

Cell death and its different modes: history of understanding and current trends

Abstract

Discussions about what is life continue to struggle; there are pros and cons for whether a virus is alive. However, an opposite thing – cell death – appears to be tantamount important and equally not-easygoing to define. Nevertheless, our current knowledge about eukaryotic cell death **has made a long way and resulted in a fruitful outcome:** starting from three types of cell death (type I, II and III **which are** mainly applicable to eukaryotic cells of organisms from the biological kingdom animalia) in 1970s, Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death has named already twelve cell death forms in 2018, including the above mentioned apoptosis, autophagy and necrosis among them. How the scientific attitude towards cellular demise evolved and various aspects of different cell death modes are reviewed in this article.

Keywords

nomenclature; regulated cell death; cornification; excitotoxicity; cysteine proteases; lysosome; plasma membrane; cancer

Abbreviations

ACD accidental cell death

ADCD autophagy-dependent cell death

ATP adenosine triphosphate

DAMP damage-associated molecular pattern

MOMP mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilization

NCCD Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death

PCD programmed cell death

RCD regulated cell death

ROS reactive oxygen species

30 Introduction

31 Today, our knowledge about eukaryotic cell death has a profound history. Microscopy
32 of mammalian cell cultures, live tissues and stained sectioned specimens of various multicellular
33 organisms (nematode *C. elegans*, fruit fly *D. melanogaster*, mouse, human and other) revealed
34 many secrets of cellular life and death. Starting from three types of cell death (type I, II and III) in
35 1970's [1], cell death has been gaining interest at an increasing rate. Regulated cell death (RCD) or
36 the events that resemble it have been also observed in the organisms of plant and fungi kingdoms,
37 even in unicellular eukaryotes and prokaryotes [2][3][4]. However, many more cell death subtypes,
38 as defined by cellular morphology, cell function and biochemical markers, had been identified in
39 the past fifty years. Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death (NCCD) has named already twelve cell
40 death forms with the canonical types of apoptosis, autophagy and necrosis among them, in 2018. As
41 molecular cell biology, biochemistry, biomedicine and biology sciences keep developing, this
42 research area continues expanding. It is interesting that according to such scientific studies even
43 Catholic Church — after almost 2000 years — updated their teaching about human life and its
44 conception, defining the death of a human zygote — a single cell — as death of a human person, in
45 1974.

46 This review investigates the evolution of the scientific cell death concept and
47 approaches to investigate it. The cell is programmed to die by many diverse mechanisms and
48 subroutines. At the same time, understanding the interplay between life- and death-promoting
49 signals, or more specifically – the mechanisms by which naturally-programmed cell death is
50 induced or suppressed, may grant us the knowledge how to extend our lives. On one hand,
51 hazardous environment causes chronic cell death that leads to organ malfunction; on the other hand,
52 cellular life can be artificially prolonged. Moreover, progress is needed in dealing with immortal or
53 cell death-resistant cells, e.g. in human cancers. As reviewed by Kaminsky and Zhivotovsky [5],
54 cell death can be pharmacologically targeted for the treatment of immunodeficiency, diabetes,
55 atherosclerosis, ischemia, reperfusion injury, infection, inflammation, autoimmune and neurological
56 disorders, acute kidney injury and transplantation. However, the success is largely dependent on our
57 understanding of what we know about a cell and what we still don't.

58 As cancer is expected to surpass cardiovascular disease as the leading cause of death
59 in many high-income populations and become the disease No.1 [6], as well as the age-related
60 diseases become usual in the aging society, concern in cell death regulation continues to grow.
61 Paradoxically, when discussions about what is life continue, e.g. whether a virus is alive, an
62 opposite thing – cell death – appeared to be equally important and not easy-going to define. A group
63 of scientists who later established the committee called Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death
64 (NCCD) put many efforts in distinguishing between live and dead at cellular level. Nevertheless, it
65 became clear that a living cell is preloaded with explosives, i.e. suicidal molecules that are coded in
66 our genome, and the abundance of those deadly molecules is amazing. Many different signal
67 transducing proteins, proteases and channel components are present in the cytoplasm and in the
68 plasma membrane of every single cell, counterbalanced by prosurvival molecular mechanisms [7].
69 It is really surprising why we are still alive.

