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Perspective

Bone-Vascular Crosstalk in Skeletal Health and Disease

Shalini Mishra*

Department of Life Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, India.

ABOVE THE STUDY

The skeleton is often perceived as a static structural framework; however, it is a highly dynamic organ intimately connected with the vascular system. Bone–vascular crosstalk has emerged as a critical determinant of skeletal development, remodeling, and repair. This interplay extends beyond simple nutrient delivery, encompassing a complex exchange of molecular signals between endothelial cells, osteoblasts, osteoclasts, and other components of the bone microenvironment. Understanding this bidirectional communication offers new insights into both physiological bone maintenance and the pathogenesis of skeletal diseases.

During bone development, vascularization is essential for the formation and growth of skeletal tissues. Blood vessels invade the developing cartilage template in endochondral ossification, delivering oxygen, nutrients, and osteoprogenitor cells. Specialized capillary subtypes, particularly type H vessels characterized by high expression of CD31 and endomucin, have been identified as key regulators of osteogenesis. These vessels are closely associated with osteoprogenitor cells and actively promote bone formation through the secretion of angiocrine factors. This discovery has redefined the role of the vasculature from a passive conduit to an active participant in skeletal biology.

In adult bone, the coupling of angiogenesis and osteogenesis remains a fundamental aspect of remodeling. Osteoblasts and endothelial cells engage in continuous communication through signaling molecules such as Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor (VEGF), Bone Morphogenetic Proteins (BMPs), and Notch signaling components. VEGF, for instance, not only stimulates blood vessel formation but also enhances osteoblast differentiation and survival. Conversely, endothelial cells release factors that influence osteoblast activity and bone matrix deposition. This coordinated interaction ensures that bone formation is synchronized with vascular supply, maintaining tissue viability and function.

The disruption of bone–vascular crosstalk is increasingly recognized as a contributing factor in skeletal diseases. In osteoporosis, age-related decline in vascular function and reduced angiogenic capacity are associated with decreased bone formation and impaired microarchitecture. Similarly, in osteoarthritis, abnormal vascular invasion into cartilage and subchondral bone contributes to disease progression and pain. In pathological conditions such as fracture non-union or avascular necrosis, inadequate blood supply severely compromises bone healing, highlighting the importance of vascular integrity in regenerative processes.

Inflammation further complicates the relationship between bone and vasculature. Chronic inflammatory states can alter endothelial function and promote the release of cytokines that disrupt normal bone remodeling. For example, pro-inflammatory mediators can enhance osteoclast activity while impairing osteoblast function, leading to net bone loss. At the same time, inflammation can induce aberrant angiogenesis, resulting in disorganized vascular networks that fail to support effective bone regeneration. These interactions underscore the need to consider both vascular and immune components in the study of skeletal disorders.

From a therapeutic perspective, targeting bone–vascular crosstalk offers promising opportunities. Strategies aimed at enhancing angiogenesis have shown potential in improving bone repair and regeneration. For instance, the delivery of pro-angiogenic factors such as VEGF, either alone or in combination with osteogenic signals, can accelerate fracture healing and improve the integration of bone grafts. Tissue engineering approaches are increasingly incorporating vascular components into scaffold design, recognizing that successful bone regeneration requires the simultaneous development of functional blood vessels.

Emerging technologies are further advancing this field. The use of advanced imaging techniques has enabled the visualization of vascular networks within bone at unprecedented resolution, providing deeper insights into their structure and function. Meanwhile, single-cell transcriptomics is uncovering the heterogeneity of endothelial and bone cells, revealing new molecular targets for intervention. These tools are helping to unravel the complexity of bone–vascular interactions and paving the way for more precise and effective therapies.

Despite these advances, significant challenges remain. The regulation of angiogenesis must be carefully controlled, as

Correspondence to: Shalini Mishra. Department of Life Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, India. E-mail: shalini.mishra.iisc@gmail.com

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excessive or abnormal vessel formation can be detrimental. Additionally, the translation of experimental findings into clinical practice requires overcoming issues related to delivery methods, dosing, and long-term safety. A more comprehensive understanding of the temporal and spatial dynamics of bone–vascular crosstalk will be essential for optimizing therapeutic strategies.

In conclusion, bone–vascular crosstalk represents a fundamental aspect of skeletal biology that extends far beyond traditional concepts of bone physiology. By integrating vascular and skeletal perspectives, researchers and clinicians can gain a more holistic understanding of bone health and disease. Continued exploration of this interplay holds great promise for the development of innovative treatments that address the underlying mechanisms of skeletal disorders rather than merely alleviating their symptoms.