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**Abstract:** Several studies have analyzed modulation of gene expression during physiological aging with interesting, but often contradictory results, depending on the model used. In the present report we compare age-related metabolic and synthetic parameters in human dermal fibroblasts (HDF) isolated from young and old subjects (ex-vivo ageing model) and cultured from early up to late cumulative population doublings (CPD) (in-vitro ageing model) in order to distinguish changes induced in vivo by the aged environment and maintained in vitro, from those associated with cell senescence and progressive CPD. Results demonstrate that fibroblasts from aged donors, already at early CPD, exhibit an impaired redox balance, highlighting the importance of this parameter during ageing, even in the presence of standard environmental conditions, which are considered optimal for cell growth. By contrast, several proteins, as those related to heat shock response, or involved in endoplasmic reticulum and membrane trafficking, appeared differentially expressed only during in-vitro ageing, suggesting that, at high CPD, the whole cell machinery becomes permanently altered. Finally, given the importance of the elastic component for a long-lasting connective tissue structural and functional compliance, this study focuses also on elastin and fibulin5 synthesis and deposition, demonstrating a close relationship between fibulin5 and ageing.

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- a) the phenotype of human dermal fibroblasts is differently modulated in the ex-vivo and in the in-vitro ageing models
- b) differences in fibroblast phenotype are mainly observed during in-vitro ageing, independently from donor's age
- c) parameters of redox balance are markedly modified with in-vitro ageing and changes depend also on donor's age
- d) extracellular elastin deposition is dramatically reduced with in vitro ageing and is associated to intracellular accumulation
- e) fibulin-5 represents a very sensitive ageing marker and may be also involved in the redox balance.

## **Comparison of ex-vivo and in-vitro human fibroblast ageing models**

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Key words : aging, fibroblast, connective tissue, oxidative stress, protein expression, elastin

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**Abstract**

Several studies have analyzed modulation of gene expression during physiological aging with interesting, but often contradictory results, depending on the model used. In the present report we compare age-related metabolic and synthetic parameters in human dermal fibroblasts (HDF) isolated from young and old subjects (ex-vivo ageing model) and cultured from early up to late cumulative population doublings (CPD) (in-vitro ageing model) in order to distinguish changes induced in vivo by the aged environment and maintained in vitro, from those associated with cell senescence and progressive CPD. Results demonstrate that fibroblasts from aged donors, already at early CPD, exhibit an impaired redox balance, highlighting the importance of this parameter during ageing, even in the presence of standard environmental conditions, which are considered optimal for cell growth. By contrast, several proteins, as those related to heat shock response, or involved in endoplasmic reticulum and membrane trafficking, appeared differentially expressed only during in-vitro ageing, suggesting that, at high CPD, the whole cell machinery becomes permanently altered. Finally, given the importance of the elastic component for a long-lasting connective tissue structural and functional compliance, this study focuses also on elastin and fibulin5 synthesis and deposition, demonstrating a close relationship between fibulin5 and ageing.

## INTRODUCTION

Ageing can be regarded as the accumulation, on a predetermined genetic background, of sequential changes leading to irreversible alterations of both cells and extracellular matrix. Moreover, advancing age has been considered to increase the incidence of cancer, neurodegenerative, and cardiovascular syndromes, possibly representing a risk factor for the occurrence of these disorders (Walker, 2002). Therefore, it is mandatory to improve the comprehension on the effects of ageing on cell behavior for a better knowledge also of the mechanisms and the molecular pathways in diseases often associated with ageing.

Many theories have been proposed to gain insights into causes and consequences of ageing, but no single theory is generally acceptable to satisfactorily explain the possible complex mechanisms, and despite the countless literature and the increased knowledge on ageing, never the less, it is still elusive what is the contribution of genetic and of environmental factors to the ageing phenotype (Kirkwood, 2002). Moreover, it is still a question of debate if cells from ageing donors or if in-vitro ageing cells represent a more suitable model for investigating this process (Schneider and Mitsui, 1976; Rubin, 1997 and 2002).

Fibroblasts play a key role in maintaining connective tissue homeostasis (Robert et al., 1992) and several humoral and cellular factors may activate or inhibit fibroblast activity or, after being released from fibroblasts, they may reciprocally act on other mesenchymal and epithelial cells (Abraham et al, 1989; Zalatnai, 2006) contributing to the complex network that modulates connective tissue homeostasis in physiological as well as in pathological conditions, such as during wound healing, inflammation or cancer (Robert and Labat-Robert, 2000).

Cultured fibroblasts represent a widespread in-vitro model for investigating genetic and acquired disorders and for exploring the importance of specific molecular pathways leading to differentiation, ageing and death (Holbrook and Byers, 1989; Van Gansen and Van Lerberghe, 1987).

It has been reported that fibroblasts, in vitro, start to develop progressive morphological changes shortly after cultures are established, regardless of the donor's age (Robbins et al., 1970), but also that cell cultures from old and young donors exhibit structural and metabolic differences quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from those observed at early and late passages. It has been therefore suggested that in-vitro ageing may represent a suitable system for examining the loss of replicative potential, whereas fibroblasts derived from old and young donors may be considered an appropriate cellular ageing model (Schneider and Mitsui, 1976).

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2 Although it cannot be excluded that, by establishing a cell culture, a forced selection might be  
3 induced on the population of fibroblasts capable of extruding from the explant, never the less, there  
4 are some parameters that exhibit and maintain, in vitro, a peculiar behavior, according to donor's  
5 age (Boraldi et al., 2003).  
6

7 Moreover, it has been suggested that fibroblast replicative lifespan in culture is inversely  
8 proportional to the age of donors (Martin et al., 1970), even though more recent, controlled and  
9 widespread investigations failed to validate this correlation (Cristofalo et al., 1998).  
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11 To our knowledge, a direct comparison of human fibroblasts from young and old donors at different  
12 cell population doublings (CPD) has been never performed.  
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14 The present study has been undertaken in order to compare the phenotype of human dermal  
15 fibroblasts (HDF) isolated and cultured from skin biopsies of young and old subjects (ex-vivo  
16 ageing model) with that of the same cells at early and late CPD (in-vitro ageing model) with special  
17 reference to proliferative capabilities, redox balance, stress response and expression of various  
18 ageing markers. Furthermore, since elastic fibers, due to their negligible turnover and their  
19 susceptibility to endogenous and exogenous noxae, represent the connective tissue component most  
20 severely affected by ageing (Robert et al., 2008), the expression of two major elastic fiber  
21 components (i.e. elastin and fibulin 5) has been evaluated.  
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## 34 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### 35 **Skin biopsies and cell culture**

36 According to the ethical guidelines approved by the Ethical Committee of the Modena University  
37 Faculty of Medicine, biopsies of skin minimally or not exposed to UV, and in the absence of  
38 diseases affecting connective tissues, were taken under local anesthesia from three young females  
39 (15.3±2.5 years) and three old females (83.3±1.5 years) who gave informed consent before  
40 undergoing surgery. Fibroblasts were allowed to extrude from biopsies during a period of 3-4  
41 weeks. Thereafter all cells from each biopsy were trypsinized, cultured until confluence and stored  
42 in liquid nitrogen until use. Cells were grown in 25 and 75 cm<sup>2</sup> flasks (Falcon) (Quaglino et al.  
43 2000) and serially passaged from 5 up to 32 CPDs (Cumulative Population Doublings). The number  
44 of population doublings (PD) was calculated using the formula:  
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54  $PD = (\ln[\text{number of cells harvested}] - \ln[\text{number of cells seeded}]) / \ln 2$  (van der Loo et al., 1998).  
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56 Cells from each individual were kept separate during all experimental procedures, always grown in  
57 parallel up to confluence and regularly observed under the inverted light microscope.  
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## Flow cytometry

For each measurement, labelled fibroblasts were resuspended in PBS, transferred to polystyrene tubes and analyzed on an EPICS XL flow cytometer (Coulter, USA) with the excitation wavelength set at 488nm. Debris and dead cells were excluded by forward and side scatter gating. Ten thousand events were collected, compared with appropriate negative controls and evaluated for each cell line using WINMDI 2.8 program. Triplicate experiments were performed using all cell lines. Preparation of fibroblasts was performed according to the parameter to be investigated.

