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# **Microarray-based identification of age-dependent differences in gene expression of human dermal fibroblasts**

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# **Summary**

Senescence is thought to play an important role in the progressive age-related decline in tissue integrity and concomitant diseases, but not much is known about the complex interplay between upstream regulators and downstream effectors. We profiled whole genome gene expression of non-stressed and rotenone-stressed human fibroblast strains from young and oldest old subjects, and measured Senescence Associated-β-gal (SA-β-gal) activity. Microarray results identified gene sets involved in carbohydrate metabolism, Wnt/β-catenin signaling, the cell cycle, glutamate signaling, RNA-processing and mitochondrial function as being differentially regulated with chronological age. The most significantly differentially regulated mRNA corresponded to the p16 gene. p16 was then investigated using qPCR, Western blotting and immunocytochemistry (ICC). In conclusion, we have identified cellular pathways that are differentially expressed between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects.

### **Introduction**

In addition to apoptosis, senescence is thought to contribute to the progressive age-related decline in tissue integrity and the concomitant diseases (1). It was found that various types of stressors (e.g. cytokines, oxidative agents) could induce premature senescence, implying a significant role for environmental factors in accelerating the aging process. In the past, studying senescence in vivo was thwarted by the lack of markers that indubitably identify senescent cells. Meanwhile studies into the signal transduction pathways of senescence have led to identification of many proteins that have overlapping roles in senescence, apoptosis and DNA-damage sensing (2).

Despite the fact that senescence, apoptosis and DNA-damage repair have been shown to play pivotal roles in the aging process, not much is known about the complex interplay between upstream and downstream pathways that operate intracellularly and between tissues on the systemic level. Gene expression array technologies may help to find a specific profile of differential gene expression as a marker of senescence. Comparisons of gene expression profiles have been made between various tissues of chronologically young and old mammalian model organisms (3-13) and humans (14-24). These studies show that different tissues in various species show similar changes in expression of genes involved in DNA-damage repair, cell cycle progression, senescence, apoptosis, stress response, immune response and metabolism. However, there are also many species-dependent and tissue-dependent differences that these studies did not address, and it is also not clear which changes are the results of the aging process and which drive the aging process. We have already reported that human skin fibroblast strains derived from chronologically young subjects, when compared with fibroblast strains from oldest old subjects (90 years of age), are less prone to go into senescence and more prone to go into apoptosis, both under nonstressed and stressed conditions (25). Also, fibroblast strains from middle aged offspring of nonagenarian siblings exhibited less senescence and more apoptosis when compared with fibroblasts from the partners of the offspring, representing the general population. Thus, fibroblasts from the offspring demonstrated younger cellular characteristics than fibroblasts from age-matched controls.

Here, we aimed to identify the cellular pathways that drive the differences with chronological age in cell senescence and apoptosis. We performed whole genome gene expression profiling of non-stressed and rotenone-stressed human fibroblast strains from young and old subjects. We expected the rotenone treatment to exacerbate differences in gene mRNA levels with age and, in particular, affect genes involved in senescence, apoptosis, DNAdamage repair, cell cycle progression, stress responses and metabolism. We validated the most significant mRNA change by qPCR and then performed a replication experiment in independent strains to investigate whether mRNA changes were reflected by protein level changes.

### **Material and methods**

#### **Study design**

The Leiden 85-plus Study (26) is a prospective population-based study in which all inhabitants aged 85 years or older of the city of Leiden, the Netherlands, were invited to take part. Between September 1997 and September 1999, 599 out of 705 eligible subjects (85%) were enrolled. All participants were followed for mortality and 275 subjects survived to the age of 90 years. During the period December 2003 up to May 2004, a biobank was established from fibroblasts cultivated from skin biopsies from 68 of the 275 surviving 90 year-old participants (27). These participants were in good physical and mental condition and were able to come to the research institute, where the same qualified physician carried out the procedures. During the period August to November 2006, we also established a biobank of fibroblast strains established from biopsies taken from 27 young subjects (23-29 years old).

