  
207 destabilization and telomere uncapping, generating Telomere dysfunction-Induced Foci (TIFs)  
208 that activate the DDR, eventually causing cell-cycle arrest. This response can also be elicited by  
209 inhibiting or altering genes involved in telomere maintenance (d'Adda di Fagagna, 2008).  
210 Another form of DNA damage, termed Telomere-Associated Foci (TAFs), can exist at telomeres  
211 due to oxidative DNA damage at telomeric G-rich repeats, irrespective of telomere length or  
212 Shelterin loss (de Lange, 2018; Shay and Wright, 2019).

213 Although half the persistent DNA damage foci in senescent cells localize to telomeres,  
214 other stressful subcytotoxic insults can trigger senescence by inducing irreparable DNA damage  
215 (Figure 1). Numerous genotoxic agents, including radiation (ionizing and UV), pharmacological  
216 agents (e.g., certain chemotherapeutics), and oxidative stress trigger senescence. Moreover,  
217 activated oncogenes can induce senescence (known as OIS) as a tumor suppressive response,  
218 restricting the uncontrolled proliferation of potentially oncogenic cells. OIS is often mediated by  
219 the tumor suppressors p16<sup>INK4A</sup> and ARF, both encoded by the *CDKN2A* locus, imposing a cell-  
220 cycle arrest (Kuilman et al., 2010; Serrano et al., 1997). But the DDR also plays a major role in  
221 triggering OIS (Gorgoulis and Halazonetis, 2010; Gorgoulis et al., 2018; Halazonetis et al.,  
222 2008). In this case, the damage signal originates at collapsed replication forks as a result of  
223 oncogene-driven hyperproliferation. Recently, it was shown that the DDR and ARF pathways

224 can act in concert during OIS with the former requiring a lower oncogenic load than the latter  
225 (Gorgoulis et al., 2018).

226 Senescent cells harbor persistent nuclear DNA damage foci termed DNA-SCARS (DNA-  
227 segments with chromatin alterations reinforcing senescence). DNA-SCARS are distinct from  
228 transient damage foci; unlike transient foci, they specifically associate with promyelocytic  
229 leukemian (PML) nuclear bodies, lack the DNA repair proteins RPA and RAD51 and ssDNA  
230 and contain activated forms of the DDR mediators CHK2 and p53 (Rodier et al., 2011). DNA-  
231 SCARS are dynamic structures, with the potential to regulate multiple aspects of the senescent  
232 cells, including the growth arrest and SASP (Rodier et al., 2011). However, as not all  
233 senescence-inducing stimuli generate a persistent DNA damage response, DNA-SCARS are not  
234 a global feature of the senescent cells. CCFs are another type of DNA damage in senescent cells  
235 (Ivanov et al., 2013). These cytoplasmic chromatin fragments activate a proinflammatory  
236 response, mediated by the cGAS–cGAMP–STING pathway (Ivanov et al., 2013; Li and Chen,  
237 2018), that can serve as another non-inclusive senescence-associated marker.

### 238 Protein damage

239 Proteotoxicity is a hallmark of aging and cellular senescence (Kaushik and Cuervo,  
240 2015). Hence, damaged proteins help identify senescent cells (**Figure 1**). A prominent source of  
241 protein damage is ROS, which oxidize both methionine and cysteine residues and alter protein  
242 folding and function (Hohn et al., 2017). Many protein tyrosine phosphatases (PTPs) contain  
243 cysteine residues in their active sites that can be inactivated by oxidation. This inactivation can  
244 trigger senescence by hyperactivating ERK signaling, similar to the effect of activated oncogenes  
245 (Deschenes-Simard et al., 2013). High phospho-ERK levels were detected in pre-neoplastic  
246 lesions, rich in senescent cells, such as melanocytic nevi and benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH)

247 (Deschenes-Simard et al., 2013) and are a characteristic of therapy-induced senescence  
248 (Haugstetter et al., 2010). The PTP oxidation pattern (the oxPTPome) can be revealed by a  
249 monoclonal antibody that recognizes oxidized cysteine (Karisch et al., 2011).

250 ROS, in the presence of metals, can carbonylate proline, threonine, lysine and arginine  
251 residues. Protein carbonylation exposes hydrophobic surfaces, leading to unfolding and  
252 aggregation, and protein carbonyl residues can be specifically detected using antibodies  
253 (Nystrom, 2005). Moreover, carbonyl residues can react with amino groups to form Schiff-  
254 bases, contributing to protein aggregation. Subsequent cross-linking with sugars and lipids  
255 forms insoluble aggregates, termed lipofuscin from the Greek “lipo” meaning fat and “fuscus”  
256 meaning dark. Lipofuscin can be visualized in lysosomes by light microscopy or a histochemical  
257 method using a biotinylated Sudan Black-B analogue (GL13) (Evangelou et al., 2017). The  
258 latter is emerging as another indicator of senescent cells in culture and *in vivo* (Evangelou et al.,  
259 2017; Gorgoulis et al., 2018; Myrianthopoulos et al., 2019). It should be noted that damage  
260 accumulation continues, even when cell division ceases, and can continue for months or even  
261 years.

262 Most protein oxidative damage is not reversible, and degradation by the ubiquitin  
263 proteasome system (UPS) or autophagy often eliminates these proteins. As the UPS (Deschenes-  
264 Simard et al., 2013) and autophagy are active in senescent cells, they could prove to be useful in  
265 characterizing the senescent state (Ogrodnik et al., 2019a). Similarly, PML bodies act as sensors  
266 of reactive oxygen species and oxidative damage (Niwa-Kawakita et al., 2017) and can also be  
267 non-exclusive biomarkers of cellular senescence (Vernier et al., 2011).