### Determination of $\beta$ -galactosidase ( $\beta$ -gal) activity

The fluorogenic substrate C<sub>12</sub>FDG (imaGene Green) was used in the presence or absence of chloroquine, an inhibitor of endogenous  $\beta$ -gal. C<sub>12</sub>FDG is a membrane permeable, nonfluorescent substrate of  $\beta$ -gal, which after hydrolysis of the galactosyl residues emits a green fluorescence that remains confined within the cell. Fibroblasts were plated in 35 mm dishes at the density of  $1.2 \times 10^5$  cells. After two days from seeding, the majority of cells were still in a proliferative state. Therefore, some dishes were pre-treated with 300 $\mu$ M chloroquine for 90 minutes at 37°C. All dishes were then incubated with 300 $\mu$ M of C<sub>12</sub>FDG for 1 h. Cells were washed in ice-cold PBS, detached with trypsin and centrifuged. The obtained pellets were resuspended in 300 $\mu$ l of PBS. Fluorescence was measured at the emission wavelength of 520 nm.

### F-actin staining

Trypsinized cells were centrifuged for 10 min at 1000g, washed in PBS, suspended in 1ml of 3% paraformaldehyde in PBS for 10 min at 4°C and centrifuged again for 5 min. Samples were permeabilized by addition of 0.05% Triton X-100 in PBS for 10min at 4°C. After a rapid centrifugation, cells were incubated with phalloidin-FITC labelled for 30 min at 4°C. After washing with PBS, pellets were resuspended in 500  $\mu$ l of PBS. Fluorescence was measured at the emission wavelength of 520 nm.

### Elastin determination

Cells were trypsinized, centrifuged and fixed in cold methanol for 10 min at 4°C. After washes in PBS, cells were incubated for 30 min in blocking solution (1% BSA in PBS), centrifuged and incubated for 1 h at room temperature with primary rabbit anti-elastin (Abcam) antibodies diluted 1:80 in PBS plus 1% BSA. After washes with PBS, incubation with a secondary TRITC conjugate goat anti-rabbit IgG antibody (Sigma) was performed for 1 h at room temperature. Cells were finally centrifuged for 5 min at 4°C and resuspended in 300 $\mu$ l of PBS. Fluorescence was measured at the emission wavelength of 575 nm.

### Reactive oxygen species (ROS) measurements

1 Intracellular levels of ROS as superoxide anion ( $O_2^{\bullet-}$ ) and hydrogen peroxide ( $H_2O_2$ ) were  
2 estimated using the dihydroethidium ( $DH_2$ , 1  $\mu$ M) and the  $H_2DCF$ -DA (2 $\mu$ M) probes (Molecular  
3 Probes, Eugene, OR) (Luo et al., 2002). Fibroblasts treated with  $DH_2$  for 60 minutes at 37 °C were  
4 then trypsinized and collected in 500  $\mu$ l of PBS, whereas cells to be stained with  $H_2DCF$ -DA were  
5 trypsinized, centrifuged for 10 min at 1000g, washed in PBS, suspended in 500 $\mu$ l of PBS, incubated  
6 with the probe for 30 min at 37°C, centrifuged for 5 min at 4°C and finally resuspended in 250 $\mu$ l of  
7 PBS.  $DH_2$  and  $H_2DCF$ -DA fluorescence was measured at the emission wavelength of 575 and 520  
8 nm, respectively.  
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### 16 **Total antioxidant status (TAS)**

17 The total antioxidant activity was measured using the Antioxidant Assay kit (Cayman, Ann Arbor,  
18 MI) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Briefly, fibroblasts were cultured at confluence,  
19 detached with a cell scraper and centrifuged at 1000 x g at 4°C. Pellets were homogenized on ice in  
20 5mM potassium phosphate buffer, pH 7.4, centrifuged at 10.000 x g at 4°C for 15 minutes and  
21 supernatants were collected for analyses. The assay relies on the ability of the antioxidants present  
22 in the sample to inhibit the oxidation of ABTS® to ABTS® + metmyoglobin. The ability of the  
23 antioxidants in the sample to prevent ABTS oxidation was compared with that of Trolox, a water-  
24 soluble tocopherol analogue, and quantified as molar Trolox equivalents by reading the absorbance  
25 at 405 nm.  
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### 36 **Superoxide dismutase (SOD) activity**

37 SOD activity was measured on trypsinized cells using the Superoxide Dismutase Assay (Cell  
38 Technology, Inc, USA) according to manufacturer's instructions. Briefly, the enzyme activity was  
39 determined using the highly water soluble tetrazolium salt WST-1 (= 2-(4-Iodophenyl) -3- (4-  
40 nitrophenyl)-5-(2,4-disulfophenyl) -2H-tetrazolium, monosodium salt) assay. This method is based  
41 on the production of a water-soluble formazan dye upon reduction by superoxide anions (Ukeda et  
42 al., 1999) produced by xanthine-xanthine oxidase added in order to generate a reproducible flux of  
43  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ . SOD competes with WST-1 for  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ , resulting in the inhibition of WST-1 reduction. The  
44 percentage of inhibition of WST-1 reduction is therefore a measure of SOD activity. The amount of  
45 reduced WST-1 (corresponding to formazan dye formation) was followed spectrophotometrically at  
46 450 nm and values were obtained using the following equation:  
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$$56 \quad 1 / \{[(A \text{ control } 1 - A \text{ control } 3) - (A \text{ sample})] / (A \text{ control } 1 - A \text{ control } 3)\} \times 100$$

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## Western blot

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2 Cells were washed several times with phosphate-buffered saline and homogenized in RIPA buffer  
3 (50 mM Tris, pH 7.5, 0.1% Nonidet P-40, 0.1% deoxycholate, 150 mM NaCl, and 4 mM EDTA) in  
4 the presence of protease inhibitors (Sigma). Cellular lysates were centrifuged at 15000 rpm for 20  
5 minutes to clear cell debris, and supernatants were collected and stored at  $-80^{\circ}\text{C}$  until analysis.  
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7 Protein concentration in the cellular extracts was determined using the Bradford method (Bradford,  
8 1976). Proteins (30 $\mu\text{g}$  proteins/lane) were separated on 10-lane 1-DE 10% or 12% polyacrylamide  
9 gel (see Table 1), under reducing conditions and transferred onto nitrocellulose membranes.  
10  
11 Membranes were blocked in TBS+ 0.1% Tween 20 (TBST) + 5% non fat dry milk for 1 h at room  
12 temperature (RT) and incubated with primary antibodies diluted in TBST + 2,5% non fat dry milk  
13 (see Table 1). Appropriate horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-conjugated secondary antibodies (Abcam,  
14 Cambridge, UK, diluted 1:5000) were used after 3 washes of membranes in TBST. Western blots  
15 were visualized using Super Signal West Pico (Pierce) according to manufacturer's protocols.  
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17 Densitometric analysis of protein bands was performed using the ImageQuant TL v2005 software  
18 (GE Healthcare).  
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## RNA preparation and quantitative Real-Time PCR (qRT-PCR)

