

UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO
FACULDADE DE ODONTOLOGIA DE BAURU

RODRIGO FONSECA BUZO

**Microscopic and immunohistochemical characterization of tumor
development in immunocompromised mice xenografted with cancer stem
cells of oral squamous cell carcinoma**

**Caracterização microscópica e imuno-histoquímica do desenvolvimento
tumoral em camundongos imunodeficientes xenotransplantados com
células-tronco de câncer de carcinoma epidermóide de boca**

BAURU

2020

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Dissertação apresentada a Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru da Universidade de São Paulo para obtenção do título de Mestre em Ciências no Programa de Ciências Odontológicas Aplicadas, na área de concentração Biologia Oral.

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BAURU

2020

Buzo, Rodrigo Fonseca

Microscopic and immunohistochemical characterization of tumor development in immunocompromised mice xenografted with cancer stem cells of oral squamous cell carcinoma / Rodrigo Fonseca Buzo – Bauru, 2020.

79p. : il. ; 31cm.

Dissertação (Mestrado) – Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru. Universidade de São Paulo

Orientador: Profa. Dra. Camila de Oliveira Rodini Pegoraro

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Assinatura:

Data:

Comitê de Ética da FOB/USP
CEEPA-Proc. Nº 002/2017
Data: 05/05/2017

FOLHA DE APROVAÇÃO

DEDICATÓRIA

*Primeiramente, a **Deus**, pela sua infinita graça, amor e misericórdia que me alcançam todos os dias, me encorajando a realizar este sonho.*

*Aos meus pais **Fred e Isabela**, que nunca mediram esforços para me ajudar a chegar até aqui. Amo vocês. Agradeço por sempre estarem ao meu lado.*

AGRADECIMENTOS ESPECIAIS

Em especial agradeço,

*A minha orientadora **Profa. Dra. Camila de Oliveira Rodini**, por me orientar na elaboração deste trabalho. Obrigado pela confiança que depositou em mim. Saiba que você colaborou de forma imensurável para meu amadurecimento profissional.*

*À **Nádia Ghinelli Amôr**, por ser essa amiga e confidente que esteve ao meu lado desde o início, me mostrando sempre o bom que a vida tem para oferecer. Sou muito grato pela paciência em me corrigir e tranquilidade em me ensinar. Para mim, você é um exemplo de amor à pesquisa.*

*Ao **Rafael Carneiro Ortiz**, pela sua amizade e por cooperar grandemente em meu crescimento científico. Sou imensamente grato por toda sua dedicação com este projeto.*

*À **Luciana Mieli Saito e Nathália Martins Lopes** pelo apoio e contribuição como grupo de pesquisa. Sou grato por nossa amizade e bom convívio.*

*Às técnicas do laboratório de Histologia, **Danielle Ceolim e Patrícia Germínio**, pela inestimável ajuda prestada neste trabalho. Obrigado por sempre estarem ao meu lado, me dando suporte e impulso nos momentos de dificuldade, e também me proporcionando momentos de bom-humor ao lado de vocês.*

*Às demais alunas do departamento de Histologia, **Angélica Fonseca, Jéssica Melchades, Paula Sanches e Suelen Pains** pela convivência maravilhosa que temos no laboratório. Agradeço a colaboração e amizade.*

*A todos os demais **professores e funcionários da FOB-USP**, por estarem sempre dispostos a ajudar.*

Rodrigo Fonseca Buzo

AGRADECIMENTOS INSTITUCIONAIS

Ao Prof. Dr. Vahan Agopyan, digníssimo reitor da Universidade de São Paulo;

Ao Prof. Dr. Pedro Vitoriano de Oliveira, digníssimo Secretário Geral da Universidade de São Paulo;

Ao Prof. Dr. Carlos Ferreira dos Santos, digníssimo Diretor da Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru da Universidade de São Paulo;

Ao Prof. Dr. Guilherme dos Reis Pereira Janson, digníssimo Vice-diretor da Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru da Universidade de São Paulo;

Ao Prof. Dr. José Henrique Rubo, digníssimo Prefeito do Campus da Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru da Universidade de São Paulo;

À Prof. Dra. Izabel Regina Fischer Rubira Bullen, digníssima Presidente da Pós-Graduação da Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru da Universidade de São Paulo;

À Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior, CAPES, pela bolsa concedida no meu mestrado;

À Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP), órgão de fomento deste trabalho (número de processo: 2013/07245-9).