268 Lipid damage

269 Lipids are essential for cell membrane integrity, energy production and signal  
270 transduction. Some age-related diseases are characterized by altered lipid metabolism, resulting  
271 in lipid profile changes (Ademowo et al., 2017). Although senescent cells are marked by  
272 changes in lipid metabolism, it is unclear how this contributes to the senescent phenotype (Figure  
273 1).

274 Mitochondrial dysfunction during senescence can result in ROS-driven lipid damage,  
275 lipid deposits (Correia-Melo et al., 2016; Ogrodnik et al., 2017) and lipofucin accumulation  
276 (Gorgoulis et al., 2018). Apart from oxidation, lipid-derived aldehyde modifications [e.g., 4-  
277 hydroxy-2-nonenal (4-HNE)] have been reported in senescent cells (Ademowo et al., 2017; Jurk  
278 et al., 2012).

279 Lipid accumulation in senescent cells can be visualized using various commercial dyes  
280 and assays (Ogrodnik et al., 2017) or immunostaining for lipid associated proteins such as  
281 Perilipin 2 (Ogrodnik et al., 2017). Importantly, genetic or pharmacological clearance of  
282 senescent cells in obese and aging mice reduced lipid deposits in liver (Ogrodnik et al., 2017)  
283 and brain (Ogrodnik et al., 2019b).

284 Despite the association with lipid accumulation, our knowledge about specific lipid  
285 metabolite composition in senescent cells is sparse. Fatty acids, their precursors and  
286 phospholipid catabolites, such as eicosapentaenoate (EPA), malonate, 7-alpha-hydroxy-3-oxo-4-  
287 cholestenoate (7-HOCA) and 1-stearoylglycerophosphoinositol increase in senescent fibroblasts,  
288 whereas linoleate, dihomo-linoleate and 10-heptadecenoate decline (James et al., 2015).  
289 Moreover, free cholesterol rises, accompanied by reduced phospholipids and cholesteryl esters  
290 derived from acetate, while fatty acid synthase and stearoyl-CoA desaturase-1 declines (Maeda  
291 et al., 2009). Several methods are available to detect lipid changes in tissues and cells, but their

292 use as a senescence biomarker remains limited due to high variability of the senescence-  
293 associated lipid profile. For example, lipid metabolites vary significantly between oncogene-  
294 induced senescence and replicative senescence (Quijano et al., 2012).

### 295 *Deregulated metabolic profile*

#### 296 Mitochondria

297 Senescent cells exhibit several changes in mitochondrial function, dynamics and  
298 morphology. Mitochondria in senescent cells are less functional, showing decreased membrane  
299 potential, increased proton leak, reduced fusion and fission rates, increased mass and abundance  
300 of tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle metabolites (Kaplon et al., 2013; Passos et al., 2010). While  
301 mitochondria are more abundant, it appears their ability to produce ATP is compromised (Birch  
302 and Passos, 2017; Korolchuk et al., 2017). In contrast, senescent cells often produce more ROS,  
303 which can cause protein and lipid damage, as discussed in previous sections (see '*protein*  
304 *damage*' and '*lipid damage*'), but also telomere shortening and DDR activation (Passos et al.,  
305 2007). Targeting aspects of mitochondrial biology, such as the electron transport chain (ETC),  
306 complex I assembly, mitochondrial fission rates and biogenesis, mitochondrial sirtuins and/or  
307 disruption of the TCA cycle can trigger senescence (Correia-Melo et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2013;  
308 Kaplon et al., 2013; Miwa et al., 2014; Moiseeva et al., 2009; Park et al., 2010; Wiley et al.,  
309 2016). Altered AMP:ATP and ADP:ATP ratios during senescence contribute to cell-cycle  
310 withdrawal by activating AMPK (AMP-activated protein kinase), a main sensor of energy  
311 deprivation (Birch and Passos, 2017).

312 Mitochondrial dysfunction during senescence is also implicated in SASP regulation.  
313 Mitophagy (mitochondrial clearance) in senescent cells appears to suppress the SASP  
314 (Correia- Melo et al., 2016). Genetic or pharmacological inhibition of the ETC can induce

315 senescence even though cells lack expression of key pro-inflammatory SASP factors, such as IL-  
316 6 and IL-8 (Wiley et al., 2016). NAD<sup>+</sup>/NADH ratios are reduced in senescent cells (Wiley et al.,  
317 2016), which could alter the activity of poly-ADP ribose polymerase (PARP) and sirtuins, both  
318 involved in activation of the SASP-regulator NF-kB (Birch and Passos, 2017).

319 While substantial data support a role for mitochondria in senescence in culture, less is  
320 known *in vivo*. Mouse models of mitochondrial dysfunction and enhanced oxidative stress show  
321 increased senescence (Wiley et al., 2016), but a detailed characterization of mitochondrial  
322 function in senescent cells *in vivo* is lacking. Because mitochondrial dysfunction characterizes  
323 other cellular processes (Eisner et al., 2018), it is not a consistent biomarker of senescence.  
324 Finally, it is not clear whether senescent cells contribute to declining mitochondrial function  
325 during aging and age-related diseases (Srivastava, 2017).