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30 Total RNA was isolated using the RNeasy Protect cells Mini kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA). Quality  
31 and quantity of RNA were checked by spectrophotometry and agarose gel electrophoresis.  
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33 According to manufacturer's instructions, 3 $\mu\text{g}$  of total RNA were reverse transcribed using  
34 Superscript III (Invitrogen) and Oligo dT primers (Invitrogen) and 2 $\mu\text{l}$  of cDNA were amplified on  
35 a iCycler (BioRad) using SYBR<sup>®</sup> GreenER<sup>™</sup>qPCR SuperMix (Invitrogen). Characteristics of  
36 primers are shown in Table 2. Thermal cycling parameters were set to  $50^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 2 min,  $95^{\circ}\text{C}$  for  
37 3min, 45 cycles of  $95^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 30s, an annealing temperature of  $60^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 30 s and  $72^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 30 s,  
38 followed by melting curve analysis with a temperature ranging from 95 to  $65^{\circ}\text{C}$ .  
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40 Experiments were carried out in triplicate and gene expression in each sample was normalized  
41 against the housekeeping gene (CLK2) and quantified with the Pfaffl method (Pfaffl, 2001).  
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## Confocal microscopy

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52 Fibroblasts, plated in 2 well- chamber slides at a density of  $3 \times 10^4$  cells, were grown for 5 days in  
53 2 ml of DMEM with 10% FBS. Confluent cells were grown for further 48h in the presence or  
54 absence of 100 $\mu\text{M}$   $\beta$ -aminopropionitrile. Cells were fixed in cold methanol for 10 min at  $4^{\circ}\text{C}$ . After  
55 washes with PBS, the cell monolayer was treated with a blocking solution (1% BSA in PBS) for 30  
56 min and incubated for 2 h at room temperature with rabbit polyclonal anti-elastin (Abcam) and goat  
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1 polyclonal anti-fibulin-5 antibodies (Santa Cruz Biotechnology), diluted 1:100 in PBS. After  
2 extensive washes with PBS, fibroblasts were incubated, for 1h at room temperature, with secondary  
3 antibodies conjugated with either goat anti-rabbit IgG TRITC (Sigma) diluted 1:200 or rabbit anti-  
4 goat IgG FITC (Sigma) diluted 1:100. After a final wash, cells were visualized with a Leica TCS  
5 SP2 confocal microscope. Negative controls were routinely performed by omitting the primary  
6 antibody incubation step.  
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## 10 **Data analysis**

11 Experiments were performed independently at least three times using all cell lines (i.e. dermal  
12 fibroblasts obtained from biopsies of 3 young and 3 old donors) kept separated during all  
13 experiments. Data were expressed as mean values  $\pm$  SEM of all measurements and compared by  
14 Anova test with significance at  $p < 0.05$ .  
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21 Statistical data were obtained using GraphPad software (San Diego, CA, USA).  
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## 27 **RESULTS**

### 28 **Morphology, cell growth and determination of $\beta$ -galactosidase activity**

29 Activity of  $\beta$ -galactosidase, a widespread used marker of replicative senescence, was detectable in  
30 fibroblasts already at early CPD, and values progressively increased with passages, although  
31 independently from donor's age (Figure 1a, right panel). At higher CPD, a greater heterogeneity  
32 between cell lines was observed. Cells pre-treated with chloroquine were completely negative  
33 (Figure 1a, left panel), indicating that beta-galactosidase activity was only of intracellular origin.  
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40 Consistently, fibroblasts isolated from young (yHDF) and old donors (oHDF), independently from  
41 donor's age, exhibited good growth capabilities at early passages and, by light microscopy, all cells  
42 strains were characterized by a typical elongated shape and were oriented in a parallel array (Figure  
43 1b, upper panels). Around CPD 30 cell growth started to decline, although with a certain variability  
44 between cells derived from different individuals. Morphologically, fibroblasts at high passages  
45 appeared more polymorphous and progressively larger with numerous intracellular vacuoles,  
46 suggesting an accumulation of proteins and/or metabolites (Figure 1b, lower panels).  
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53 Phenotypic changes were also confirmed by FACS analysis, since forward and side scatter values  
54 progressively increased with in-vitro ageing (data not shown).  
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58 Changes in cell shape appeared, at least in part, associated with cytoskeletal modifications. Staining  
59 for F-actin revealed only a moderate increase of fluorescence intensity when yHDF and oHDF were  
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1 compared at early passages; by contrast, at high CPD, the F-actin content significantly increased in  
2 all cell lines, independently from donor's age (Figure 1c).  
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### 5 **Parameters of redox balance**

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7 TAS measurement, taken as an indicator of the total antioxidant potential of cell cultures, revealed a  
8 progressive decline in the in-vitro aged cells as well as in oHDF at low CPD, compared with  
9 fibroblasts from young donors (Figure 2a).  
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11 Similarly, superoxide dismutase (SOD) activity was lower in in-vitro aged cells and, at low CPD,  
12 also in oHDF (Figure 2b) compared to yHDF.  
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14 The intracellular content of reactive oxygen species (ROS) was evaluated by measuring the  
15 fluorescence intensity of the H<sub>2</sub>-DCFDA (Figure 2c) and the DH<sub>2</sub> (Figure 2d) probes sensitive to  
16 the presence of hydrogen peroxide (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) and superoxide anion (O<sub>2</sub><sup>•-</sup>), respectively. Values  
17 appeared significantly higher in cells from old donors, and the DH<sub>2</sub>-related signal was further  
18 increased during in-vitro ageing (Figure 2d). By contrast, staining with H<sub>2</sub>-DCFDA was not  
19 modified by in-vitro ageing since values observed at early CPD were similar to those at late CPD  
20 (Figure 2c).  
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22 Taken together, these data indicate that reduced antioxidant properties (TAS, SOD) and  
23 consequently higher ROS levels were induced by in-vitro ageing and were present in oHDF already  
24 at low CPDs.  
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### 28 **Protein expression**

29 As revealed by the Bradford assay, the total amount of proteins produced by cells, in both  
30 experimental models, was not significantly different, suggesting that ageing, at least in the in-vitro  
31 cell culture model, is more associated to a different expression of specific proteins than to a  
32 significant reduction of the whole protein synthesis.  
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### 36 Proteins related to redox balance and cell stress

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38 Looking at molecules related to changes in the redox status, we have firstly investigated  
39 thioredoxin-1 (Trx), an antioxidant enzyme that, being localized in the cytosol and in the nucleus,  
40 controls many transcription factors (Holmgren, 2010) either alone or in combination with  
41 peroxiredoxin (Prdx), protects against environmental stress and promotes longevity (Olahova et al.,  
42 2008). At early CDP cells from oHDF expressed significantly reduced levels of TRX (Figure 3a)  
43 and only slightly less PRDX2 compared to yHDF (Figure 3b). During in-vitro ageing, yHDF  
44 exhibited significantly reduced PRDX2 expression, whereas the low levels in oHDF were very  
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1 similar at early and late CPD (Figure 3b). By contrast, TRX expression was no further reduced at  
2 high CPD compared to values at low CPD (Figure 3a). These findings sustain once more that  
3 altered redox balance is a key point not only in in-vitro ageing, but also in oHDF at low CPD.  
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5 Cells try to protect themselves by activating a heat shock response (Feder and Hofmann, 1999) in  
6 order to repair moderate protein misfolding and to prevent inter- or intra-molecular aggregation of  
7 damaged proteins. Hsp27 and Hsp60 appeared significantly decreased during the in-vitro ageing,  
8 independently from donor's age (Figure 3d,e). By contrast, Hsp90 was reduced not only with in-  
9 vitro ageing, but already in oHDF at early CPD. At high CPD, expression of Hsp90 was markedly  
10 reduced in yHDF, whereas levels in oHDF were not further diminished (Figure 3f). Surprisingly,  
11 expression of FKBP52, a cochaperone of Hsp90, was significantly up-regulated during in-vitro  
12 ageing in all cell lines. Differences according to donor's age were always negligible (Figure 3c).  
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#### 21 Endoplasmic reticulum and plasma membrane proteins

