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Abstract

# Modeling the Peripheral Nervous System Disorder Familial Dysautonomia Using Human Pluripotent Stem Cells

**Nadja Zeltner**
*University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA*

## Abstract:

Functional and molecular aspects of human genetic disease can be recapitulated in vitro using patient-specific pluripotent stem cells (PSCs). Familial Dysautonomia (FD) is a debilitating developmental and degenerative disorder that primarily affects derivatives of the neural crest (NC), such as the peripheral nervous system (PNS). For unknown reasons, FD patients present with mild or severe disease despite carrying the identical, homozygous point mutation in ELP1. We present in vitro phenotypes at various stages of development that capture severe and mild FD in human PSC-derived cellular lineages. Patient-specific cells only from severe but not mild FD display an impaired capacity of developing into NC derivatives, such as autonomic and sensory neurons, thus they have neurodevelopmental defects. Interestingly however, both severe and mild FD cells show defects in peripheral neuron survival, indicating neurodegeneration as the primary culprit in mild FD. Genetic rescue of the FD mutation in severe FD iPSCs reversed NC, but not sensory neuron lineage phenotypes, implicating that the known FD mutation does not account for all symptoms. Employing whole-exome sequencing (WES), we identified candidate mutations that were only found in severe but not mild FD patients and show that these modifier mutations converge onto defects withing the extracellular matrix. We further found that the sympathetic lineage in severe FD patients is hyperactive, a previously shown culprit of degeneration. Our study demonstrates that human PSC-based disease modeling is highly sensitive in recapitulating disease severity and paves the road for applications in personalized medicine.

## Biography:

Dr. Zeltner has received her PhD from Ichan School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York and has completed her postdoctoral studies in Dr. Lorenz Studer's laboratory at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New

York. Dr. Zeltner has been appointed Assistant Professor at the Center for Molecular Medicine at the University of Georgia in 2018. Her research focuses on disease modeling using human pluripotent stem cells with particular focus on the peripheral nervous system (PNS). Her ultimate goal is employing this technology to further the understanding of PNS disorders that will lead to the development of novel drugs and therapeutics.

## Publication of speakers:

- Nadja Zeltner et al ; Site-specific integration of adeno-associated virus involves partial duplication of the target locus, 2009 Apr 16
- Nadja Zeltner et al ; Combined small-molecule inhibition accelerates the derivation of functional, early-born, cortical neurons from human pluripotent stem cells, 2017 Jan 23
- Nadja Zeltner et al ; Capturing the biology of mild versus severe disease in a pluripotent stem cell-based model of Familial Dysautonomia, 2016 Nov 14
- Nadja Zeltner et al ; Feeder-free Derivation of Neural Crest Progenitor Cells from Human Pluripotent Stem Cells, 2014 May 22.
- Nadja Zeltner et al ; Near-perfect infectivity of wild-type AAV as benchmark for infectivity of recombinant AAV vectors, 2010 Mar 25

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