### 326 Lysosomes

327 Secretion requires simultaneous activation of anabolic and catabolic processes (see  
328 “Secretion”) (Salama et al., 2014). Increased catabolism provides energy and raw materials, and  
329 is favored by the lysosome, the end-degradation compartment of phagocytosis, endocytosis and  
330 autophagy (Settembre and Ballabio, 2014). Lysosome biogenesis is transcriptionally-driven, and  
331 depends on the cellular energetic or degradative needs (Settembre and Ballabio, 2014).  
332 Intriguingly, when amino acid levels in the lysosomal lumen are high, mTOR1 is recruited and  
333 activated and *vice versa* (Settembre and Ballabio, 2014). Additionally, lysosomes interact with  
334 mitochondria to preserve mitochondrial homeostasis (see “Mitochondria”) (Park et al., 2018).

335 Lysosomes in senescent cells increase in number and size, evident by the cytoplasmic  
336 granularity seen microscopically (Robbins et al., 1970); **Figure 1, Suppl Video 1**, for non-  
337 senescent cells see **Suppl Video 2**). The increased lysosomal number might reflect an attempt to

338 balance the gradual accumulation of dysfunctional lysosomes by producing more new  
339 lysosomes. Thus, the balance between anabolism and catabolism, vital for secretion, is extended.  
340 This balance is maintained during OIS through the TOR-autophagy spatial-coupling-  
341 compartment (TASCC), which coordinates the production of SASP factors (Salama et al., 2014).

342         The elevated lysosomal content does not necessarily reflect increased activity, as the  
343 degradation stage of autophagy also declines (Park et al., 2018). Thus, the lysosome-  
344 mitochondrial axis degrades, leading to decreased mitochondrial turnover that increases ROS  
345 production. Subsequently, ROS targets cellular structures, including lysosomes, forming a  
346 vicious feedback loop that induces more damage (Park et al., 2018). The increased lysosomal  
347 mass has been linked to SA- $\beta$ -gal activity (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018), a senescence  
348 biomarker. However, although the SA- $\beta$ -gal is prominent in senescent cells (Dimri et al., 1995;  
349 Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018), it is neither required nor a determinant of the senescent  
350 phenotype (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018). From a therapeutic viewpoint, the enlarged  
351 lysosomal compartment offers an increased capacity to trap drugs that can be protonated, such as  
352 the selective CDK4/6 inhibitors palbociclib, ribociclib and abemaciclib. This capacity reduces  
353 their effective concentration in the cytosol and nucleus, but counteracted by the slow release of  
354 the drugs from the lysosomes, thereby increasing drug exposure time (Llanos et al., 2019).  
355 Another senescence trait, related to lysosomal malfunction, is the intra-lysosomal accumulation  
356 of lipofuscin aggresomes (see “*Protein damage*” and “*Lipid damage*”, reviewed in (Gorgoulis et  
357 al., 2018). Interestingly, lipofuscin was reported to stimulate expression of the anti-apoptotic  
358 factor Bcl-2, conferring resistance to apoptosis, another characteristic of senescent cells  
359 (McHugh and Gil, 2018). Lysosomes in senescent cells also participate in chromatin processing  
360 (CCFs) (see “*DNA damage*” and “*Secretion*”) (Ivanov et al., 2013).

361

## 362 **Senescence-associated (epi)-genetic and gene expression changes**

363 The features listed above are associated with changes in gene expression, determined by  
364 transcriptional regulation of coding and non-coding RNAs, which can be exploited for  
365 senescence detection (**Figure 1**). Here, we discuss such major alterations, and describe a novel  
366 database that can aid the identification of genes associated with senescence, termed SeneQuest  
367 (<http://Senequest.net>) [see **Supplementary Information and Suppl. Table 1**].

### 368 *Chromatin landscape*

369 Epigenetic modifications occur during senescence, but are mostly context-dependent  
370 (Cheng et al., 2017). For example, replicative senescence has been correlated with global loss of  
371 DNA methylation at CpG sites (Cheng et al., 2017). In addition to the global loss of DNA  
372 methylation, cellular senescence entails focal increases in DNA methylation at certain CpG  
373 islands (Cruickshanks et al., 2013). Interestingly, this DNA methylation profile somewhat  
374 resembles the cancer- and aging-associated methylome patterns (Cruickshanks et al., 2013; Xie  
375 et al., 2018). Cells undergoing OIS fail to show such alterations in DNA methylation (Xie et al.,  
376 2018), reinforcing the diverse nature of epigenetic alterations during senescence.

377 Senescent cells also exhibit a global increase in chromatin accessibility, but the genome-  
378 wide profile varies depending on the stimulus (De Cecco et al., 2013). Individual histone  
379 modifications and variants (Cheng et al., 2017; Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018; Rai et al., 2014)  
380 demonstrate alterations during senescence. For instance, H4K16ac is often enriched at active  
381 promoters in senescent, but not proliferating, cells (Rai et al., 2014). Its accumulation correlates  
382 closely with histone variant H3.3, which is deposited into chromatin in a DNA replication-  
383 independent manner by the HIRA/UBN1/CABIN1 and ASF1a chaperones (Rai et al., 2014).



384 Notably, N-terminus proteolytic cleavage of H3.3 correlates with gene repression in a different  
385 subset of genes during senescence (Ivanov et al., 2013). Global loss of linker histone H1 is  
386 another senescence feature (Funayama et al., 2006). Certain histone modifications are vital, such  
387 as elevated H4K20me3 and H3K9me3, which contribute to the proliferation arrest (Cheng et al.,  
388 2017; Di Micco et al., 2011; Salama et al., 2014), whereas elevated H3K27ac at gene enhancers  
389 promotes a SASP (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018).