22 Oxidative damage is known to affect not only plasma membrane constituents, but also molecules  
23 located in other organelles and/or cellular compartments such as those in endoplasmic reticulum  
24 (ER). The ER contains a number of molecular chaperones including GRP78, calreticulin (CALR)  
25 and protein disulfide isomerase (PDI) that, upon decrease in their expression or activity, could  
26 directly contribute to the age-dependent accumulation of misfolded proteins. CALR, GRP78 and  
27 PDI were always less expressed in in-vitro aged fibroblasts, being the influence of donor's age  
28 generally not significant (Figure 3g-i).  
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36 Furthermore, since oxidative stress may have consequences on cell membrane structure and  
37 function, we have also investigated the expression of two important constituents of cell membranes,  
38 as caveolin 1 (CAV 1) and annexin II (ANXII). Both proteins were up-regulated in the ex-vivo and  
39 in the in-vitro ageing models, although changes appeared more dependent on CPDs (Figure 3j,k).  
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43 By contrast, the expression of galectin 1 (LEG1), a carbohydrate binding protein present on the cell  
44 surface and capable of activating several intracellular signaling pathways, did not change in  
45 fibroblasts from donors of different ages as well as at early or late CPDs (Figure 4l).  
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#### 50 Proteins related to synthetic and metabolic pathways

51 As far as cellular metabolic pathways,  $\alpha$ -enolase (ENO1A1), a highly conserved cytoplasmic  
52 glycolytic enzyme, has been linked in-vivo and in-vitro to the ageing process (Kanski et al., 2005;  
53 Dierick et al., 2002) and is upregulated by oxidative stress (Trogakos et al., 2006; Baty et al.,  
54 2005). In the present study, ENO1A1 was similarly expressed in yHDF and oHDF at early CPD,  
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whereas there was a marked up-regulation with in-vitro ageing and changes were more evident in oHDF than in yHDF (Figure 3m).

Consistently with the occurrence of modified energy production and/or altered metabolism with in-vitro ageing (Corstjens et al., 2007), we have observed that the expression of receptors for advanced glycation end products (RAGE) exhibited a significant in-vitro age-dependent increase. Differences between cells from young and old donors were negligible at all CPDs (Figure 3o).

By contrast, expression of elongation factor 1A1 (eEF1A1), that is responsible for the enzymatic delivery of aminoacyl tRNAs to the ribosome, but has been also related to cell senescence (Byun, 2009), was significantly down-regulated during in-vitro ageing, being differences due to donor's age irrelevant at all CPDs (Figure 3n).

### **Elastic fiber-related gene and protein expression**

In vivo elastin is physiologically expressed and synthesized especially in the perinatal period (Quaglino et al., 1996). In this in vitro study, elastin mRNA expression was not significantly modified in fibroblasts from donors of different age and during the in-vitro ageing (Figure 4a). By contrast, elastin protein production, evaluated by Western blot and flow cytometry with antibodies recognizing both soluble and insoluble forms of tropoelastin (Figure 4b and 4c), independently from donor's age, was significantly up-regulated at high CPD. However, immunolabelling of in-vitro aged-cells with the same antibodies failed to reveal increased amounts of elastic fibers, whereas there was a more intense intracellular fluorescence. The occurrence of an unspecific staining was excluded by appropriate negative controls (data not shown). The intracellular staining started to be evident in oHDF already at low passages (Figure 4f-g), when the elastin filamentous network was always less evident and less organized (Figure 4e) compared to yHDF (Figure 4d). In in-vitro aged fibroblasts, immunofluorescence was mainly intracellular, especially in the nuclear/perinuclear region and in small dots spread in cytoplasm or at the close periphery of the cells.

Incubation of the cells with beta-aminopropionitrile (100 $\mu$ M), an inhibitor of the crosslinking enzyme lysyl oxidase (Keeley, 1976), did not change the intensity nor the pattern of the immunostained elastic network (data not shown), indicating that fibers were not crosslinked, consistently with previous observation that, at physiological temperature, due to its coacervation properties (Bressan et al., 1986), elastin forms amorphous extracellular aggregates also in the absence of crosslinks.

By contrast, both at mRNA and protein levels (Figure 5a and 5b), fibulin 5 appeared significantly reduced during the in-vitro ageing and in oHDF already at early CPDs. At low CPD, fibroblasts from young donors appeared all positively labelled by anti-fibulin 5 antibodies (Figure 5c).

1 Negative controls allowed to assess the specificity of the reactions (data not shown).  
2 Immunolabelling of oHDF at early CPD revealed a reduced staining with a marked heterogeneity  
3 between cells (Figure 5d), since few fibroblasts were still positive, but the great majority of cells  
4 exhibited only a weak fluorescence (Figure 5 d). At high CPD, independently from donor's age,  
5 fluorescence was barely detectable in all cells (Figure 5 e and f).  
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## 10 **DISCUSSION**

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14 The present study was performed in order to explore if fibroblast phenotype is differently  
15 modulated depending on the experimental ageing model. Therefore, on the basis of findings from  
16 experimental models, as well as from in vivo data (Boraldi et al., 2003; Weinert and Timiras, 2003;  
17 Ljubuncic and Reznick, 2009), we have compared ex-vivo and in-vitro aged human fibroblasts by  
18 investigating a selection of parameters that represent and reflect the behaviour of different cell  
19 responses and cellular compartments.  
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25 In agreement with the observations of Cristofalo et al. (1998), we could not discriminate, in vitro,  
26 fibroblasts from young or old donors, since no significant differences were observed as far as  
27 morphological features, F-actin expression and proliferative lifespan in culture. By contrast, all  
28 these parameters appeared significantly modified during in-vitro ageing.  
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32 Since,  $\beta$ -Gal has been considered by several Authors a marker of replicative senescence and  
33 possibly of ageing (Dimri et al., 1995; Campisi, 2005), we have investigated its expression in our  
34 experimental models. The observed CPD-dependent increase of  $\beta$ -Gal, the presence of positive cells  
35 already at low passages and the absence of differences related to donor's age are in agreement with  
36 previously reported data (Ravelojaona et al., 2000) and further support the hypothesis that  
37 senescence cannot be regarded as an anti-oncogene mediated process enabling fibroblasts to escape  
38 malignancy (Campisi 2005). Consistently with the observation that  $\beta$ -Gal is expressed by several  
39 cancer cell lines (Krishna et al., 1999) and in a variety of conditions (Severino, 2000), present  
40 findings suggest that, even in a newly established cell culture system, there are cells positive to  $\beta$ -  
41 Gal, suggesting that senescent or quiescent cells may coexist with cell clones still capable to  
42 proliferate and to respond to growth factors (Kurz et al., 2000; Maier et al., 2007). Therefore,  $\beta$ -Gal  
43 is probably not a suitable indicator for making a distinction between a long quiescence and a  
44 terminal post-mitotic state (Macieira-Coelho, 2010).  
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57 It is generally accepted that ageing is associated with a progressive loss of functions and that  
58 changes in the regulation of protein synthesis, post-translational modifications and turnover may  
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1 represent key factors in the age-related decline of maintenance, repair and survival of cells, tissues  
2 and organisms (Rattan, 1996).