“ Todas as vitórias ocultam uma abdicação. ”

Simone de Beauvoir

RESUMO

Caracterização microscópica e imuno-histoquímica do desenvolvimento tumoral em camundongos imunodeficientes xenotransplantados com células-tronco de câncer de carcinoma epidermóide de boca

O carcinoma epidermóide de boca (CEB) é uma das neoplasias mais comuns da região de cabeça e pescoço, com sobrevida global inferior a 5 anos. O pior prognóstico da doença está associado à presença de metástases linfonodais, que tem participação de uma subpopulação de células-tronco presente nos tumores, conhecidas por células-tronco de câncer (CSC, do inglês *cancer stem cells*). Essa subpopulação sofre transição epitélio-mesenquimal (EMT, do inglês *epithelial-mesenchymal transition*), processo no qual as células epiteliais adquirem um fenótipo mesenquimal tornando-se migratórias e invasivas. CSC podem ser identificadas por meio de biomarcadores, sendo a proteína CD44 a mais utilizada em CEB. Vale ressaltar que na pesquisa do câncer bucal, os modelos animais têm sido amplamente utilizados como estratégia para entender a carcinogênese, bem como para testar novos agentes antineoplásicos e desenvolver novas abordagens terapêuticas. O objetivo deste estudo foi avaliar e comparar microscopicamente tumores murinos induzidos por xenotransplante de duas subpopulações de CSC, CD44^{High}ESA^{High} (epitelial) e CD44^{High}ESA^{Low} (mesenquimal), presentes em linhagens de CEB humano LUC4. Após isolamento por meio de citometria de fluxo (BD FACSAria™ Fusion), foi realizado o xenotransplante das duas subpopulações com 5x10³ células inoculadas na língua, em dois grupos com 12 camundongos machos NOD/SCID cada. Após 49 dias, os tumores formados foram medidos, coletados e submetidos ao processamento histotécnico para caracterização microscópica e imuno-histoquímica. A subpopulação CD44^{High}ESA^{High} apresentou maior potencial tumorigênico, formando tumores (média da área: 4,22 mm²) em todos os animais inoculados. Em contrapartida, apenas seis animais (50%) xenotransplantados com células CD44^{High}ESA^{Low} desenvolveram tumores microscopicamente visíveis (média da área: 0,20 mm²). Foram observadas alterações estruturais e celulares semelhantes ao CEB de humanos em ambos os grupos. Além disso, os animais do grupo CD44^{High}ESA^{High} apresentaram maior perda de peso comparado ao grupo CD44^{High}ESA^{Low} (p= 0,0217). A correlação de subpopulações de CSC com seus tumores correspondentes *in vivo* representa uma abordagem confiável para futuras pesquisas sobre câncer bucal, destacando o papel de diferentes fenótipos de CSC no desenvolvimento e progressão de CEB. Estudos adicionais devem ser realizados

nesse campo, por exemplo, para entender como eles respondem na terapêutica comumente usada e desenvolver técnicas para superar os mecanismos de resistência.

Palavras-chave: Carcinoma Epidermóide. Células-tronco Neoplásicas. Transição Epitelial-Mesenquimal. Modelo Animal.