#### **Fibroblast cultures and experimental setup**

Three-mm biopsies were taken from the sun unexposed medial side of the upper arm. Fibroblasts were grown in D-MEM:F-12 (1:1) medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (FCS, Gibco, batch no. 40G4932F), 1 mM MEM sodium pyruvate, 10 mM HEPES, 2

mM glutamax I, and antibiotics (100 Units/mL penicillin, 100  $\mu$ g/mL streptomycin, and 0.25– 2.5 µg/mL amphotericin B), all obtained from Gibco, Breda, the Netherlands. This medium will be referred to as standard medium. Fibroblasts were incubated at  $37^{\circ}$ C with 5% CO<sub>2</sub> and 100% humidity. All cultures that are used in the present study were grown under predefined, highly standardized conditions as published earlier (27) and frozen at low passage. Trypsin (Sigma, St Louis, MO, USA) was used to split fibroblasts using a 1:4 ratio each time they reached 80-100% confluence.

Passage 11 fibroblasts were thawed from frozen stocks on day zero. On day four, seven and 11 fibroblasts were further passaged in order to multiply fibroblasts. On day 18 the experiments were started. For the microarray experiments, fibroblast strains were seeded at 5200 and 7500 cells/cm<sup>2</sup> for non-stressed and rotenone-stressed cultures respectively. For the replication experiments, fibroblast strains were seeded at 2300 and 3900 cells/cm<sup>2</sup> for non-stressed and rotenone-stressed cultures respectively. Strains were seeded in batches of eight strains per condition.

To chronically stress fibroblast strains, medium was supplemented with 0.6 µM rotenone (Sigma, St Louis, MO, USA), known to induce an increase in the intracellular production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) at the mitochondrial level (28). After three days fibroblast strains were assessed for SA-β-gal, ROS, microarray experiments, p16 on the mRNA level and the protein level as described below. In order to check early response genes samples were also taken at three hours for the microarray experiments.

#### **Flow cytometric measurement of SA-**β**-galactosidase activity**

Fibroblasts were prepared as described earlier (29). In short, to change the lysosomal pH to pH 6, fibroblasts were incubated with medium containing 100 nM bafilomycin A1 (VWR, Amsterdam, the Netherlands) for 1 hour. Fibroblasts were then incubated with 33 µM of the  $β$ -galactosidase substrate C<sub>12</sub>FDG (Invitrogen, Breda, The Netherlands), in the presence of 100 nM bafilomycin. After trypsinisation, fibroblasts were washed once and resuspended in 200 µl ice cold PBS. Fibroblasts were measured in the FITC-channel and analysis was performed on the Median Fluorescence Intensity (MdFI) values.

#### **Flow cytometric measurement of ROS**

Fibroblasts were incubated in medium supplemented with 30 µM dihydrorhodamine 123 (Invitrogen, Breda, The Netherlands). They were then trypsinized, washed in ice-cold PBS, pelleted and resupended in 200 µl ice-cold PBS. Fibroblasts were kept on ice before measurement of MDI in the FITC-channel.

#### **Microarray Analysis**

All products were purchased from Agilent Technologies UK Ltd (Wokingham, Berkshire, UK) and used according to manufacturer's protocol unless stated otherwise. All samples (n=12) were isolated and run on microarrays separately. Total mRNA was isolated using the RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen Ltd, Crawley, UK) and 300ng was mixed with an appropriate amount of One-Color RNA Spike-In RNA and converted into labelled cRNA (One-Color Low RNA Input Linear Amplification Kit PLUS). Labelled cRNA was purified using an RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen Ltd, Crawley, UK) and 2µg was hybridised to Agilent human whole genome Oligo Arrays (G4112F; 41094 probes) using reagents supplied in the Agilent Hybridisation Kit (One-Color Microarray-Based Gene Expression Analysis Protocol). Microarray slides were hybridised for 17 h at 65 °C and subsequently washed in acetonitrile for 1 min followed by 30s in Agilent Stabilisation and Drying Solution. Scanning of the slides was performed with the Agilent G2565BA Microarray Scanner System. The Agilent G2567AA Feature Extraction Software (v.9.1) was used to extract data and check the quality. To comply with MIAME requirements the data discussed in this publication have been deposited in NCBI's Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) (30;31) and are accessible through GEO Series accession number GSE28300 (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE28300).

