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DECODING BIOLOGICAL IMMORTALITY: MOLECULAR INSIGHTS FROM NATURE'S AGELESS ORGANISMS

Pritilata Adhikary [a], Shreya Singh [b], *Atreyee Kundu [c]

[a,b,c] Department of Microbiology, Techno India University, Kolkata-700091, West Bengal, India

Abstract

The journey from birth to death has long been seen as an unavoidable biological trajectory, but nature's remarkable exceptionsdefy this principle. Some species,such as *Turritopsis dohrnii*, *T. nutricula* (immortal jellyfish), *hydra* spp., sponges, lobsters, and naked mole rats, exhibit sustained regenerative potential, allowing them to maintain vitality throughout their life. This review delves into the molecular and cellular pathways of senescence and biological immortality, emphasizing telomere dynamics, oxidative stress regulations and autophagy-senescence crosstalk. By comparing the naturally immortal organisms with biological mortal species, it reveals how certain species preserve genetic integrity and tissue renewal.The insights gained from these models could pave the way for future therapeutic approaches, like telomerase modulation, senolytics and regenerative biotechnology that aim to slow down ageing and lengthen human health span.

Keywords: Senescence; immortal beings; programmed cell death; ageing; regeneration.

1. Introduction

Ageing is a slow, multifactorial process characterized by the progressive accumulation of cellular damage and a gradual decline in functions. Despite being an inevitable process, some species defy this idea by displaying remarkable regenerative abilities and apparent biological immortality. *Turritopsis dohrnii*has the ability to switch back from the adult medusa stage to its young polyp form, which allows it to escape death and begin a new life cycle. In the same manner, hydra maintains a continuous stem cell renewal without any functional loss[1]. Naked mole ratscan ward off oxidative stress and cancer[2], whereas lobsters maintain active telomerase throughout their life cycle, which allows perpetual cell divisions. Sponges, too, exhibit indefinite tissue renewal due to their remarkable cellular plasticity.These species offer unique opportunities to understand the biological principles underlying biological immortality and negligible senescence. They demonstrate that longevity is the result of improved molecular maintenance, damage repair and evolutionary adaptations. The insights gleaned from these models shed light on conserved molecular mechanisms that sustained vitality, including damaged DNA repair, persistent telomerase activity and enhanced antioxidant defense[3].

In contrast, telomere shortening, damage to DNA strands, oxidative stress and metabolic imbalance cause cellular senescence in humans and higher organisms, a condition of irreversible growth arrest. On the organismal level, senescence is seen as ageing, which is defined by cognitive deterioration, wrinkled skin and poor immunity. At the cellular level, it is controlled by signaling pathways like p53/p21 and p16/ Rb, which orchestrate cell cycle arrest in response to damage. The Senescence-Associated-Secretory-Phenotype(SASP), a pro-inflammatory molecule released by senescent cells that promotes tissue dysfunction and age-related disorders like cancer, diabetes and neurodegenerative diseases [4].

Although senescence has positive effects on wound healing, tissue remodelling and tumour suppression, its chronic buildup causes degeneration and impairs homeostasis. It has important ramifications for longevity studies and regenerative medicine to learn how some species naturally avoid ageing. Molecular mechanisms that preserve genomic stability and cellular youthfulness are evident in the sustained telomerase activity in lobsters and in stem cell regeneration in hydra. Similarly, the naked mole rat's high proteostasis and resistance to oxidative stress provide essential information about the process involved in maintaining protein quality control and tolerating stress [2].

Understanding these biological outliers helps us to grasp the fine line between cellular death and renewal. By comparing mortal species to those

with minimal senescence, we can identify the evolutionary and molecular mechanisms that supports vitality, offering a roadmap for understanding how life can withstand time. This article offers an integrative framework that connects molecular, comparative and translational views, whereas earlier studies have concentrated on specific elements of ageing and immortality. Investigating the nature's immortal species can guide the design of next-generation therapeutic approaches, such as regenerative biotechnology, telomerase modulation, that are aimed at fostering healthy longevity.