ABSTRACT

Microscopic and immunohistochemical characterization of tumor development in immunocompromised mice xenografted with cancer stem cells of oral squamous cell carcinoma

Oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC) is one of the most common neoplasms of the head and neck region, with overall survival <5 years. The worst prognosis of the disease is lymph node metastasis associated with a subpopulation of stem cells in tumors, known as cancer stem cells (CSC). Studies have shown that this subpopulation undergoes epithelial to mesenchymal transition (EMT), a process which epithelial cells acquire a mesenchymal phenotype. In OSCC, CSC can be identified by biomarkers, CD44 transmembrane protein being the most *commonly* used. In oral cancer research, animal models have been widely used as a strategy to understand carcinogenesis as well as to test new antineoplastic agents and to develop new therapeutic approaches. We aimed to evaluate and compare microscopically murine tumors induced by CSC xenotransplantation. Two subpopulations CD44^{High}ESA^{High} (epithelial) and CD44^{High}ESA^{Low} (mesenchymal) were isolated from OSCC cell line LUC4 by flow cytometry (BD FACSAria™ Fusion). Xenotransplantation was performed with 5x10³ cells injected in the tongue into two groups with twelve NOD/SCID mice each one. Forty-nine days post-injection, tumors were measured, collected and submitted to histotechnical processing for microscopic and immunohistochemical analyses. CD44^{High}ESA^{High} cells showed great tumorigenic potential, being able to originate larger tumors in twelve animals (average tumor area: 4.22 mm²). In contrast, only six animals (50%) xenografted with CD44^{High}ESA^{Low} cells developed microscopically visible tumors (average tumor area: 0.20 mm²). Structural and cellular changes similar to the human OSCC were observed in both groups. In addition, animals xenografted with CD44^{High}ESA^{High} cells showed greater weight loss compared to the CD44^{High}ESA^{Low} group (p = 0.0217). The correlation of CSC subpopulations with their corresponding tumors *in vivo* represents a reliable approach for future research in oral cancer, highlighting the role of different CSC phenotypes in OSCC development and progression. Further studies should be conducted in this field, for example, in understanding how they respond to commonly used therapeutics and develop techniques to overcome their resistance mechanisms.

Keywords: Squamous Cell Carcinoma. Neoplastic Stem Cells. Epithelial-Mesenchymal Transition. Animal Model.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OSCC	Oral Squamous Cell Carcinoma
ITF	Invasive Tumor Front
CSC	Cancer Stem Cells
OCT-4	Octamer-binding Transcription Factor 4
SOX-2	Sex Determining Region Y-box 2
SC	Stem Cells
NOD/SCID	Non-obese Diabetic/severe Combined immunodeficient
ALDH1	Aldehyde Dehydrogenase Enzyme 1
BMI1	B-lymphoma Moloney murine leukemia virus insertion 1
HNSCC	Head and Neck Squamous Cell Carcinoma
TSSC	Tongue Squamous Cell Carcinoma
DMBA	9, 10-dimethyl-1, 2-benzanthracene
4NQO	4-nitroquinoline 1-oxide
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
CEB	From Portuguese “ <i>Carcinoma epidermóide de boca</i> ”
CD44	Principal cell surface receptor for hyaluronate

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1 INTRODUCTION

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Oral squamous cell carcinoma

Oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC) is one of the most common malignant neoplasms of the head and neck region. It involves inner mucosa of the lips, tongue, floor of mouth, gingiva, palate, and buccal mucosa. The major risk factors for OSCC include the frequent use of tobacco and alcohol, as well as papilloma virus infection, associated with genetic susceptibility (PETRICK; WYSS; BUTLER; CUMMINGS *et al.*, 2014). The prognostic factor with the most significant impact is the presence of metastasis in cervical lymph nodes, which occurs in 25 to 65% of the cases (HANNEN; VAN DER LAAK; MANNI; PAHLPLATZ *et al.*, 2001; JÄRVINEN; AUTIO; KILPINEN; SAARELA *et al.*, 2008; KALLURI; WEINBERG, 2009; KOSUNEN; PIRINEN; ROPPONEN; PUKKILA *et al.*, 2007; SZANISZLO; FENNEWALD; QIU; KANTARA *et al.*, 2014; VERED; YAROM; DAYAN, 2005)