#### **Validation/replication of p16 by qPCR**

cDNA syntheses of total RNA extracted from non-stressed fibroblast strains or rotenonestressed fibroblast strains was carried out using 0.5µg total RNA per reaction. Synthesis of cDNA was via AMV first strand synthesis kit (Roche Applied Science, Hertfordshire, UK) according to the manufacturer's instructions. All PCR mixes were prepared in triplicate, comprising 0.1µl of freshly prepared cDNA, 1 x SYBR Green PCR master mix (Bio-Rad Laboratories Ltd, Hemel Hempstead, UK) and 1 x QuantiTect PCR primers (Qiagen Ltd, Crawley, UK) specific for the genes CDKN2A/p16 (QT00089964) or to PPIA/cyclophilin A (QT00062311). Semi-quantitative PCR was performed on a Bio-Rad iCycler. Transcript levels were normalized to PPIA and data analysis was performed using the comparative cycle threshold method (∆∆CT).

#### **p16 immunoblotting**

Fibroblasts were lysed in RIPA buffer (20mM Triethanolamine-HCL, ph 7.8, 140 mM NaCl, 0.1% Natrium deoxycholaat, 0.1% Natrium dodecylsulfaat (SDS) and 0.1% Triton X-100) with protease inhibitors (SIGMAFAST<sup>™</sup> Protease Inhibitor Cocktail Tablets, EDTA-free) used according to the manufacturer's protocol. Proteinlysates of the fibroblasts were stored at -80°C. Protein content was determined by Pierce BCA Protein Assay Kit (Thermo Scientific, Breda, the Netherlands). Proteins were fractionated by 10% and 15% SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis. For every strain the loaded amounts of protein were the same for the unstressed and for the rotenone-stressed condition. Samples of three subjects were not used for immunoblots because of very low protein content. Proteins were blotted onto a PVDF membrane (Immobilon-P, Millipore, Billerica, USA). Membranes were blocked in Tris-Buffered Saline Tween-20 (TBST) containing 10% non-fat dry milk. Primary antibodies were prepared in TBST solution with 10% dry milk. Membranes were incubated overnight at 4°C with the following primary antibodies: α-p16 JC8 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, 1:500) and α-Hausp Pab (Bethyl laboratories, Montgomery 1:1000). After incubation, membranes were washed three times with TBST and incubated with goat anti-mouse or goat anti-rabbit antibody coupled to horse-radish-peroxidase for one h at room temperature. Antibody binding was visualized using Super Signal West Dura (Thermo Scientific, Breda, the Netherlands) and exposure to X-ray film. The software package Odyssey (LI-COR Biosciences, Lincoln, USA) was used to quantify the values from the Immunoblot signals, the values of which were expressed in arbitrary units (AU). All values were normalized for loading control before they were used further for statistical analyses.

#### **Immunocytochemical staining for p16**

Fibroblasts were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS for four minutes. After permeabilization for 20 minutes in 0.2% Triton (Sigma, St Louis, MO, USA) in PBS, samples were

blocked with blocking buffer (3% BSA in PBS) for one hour at room temperature and incubated for two hours with anti-p16 (JC8) antibody (Santa Cruz Biotechnology Inc., Santa Cruz, USA), diluted 1/100 in blocking buffer. After five washes with PBS, cells were treated with  $0.3\%$  H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> in methanol to reduce background peroxidase activity. Fibroblasts were then stained using an anti-mouse IgG Vectastain Elite ABC kit (Vector laboraties, Burlingame, CA, USA) and a DAB Peroxidase Substrate Kit (Vector laboraties, Burlingame, CA, USA), according to the manufacturer's protocols. Fibroblasts were counterstained with Hematoxylin (Vector laboraties, Burlingame, CA, USA) for five minutes and incubated with NH4OH in 70% ethanol for one minute. After washing in water, slides were mounted with Faramount Mounting Medium (DAKO, Heverlee, Belgium) and photographed with a Leica microscope (Leica Microsystems, Rijswijk, the Netherlands). Per sample 500 randomly chosen cells were assessed for p16 positivity.

