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Study of fibroblast contractility on 2D and 3D soft gels

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Fibroblast activation is a multi-step process defined by increased contractile properties and associated processes (increased ECM production, tissue remodelling, proliferation...). In the presence of persistent stimuli from cancer lesions, these fibroblasts become CAFs (Cancer-Associated Fibroblasts) that are pro-tumorigenic cells that can chemically and mechanically remodel the tumor micro-environment, promoting the proliferation and invasion of cancer cells [1]. A growth factor (TGF- β - a key mediator in activation) was used to activate two different subsets –normal fibroblasts (WPMY-1) and activated fibroblasts (exp-CAF1 [2]).

This activation was verified by the implementation of a functional assay using 3D gel composed of type-1 collagen. As the involvement of matrix stiffness has become more apparent in the differentiation of fibrob-lasts, hydrogels of different stiffness (1 kPa –100 kPa) were prepared to mimic physiological and pathological conditions [3]. The stiffness of these hydrogels, embedded with micrometric beads, was characterized through active microrheology using optical tweezers to define the frequency-dependent viscoelastic modulus $G^*(\omega)$.

[1] R. Kalluri, Nat. Rev. Cancer, 16 (2016), 582-598.

[2] Y. Kojima et al. PNAS, 107, (2010) 20009-20014.

[3] M. Carrancá et al. Journal of Biomedical Materials Research. Part A, 109 ,(2021) 926-937.

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