OSCC is microscopically characterized by islets and cords of tumor epithelial cells with cellular atypia (nuclear hyperchromasia, pleomorphism, altered nuclear-cytoplasmic ratio, frequent and abnormal mitoses, dyskeratosis and keratin pearls) and architectural changes (loss of stratification and basement membrane). The tumors are graded into well-differentiated areas that resemble closely to normal squamous epithelium, moderately-differentiated areas exhibiting usually less keratinization, and poorly-differentiated (or undifferentiated) areas with predominance of immature cells and minimal keratinization (WHO, 2005). In addition, perivascular, perimuscular and perineural invasion by OSCC cells is often present in the invasive tumor front (ITF) that corresponds to three to six cell layers or detached tumor cell groups at the advancing edge (PIFFKÖ; BÄNKFALVI; OFNER; BRYNE *et al.*, 1997).

1.2 Cancer stem cells

Two hypotheses currently predominate to explain how cancer develops. In the stochastic model (Fig. 1A), all tumor cells are proliferative and display unlimited tumor-initiating capacities (WACLAW; BOZIC; PITTMAN; HRUBAN *et al.*, 2015). In contrast, the cancer

stem cells (CSC) theory (Fig. 1B) suggests that only one subpopulation among all tumor cells is highly proliferative and initiate a new tumor growth (CLEVERS, 2011; KOREN; FUCHS, 2016; REYA; MORRISON; CLARKE; WEISSMAN, 2001). However, the tumor hierarchy is not a one-way route, but can be reversible, which differentiated cells can dedifferentiate and obtain stem-like properties under specific conditions, such as OCT-4, Nanog and SOX-2 overexpression (HERREROS-VILLANUEVA; ZHANG; KOENIG; ABEL *et al.*, 2013; MEACHAM; MORRISON, 2013).