#### **Statistics**

Raw data produced from microarrays were imported into R version 2.11.0 (2010-04-22) (32), an open source statistical analysis program, using custom code. Background correction was performed using the normexp+offset method and data were log-transformed (33). Differential expression of genes was determined by fitting a linear model using the lmFit function from the limma package and moderated t-statistics were computed using the ebayes function (34). The linear model included parameters for treatment, age, gender and batch effects. Bonferroni-Holm multiple testing correction was also applied (FDR(p) < 0.05).

For the probes showing significant differences in expression of mRNA between fibroblast strains from young and old strains, variation in expression between strains from different subjects was presented as a heatmap.

The Bonferroni-Holm data set was uploaded into the Ingenuity application [www.ingenuity.com]. Each probe identifier was mapped to its corresponding object/gene in Ingenuity's Knowledge Base. These molecules, called Network Eligible molecules, were overlaid onto a global molecular network developed from information contained in Ingenuity's Knowledge Base. Networks of Network Eligible Molecules were then algorithmically generated based on their connectivity. The Functional Analysis identified the biological functions and/or diseases that were most significant to the data set. Right-tailed Fisher's

exact test was used to calculate a p-value determining the probability that each biological function and/or disease assigned to that data set is due to chance alone. Canonical pathways analysis identified the pathways from the Ingenuity Pathways Analysis library of canonical pathways that were most significant to the data set. The significance of the association between the data set and the canonical pathway was measured in 2 ways: 1) A ratio of the number of molecules from the data set that map to the pathway divided by the total number of molecules that map to the canonical pathway is displayed. 2) Fisher's exact test was used to calculate a p-value determining the probability that the association between the genes in the dataset and the canonical pathway is explained by chance alone.

Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA; www.broad.mit.edu\gsea) (35;36) was applied for functional pathway analysis between comparative conditions. Probes from the microarray were collapsed into 17517 gene features and ordered by signal to noise ratio into a rank ordered list (L). For each gene set (S) an enrichment score (ES) is calculated which reflects the degree to which it is overrepresented at the extremes (top or bottom) of the entire ranked list L based on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic. Briefly, the score is calculated by traversing the list L and increasing a running-sum statistic when a gene is encountered which is in S and decreasing it when genes are encountered which are not in S. The magnitude of the increment corresponds to the degree that the gene correlates to the phenotype. Statistical significance (nominal P-value) of the ES is determined by empirical phenotype-based permutation; specifically the phenotype labels are permuted and the ES of the gene set is recalculated to generate a null distribution for the ES. Nominal p-value is computed relative to this null distribution. Significance levels are then adjusted to account for multiple hypotheses testing first by normalizing the ES for each gene set to account for the size of the set (NES) and then by controlling the proportion of false positives by calculating the FDR corresponding to each NES. Gene sets were obtained from the Broad Institute Molecular Signatures Database.

All other analyses were performed with the software package SPSS 16.0.01 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Since the AU values from the Western blotting results were not normally distributed, they were normalised by log-transformation. Rotenone-induced effects were

analysed using linear mixed models (LMMs), adjusting for batches of experiments, repeat experiments and gender (and also age in case of offspring/partner comparison). Differences between groups (young/old, offspring/partner) in non-stressed and rotenone-stressed conditions were analysed using similar linear mixed models.

### **Results**

#### **Microarray analysis dependent on chronological age**

SA-β-gal activity was measured in fibroblasts from young and old subjects under nonstressed and stressed conditions to assure that rotenone treatment for three days would increase levels of senescence, as previously observed (29). Six young subjects and six old subjects were randomly chosen (age: 23.1±1.6 [mean±SD] and 90.3±0.5 years, respectively, three males and three females for both young and old). All subjects were in good physical and mental condition and were able to come to the research institute. There was a significant increase in SA-β-gal activity in all fibroblast strains after three days of exposure to 0.6 µM rotenone (non-stressed: 2365±236 [MdFI in arbitrary units; mean±SE], rotenone: 4366±489, p<0.001). Furthermore, strains from old subjects showed a higher SA-β-gal activity under non-stressed conditions and a higher stress-induced increase in SA-β-gal activity (Supplemental table 2).