70

71 The 20th century

72 In 1951, a scientist Glucksmann collected and documented over 70 scattered reports
73 which had been published previously about cell deaths *in vivo* and *in vitro* [8]. This date may be
74 considered as a starting point from which eukaryotic cell death science started evolving. Yet, there
75 is data that cell death evidence may go back even into 19th century (the year 1842), as presented in
76 one of the multiple chronologies of cell death [9]. As noted in the published analysis from the ISI-
77 Science citation index [10] and nicely reviewed by Lockshin [11], the history of apoptosis, or a
78 programmed cell death (PCD) to which this term had been applied for decades, made this field of
79 research world-famous and fashionable. The number of publications has been growing enormously.
80 Cell viability assays for *in vitro* evaluation of cytotoxicity were developing, but cellular
81 morphology was the main criterion to describe the type of cell death while trying to fit into a
82 container of three cell death types: apoptosis (regulated cell suicide; the hallmark – cell shrinkage,
83 condensed and fragmented nucleus), autophagy (self cannibalism; the hallmark – double-membrane
84 vesicles in the cytoplasm) and necrosis (passive cell swelling; the hallmark – swelling mitochondria
85 and increased cell size). Later, molecular patterns of a certain cell death type began to emerge. For
86 example, ‘DNA-ladder’ as a result of inter-nucleosomal DNA degradation, emergence of
87 phosphatidylserine on the cell surface, and also activation of cysteine proteases caspases, were
88 considered as obligate markers of apoptotic cell death. Some other immunohistochemical markers
89 included cleaved cytokeratin-18, cleaved caspase-3, cleaved lamin A, phosphorylated histone
90 H2AX, cleaved poly(ADP ribose) polymerase, and translocation of apoptosis-inducing factor AIF
91 [12]. However, massive research of apoptosis led to inconsistency in the terminology, until a group
92 of specialists decided to establish a committee which would become an authority. Thereafter,
93 Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death published their first recommendations in 2005 [13],
94 followed by publications in 2009 [14], 2012 [15], 2015 [16] and 2018 [4].
95

96 Year 2005

97 Briefly, in the article of 2005, all the known at that time cell death forms have been
98 described, namely apoptosis, autophagic cell death, necrosis/oncosis, mitotic catastrophe,
99 cornification, excitotoxicity, anoikis and Wallerian degeneration. Probably for the first time, a
100 difference between ‘dying’ and ‘dead’ cells has been emphasized. According to suggested
101 terminology, cell death was not as a process but rather a consequence *post factum*. Even in 2005 it
102 was clear that there were atypical cell death forms that possessed the attributes of both apoptosis
103 (active cell death) and necrosis (passive cell death). Moreover, it was apparent that there might be
104 switching between different modes of cell death execution and that the definition of ‘point-of-no-
105 return’ was extremely varied among different cells, thus the Committee chose to substantiate that
106 the cell was ‘dead’ when the following criteria were met: i) its plasma membrane disintegrated, ii)
107 the nucleus completely fragmented, iii) membrane-bound cell particles formed and engulfed by
108 neighbour cells. Another important thing, the causes of cell death were imperatively appointed to be
109 named in every case in biomedical research, especially the methods of active investigation, making
110 a difference between death induction and death morphology. For example, ‘caspase-3-positive
111 cells’ were to be more precise than ‘apoptotic cells’, and ‘etoposide-induced cell death’ would not
112 involve any disputes whether it is apoptotic, autophagic or necrotic cell death. Similarly, e.g.

113 ‘TUNEL (terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase-mediated dUTP nick end labelling)-positive cells’
 114 do not necessarily are dying, though it is presumed that they are; TUNEL assay simply detects
 115 DNA strand breaks, while in certain stem cells such DNA damage is slowly but successfully
 116 repaired [17]. Finally, cells with autophagic phenotype were suggested to be renamed as cells ‘with
 117 double-membrane vesicles’ or cells with ‘vesicular redistribution of LC3’, while autophagic cell
 118 death was questioned to exist at all [13].

119 Moreover, in 2005, NCCD questioned the usage of common pan-caspase inhibitor N-
 120 Benzyloxycarbonyl-Val-Ala-Asp fluoromethyl ketone (Z-VAD.fmk; with aspartyl residue either
 121 methylated or not). There were data that this inhibitor was non-selective towards caspases but also
 122 irreversibly inhibited cytoplasmic cysteine proteases calpains as well as lysosomal cysteine
 123 proteases cathepsins. In this regard, prevention of cell death by Z-VAD.fmk was suggested not to be
 124 called as ‘inhibition of caspase-dependent apoptosis’, as the above mentioned other proteases
 125 participate in various cell death events, including those of autophagy, necrosis and necroptosis, as
 126 later reviewed in [18] (Table 1).

127 Furthermore, in 2005, the Committee made a step towards combining several cell
 128 death modes (anoikis with apoptosis, oncosis with necrosis) and suggested refraining from the
 129 introduction of new terms like *aponecrosis* or *necroapoptosis*.

130

Protein	Functions	Cell death modality
Caspase-1	Interleukin IL-1 β and IL-18 conversion; Inflammation [4]	Pyroptosis
Caspase-2	Sensing DNA damage [19]	Apoptosis/ mitotic catastrophe
Caspase-3	Cleavage of multiple proteins, including activation of caspase-8/10	Apoptosis [4]
Caspase-8	Activation of caspase-3; cleavage of Bid [16]	Extrinsic apoptosis (death receptors); Autophagic FADDosome [20]
Caspase-9	Activation of caspases-3/6/7	Intrinsic apoptosis; Dependence receptor-induced extrinsic apoptosis [15]
Caspase-10	FLIPosome formation; FADDosome formation; caspase-8 activation	Necroptosis; Apoptosis [21]
Caspase-12*	Effector of ER stress [22]; Antiinflammatory	Intrinsic apoptosis; Paraptosis
Caspase-14	Formation of epidermis [23]	Cornification
Cathepsins	Proteolysis in lysosomes	LDCD [4]; ADCD
Calpains	Proteolysis in cytoplasm **	Necrosis; Ferroptosis; Apoptosis

131

132 Table 1: Functions of various cysteine proteases in cell death. * Functional in rodents, but in majority
 133 of human population inactive due to a mutation [24]. ** Ca²⁺-dependent activation under Ca-overload
 134 conditions [25].