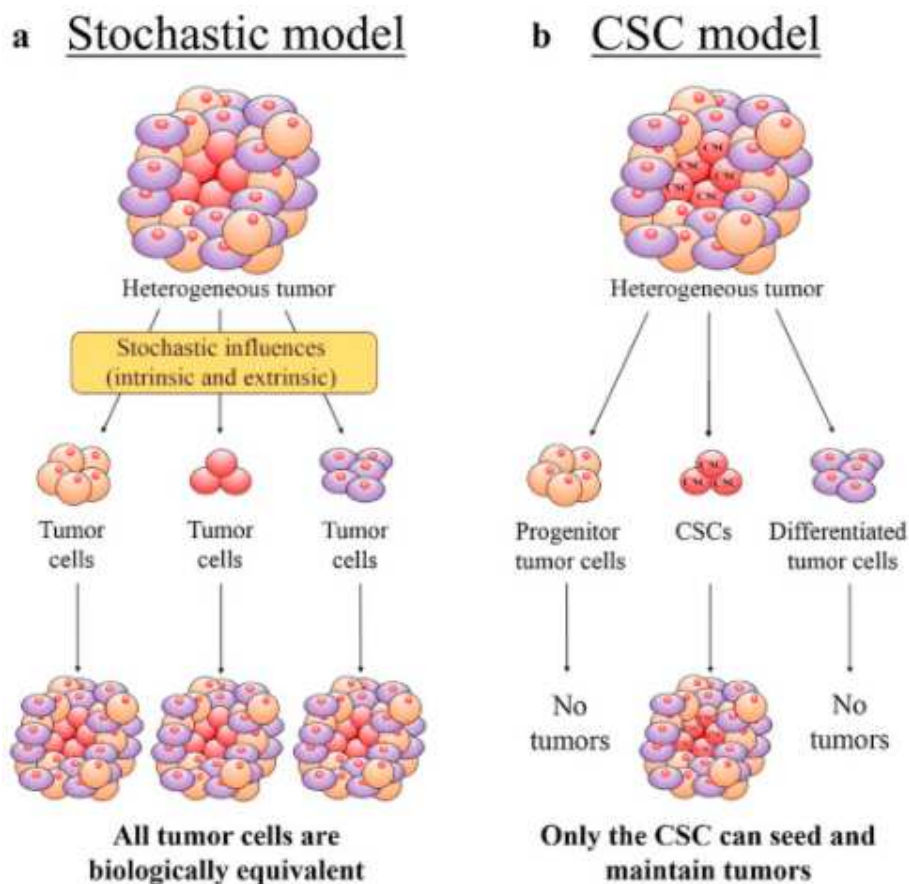


Figure 1. Models of cellular heterogeneity in solid tumors. Tumors are composed of a heterogeneous population of cells with different phenotypic characteristics. Different cell types are shown in different colors; (A) stochastic model: all tumor cells are biologically equivalent and have equal tumorigenic capacities. The behavioral variation is the result of intrinsic and extrinsic stochastic influences; (B) Cancer stem cell hypothesis: only a subpopulation of tumor cells (CSC, in red) is able to self-renew and originate new tumors (KOREN; FUCHS, 2016).

In normal tissues, stem cells (SC) are defined as immature and non-specialized cells that display a unique ability to self-renew and differentiate into specialized cells in an attempt to maintain tissue integrity (EGUSA; SONOYAMA; NISHIMURA; ATSUTA *et al.*, 2012; LEMISCHKA, 2005; VALENT; BONNET; DE MARIA; LAPIDOT *et al.*, 2012). CSC have similar properties to SC and they were identified as an essential source of tumor cells in

different malignancies, such as in oral cancer (ERAMO; LOTTI; SETTE; PILOZZI *et al.*, 2008; O'BRIEN; POLLETT; GALLINGER; DICK, 2007; RODINI; LOPES; LARA; MACKENZIE, 2017). Importantly, these cells are chemoresistant and capable to propagate and support tumorigenesis (DAWOOD; AUSTIN; CRISTOFANILLI, 2014; SHIGDAR; LI; BHATTACHARYA; O'CONNOR *et al.*, 2014). According to Singh *et al.* (2003), the ability to initiate tumors and originate heterogeneous cell populations found in the original tumor are exclusive properties of CSC. In view of that, it is important to develop specific therapies targeting CSC for cancer treatment.

The first evidence of CSC in tumor progression was demonstrated when human leukemic tumor cells were xenografted in non-obese diabetic/severe combined immunodeficient (NOD/SCID) mice, and only CD34⁺/CD38⁻ cells were capable to initiate tumor growth (BONNET; DICK, 1997). Thereafter, CSC were identified by specific markers in solid brain tumors (CD133⁺ cells) (SINGH; CLARKE; TERASAKI; BONN *et al.*, 2003), breast tumors (CD44^{high}/CD24^{low}/ESA⁺) (AL-HAJJ; WICHA; BENITO-HERNANDEZ; MORRISON *et al.*, 2003), prostate tumors (CD44⁺) (PATRAWALA; CALHOUN; SCHNEIDER-BROUSSARD; LI *et al.*, 2006) and oral tumors (CD44^{+/high}) (LOCKE; HEYWOOD; FAWELL; MACKENZIE, 2005; PRINCE; SIVANANDAN; KACZOROWSKI; WOLF *et al.*, 2007). Researchers also identified CSC by the high activity of the aldehyde dehydrogenase enzyme (ALDH1) in breast and oral cancers (CLAY; TABOR; OWEN; CAREY *et al.*, 2010; GINESTIER; HUR; CHARAFE-JAUFFRET; MONVILLE *et al.*, 2007).

The subsequent studies on CSC biomarkers revealed that this subpopulation is significantly involved with tumor behavior. BMI1 (also known as B-lymphoma Moloney murine leukemia virus insertion region 1) is involved in the self-renewal, differentiation and initiation of brain and prostate tumors (ABDOUH; FACCHINO; CHATOO; BALASINGAM *et al.*, 2009; LUKACS; GOLDSTEIN; LAWSON; CHENG *et al.*, 2010). Overexpression of BMI1 in an ALDH1⁺ subpopulation was correlated with increased tumor formation, cell migration, local invasion, and metastasis in head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC) (YU; LO; CHEN; HUANG *et al.*, 2011). This suggests that presence of BMI1 can be used as a predictive marker of CSC in addition to CD44 and ALDH1.