Gene expression profiles were generated using fibroblast strains from young and old subjects under non-stressed conditions and stressed for three hours and three days with rotenone. After quantile normalisation of the data, a linear regression model was used in conjunction with a Bonferroni-Holm multiple testing correction (p<0.05) to detect mRNAs that were differentially expressed between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects. A total of 215 out of 41094 probes were identified whose expression was significantly different between the fibroblast strains from young and old subjects (Supplemental table 1). Variation in expression between strains from different subjects was presented as a heatmap (Supplemental figure 1). These differences between young and old were present in the untreated samples as well as in the samples obtained after treatment with rotenone for three hours and after treatment with

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rotenone for three days. The 215 differentially expressed probes could be mapped to 106 genes (Table 1).

#### **Pathway analysis**

To identify cellular pathways that could be responsible for the age-dependent changes in gene expression, Ingenuity Pathway Analysis was performed using all data and applying a Bonferroni-Holm cutoff to generate a target list for further study. The 215 probes could be mapped to 106 genes eligible for Ingenuity network analysis and 100 genes allowing function and canonical pathway analysis. Twelve over-represented gene networks were identified, with the most significant Ingenuity network containing p16 (CDKN2A) at its centre (Figure 1) and corresponding to the biological functions Tumour Morphology, Cell Cycle progression and Cellular Development. The biological function most significantly enriched in the 100 genes was Carbohydrate Metabolism. For the canonical pathway analysis Wnt/β-Catenin signaling was the most significantly enriched. The top 10 functions and canonical pathways derived from these analyses are shown in Figure 2.

To complement the Ingenuity analysis, a GSEA-based analysis was performed as this approach uses significance data across all the probes rather than a division of the list via a significant cutoff. When the data from old subjects were compared with that from young subjects, 446 of 967 gene sets were more highly expressed in the strains from the old subjects. Using a false discovery rate (FDR) cutoff of 0.25, the Glutamate Signaling Pathway appeared to be significantly enriched (nominal p-value: 0.006, FDR: 0.22, ES: 0.68, NES: - 17.7) due to the differential regulation of the genes HOMER2, GRIA3, GRIN2B and GRIK2. In fibroblast strains from young subjects, 521 of 967 gene sets were more highly expressed when compared with strains from old subjects and 29 gene sets were significantly enriched at a FDR cutoff of 0.25 (Table 2). These gene sets were mainly involved in mitochondrial processes, the cytoskeleton (especially the machinery needed for mitosis) and RNA-processing.



**Figure 1.** Top network generated by the use of Ingenuity Pathway Analysis (IPA), carried out on comparing young with old subjects with the Bonferroni-Holm cutoff applied (p<0.05). Molecules are represented as nodes, and the biological relationship between two nodes is represented as a line. The intensity of the node color indicates the degree of up- (red) or down- (green) regulation in fibroblast strains from young subjects. Nodes are displayed using various shapes that represent the functional class of the gene product (diamond: enzyme, horizontal oval: transcription factor, circle: other).





**Figure 2.** Ingenuity analysis. A, top 10 biological functions; B, top ten canonical pathways. Analysis was carried out on comparing young with old subjects with the Bonferroni-Holm cutoff applied (p<0.05). Ratio: expression in young/expression in old.









**Table 2.** Gene sets more higly expressed in fibroblast strains from young subjects when compared with strains from old subjects, and significantly enriched at FDR<0.25, identified by GSEA.