Mechanisms behind Cellular Senescence

Cellular senescence is a complicated biological mechanism that irreversibly prevents cells from dividing in response to intrinsic and extrinsic stimuli. In its initial stages, it serves as a defensive barrier against tumour development and promotes tissue regeneration, but its chronic persistence functional decline. Telomere attrition, DNA damage, oxidative stress, or mitochondrial dysfunction may cause senescence, which may be replicative or stress-induced. The main molecular mechanisms that regulate this process are detailed in the following subsections.

2.1 ***Molecular Signaling Pathways***

The starting and maintenance of the senescent state are mostly guided by two linked tumour-suppressor channels: *p53/p21^CIP1/WAF1^* and *p16^INK4a^/Rb*. The p53/p21 path is triggered in response to DNA damage and telomere malfunction by means of the ATM/ATR kinase cascade. By suppressing cyclin-dependent kinases (CDKs), activated p53 induces p21, thereby halting the cell cycle at the G1/S checkpoint. Parallel-wise, the p16/Rb pathway serves as an autonomous or complementary mechanism by p16 inhibiting CDK4/6, thereby keeping Rb in its hypophosphorylated, active form. This helps to reinforce permanent growth arrest by preventing E2F-mediated expression of S-phase genes[5]. Cross-talk and coordinated activity between these two routes guarantee that the senescent phenotype stays stable and irreversible[6]. Besides these endogenous tumor-suppressor channels, external apoptotic signals triggeredby death receptors like Fas and TNFR1 can also intersect with caspase activation and senescence induction (Figure 1).

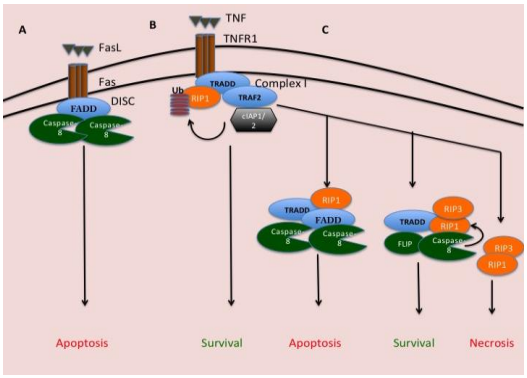

Fig. 1:Extrinsic death-receptor signaling involved in senescence and apoptosis.

2.2 Oxidative Stress and Mitochondrial Dysfunction

Excess ROS output results in oxidative stress, which accelerates senescence significantly. Damage to macromolecules causes the DNA Damage Response (DDR), keeping p53 and *NF-κB* signaling active, hence driving the Senescence-Associated Secretory Phenotype (SASP). Both producers and targets of ROS, mitochondria play a central role[7]. Bcl-2 family proteins permeate the mitochondrial membrane under sustained stress, therefore releasing cytochrome c, *Smac/Diablo*, and *Omi/HtrA2*. These substances combine to form the apoptosome (APAF1 + procaspase-9), therefore activating caspases, which might result in apoptosis or, if incomplete, senescence[8]. Chronic mitochondrial malfunction promotes ROS production, therefore strengthening the senescent condition. Figure 2 depicts this apoptotic route mediated by mitochondria connecting oxidative damage with senescence.

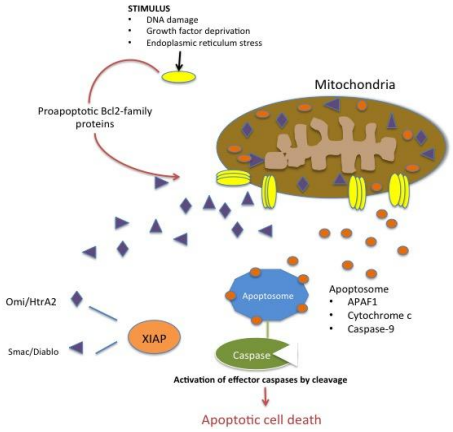

Fig.2:Mitochondria-mediated apoptotic pathway.