Research of our group is investigating the role of CSC and tumor microenvironment in OSCC development and progression (Young Investigator Grant, FAPESP # 2013/07245-9). Recently, we found that CD44 immunoexpression was associated with lymph node metastasis,

while high expression of ALDH1 was associated with angiolymphatic invasion (ORTIZ; LOPES; AMÔR; PONCE *et al.*, 2018).

1.3 Epithelial-mesenchymal transition

The epithelial to mesenchymal transition (EMT) is a biological process involved in early stages of embryonic development. Epithelial cells loss apical-basal polarity and intercellular junctions, acquiring a mesenchymal phenotype that enables them to migrate beyond the primary site to integrate into surrounding or distant tissues (PARSANA; AMEND; HERNANDEZ; PIANTA *et al.*, 2017). Importantly, studies have demonstrated that carcinoma cells undergo EMT, acquiring migratory and- invasive properties, which are a critical step during tumor metastasis events (FEDELE; CERCHIA; CHIAPPETTA, 2017; THIERAUF; VEIT; HESS, 2017).

Notably, CSC undergo EMT mediated by cell transcription factors (SLUG, SNAIL and TWIST) activated in response to WNT signaling pathways, leading to intracellular changes such as hyperregulation of vimentin expression, inhibition of E-cadherin expression and nuclear translocation of β -catenin (THIERY, 2003). In OSCC, Biddle *et al.* identified two distinct phenotypes of CSC: one described as proliferative with epithelial characteristics, CD44^{High}ESA^{High}; and another with migratory traits, CD44^{High}ESA^{Low}, which exhibits mesenchymal properties. Consequently, it is worth to emphasize the role of biomarkers to identify these phenotypes as a target in further cancer therapies (BIDDLE; LIANG; GAMMON; FAZIL *et al.*, 2011).

Liu *et al.* investigated the immunoexpression of EMT-related proteins in tongue squamous cell carcinoma (TSSC). SNAIL, E-cadherin, N-cadherin, and Vimentin were associated with tumorigenesis and pathological outcomes. Vimentin was described as a potential prognostic factor for TSCC patients (LIU; KANG; WU; SUN *et al.*, 2017). In a different study, SNAIL expression in HNSCC was correlated with metastasis and poor prognosis (YANG; CHANG; CHIOU; LIU *et al.*, 2007). Reduced E-cadherin expression at the invasive tumor front suggest that this transmembrane glycoprotein is a noteworthy EMT marker in OSCC (COSTA; LEITE; CARDOSO; LOYOLA *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, high expression of N-cadherin has been correlated to enhanced tumor cell invasion and migration, leading to tumor

growth in carcinomas (SMITH; TEKNOS; PAN, 2013). Thus, SNAIL, E-cadherin, N-cadherin, and Vimentin expression is well recognized and established as EMT markers.

1.4 Experimental models of tumorigenesis *in vivo*

The most used protocol for experimental models of tumorigenesis *in vivo* involves the use of chemical agents as carcinogens. DMBA (9, 10-dimethyl-1, 2-benzanthracene) and 4NQO (4-nitroquinoline 1-oxide) are the most used in oral experimental chemical carcinogenesis. DMBA causes DNA adduct formation, failure in the repair of which leads to the development of cancer (MAAYAH; GHEBEH; ALHAIDER; EL-KADI *et al.*, 2015). DMBA also promotes local irritation, resulting in inflammatory response and necrosis. Thus, early epithelial lesions become difficult to analyze (KANOJIA; VAIDYA, 2006; RAJU; IBRAHIM, 2011). On the other hand, 4NQO is a water-soluble agent, which induces tumors in the oral cavity with histological and molecular changes similar to oral carcinogenesis in humans (VERED; YAROM; DAYAN, 2005). This model often results in multiple lesions, which enables to study all stages of tumorigenesis, including dysplasia, invasive tumor at the primary site and metastasis. However, this model includes a long time for tumor development (at least 48 weeks), the size and the number of tumors are hardly reproducible among replicates, and the mice display low rate of lymphatic metastasis (SZANISZLO; FENNEWALD; QIU; KANTARA *et al.*, 2014).