FDR: false discovery rate, ES: enrichment score, NES: normalised enrichment score

#### **p16**

An expression probe corresponding to p16 was the most significantly differentially expressed probe between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects, being higher in strains from old subjects. Rotenone-treatment resulted in decreases in p16 mRNA expression after three hours and even more so after three days which were similar for fibroblast strains from young and old subjects, i.e. there was no significant rotenone-age interaction. This was validated by qPCR (non-stressed=1, fold change 3 hours rotenone [mean±SE]: 0.74±0.04, fold change 3 days rotenone: 0.67±0.04, p<0.001). For each condition, p16 mRNA levels were found to be higher in fibroblast strains from old subjects (Supplemental table 2). To verify these results, we performed a replication experiment on fibroblast strains from a new set of ten young and ten old subjects (age: 25.5±1.8 [mean±SD] and 90.2±0.3 years). To assess the rotenoneinduced stress response, levels of reactive oxygen species (ROS [MdFI in arbitrary units] non-stressed: 1580±70 [mean±SE], rotenone: 2181±124, p<0.001) and SA-β-gal activity ([MdFI in arbitrary units] non-stressed: 2793±278, rotenone: 4278±330, p<0.001) were measured. There was no difference in SA-β-gal activity between strains from young and old subjects, but strains from old subjects did show a greater rotenone-induced increase in SA-βgal activity (Supplemental table 2). Under non-stressed conditions ROS levels were higher in strains from old subjects (MdFI in arbitrary units, young: 1500±150, old: 1656±148, p=0.027), but there were no differences in rotenone-induced increases. p16 was measured by qPCR, Western blotting and immunocytochemistry (ICC). Consistent with the microarray experiments, p16 mRNA expression decreased (non-stressed=1, rotenone: 0.74±0.04, p<0.001). Under non-stressed conditions, fibroblast strains from old subjects showed significantly lower levels of p16 mRNA when compared with strains of young subjects (Supplemental table 2), contrary to the microarray results of the microarray experiment. Under stressed conditions there was no difference in p16 mRNA expression or protein levels. Western blotting demonstrated neither rotenone-induced changes in p16 protein levels, nor any differences between strains from young and old subjects. ICC showed rotenone-induced increases in p16 positive fibroblasts (Non-stressed: 2.40±0.31%, rotenone: 7.02±0.72%, p<0.001). Under non-stressed conditions percentages of p16-positive fibroblasts were higher for strains from old subjects when compared with strains from young subjects (young: +1.39±0.31%, old: +3.05±0.31%, p<0.001), as were rotenone-induced increases in p16 positive percentages (young: +3.43±0.65%, old: +5.08±0.65%, p=0.060).

### **Discussion**

In this study we addressed which pathways could be responsible for the reported differences in senescence and apoptosis between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects (25;37) using microarray methodology. Age-dependent differences were found in pathways involved in carbohydrate metabolism, Wnt/β-catenin signalling, the cytoskeleton, cell cycle, RNAprocessing and mitochondrial function. No significant rotenone-age interactions were detected in this analysis indicating that the differences with age in mRNA levels were generally similar in stressed and non-stressed conditions.

#### **Ingenuity analysis**

Ingenuity analysis identified carbohydrate metabolism as the biological function that was most differentially expressed between strains from young and old subjects. The most significant pathway within this function was modification of glycosaminoglycans (GAGs), which are important components of the extracellular matrix (ECM). In support of this finding, it has been reported that physiological aging is associated with ECM remodeling, reflected by plasma GAGs concentrations (38). Genes involved in carbohydrate metabolism identified by Ingenuity were, amongst others, CD44, CXCL12 and TLR4. CD44 is a cell-surface glycoprotein important for cell-cell interactions, cell adhesion and migration (39;40). In aged fibroblasts, TGF-1-induced association between CD44 and EGF-R is lost with resultant suppression of ERK1/2 activation (41) and this might explain the lower CD44-expression in fibroblast strains from old subjects that we observed. In addition, CD44 is a receptor for hyaluran (HA), which is an important component of the ECM. HA acts through TLR4 and CD44 to stimulate an immune response against the septic response (42). Lower TLR4 activity has also been linked to reduced inflammatory response and successful aging (43), consistent with the higher TLR4-expression in fibroblast strains from old subjects observed in

the study reported here. CXCL12/SDF-1 is a chemotactic cytokine involved in cell motility (44) and showed lower expression in fibroblast strains from old subjects, correlating well with the decreased expression with age reported in animal models (45). Taken together, these results suggest that differences in cell to cell signaling might explain the differential regulation of carbohydrate metabolism between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects.