2.3 Telomere Dynamics: The Molecular Clock of Senescence

By capping chromosome ends, telomeres stop genetic instability. Every division shortens telomeres until they reach a critical length, therefore triggering the ATM/ATR-p53-p21 path, which ensures permanent arrest. Although germline and stem cells preserve telomeres via telomerase, its inhibition in somatic cells restricts proliferative ability, therefore making telomere attrition a characteristic of ageing [6], [9]. Thus, both cellular rejuvenation techniques and replicative lifespan depend on telomere maintenance.[10]

2.4 Proteostasis and the Mitochondrial Unfolded Protein Response (UPRmt)

Ageing cells exhibit impaired protein quality control and sometimes show proteostatic collapse. Through the induction of chaperones and proteases, the UPRmt pathway restores mitochondrial homeostasisthat refolds or degrades incorrect proteins, the UPRmt pathway restores mitochondrial balance. In long-lived species, effective proteostasis helps to preserve organelle function and cell integrity, therefore promoting stress resistance and longevity.[11]

2. 5 Autophagy-Senescence Crosstalk

Autophagy serves two roles: firstly, helping survival by getting rid of damaged parts, yet its malfunction accelerates senescence. Recent studies from Wang et al(2023)[4][12]show that removing damaged mitochondria through selective mitophagy lowers senescence, whereas defective autophagy increases ROS buildup and DNA damage. Therefore, preserving youth at the cellular level depends on appropriate autophagy.

At the point of senescence and survival, these processes - DNA damage signaling, oxidative stress, and telomere shortening- come together. Their balanced regulation decides whether a cell regenerates, ages, or repairs itself. Understanding how long-lived species reduce these molecular triggers offers insightful knowledge of longevity paths discussed below.

3. Molecular Pathways of Longevity

Longevity is governed by a complex interplay of hormonal, metabolic, mitochondrial, and genetic factors that collectively determine the pace of ageing and the capacity for cellular repair. At the molecular level, these pathways maintain homeostasis, regulate energy utilization, and coordinate responses to environmental and physiological stress. Evolutionarily conserved signaling networks such as the insulin/insulin-like growth factor-1 *(IIS)* pathway, *mTOR* (mechanistic target of rapamycin) signaling, AMP-activated protein kinase(AMPK), and sirtuin systems act as key determinants of lifespan across diverse species-from yeast to mammals.[13]

3.1 Hormonal and Metabolic Regulation

Hormonal balance plays a pivotal role in modulating lifespan. The IIS pathway integrates nutrient availability and growth signals; reduced IIS activity, as observed in *Caenorhabditis elegans*, *Drosophila*, and mice, is associated with enhanced longevity through increased stress resistance and autophagy. Similarly, mTOR acts as a nutrient-sensing hub, promoting growth under abundant energy conditions but accelerating ageing when hyper-activated. Inhibition of mTOR, either through caloric restriction or pharmacological agents like rapamycin, extends lifespan by improving metabolic efficiency and enhancing autophagic clearance of damaged organelles. The AMPK pathway, activated under low energy states, counterbalances mTOR by promoting catabolic processes and mitochondrial biogenesis, thus sustaining cellular vitality during metabolic stress.[11]

3.2 Mitochondrial Homeostasis and Redox Balance

Mitochondria are central to both energy metabolism and ageing. Their dynamic processes-fusion, fission,and mitophagy- preserve mitochondrial integrity and regulate reactive oxygen species (ROS) production. Mild oxidative stress triggers adaptive responses that increase antioxidant capacity and cellular resilience[14], a phenomenon termed mitohormesis[8]. Conversely, persistent mitochondrial dysfunction generates excessive ROS, damaging DNA, proteins, and lipids, and thereby accelerating senescence. Long-lived organisms, such as naked mole rats, maintain superior mitochondrial quality control, efficient electron transport, and enhanced proteostasis, all of which contribute to delaying ageing and extended lifespan[2].