The gold-standard method applied in the study of CSC phenotype is the xenoinplantation of human tumor cells into immunocompromised animals (SCHATTON; FRANK, 2010). This experimental model generates lesions that displays similarities to the cellular and molecular changes which occur during the development and progression of OSCC in humans (RAJU; IBRAHIM, 2011). In addition, animal models can be used for the development of biological markers for diagnosis and prognosis of the disease (KANOJIA; VAIDYA, 2006).

Immunoexpression of CD44, ALDH1 and BMI1 have been reported as potential prognostic markers in OSCC. In view of the mutual relationship between CSC and EMT in tumor progression, EMT-related proteins (E-cadherin, SNAIL and Vimentin) might be relevant biomarkers in the study of CSC phenotypes. Therefore, we aimed to induce tumorigenesis by xenoinplantation of the CSC subpopulations (CD44^{High}ESA^{High} and CD44^{High}ESA^{Low} into the

tongue of NOD/SCID mice. Further, formed tumors were characterized microscopically by H&E and submitted to immunohistochemistry for the above-mentioned markers.

4 CONCLUSION

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, using the surface markers CD44 and ESA we isolated two different phenotypes of CSC from OSCC. Epi-CSC displayed high tumorigenic potential to form heterogeneous tumors into NOD/SCID mice 49 days-post inoculation. Moreover, these tumors reproduced histopathological and immunolabeling pattern similar to human OSCC suggesting that xenografting Epi-CSC into immunocompromised mice represent a trustworthy approach for future oral cancer research.

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ANNEX



Universidade de São Paulo Faculdade de Odontologia de Bauru

Comissão de Ética no Ensino e Pesquisa em Animais

CEEPA-Proc. Nº 002/2017.

Bauru, 5 de maio de 2017.

Senhora Professora,

Informamos que Projeto de Pesquisa denominado "*Caracterização da Relação Funcional entre Macrófagos, Fenótipo Célula-Tronco de Câncer e Fenômeno de Transição Epitélio-Mesenquimal no Carcinoma Epidermóide de Boca*" tendo Vossa Senhoria como Pesquisador Responsável, que envolve a utilização de animais (roedores), para fins de pesquisa científica, encontra-se de acordo com os preceitos da Lei nº 11.794, de 8 de outubro de 2008, do Decreto nº 6.899, de 15 de julho de 2009, e com as normas editadas pelo Conselho Nacional de Controle da Experimentação Animal (CONCEA), foi analisado e considerado APROVADO em reunião ordinária da Comissão de Ética no Ensino e Pesquisa em Animais (CEEPA), realizada nesta data.

Vigência do projeto:	<i>Maio/2017 a Maio/2020</i>
Espécie/Linhagem:	<i>Camundongos imunodeficientes NOD/SCID</i>
Nº de animais:	<i>300</i>
Peso/Idade	<i>20g/6-8 semanas</i>
Sexo:	<i>Machos e fêmeas</i>
Origem:	<i>Centro de Bioterismo da Faculdade de Medicina da USP</i>

Esta CEEPA solicita que ao final da pesquisa seja enviado um Relatório com os resultados obtidos para análise ética e emissão de parecer final, o qual poderá ser utilizado para fins de publicação científica.

Atenciosamente,


Profª Drª Ana Paula Campanelli

Presidente da Comissão de Ética no Ensino e Pesquisa em Animais

Profa. Dra. Camila de Oliveira Rodini Pegoraro
Docente do Departamento de Ciências Biológicas