3 Within this context, the free radical theory of aging (Harman, 1956) has received, for more than  
4 four decades, great support and popularity, although, more recently, an expanded criticism has  
5 arisen (Bokov et al., 2004; Muller et al., 2007) leading to controversial hypotheses (Barouki, 2006).  
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7 In the present study, the redox balance, as the ratio between antioxidant and oxidant species,  
8 decreased during in-vitro ageing and was lower in fibroblasts from old compared to young donors.  
9 This finding indicates that, despite the presence of optimal environmental conditions and/or the  
10 possible selection of more active cell clones, oHDF and in-vitro aged fibroblasts exhibit and  
11 maintain in vitro parameters of oxidative stress, a condition that is known to favour protein, lipid  
12 and DNA damages (Jung et al., 2009).  
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15 As suggested in a model of oxidative stress-induced premature ageing (Dasari et al., 2006; Volonte  
16 et al., 2002), changes in the expression of membrane molecules as annexin II and caveolin 1 might  
17 have a great influence on the ageing process, due to their ability of modulating the plasticity of the  
18 membrane-associated actin cytoskeleton (Hayes et al., 2006) and of interacting with a variety of  
19 regulatory and structural molecules (Park, 2006). In accordance with the proposed role of caveolin 1  
20 as a potential target of the aging process (Park, 2006) and with the observations that changes in  
21 annexin II expression may have consequences on caveolae formation and localization (Parkin et al.,  
22 1996; Sagot et al., 1997), we have provided evidence that both caveolin 1 and annexin II are  
23 significantly upregulated during in-vitro-ageing.  
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26 By contrast, expression of the polyvalent molecule galectin-1 remained quite constant in all  
27 experimental conditions. Although the biological activity of galectin-1 depends on the  
28 properties/characteristics of the binding partners (Camby et al., 2006), data from the present study  
29 indicate that in physiological conditions, such as aging, galectin 1 expression is a rather stable  
30 parameter, whereas significant changes are associated with pathologic conditions (Demydenko and  
31 Berest, 2009) or to modified environmental conditions, as during hypoxia (Boraldi et al., 2007).  
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34 A further marker of protein damage is the presence of advanced glycation end products (AGEs)  
35 that, either directly or by interacting with RAGE, may trigger intracellular signalling pathways,  
36 rapid generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and up-regulation of inflammatory pathways  
37 (Ramasamy et al, 2005), thus playing a pivotal role in the development and acceleration of age-  
38 related diseases (Bierhaus et al, 2005). The marked increase of RAGE expression, observed during  
39 in-vitro ageing, may contribute to worsening the redox balance and further supports the concept  
40 that, at high CPD, the cell machinery is permanently and irreversibly modified. In addition, during  
41 in-vitro ageing, we have demonstrated a significant decrease of GRP78, calreticulin and PDI, three  
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1 proteins of the endoplasmic reticulum that, if not adequately present or active, significantly  
2 contribute to the age-dependent accumulation of misfolded proteins.

3 Cells counteract protein misfolding and aggregation by activating a heat shock response (Feder and  
4 Hofmann, 1999). The observed reduced expression of Hsp 27, 60 and 90 at high CPD, suggests that  
5 in-vitro aged cells lose the ability of actively counteracting stress conditions. Interestingly, the  
6 expression of Hsp90 appeared to be particularly sensitive to the ageing process, being down-  
7 regulated in in-vitro aged cells as well as in oHDF at early CPD. Moreover, Hsp90 interacts with  
8 different proteins including FKBP52, an immunophilin also known as Hsp56, that functions in the  
9 glucocorticoid receptor system increasing the receptor avidity for hormones (Ratajczak et al., 2003).  
10 During in-vitro ageing FKBP52 was significantly upregulated and this finding could be further  
11 investigated in future studies in order to better understand the relationships between ageing, Hsp  
12 and metabolic pathways, through hormone regulation.

13 Changes in mesenchymal cell phenotype and behaviour significantly affect connective tissue  
14 homeostasis. Loss of elasticity is a well known paradigm of ageing connective tissue, and data are  
15 present in the literature demonstrating that tropoelastin production is dramatically decreased with  
16 in-vitro ageing or in cells from 70 to 90 year old donors (Sephel and Davidson, 1986) compared to  
17 cells from young subjects. In the present investigation, differences in elastin mRNA expression  
18 were negligible both in the ex-vivo and the in-vitro ageing models, whereas a significant up-  
19 regulation was detected at protein level in in-vitro aged fibroblasts. However, by confocal  
20 microscopy, the intricate elastin network present at early passages was less evident in cultures from  
21 old donors and completely disappeared during in vitro ageing, leaving a marked intracellular  
22 immunostaining. The presence of intracellular tropoelastin, especially in the perinuclear area, has  
23 been already demonstrated in vitro, suggesting that it may correlate to the elastogenic potential of  
24 the cells (Grosso et al., 1990). It may also represent the substrate for endogenous proteolytic  
25 activities leading to the formation of elastin peptides capable of triggering signals leading to cell  
26 cycle progression in an autocrine or paracrine manner (Jung et al., 1998) with complex and  
27 profound consequences in vivo. At present, although we cannot exclude that biologically active  
28 elastin peptides/fragments may be formed by proteolysis, never the less present data already  
29 indicate that the presence of elastin mRNA does not imply that functional and efficient elastic fibers  
30 are formed in the extracellular compartment. These findings are in perfect agreement with those  
31 demonstrated in the wound healing process (Davidson et al., 1992). Moreover, elastin could be  
32 retained within cells possibly due to changes in the expression of chaperones as  
33 glycosaminoglycans (Fleischmajer et al., 1972; Pasquali-Ronchetti et al., 1984) or due to inefficient

1 recycling of the EBP, the elastin binding protein that, acting as a tropoelastin chaperone, allows  
2 effective extracellular fiber deposition (Hinek, 1995)

3 Finally, in agreement with findings from the literature (Kadoya et al. 2005) that fibulin 5 (FBLN5)  
4 is markedly decreased in the aged reticular dermis, we have shown that FBLN5 was significantly  
5 reduced at mRNA and protein levels in fibroblasts from old donors as well as in in-vitro aged cells.  
6 FBLN5 is known to bind tropoelastin, to promote its coacervation (Hirai et al., 2007) and to induce  
7 elastic fiber assembly (Nakamura et al., 2002; Yanagisawa et al., 2002). Therefore, reduced FBLN5  
8 expression could contribute to the reduced and less organized deposition of elastin aggregates  
9 observed in oHDF already at low CPD. Finally, it has to be mentioned that, in blood vessels,  
10 fibulin-5 is required to assure a proper binding of ecSOD to tissues, and to control the redox state  
11 (Nguyen et al., 2004). It could be therefore suggested that a similar mechanism may function also at  
12 dermal level, and that the age-dependent decreased expression of fibulin-5 and reduced SOD  
13 activity may contribute to the altered redox balance.  
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25 In conclusion, the present investigation, by directly comparing fibroblasts from young and old  
26 donors (ex-vivo ageing model) at early and late CPDs (in-vitro ageing model), demonstrates that a)  
27 the great majority of differences, for instance stress response, endoplasmic reticulum and cell  
28 membrane compartments and post-translational protein modifications, are mainly observed during  
29 in-vitro ageing, independently from the age of donors; b) the redox balance is markedly affected by  
30 in-vitro ageing, although impairment depends also on donor's age, suggesting that the in-vitro  
31 optimal environment is non capable of restoring this parameter towards a younger phenotype; c)  
32 elastin deposition in the extracellular space is reduced in cultures from old donors and is  
33 dramatically abolished during in- vitro ageing; d) the high elastin expression is not sufficient to  
34 produce elastin deposition in the extracellular matrix, since it seems that in-vitro aged cells loose  
35 the ability to extrude tropoelastin in the extracellular compartment; e) fibulin-5 represents a very  
36 sensitive ageing marker and could play an important role in EMC homeostasis, controlling also the  
37 redox balance.  
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## LEGEND TO FIGURES

**Figure 1.** a) Replicative senescence has been evaluated measuring beta-galactosidase positive cells by flow cytometry. A representative experiment reported in the left panel shows the fluorescence intensity of one fibroblast line at different CPD (i.e. CPD 8, 20 and 30). The effect of in-vitro ageing is illustrated in histograms on the right panel. Data are expressed in comparison with values obtained in yHDF at CPD 8 set at one. b) Light microscopy of cultured human dermal fibroblasts from young and old donors at early (CPD8) and late (CPD 30) CPDs. c) F-actin staining with fluorescent-phalloidin was investigated by flow cytometry on cultured human dermal fibroblasts from young (Y) and old (O) donors at early (CPD8) and late (CPD 30) CPDs. A representative experiment is reported in the left panel.