3.3 Genetic Determinants of Longevity

Genetic regulation of ageing involves an intricate network of transcription factors and longevity-associated genes. The *FOXO*family of transcription factors, downstream of the IIS and AMPK pathways, promotes the expression of genes responsible for antioxidant defense, DNA repair, and autophagy. Sirtuins, a family of NAD-dependent deacetylases, further coordinate genomic stability, metabolic adaptation, and stress resistance by modifying histones and key transcriptional regulators such as PGC-1α and p53. Caloric restriction and NAD^+ precursors

enhance sirtuin activity, linking metabolic state to epigenetic longevity regulation.[15]

3.4 Repair and Regeneration Mechanisms

The maintenance of genomic and proteomic integrity is vital for long term longevity. Robust DNA repair pathways- such as base excision repair and non-homologous end joining-preserve genome stability, while autophagy and the ubiquitin-proteasome system eliminate damaged proteins and organelles[4].Enhanced regenerative potential, mediated by the activation of stem cells and telomerase, also contributes to prolonged lifespan. Organisms with continuous regenerative capacity, such as *Hydra* and certain planarians, exhibit negligible senescence, highlighting the importance of cellular renewal mechanisms in sustaining life[1].

Longevity arises from a delicate balance between energy production, stress adaptation, and damage repair. The interplay among hormonal signaling, mitochondrial function, and genetic regulation defines an organism's capacity to resist degeneration and maintain physiological youth. By decoding these molecular networks, researchers can identify key targets for interventions,which aim at increasing not only lifespan but also health span, moving humanity closer to the biological secrets of nature's long-lived and ageless organisms[16].

4. Comparative Models of Biological Immortality

Some living organisms in nature overcome the biological limits of ageing; it offers humans a special chance to uncover the molecular origins of everlasting youth. Hydra, a freshwater animal that belongs to the phylum Cnidaria, renews itself via its stem cells and exhibits almost unbelievable senescence and is among the best-studied species. Under the regulation of transcription factors, including *FoxO*, which maintains them in a state of constant regeneration without affecting cell identity, their epithelial and interstitial stem cells divide continually[1][12]. Likewise, *Turritopsis dohrnii*,- the hydrozoan jellyfish sometimes called the "immortal jellyfish," has amazing de-growth potential as it converts from an adult medusa back to its juvenile polyp condition by means of cellular differentiation. Apart from being an outstanding model for natural cell rejuvenation, this amazing ability to biologically reset its diapausing life cycle highlights the hitherto unknown significance of apoptosis in obligate developmental diapause[17]. It turns out that lobsters also exhibit an intriguing form of biological toughness. Lobsters avoid telomere shortening and allow constant somatic cell division during their developing stage through the great activity of the telomerase. Their regenerative capacity makes them live longer and allows their damaged tissues to be repaired even after adulthood, resulting in the expression of telomerase[18].

Another example is of naked mole rats, which are a subterranean mammal, showing a different anti-ageing strategy. This species of rat shows outstanding resistance to oxidative stress and cancer due to hyaluronan, which helps to enhance its tissue elasticity and cell stability. Their mitochondria not only produce less reactive oxygen species, but their proteome is also extraordinarily resistant to damage, hence optimizing its damage intake. Some species, like sponges and bivalves like *Arctica islandica*,which have a long lifespan, have little to no senescence due to slow metabolism and good DNA repair mechanisms and defence against antioxidants[19]. All these creatures show that there is not only a single way to immortality, but rather these organisms have evolved in different ways, like stem cell renewal and telomerase activation, to metabolic optimization and cellular reprogramming to prevent ageing and keep life going seamlessly. Comprehension of these natural designs of longevity offers transformational ideas for tissue engineering, regenerative medicine, and the effort to lengthen human lifespan.[20]

5. Evolutionary and Theoretical Perspectives on Ageing

As both a physiological must and an evolutionary conundrum, ageing has long fascinated scientists. Natural selection mostly favours characteristics that increase reproductive success from an evolutionary point of view rather than life span, which explains why ageing typically starts after reproductive maturity. Ageing can be interpreted through two primary frameworks: programmed and damage-based theories[21].

