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► **To cite this version:**

Alexandra Depince, Florent Murat, Mateus Contar Adolfi, Violette Thermes, Yann Guiguen, et al.. Integrating TGF-beta signalling pathways and epigenetic modulations for controlling sex determination in medaka. 2. European Symposium on Sex Determination in Vertebrates, Oct 2022, Giens, France. <hal-03833209>

HAL Id: hal-03833209

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-03833209v1>

Submitted on 28 Oct 2022

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Integrating TGF- β signalling pathways and epigenetic modulations for controlling sex determination in medaka

Alexandra Depincé¹, Florent Murat¹, Mateus Contar Adolfi², Violette Thermes¹, Yann Guiguen¹, Manfred Schartl² and Amaury Herpin¹

amaury.herpin@inra.fr

¹ INRAE, UR1037 Fish Physiology and Genomics, Rennes F-35000, France.

² Department of Physiological Chemistry, University of Würzburg, D-97074 Würzburg, Germany.

In stark contrast to birds and mammals, which feature extreme conservative sex-determination mechanisms across species, fish display an amazing broad range of systems and master sex-determining (SD) genes. Thus, the molecular pathways of sex-determination and differentiation must have recurrently and independently adjusted and adapted during the course of evolution. Interestingly, although being clearly subordinates of the sex-regulatory network in mammals, TGF- β family members (*Amh*, *Gsdf*, *Gdf6* or *Bmpr1bb*, *Amhr2*...) have nevertheless been the source of most of the SD genes in fish.

Facing this rolling wave of TGF- β signaling in primary SD, and taking advantage of this “evolution in action”, our aim is to decipher the key role of those TGF- β signaling pathways and their functional evolution for sex determination and maintenance of gonad sexual identity: -How is signaling specificity achieved among the different gonadal TGF- β signal transducing factors? -What are the underlying molecular mechanisms determining the sex functions of these factors? and -How do they branch into the canonical downstream sex regulatory network?

Focusing on medaka *Gdf6* and *Amh* for approaching these conceptual questions, and using *in-vivo* and *in-vitro* approaches, combining gene editing together with transcriptomics and functional studies, we find that, in a context of sex determination:

- *Amh* and *Gdf6* likely act through different signaling pathways and are, in a physiological manner, distinctly integrated.
- *Amh* and *Gdf6* pathways do not necessarily branch together with the canonical sex-determining gene regulatory network for exerting their respective functions.
- Medaka *Gdf6* paralogs control variations in the methylation landscape, leading to epigenetic modifications strictly regulating sex determination.

Finally, evidence is provided for an unexpected link between (i) a growth factor, (ii) transcription factors and (iii) the modulation of the methylation landscape in the context of sex determination.