Histograms represent mean values of all experiments with different cell lines. Data are expressed as mean values  $\pm$  SEM. \$  $p < 0.05$  CPD 30 vs lower CPD 8

**Figure 2.** Fibroblasts from young (Y) and old (O) donors, at early (CPD8) and late (CPD30) CPDs, were assessed spectrophotometrically, using specific kit assays, for TAS (a) and SOD activity (b) and by flow cytometry, using the fluorescent probes H<sub>2</sub>-DCFDA (c) and DH<sub>2</sub> (d), for levels of reactive oxygen species as H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>2</sub><sup>•</sup>. Data are expressed as mean values  $\pm$  SEM.

\$  $p < 0.05$  CPD 30 vs CDP 8; \*  $p < 0.05$  Y vs O fibroblasts at the same CPD.

**Figure 3.** The expression of tioredoxin (TRX, a); peroxiredoxin 2 (PRDX2, b), co-chaperone FKBP52 (c), chaperones Hsp27 (d), Hsp60 (e), Hsp90 (f), calreticulin (CALR, g), 78kDa glucose regulated protein (GRP78, h), protein disulfide isomerase (PDI, i), caveolin 1 (CAV1, j), annexin II (ANX II, k), galectin 1 (LEG1, l), enolase 1 (ENO1A1, m), elongation factor 1A1 (eEF1A1, n) and receptor for advanced glycosylation end products (RAGE, o) was evaluated by Western blot in fibroblasts from young (Y) and old (O) donors at early (CPD8) and late (CPD30) CPDs. Histograms represent the densitometric analysis of Western blots performed with all cell lines. Expression is normalized to fibroblasts from young donors at CPD8, set as one-fold, and data are expressed as mean values  $\pm$  SEM. Representative immunoblots are shown in the lower part of each panel.

\$  $p < 0.05$  CPD 30 vs CDP 8; \*  $p < 0.05$  Y vs O fibroblasts at the same CPD.

1 **Figure 4.** Elastin (ELN) mRNA (a) and protein expression (b,c) were evaluated by RT-PCR (a),  
2 Western blot (b, with a representative immunoblot shown in the lower part of the panel) and flow  
3 cytometry (c) on fibroblasts from young (Y) and old (O) donors at early (CPD8) and late (CPD30)  
4 CPDs. In histograms expression is normalized to fibroblasts from young donors at CPD8, set as  
5 one-fold, and data are expressed as mean values  $\pm$  SEM. Lower panels (d-g) illustrate, by confocal  
6 microscopy, the anti-elastin immunostaining of fibroblasts from young and old donors at early  
7 (CPD8) and late (CPD30) CPDs.  
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10 \$ p<0.05 CPD 30 vs CDP 8.  
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16 **Figure 5.** Fibulin 5 (FBLN 5) mRNA (a) and protein expression (b) were evaluated by RT-PCR (a),  
17 Western blot (b, with a representative immunoblot shown in the lower part of the panel) on  
18 fibroblasts from young (Y) and old (O) donors at early (CPD8) and late (CPD30) CPDs. In  
19 histograms expression is normalized to fibroblasts from young donors at CPD8, set as one-fold, and  
20 data are expressed as mean values  $\pm$  SEM. Lower panels (c-f) illustrate, by confocal microscopy,  
21 the anti-fibulin 5 immunostaining of fibroblasts from young and old donors at early (CPD8) and  
22 late (CPD30) CPDs.  
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29 \$ p<0.05 CPD 30 vs CDP 8; \* p<0.05 Y vs O fibroblasts at the same CPD.  
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**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of antibodies used for WB and related experimental conditions.**

Immunogen	Short name	Host/ Ab type §	Working dilutions and incubation time & temperature	Catalogue No/ Company*
Annexin II	ANX II	Gp	0.3µg/ml - 12h 4°C	2242/AB
Calreticulin	CALR	Rp	1:2000 - 1h RT	4606/S
Caveolin1	CAV1	Mm	1:1000 - 12h 4°C	17052/AB
Elastin	ELN	Rp	1:500 - 12h 4°C	21607/AB
Elongation factor 1A1	eEF1A1	Rp	1 µg/ml - 1h RT	37969/AB
Enolase 1	ENO1A1	Rp	0.03µg/ml - 1h RT	49343/AB
Fibulin 5	FBLN5	Gp	1:1000 - 12h 4°C	23062/SC
FKBP52	FKBP52	Mm	1 µg/ml - 1h RT	54991/AB
Galectin 1 <sup>1)</sup>	LEG1	Rp	0.2µg/ml - 1h RT	25138/AB
78kDa glucose regulated protein	GRP78	Rp	1µg/ml - 1h RT	21685/AB
Heat shock protein 90	Hsp90	Mm	1µg/ml- 12h 4°C	1429/AB
Heat shock protein 60	Hsp 60	Mm	1:10000 - 1h RT	13532/AB
Heat shock protein 27	Hsp 27	Mm	1:1000 - 1h RT	2790/AB
Peroxiredoxin 2	PRDX 2	Rp	1:10000 - 12h 4°C	15572/AB
Protein disulfide isomerase	PDI	Mm	1:2000 - 1h RT	2792/AB
Receptor for advanced glycosylation end products	RAGE	Rp	1:100 - 30 min 4°C	37647/AB
Thioredoxin <sup>1)</sup>	TRX	Rp	0.5µg/ml - 12h 4°C	16835/AB

<sup>1)</sup> loaded on 12% polyacrylamide gel

§ Mm, mouse monoclonal; Rp, rabbit polyclonal; Gp, goat polyclonal.

\* AB, Abcam; S, Sigma; SC, Santa Cruz

**Table 2**  
**Characteristics of primers used for qRT-PCR**

	<b>Lenght</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Tm</b>	<b>%GC</b>	<b>Sequence</b>	<b>Slope</b>	<b>E %</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>
<b>ELN</b>								
Forward	21	2120-2140	59	52	CAGCTAAATACGGTGCTGCTG	-3.357	98.6	0.973
Reverse	19	2195-2213	59	52	AATCCGAAGCCAGGTCTTG			
<b>FBLN 5</b>								
Forward	21	1263-1283	59	57	CGGCACATACTTCTGCTCCTG	-3.205	105	0.95
Reverse	23	1323-1345	59	48	GCTCACATTCGTTGATGTCTTGG			
<b>CLK2</b>								
Forward	22	1231-1252	59	45	ACCTACAACCTAGAGAAGAAGC	-3.206	105	0.954
Reverse	18	1335-1352	59	61	GGCGAGTGGAGACAATGG			