5.1 Programmed Theories

These suggest that ageing results from genetically controlled processes governing lifespan as part of species-specific survival plans. Over time, epigenetic and hormonal systems progressively restrict regeneration to balance population dynamics and resource distribution [22].

5.2 Theories of Stochastic or Damage

These highlight protein misfolding, replication errors, and random molecular damage caused by ROS. Over time, the buildup of such lesions compromises repair systems and speeds functional deterioration. According to the disposable soma theory, life is a trade-off between maintenance and reproduction[23].

Modern integrative theories imply that both perspectives can represent different facets of a single biological reality: genetic programs determine the organism's power for repair and regeneration. Interestingly, species exhibiting minimal senescence—such as Hydra, *Turritopsis dohrnii*, and certain molluscs—seem to have optimized this balance through sustained somatic maintenance and efficient DNA repair. Therefore, ageing emerges not as a predetermined fate but as an adaptive consequence of evolutionary trade-offs between growth, reproduction, and survival. Environmental and metabolic stresses, on the other hand, define the rate at which damage accumulates. Knowing these theoretical and evolutionary frameworks offers an important perspective on the evolution of ageing and how its basic processes may be changed to increase human health span.

6. Biomarkers and Future Therapeutic Prospects

6.1 Biomarkers of Ageing

Progressive molecular and cellular degradation distinguishes ageing; this may be measured by particular biomarkers and increasingly handled by innovative treatment approaches. Telomere length, DNA methylation patterns, mitochondrial activity, and expression of ageing-associated genes, which are*p16^INK4a^* and *p21^CIP1/WAF1^*[24]. These are among the most dependable biomarkers of biological ageing. Also indicating biological ageing are oxidative stress markers, inflammatory cytokines, and activity of SA-β-galactosidase. Including multi-omics and molecular imaging methods improves the accuracy of ageing evaluations[25].

6.2 Therapeutic Interventions and Translational Insights

Three main methods dominate modern research from a therapeutic standpoint: Telomerase-based treatments seek to restore chromosomal integrity by reactivating telomerase[26], hence slowing senescence and improving tissue repair, although oncogenic potential poses safety issues. Senolytic drugs selectively eliminate senescent cells to reduce chronic inflammation and restore youthful function; however, senomorphic molecules modulate the SASP without eliminating cells[27]. Regenerative biotechnology, including stem cell treatment, partial cellular reprogramming, and CRISPR-mediated gene correction, seeks to reverse tissue deterioration and reestablish youthful function[28], as shown in Table 1.

6.3 From ageless organisms to human therapeutics

Translational approaches to increase human lifespan are motivated by lessons learned from naked mole rats, Turritopsis, and Hydra. These strategies include telomerase activation, senolytics, and CRISPR-mediated rejuvenation.The combination of comparative biology and biomedical innovation shows that longevity techniques observed in nature are not just curiosities but possible models for future treatments. These nature-inspired strategies, may lead to long-term human rejuvenation and a longer health span.

7. Conclusion

Nature's timeless organisms demonstrate biological prowess in defying time. They maintain genomic stability and tissue viability indefinitely by sustaining telomerase activity, proteostasis, and regeneration potential. Understanding these systems opens up new possibilities for human longevity research. Future research should focus on incorporating telomerase regulation, mitochondrial rejuvenation, and tailored senolytic therapy into safe clinical settings. Finally, putting nature's lessons into biotechnology may not only increase lifespan but also improve health, ensuring vitality throughout life.

Table 1:Comparative Overview of Emerging Anti-Ageing Therapeutic Strategies

	Mechanisms	**Advantage**	**Limitations**
Telomerase-based Therapy	Restores telomere length, genomic stability	Delays senescence and supports regeneration	Potential oncogenic risk
Senolytic therapy	Precise clearance of ageing cells	Low inflammation and rejuvenates tissues	Off-target toxicity
Regenerative biotechnology	Stem cell and gene editing interventions	Reverses tissue ageing	Ethical and safety challenges

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