The most significant canonical pathway identified by the Ingenuity analysis was the Wnt/βcatenin pathway, which is frequently deregulated in cancer (46;47) and consists of, amongst others, the genes B-TRCP, CK2, CDKN2A (or p14/p16: see below) and WNT5A. WNT5Aexpression was higher in fibroblast strains from old subjects, consistent with reduced cell proliferation in fibroblast strains from old subjects (25) and age-dependent increased WNT5A-expression reported for animal models (48). In support of this, the top Ingenuity network indicated reduced cell proliferation in fibroblast strains from old subjects via the increases found in p15, p16 and RUNX2 mRNA. However, the expression levels of some genes were opposite to that expected. For example, B-TRCP is involved in ubiquitination and degradation of β-catenin which, as a consequence, leads to cell cycle arrest (49) and CK2 is activated by Wnt/β-catenin signalling (50). We found lower B-TRCP and CK2 expression in fibroblast strains from old subjects, suggesting increased cell proliferation. Thus, although the Ingenuity analysis indicated reduced cellular proliferation in fibroblast strains from old subjects, some contradictory findings warrant further pathway analysis to validate the findings.

#### **GSEA analysis**

GSEA pathway analysis resulted in gene sets such as spindle, spindle pole and microtubule organizing centre showing lower expression in fibroblast strains from old subjects, supporting the view that there was inhibition of the cell cycle in fibroblast strains from the old subjects. In addition, there was an increased activity of pathways linked to RNA processing in the young strains, consistent with the idea that with cellular aging (senescence) the expression of many genes required for the cell cycle decrease (51). Indeed, fewer senescent fibroblasts are observed in strains from young subjects (25). Combined with the Ingenuity analysis, these results suggest a reduced cellular proliferation rate in fibroblast strains from old subjects, as we indeed showed recently (37).

Mitochondrial function was also detected by the GSEA analysis. This was striking because rotenone binds to the electron transport chain in mitochondria, disrupting the production of ATP (52). Our previous results demonstrated that rotenone treatment exacerbated differences in the number of fibroblasts entering cellular senescence and apoptosis between strains from young and old subjects (25). Thus, as mitochondrial membrane potential is impaired in fibroblasts from old subjects (53), rotenone insult could lead to greater ROS production in the fibroblasts from the old subjects and consequently more cellular senescence.

GSEA analysis also identified the Glutamate Signaling Pathway gene set as the most differentially upregulated pathway in the fibroblast strains from the old subjects. Although fibroblasts are known to utilize glutamate signaling (54), very little is known about the role glutamate signaling plays in fibroblast function. These results are the first to indicate that glutamate signaling is upregulated with age in skin fibroblasts and the consequences of these changes on fibroblast function now requires further examination.

Boraldi et al. (55) also compared fibroblast strains from young and old subjects (ex vivo aging model) at early and late CPDs (in vitro aging model). While showing the majority of differences, like stress response, endoplasmic reticulum and cell membrane compartments and post-translational protein modifications, for in vitro aging, they did not observe many differences dependent on the age of subjects. It must be noted, though, that they used only three strains per age group. Although the effect was more pronounced in in vitro aging, they did find that deterioration of the redox balance depended on the subjects' age, consistent with the difference in expression of genes involved in mitochondrial function that reported here. Furthermore, elastin and fibulin-5 expression, both important ECM components, were differently expressed in cultures between fibroblast strains from young and old donors, consistent with the different expression of genes involved in ECM remodeling, cell-cell interactions and cell adhesion reported here.