390 Senescence is also associated with chromatin morphological changes. Senescence-  
391 associated heterochromatin foci (SAHF), visualized as DAPI-dense foci, are enriched in  
392 Heterochromatin Protein (HP) 1. SAHFs derive from chromatin factors, including RB, histone  
393 variant macroH2A, high mobility group A proteins, the HIRA/UBN1/CABIN1 and ASF1a  
394 chaperones, and increased nuclear pore density (Boumendil et al., 2019; Salama et al., 2014).  
395 SAHFs were initially hypothesized to contribute to gene regulation (Salama et al., 2014).  
396 However, SAHFs were since shown to comprise largely late-replicating gene poor  
397 heterochromatic regions, even in proliferating cells, suggesting a small role in senescence-  
398 associated gene expression (Salama et al., 2014). Senescence is also correlated with global loss  
399 of linker histone H1 (Funayama et al., 2006). Notably, SAHFs seem to be cell type- and  
400 stimulus-dependent, as they are not seen in all senescent cells (Di Micco et al., 2011; Kennedy et  
401 al., 2010; Sharpless and Sherr, 2015), rendering them useful for senescence identification, while  
402 the functional significance remains to be elucidated.

403 Another chromatin feature, termed senescence-associated distension of satellites (SADS),  
404 corresponds to de-compaction of (peri-)centric constitutive heterochromatin (Cruickshanks et al.,  
405 2013; De Cecco et al., 2013; Swanson et al., 2013). SADS precede SAHF formation and might  
406 be widely linked to senescence (Swanson et al., 2013). Retrotransposable elements are another

407 type of constitutive heterochromatin related to senescence. The normally-repressed LINE-1 (L1)  
408 retrotransposons are activated, stimulating the cGAS-STING pathway that elicits a type I  
409 interferon response (see "Secretion") (De Cecco et al., 2013). Hence, in addition to triggering  
410 genomic instability, these elements fuel the SASP (Criscione et al., 2016).

411 Downregulation of lamin B1, a major component of the nuclear lamina, is another key  
412 feature of senescence (Dou et al., 2015; Freund et al., 2012; Shah et al., 2013; Shimi et al.,  
413 2011). Lamin B1 loss correlates with epigenetic profiles (Salama et al., 2014), as well as  
414 senescence-associated chromatin structures (SAHF and SADS) (Salama et al., 2014; Swanson et  
415 al., 2013). Its reduction occurs predominantly at H3K9me3-rich regions, a process that appears  
416 to liberate H3K9me3 from the nuclear lamina promoting spatial rearrangement of H3K9me3-  
417 heterochromatin to form SAHF (Salama et al., 2014). Hi-C analysis (genome-wide mapping of  
418 chromatin contacts) in OIS revealed a reduction in local connectivity at regions enriched for  
419 H3K9me3 and lamin B1, perturbing these long-range interactions (Chandra et al., 2015).  
420 Replicative senescence, on the other hand, showed loss of long-range and gain of short-range  
421 interactions within chromosomes (Criscione et al., 2016), implying that the nature of senescence-  
422 associated high-order chromatin interactions is stimulus and context-dependent (Zirkel et al.,  
423 2018). Furthermore, lamin B1 loss and reduced nuclear integrity is suggested to fuel the SASP  
424 by contributing to CCF formation (Dou et al., 2015; Ivanov et al., 2013), thereby stimulating the  
425 cGAS-STING pathway and interferon response (see "Secretion") (Li and Chen, 2018).  
426 Autophagy-mediated CCF formation (Dou et al., 2015) together with reduced histone synthesis  
427 (O'Sullivan et al., 2010) might also lead to a global loss of core histones during senescence,  
428 affecting the chromatin landscape (Chan and Narita, 2019; Ivanov et al., 2013).

429 *Transcriptional signatures*

430 Several genes linked to the cell cycle arrest and SASP are frequently interrogated in  
431 combination with other biomarkers to validate the senescence phenotype or type of senescence  
432 (**Figure 1**). For example, increased expression of the cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitors  
433 CDKN1A (p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup>), CDKN2A (p16<sup>INK4A</sup>) and CDK2B (p15<sup>INK4B</sup>) and a subset of SASP  
434 genes, along with decreased expression of cyclins CCNA2 and CCNE2 and LMNB1 should be  
435 determined. In addition, the transcriptome of putative senescent cells should be established,  
436 which can then be compared with the increasing number of existing senescence transcriptomes  
437 (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2018).

438 Whole-transcriptome studies have been instrumental in defining major signaling  
439 pathways involved in establishing senescence phenotypes, and in some cases predicting drug  
440 targets (Zhu et al., 2015). A set of 13 genes was differentially regulated in several cell types  
441 undergoing distinct forms of senescence, including oncogene-, replicative- and DNA damage-  
442 induced senescence (Hernandez-Segura et al., 2017). More recently, a similar study, which  
443 considered only fibroblasts and endothelial cells, also attempted to define senescence-associated  
444 transcriptome signatures (Casella et al., 2019). Due to the current paucity of transcriptome data  
445 sets, and the availability of more single-cell studies that allow evaluation of intra-population  
446 variability (Wiley et al., 2017a; Zirkel et al., 2018), these gene signatures will likely change in  
447 coming years. But ultimately a senescence gene expression signature will prove valuable for  
448 identifying senescence under many conditions in culture and *in vivo*.

