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L'horloge de segmentation humaine sonne toutes les cinq heures

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fluorescents pour pouvoir observer en temps réel, au microscope l'évolution de la concentration de ces protéines dans les cellules d'identité pré-somitique. Les résultats, spectaculaires, ont montré que l'horloge de segmentation tourne bien dans les cellules humaines avec un cycle de 5 heures. Par ailleurs, les cellules qui cyclent sont synchronisées, selon un processus qui met en jeu la voie de signalisation Notch.

English version

The vertebrae and ribs, as well as some muscles and connective tissues, are derived from paired and segmented embryonic structures, the somites, of which there are 35 to 37 in humans, distributed along the antero-posterior axis of the embryo. Somites exist in all vertebrates, and there are hundreds of them in some snake embryos. Somites are produced cyclically, budding regularly from the unsegmented caudal region of the mesoderm. The "oldest" somites are therefore also the most anterior. Work carried out several years ago by Olivier Pourquié's group had shown that in the chicken embryo, the oscillatory expression of developmental genes programs a *bona fide* molecular clock controlling the production of somites at the rate of a new pair every 90 min [1]. This cycle is of 30 min in zebrafish and two and a half hours in mice. In humans, somites begin to form around the third week of embryonic development, but the existence of cyclic waves of gene expression in human somites and their duration were unknown. These shortcomings are quite easily explained by ethical reasons (no experimentation on the human embryo beyond two weeks after fertilization) and also by the technical impossibility of following *in utero* the development of human embryos of this age.

In a recent work published in the journal *Cell* [2], Olivier Pourquié's team at Harvard University has circumvented this problem and succeeded in solving this enigma. Professor Yamanaka (Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2012) has shown that it is possible, with a defined cocktail of genes, to reprogram mature, differentiated cells (for example from the skin) and restore their capacity to produce all the cell types found in body organs [3]. These reprogrammed cells are called induced pluripotent stem cells, or iPSCs. For

Ces travaux illustrent une nouvelle fois l'extraordinaire conservation évolutive des processus embryonnaires fondamentaux tels que la somitogenèse. Ils ouvrent également la voie vers la production à grande échelle de cellules capables de donner des muscles et des os pouvant servir à comprendre des pathologies humaines et à développer de nouveaux outils thérapeutiques.

their study, Dr. Pourquié's team developed an experimental protocol that allows, with only 2 chemical compounds, to transform iPSCs into cells of the pre-somitic mesoderm, from which somites are born. Next, the researchers had these cells express proteins that are known to be cyclically expressed during vertebrate somitogenesis and coupled them to fluorescent indicators so that changes in the concentration of these proteins in pre-somitic identity cells could be observed in real time under the microscope. The results are spectacular and show that the segmentation clock runs in human cells with a 5-hour cycle. In addition, the cycling cells are synchronized via cell-cell interactions that involves the Notch signalling pathway.

This work illustrates, once again, the extraordinary evolutionary conservation of fundamental embryonic processes such as somitogenesis. It also paves the way for the large-scale production of cells capable of producing muscles and bones that could be used to understand human pathologies and develop new therapeutic tools.

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