Figure 1  
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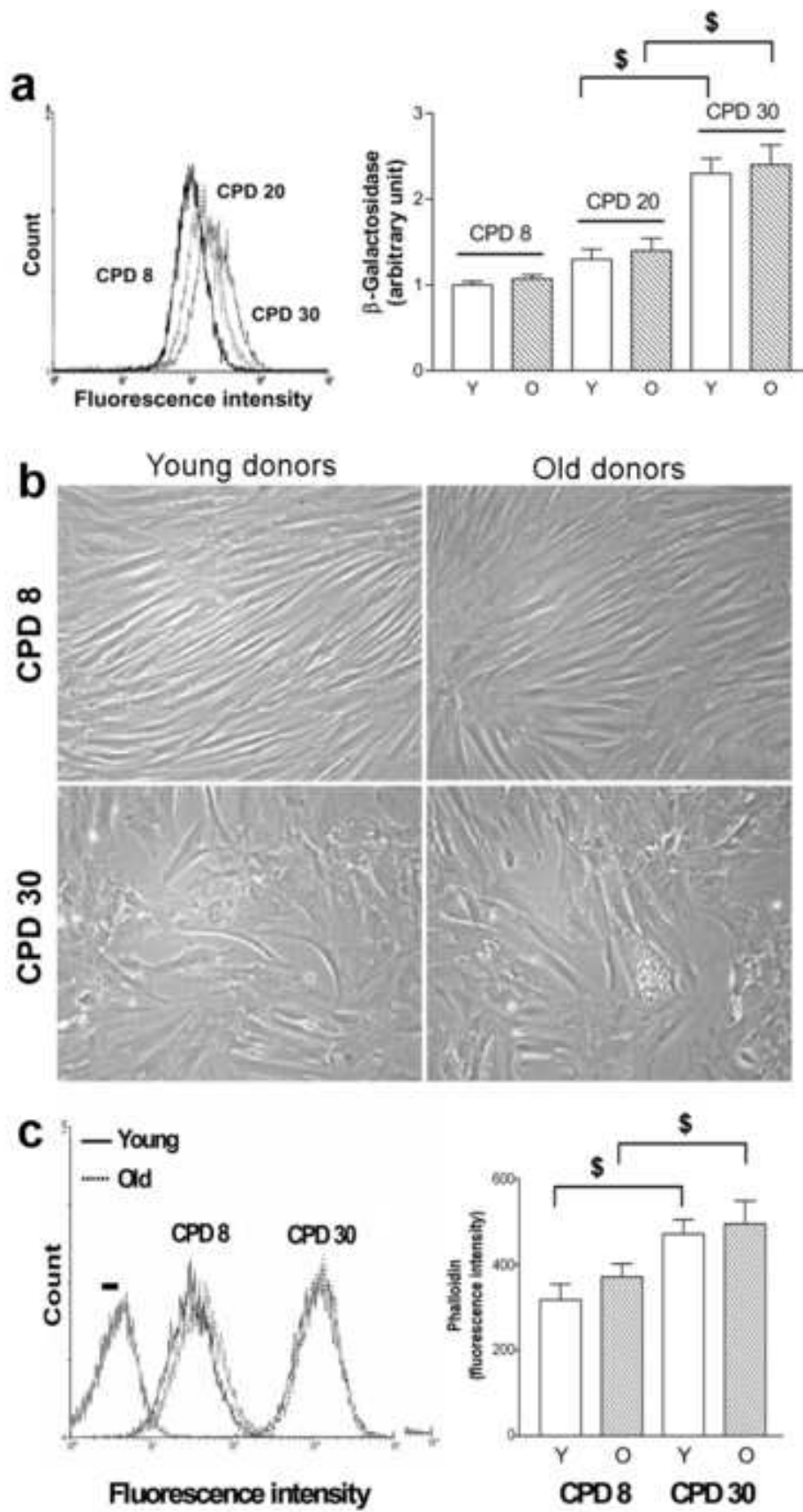


Figure 2  
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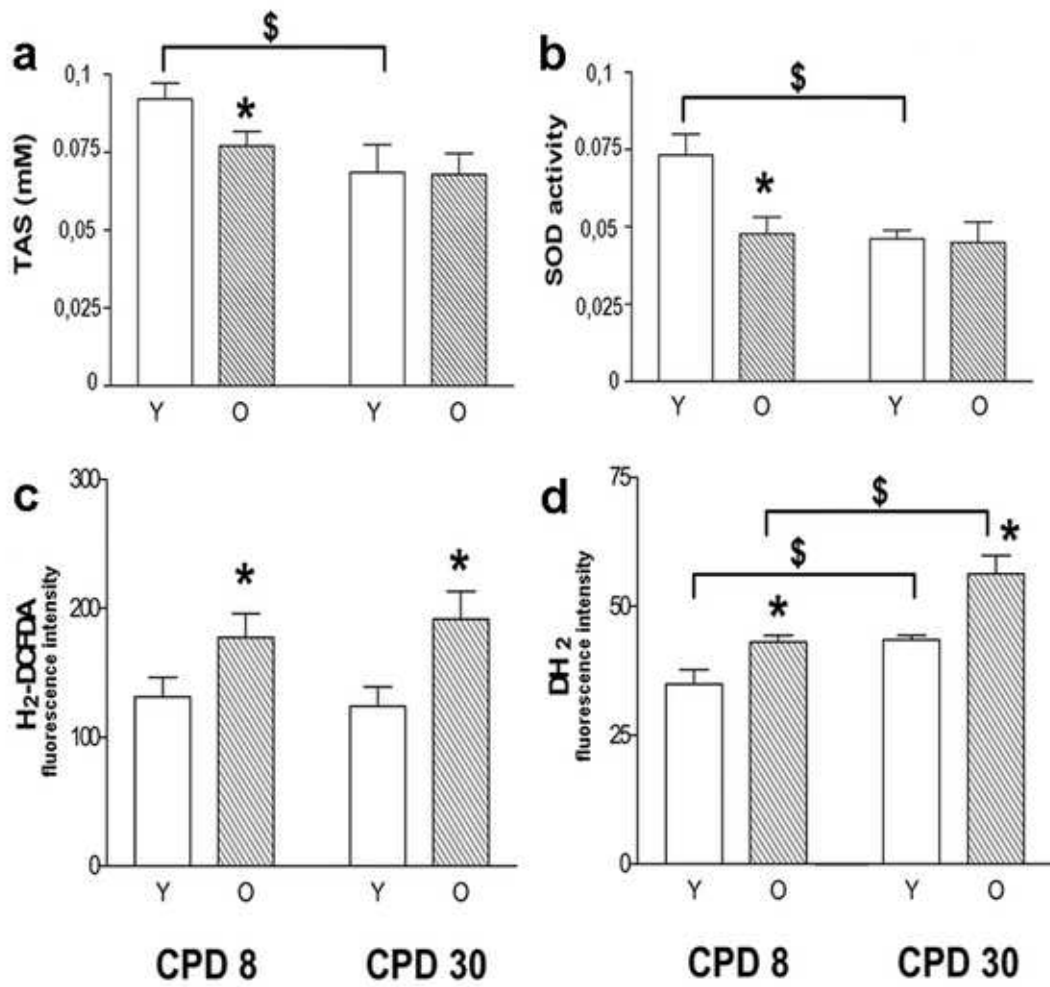