#### 449 *miRNAs and non-coding RNAs*

450 Non-coding RNAs, particularly microRNAs (miRNAs), can influence the senescence  
451 program, alone or in concert. Functional studies revealed several miRNAs that directly or  
452 indirectly modulate the abundance of key senescence effectors, including p53, p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup> and

453 SIRT1 (Suh, 2018). miR-504 targets the p53 3'UTR, reducing p53 abundance and activity (Hu  
454 et al., 2010). Also, Gld2-mediated stabilization of miR-122 enables its binding to the CBEP  
455 3'UTR, resulting in decreased p53 mRNA polyadenylation and translation (Burns et al., 2011).  
456 Conversely, miR-605 targets MDM2, triggering p53-mediated senescence (Xiao et al., 2011),  
457 and multiple miRNAs downregulate p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup>, including 28 miRNAs that block OIS  
458 (Borgdorff et al., 2010). Likewise, miR-24 suppresses p16<sup>INK4a</sup> in cells (Lal et al., 2008) and  
459 disease models, including osteoarthritis (Philipot et al., 2014). Intricate miRNA feedback loops  
460 can modulate senescence programs. For example, a p53/miRNA/CCNA2 pathway drives  
461 senescence independently of the p53/p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup> axis (Xu et al., 2019). Similarly, p53-  
462 dependent upregulation of miR-34a/b/c downregulates cell proliferation and survival factors  
463 (Hermeking, 2010). Non-coding RNAs also regulate the SASP (Panda et al., 2017). MiR-  
464 146a/b, for example, increases weeks after senescence induction and dampens a proinflammatory  
465 arm of the SASP (Bhaumik et al., 2009). miRNAs also downregulate repressors of senescence,  
466 including Polycomb Group (PcG) members CBX7, EED, EZH2 and SUZ12 (miR-26b, 181a,  
467 210 and 424), leading to p16<sup>INK4a</sup> derepression and senescence initiation (Overhoff et al., 2014).  
468 Finally, the role of miRNAs in senescence extends beyond their classical functions. For  
469 example, Argonaute 2 (AGO2) binds let-7f in the nucleus, forming a complex with RB1 (pRB),  
470 resulting in repressive chromatin at CDC2 and CDCA8 promoters (Benhamed et al., 2012).  
471 Silencing these E2F target genes is required for senescence initiation.

472 Long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs) (> 200 nt) can bind RNA, DNA or proteins to regulate  
473 senescence. For example, ANRIL, a 30-40kb antisense transcript encoded by theCDKN2A  
474 locus, binds CBX7 to repress INK4b/ARF/INK4a expression (Kim et al., 2017). Likewise, the  
475 lncRNA PANDA recruits PcG complexes, suppressing senescence-promoting genes (Kim et al.,

476 2017), whereas silencing of GUARDIN, a p53-responsive lncRNA, causes senescence or  
477 apoptosis (Hu et al., 2018). By contrast, following OIS induced by RAF, the lncRNA VAD  
478 preserves senescence by decreasing repressive H2A.Z deposition at INK promoters (Kim et al.,  
479 2017). Also, lncRNA UCA1 disrupts association of the RNA binding protein hnRNP A1 with  
480 p16<sup>INK4A</sup>, but not p14<sup>ARF</sup>, transcripts (Kim et al., 2017). In addition, non-coding RNA profiling,  
481 with a focus on miRNAs, provides a senescence signature (Suh, 2018). Intriguingly, the miRNA  
482 content of small extracellular vesicles released by senescent cells varies, evolving over time  
483 (Terlecki-Zaniewicz et al., 2018).

#### 484 *Immune-regulation and anti-apoptotic proteins*

485 The search for senescent protein markers started in OIS. In addition to identifying known  
486 cell cycle regulators, these studies identified DCR2 as a common marker of senescence (Collado  
487 et al., 2005), later shown to characterize other types of senescence. DCR2 is a decoy death  
488 receptor that protects senescent cells from immunity-mediated apoptosis, thus blocking immune  
489 surveillance of senescent cells (Sagiv et al., 2013). Similarly, the natural killer (NK) cell  
490 activating receptor (NKG2D) ligands MICA and ULBP2 increase upon replicative, OIS and  
491 DNA damage-induced senescence (Krizhanovsky et al., 2008b; Sagiv et al., 2016). Cell surface  
492 markers are of special interest because they should allow quantification, isolation and single cell  
493 transcriptional analysis of senescent cells extracted from tissues. However, DCR2 and NKG2D  
494 ligands are not conserved among species, making mouse/human comparisons not possible.  
495 Recently, two additional upregulated cell surface markers, Notch1 in OIS and DPP4 in  
496 replicative and OIS, were identified (Hoare et al., 2016). Both proteins have roles in regulating  
497 the SASP. Furthermore, an oxidized form of membrane-bound vimentin was identified as a  
498 senescence marker, which could be used to target these cells by the adaptive immune system

499 (Frescas et al., 2017). Finally, senescent cells are resistant to apoptosis, which can be mediated  
500 by increased expression of anti-apoptotic BCL-2 family members (Yosef et al., 2016).