#### **p16**

The gene most differentially expressed between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects was p16 and this microarray finding was confirmed by qPCR. p16 is regarded as a robust marker for cellular aging and senescence (2;56) and increasing numbers of p16 positive cells can indeed be found in mitotic aging of aging primates (57;58). We hypothesized that increased numbers of senescent cells (SA-β-gal activity) would be paralleled by p16 mRNA after rotenone-treatment. However, a decrease was observed in both the microarray experiment and the replication experiment. Furthermore, Western blot analyses could not show rotenone-induced differences in p16 protein levels whereas ICC did show rotenone-induced increased numbers of p16-positive fibroblasts. Thus, p16 mRNA levels were not reflected by p16 protein levels as measured by Western blot analysis and ICC.

Regulation of p16 activity can occur at different levels: transcription, mRNA stability, translation and protein stability. p16 mRNA stability is controlled by genes regulating the degradation of p16 mRNA which are down-regulated in late passage fibroblasts (59;60). In addition, p16 protein levels can increase in the absence of changes to p16 mRNA levels via changes to p16 protein stability (61;62). Thus, in senescent cells p16 mRNA and protein levels are likely to be stable whereas p16 protein stabilization rather than increased p16 mRNA levels could be responsible for non-senescent cells entering cell arrest. Another explanation could be that the microarray and qPCR probes both corresponded to the 3' end of the gene which is common to at least two gene transcripts (p14 and p16) whereas the proteins transcribed from the locus are unique in sequence (63). Thus, differential regulation of the different transcripts between the two experiments might well dissociate any concordance that actually exists between p16 mRNA and protein levels. The discrepancies between ICC and Western blotting could be explained by the fact that the ICC method scores each fibroblast dichotomously, while Western blotting measures the average level of all fibroblasts, underestimating the p16 positivity of some fibroblasts and overestimating the negativity of other fibroblasts, resulting in no average change.

In the microarray experiments the fibroblast strains from the old subjects showed higher levels of p16 mRNA expression for all three conditions (non-stressed, 3 hours and 3 days rotenone) consistent with increasing numbers of p16-positive fibroblasts in aging primates (57;64). No differences in the rotenone-induced fold changes in p16 mRNA expression were detected. In contrast to the microarray experiments the replication experiments showed lower expression of p16 mRNA in strains from old subjects (non-stressed) and rotenone induced a smaller decrease in p16 mRNA expression in these strains. The consistency of the p16 mRNA results across strains within each experiment, and the concordance of the ICC results across experiments indicated that the cause of this difference was technical in nature and specific to the mRNA. For example, a higher seeding density (to maximize mRNA yield) used for the microarray experiment compared with the replication experiments could have lead to differential regulation of p16 expression (65). Alternatively, changes to the expression of the housekeeping gene used in the qPCR experiments could have resulted in different qPCR results. Further detailed work investigating differences in p16 mRNA between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects, along with epistatic control of p16 mRNA levels is now required. However, as the most accurate reflection of p16 function, the ICC results reflected the gene array pathway analyses, the SA-β-gal activity and previous reported work (29) that cell cycle arrest is higher in fibroblasts strains from old subjects compared with young subjects. These results suggest that mRNA is not necessarily the best marker of p16 and ICC might be a better candidate.

In conclusion, from the microarray analyses emerged pathways involved in carbohydrate metabolism, cell cycle, mitochondrial function, glutamate signaling and RNA processing. The cell cycle inhibitor p16, involved in senescence, was the most significantly differentially expressed mRNA between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects. The discrepancies between the microarray experiments and the replication experiments could be explained by non-representative strain selection and/or technical issues regarding seeding density. Future work with higher numbers of fibroblast strains will need to identify common pathways between the contrast in chronological age and biological age (e.g. familial longevity). These pathways might then be manipulated, resulting in biologically old cells becoming biologically younger, i.e. resemble chronologically cells.

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### **Supplemental Table 1.** List of 215 probes which were differentially expressed between fibroblast strains from young and old subjects







**Supplemental table 2.** ROS levels, Senescence Associated-β-gal activity and p16 expression measured at the mRNA level in non-stressed and rotenone stressed human fibroblasts from young and old subjects from the Leiden 85-plus Study. Values are given as mean (SE).



**Supplemental Figure 1.** Variation in expression between strains from different subjects presented as a heatmap