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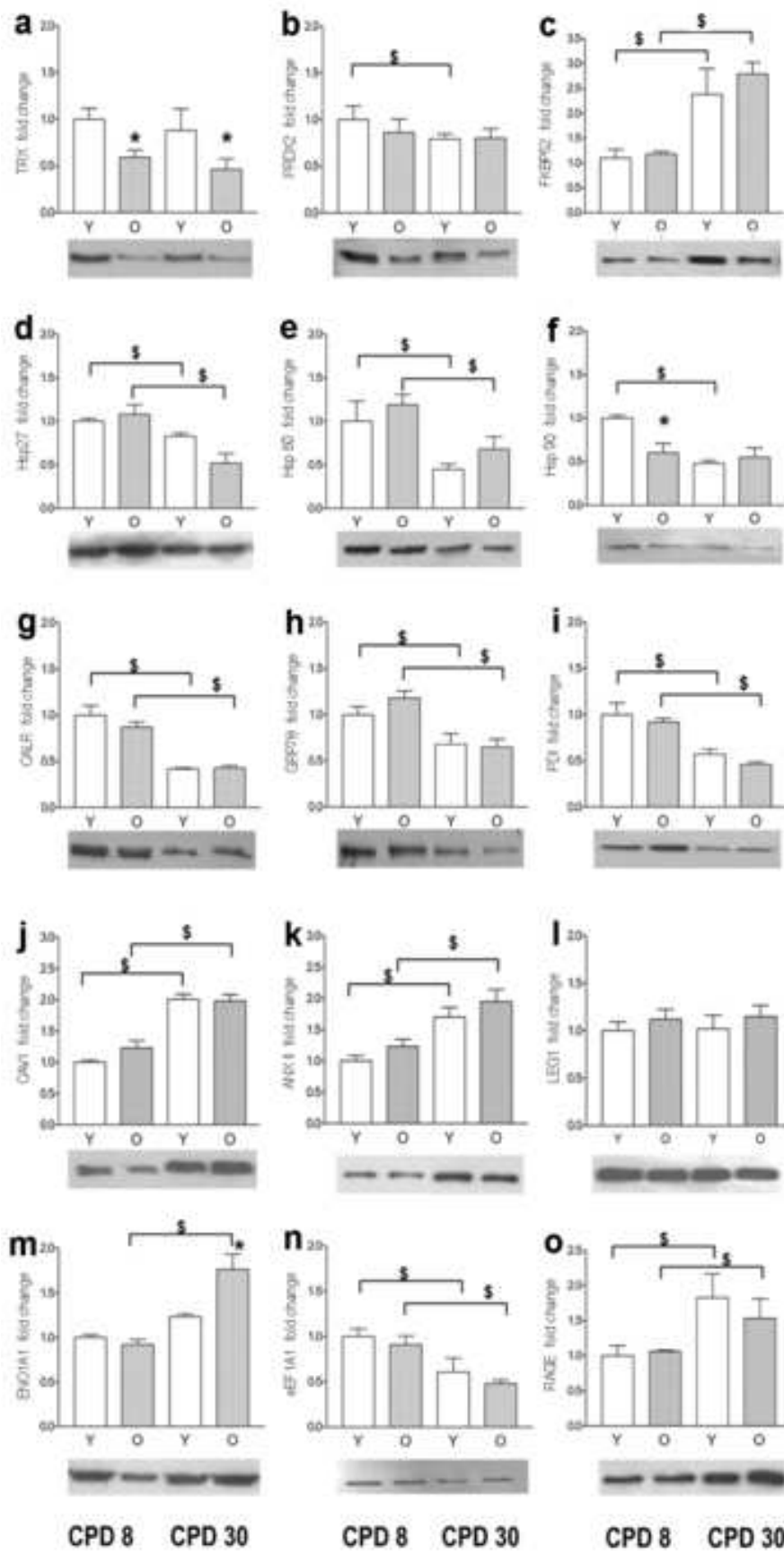


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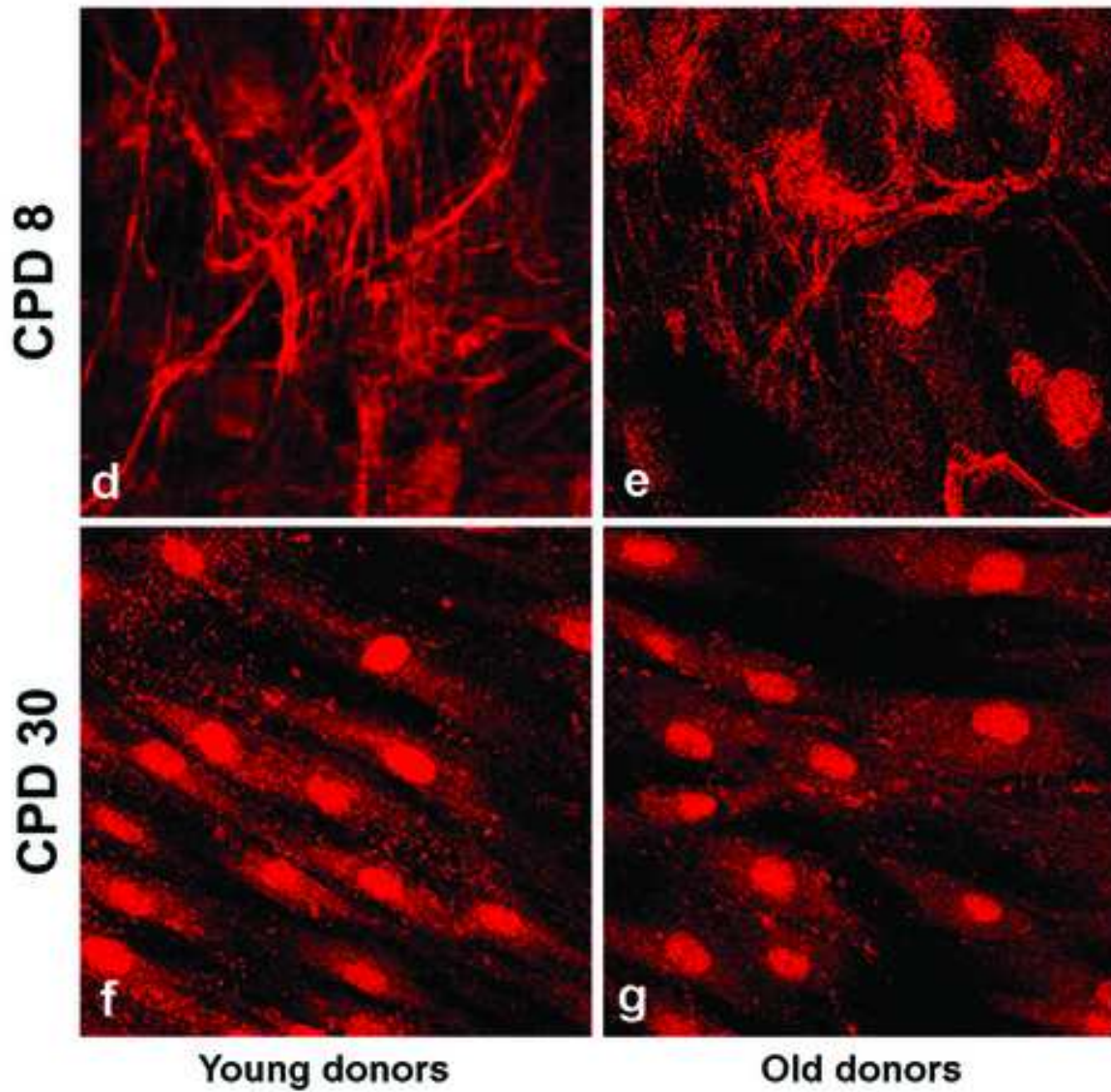
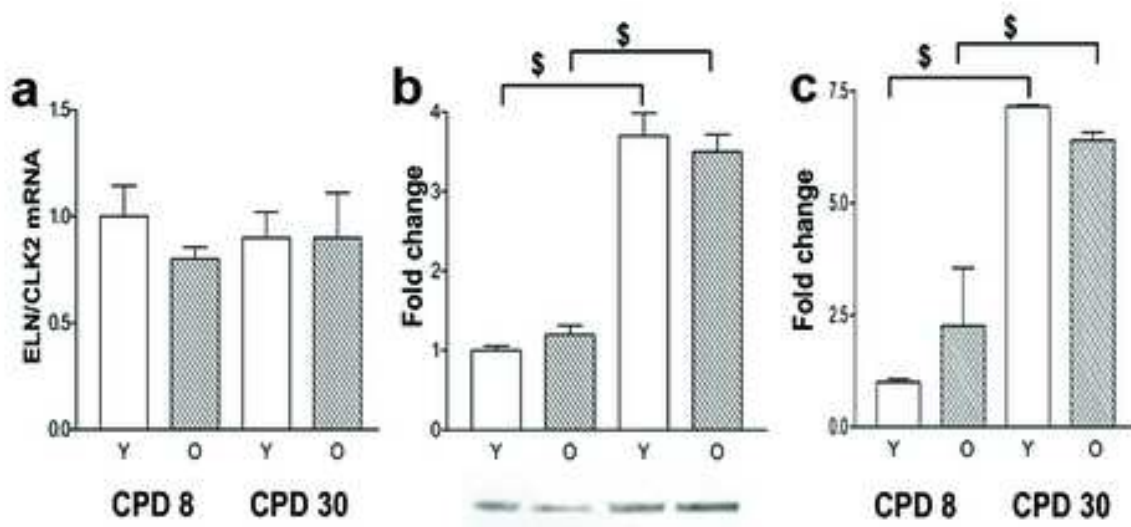


Figure 5  
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