501

## 502 ***In vivo* models to study cellular senescence**

### 503 *Senescence reporter mice*

504 Several transgenic mice were developed to estimate  $p16^{Ink4a}$  expression *in vivo* or *ex vivo*  
505 using luciferase or fluorescent protein reporters. Measuring luciferase activity longitudinally  
506 revealed an increase in  $p16^{INK4A}$  expression as mice age, as well as an age-dependent increase in  
507 inter-animal variability, whereas isolation of fluorescent p16+ cells allowed phenotyping (Liu et  
508 al., 2019; Ohtani et al., 2010). This approach allows the endogenous  $p16^{INK4A}$  promoter to drive  
509 signals, but causes p16 hemizyosity. Another mouse (p16-3MR) used a luciferase (rLUC),  
510 monomeric Red Fluorescent Protein (mRFP) and Herpes simplex Virus-Thymidine Kinase  
511 (HSV-TK) fusion protein driven by the  $p16^{INK4A}$  promoter present on a bacterial artificial  
512 chromosome, integrated into the mouse genome (Demaria et al., 2014). This approach allows  
513 detection and killing of senescent cells, and does not perturb the endogenous CDKN2A locus.  
514 Finally, INK-ATTAC mice express a FKBP-Caspase 8 fusion-protein and eGFP reporter to kill  
515 and detect p16+ cells, driven from a 1.6 kB fragment of the  $p16^{INK4A}$  promoter (Baker et al.,  
516 2011; Folgueras et al., 2018). Despite differences between these mice, they have been valuable  
517 in showing that senescent cells contribute to a wide range of age-related pathologies (Calcinotto  
518 et al., 2019). Mice expressing luciferase and eGFP from  $p21^{WAF1/Cip1}$  promoter are also available  
519 (Ohtani et al., 2007).

### 520 *Murine models of accelerated senescence and aging*

521 Several progeric mouse models have been developed to mimic human progeric  
522 syndromes, including DNA repair and genome integrity deficiencies (Folgueras et al., 2018).  
523 Progeroid mice with accelerated senescence and shortened lifespans are also useful for assessing  
524 the role of cellular senescence in aging and testing senotherapeutics. For example, the  
525 demonstration that ablation of  $p16^{\text{INK4A}}$  expressing cells slowed age-related declines in progeroid  
526  $BubR1^{\text{H/H}}$  mice provided the first evidence that senescent cells are causal for certain aging  
527 phenotypes (Baker et al., 2011; Folgueras et al., 2018). BUBR1 is important for the mitotic  
528 spindle assembly checkpoint (Guo et al., 2012).  $BubR1^{\text{H/H}}$  mice, which express 10% of the  
529 normal level of BUBR1, have increased aneuploidy, several progeroid features and increased  
530 expression of senescence markers in several organs (Folgueras AR et al., 2018). Selective  
531 removal of  $p16^{\text{INK4A}^+}$  cells from  $BubR1^{\text{H/H}}$ -INK-ATTAC mice delays kyphosis, cataracts and  
532 muscle atrophy, but not cardiac arrhythmias and arterial wall stiffening, nor does it extend  
533 lifespan (Baker et al., 2011; Folgueras et al., 2018).

534 Similarly,  $Ercc1^{-\Delta}$  progeroid mice, harboring a DNA repair defect, prematurely develop  
535 multiple morbidities associated with age, driven in part by accelerated accumulation of senescent  
536 cells in numerous tissues (Folgueras AR et al., 2018).  $Ercc1^{-\Delta}$  mice (Folgueras AR et al., 2018)  
537 express 5% of the normal level of the endonuclease ERCC1-XPF, important for nucleotide  
538 excision, interstrand crosslink and double-strand break repair. These mice develop numerous  
539 age-related histopathologic lesions in virtually every tissue (Folgueras AR et al., 2018), and  
540 accumulate oxidative DNA damage faster than wild-type mice (Wang et al., 2012). Treatment of  
541  $Ercc1^{-\Delta}$  mice with senolytic drugs reduces senescence markers and extends health span  
542 (Fuhrmann-Stroissnigg et al., 2017; Yousefzadeh et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2015). Cross-breeding

543 of these models with the *p16<sup>INK4A</sup>* reporter transgenes permits monitoring senescent cell burden  
544 longitudinally in live animals (Robinson et al., 2018; Yousefzadeh et al., 2018).

545 Hutchinson-Gilford Progeria Syndrome (HGPS) is a segmental or tissue-specific  
546 progeria, caused by mutations that compromise lamin A processing (Cau et al., 2014). Mice  
547 with altered or deleted LMNA develop HGPS-like phenotypes. They also accumulate senescent  
548 cells, as determined by SA- $\beta$ -gal staining and mRNA levels of senescence markers, in skeletal  
549 muscle and heart, consistent with sites of age-related pathology and disease (Folgueras AR et al.,  
550 2018). Similarly, in a mouse model of HGPS that recapitulates the pathogenic LMN splicing  
551 mutation, *Lmna<sup>G609G/G609G</sup>* mice, senescence in the liver and kidney was observed (Osorio et al.,  
552 2011). However, senescent cells have not yet been shown to be causative for HGPS pathology.

553 A mouse model of trichothiodystrophy (TTD) (Andressoo et al., 2006), caused by a  
554 specific mutation in the *Xpd* gene, also indicated a role for senescent cells in premature aging.  
555 Here the role of senescence in driving aging in the *Xpd<sup>TTD/TTD</sup>* was clearly documented by the fact  
556 that treatment with a D-retro inverso (DRI)-isoform peptide of FOXO4 able to disrupt FOXO4  
557 interaction with p53. Treatment with the FOXO4-DRI peptide reduced lethargy in *Xpd<sup>TTD/TTD</sup>*  
558 mice and improved fur density, running wheel activity, and physical responses to stimuli (Baar et  
559 al., 2017).

560 Loss of Cu/Zn-superoxide dismutase (*Sod1*) in mice accelerates aging (Zhang et al.,  
561 2017). *Sod1<sup>-/-</sup>* mice show increased oxidative DNA damage, senescence (*p16<sup>INK4A</sup>*, *p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup>*),  
562 SASP factors (*Il1 $\beta$* , *Il6*), SA- $\beta$ gal<sup>+</sup> cells and age-associated pathology in kidneys (Zhang et al.,  
563 2017). To date, senescence has not been demonstrated to drive pathology in *Sod1<sup>-/-</sup>* mice.

564 Deletion of the *nfk1* subunit of the transcription factor NF- $\kappa$ B induces premature ageing  
565 in mice. These mice have been shown to experience chronic, progressive low-grade



566 inflammation which contributes to a wide spectrum of ageing phenotypes and early mortality  
567 (however, in contrast to some of the widely used progeria mouse models these mice have a  
568 maximum lifespan of approximately 20 months). Furthermore, these mice show increased  
569 incidence of senescent cells in multiple tissues (Jurk et al., 2014).

570 Finally, the selective inbreeding of AKR/J mice resulted in numerous senescence-accelerated  
571 mouse (SAMP) strains including SAMP1-3 and SAMP6-11 (Takeda et al., 1997). Although  
572 these mice have increased senescence and thus can be used for testing senotherapeutics, it  
573 remains unclear which mutant genes drive senescence in these strains.

574

## 575 **Identification of cellular senescence *in vivo***

### 576 *A simplified algorithm for detecting senescent cells in situ*

577 *In vivo*, senescent cells reside in complex tissues. Their impact on tissue function can be  
578 local or global due to the SASP (Xu et al., 2018). To understand how senescence affects tissue  
579 function, tissue remodeling and aging, we need tools to identify senescent cells in tissues.

580 Single cell analyses can be performed on most tissues. Common techniques include  
581 immunostaining, in-situ hybridization and multicolour (imaging) flow cytometry. Even higher  
582 numbers of markers can be assessed by mass cytometry (Cytometry by Time-Of-Flight, CYTOF)  
583 (Abdelaal et al., 2019). Although promising, limitations include loss of information about spatial  
584 associations and variable efficiency of isolation of different cell types, including senescent vs  
585 non-senescent cells. Therefore, microscopic imaging remains a preferred method for *in situ*  
586 senescence detection.

587 As mentioned, there is currently no single marker with absolute specificity for senescent  
588 cells. Marker specificity varies, depending on cell type, tissue, organismal developmental stage,

589 species and other factors. However, some markers have more global/universal value/validity  
590 while others are related to specific senescence types. Therefore, we advise a multi-marker  
591 approach, encompassing/combining broader and more specific markers for more robust detection  
592 of senescent cells *in situ* (**Figure 3**).

### 593 *Challenges to detect senescent cells in humans*

594 The role of senescence in human disease is clear from cellular studies, while *in vivo*  
595 evidence is only now catching up (Childs et al., 2015; He and Sharpless, 2017; Munoz-Espin and  
596 Serrano, 2014). OIS, initially described in culture, was the first type of senescence validated in  
597 humans (Serrano et al., 1997). OIS or senescence induced by loss of a tumor suppressor was  
598 verified *in vivo* in human preneoplastic lesions (Collado et al., 2005; Gorgoulis and Halazonetis,  
599 2010; Kuilman and Peeper, 2009) and primary or treated neoplasias (Haugstetter et al., 2010).  
600 Later reports on the diverse activities of the senescence secretome (see “Secretion”) led to the  
601 recognition of its pro-tumorigenic properties, establishing what is now accepted as the dual role  
602 of senescence in carcinogenesis (Lee and Schmitt, 2019). Evidence linking senescence to other  
603 common age-associated human diseases has recently emerged. These diseases include  
604 neurodegenerative disorders, glaucoma, cataract, atherosclerosis/cardiovascular disease,  
605 diabetes, osteoarthritis, pulmonary, and renal and liver fibrosis (Childs et al., 2015; He and  
606 Sharpless, 2017; Munoz-Espin and Serrano, 2014) (**Suppl Table 2**).

607 In most studies, senescence is assessed in *ex vivo* cultures or fresh samples by SA- $\beta$ -gal  
608 staining or indirect markers in formalin-fixed tissues (Haugstetter et al., 2010; He and Sharpless,  
609 2017; Kuilman and Peeper, 2009; Munoz-Espin and Serrano, 2014; Serrano et al., 1997). Since  
610 SA- $\beta$ -gal is not suitable for fixed tissues, analyzing senescence in human samples is challenging.  
611 The recently developed assay and reagent Sudan Black-B (SBB) interacts with lipofuscin,

612 another hallmark of senescent cells (Georgakopoulou et al., 2013). Lipofuscin is preserved in  
613 fixed material (Georgakopoulou et al., 2013) and is resilient, as it was isolated from a 210,000  
614 year old human fossil (Harvati et al., 2019; Myriantopoulos et al., 2019). The test reagent is  
615 amenable to immunohistochemistry (Evangelou et al., 2017), and identified senescent Hodgkin  
616 and Reed-Sternberg (HRS) cells in Hodgkin lymphomas (cHL), where they predicted poor  
617 prognosis (Myriantopoulos et al., 2019). These cells are giant in size, have a large and  
618 occasionally multilobular nucleus (indication of an abortive cell cycle), have increased secretory  
619 activities, are embedded within an inflammatory milieu, and show a histological pattern strongly  
620 reflecting features of the senescence phenotype (Kuppers et al., 2012) (**Figure 1**). Another  
621 method for identifying and quantifying senescent cells *in vivo* is SA- $\beta$ -gal staining combined  
622 with ImageStream X analysis (Biran et al., 2017).

623 Despite promising results that each marker provides, no marker is completely  
624 senescence-specific (Sharpless and Sherr, 2015) (Sharpless and Sherr, 2015). We recommend  
625 combining cytoplasmic (e.g., SA- $\beta$ -gal, lipofuscin), nuclear (e.g., p16<sup>INK4A</sup>, p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup>, Ki67)  
626 and context/cell type-specific markers (Childs et al., 2015) (**Figure 3**).

627

## 628 **Conclusions, open questions and perspectives**

629 From the first description of cellular senescence by Hayflick and colleagues almost 60  
630 years ago, significant progress has been made in understanding the characteristics and functions  
631 of senescent cells. A limitation, particularly for studying biospecimens, remains the absence of  
632 specific markers. To overcome this obstacle, we propose a multi-marker approach (**Figure 3**).  
633 This strategy could also be used to evaluate the efficacy of senolysis, an emerging therapeutic

634 approach that recently entered clinical trials for treatment of various age-related pathologies  
635 (Myriantopoulos et al., 2019).

636 Conceptually, senescence can be considered a non-linear, multivariable  $[F(x,y)=z]$   
637 function where the dependent variable (outcome)  $z$  depends on the independent variables  $x$   
638 (stimulus) and  $y$  (environment). The non-linear processing is dictated by dynamic genetic and  
639 epigenetic processes that can lead to reprogramming cycles until a steady-state is achieved. At  
640 first glance, the outcomes appear to be cell cycle withdrawal and secretion of bioactive  
641 molecules. However, recent evidence suggest that the cell cycle arrest is not always a necessary  
642 outcome, as post-mitotic cells, already unable to proliferate, can assume senescence-like  
643 features, and under certain conditions senescent cells can re-enter the cell cycle. The SASP  
644 appears a common senescence-associated feature, but it is highly heterogeneous. Thus, to  
645 understand the pleiotropic phenotypes of senescent cells, a shift from traditional reductionism to  
646 more systematic, multi-parametric approaches is needed. The development of sophisticated high  
647 throughput methods and machine learning tools that can handle multi-omics data will help  
648 achieve this goal (Vougas et al., 2019). Although “old and new” have pros and cons, we can  
649 combine the best to achieve a “de profundis” analysis of senescent phenotypes. This approach  
650 will likely unveil more specific senescence-associated signatures to address important  
651 unanswered questions: What causes and regulates the SASP? How do genetic and epigenetic  
652 determinants interact with triggering stimuli and cellular microenvironments? Which genomic  
653 repair systems act in different senescence scenarios? What causes cells to evade the growth  
654 arrest, and what phenotypes do ‘escaped’ senescent cells acquire? Answers to these and other  
655 questions will help develop specific panels of markers for each senescence subtype (step 3 in the

656 workflow) and guide the evolving field of senotherapy (van Deursen, 2019), achieving the best  
657 outcome within the spirit of precision medicine.

658

659

## 660 **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

661 The authors declare conflicts of interest related to this work.

662

663

## 664 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

665 We would like to thank Nikolaos Kastrinakis, Panagiotis VS Vasileiou, Gkikas Magiorkinis,  
666 Eleni Fitsiou and Michela Borghesan for their valuable support to this work. We apologize in  
667 advance that for reason of space we have omitted the citations of relevant papers and reviews.

668

669

## 670 **FIGURE LEGENDS**

671 **Figure 1. The hallmarks of the senescence phenotype.** Senescent cells exhibit four inter-  
672 dependent (shown by the dashed thin outer cycle and bidirectional arrows) hallmarks: 1) cell  
673 cycle withdrawal, 2) macromolecular damage, 3) Secretory Phenotype (SASP) and 4)  
674 deregulated metabolism, as depicted in the outer circle (see text). The inner cycle includes  
675 distinct morphological and functional features that reflect the proposed hallmarks. Several of  
676 these traits are strongly evident in the malignant entity, the classical Hodgkin Lymphoma (see  
677 section 5). Multilobular nuclei commonly present in (senescent) HRS cells, as a result of S/M  
678 phase dissociation, are linked to cell cycle withdrawal (p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup> immunopositivity-left

679 image) while the inflammatory milieu is associated with SASP. Lipofuscin accumulation  
680 assessed with GL13 staining (brown cytoplasmic staining-right image) reflects macromolecular  
681 damage conferring to increased granularity (left centered image). The latter is also linked to  
682 deregulated metabolism. Altered/increased gene expression (right centered image) that is also  
683 accompanied by increased transcriptional “noise” also confers to macromolecular damage  
684 (Ogrodnik et al., 2019).

685 **Figure 2. Cell cycle withdrawal in senescent, quiescent and terminally differentiated cells.**

686 Depicted are differences in cell cycle arrest reversibility, activated signals (see text), secretory  
687 functions and macromolecular damage that allow discrimination between these cellular states.  
688 Macromolecular damage is a common feature of senescence. Secretion is another common  
689 feature of senescence and is sometimes (context-dependently) found in the differentiated state.  
690 Cell cycle arrest is generally considered irreversible during senescence and terminal  
691 differentiation, although cell cycle re-entry can occur under certain conditions. Green color:  
692 active/present, red color: inactive/absent. Double-headed arrows: solid=established connection,  
693 hatched: uncertain.

694 **Figure 3. A multi-marker, three-step workflow for detecting senescent cells.** The first step  
695 of the proposed workflow includes assessing senescence-associated beta-galactosidase (SA- $\beta$ -  
696 gal) activity and/or lipofuscin accumulation (SBB or GL13 staining). Secondly, co-staining with  
697 other markers frequently observed in (p16<sup>INK4A</sup>, p21<sup>WAF1/Cip1</sup>) or absent from (proliferation  
698 markers, Lamin B1) senescent cells. In the third step, identification of factors anticipated to be  
699 altered in specific senescence contexts should be identified. This multi-marker workflow can  
700 lead to the recognition of senescent cells with the highest accuracy.

701

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