135

136 **Year 2009**

137 Later, in 2009, NCCD issued recommendations entitled ‘Classification of cell death:
138 recommendations of the Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death 2009’. In this paper, several quite
139 new atypical cell death forms were described on the basis of the published research. However, the
140 main modalities of cell death were selected to be apoptosis, autophagy, cornification and necrosis.
141 Probably because of this, the historical numeration (cell death type I, II or III) was proposed to be
142 abandoned.

143 As in previous paper, NCCD continued to merge atypical death modalities with the
144 main ones. As a consequence, mitotic catastrophe, anoikis and exitotoxicity have lost their
145 autonomy, while paraptosis, pyroptosis, pyronecrosis and entosis were left as an open question.
146 Moreover, Wallerian degeneration was retracted from the cell death list due to the unfulfillment of
147 criteria required for the definition of ‘dead cell’. Specifically, peripheral neurons during Wallerian
148 degeneration usually regenerate [14].

149 Importantly, NCCD found that morphological criteria were not sufficient to identify
150 cell death type or modality; hence they suggested looking for biochemical and molecular markers
151 specific to a certain demise of a cell. For example, implication of caspases, non-caspase proteases
152 and Rip family proteins were proposed to be definitely important for this purpose in the future. And
153 yes, they did.

154

155 **Year 2012**

156 In 2012, the third recommendation entitled ‘Molecular definitions of cell death
157 subroutines: recommendations of the Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death 2012’ was published.
158 NCCD kept their promise and discussed the pros and cons of both morphological and biochemical
159 aspects of cell death. As declared in 2009, NCCD continued their mission to ensure uniformity in
160 nomenclature and the use of accepted terminology and critical evaluation of new cell death
161 modalities. Of note, the situation in laboratories had changed dramatically from 1970’s to 2012, and
162 although transmitted light microscopes continued to be an obligate instrument in cell biology for the
163 morphological evaluation of cell cultures, a bundle of molecular tools became available for such
164 research. Moreover, well-defined molecular mechanism of classic apoptosis encouraged to look into
165 the mechanisms of other cell death types. Albeit almost all atypical cell death forms were
166 phenotypically intermediate between apoptotic and necrotic, they probably could have been quite
167 well resolved and discriminated at the molecular level. Finally, novel biochemical tests were
168 acquired for more convenient and quantitative patient diagnostics, thus historical cell death
169 classification was reconsidered on the new basis.

170 In publication of 2012, many previously known molecular facts were accompanied
171 with newly discovered cell signalling events and regulatory mechanisms which helped to better
172 describe apoptosis, necrosis, autophagic cell death, anoikis, entosis, parthanatos, pyroptosis, netosis
173 and cornification.

174 However, the Committee realized that cell viability methods were the weak part of the
175 chain as still there was substantially no molecular indicator which would guarantee the exact answer
176 about cell demise. It seemed that certain cell death markers played pleiotropic roles in physiological
177 conditions as well as they were implicated in execution of different cell death types. For example,

178 caspase activation and phosphatidylserine exposure were not the unique features of apoptosis, not
179 mentioning the intracellular level of ATP or ROS, and activity of reducing enzymes. In parallel,
180 there were many quite different traditional cell viability assays: accumulation of specific dyes,
181 release of intracellular proteins, glucose uptake, cell detachment, clonogenic, metabolism-based
182 assays, TUNEL, BrdU or EdU incorporation, mitochondria membrane potential, calcium efflux into
183 cytoplasm, Calcein-AM, total protein staining and similar [26]. Thereafter, it was absolutely
184 necessary to recommend using **more than one method for cell death quantification**.

185 Nevertheless, very specific markers of cell death type or subtype began to emerge. In
186 early 2000, ligand deprivation-induced dependence receptor signalling was discovered, and in 2012
187 NCCD added this type of cell death induction to the extrinsic apoptosis but as molecularly separate
188 modality with involvement of caspase-9 instead of caspase-8. Similarly, intrinsic apoptosis was
189 divided into caspase-dependent and caspase-independent. **This cell death process was mediated by**
190 **MOMP and hence** always associated with generalized and irreversible mitochondria membrane
191 potential dissipation, release of mitochondrial proteins into the cytosol or other sub-cellular
192 compartments and inhibition of respiratory chain. Importantly, there was already enough proof that
193 necrosis is a regulated process, thus terminology 'regulated necrosis' was introduced into the
194 nomenclature. Similarly to earlier clarifications or certain terms associated with cell death, in the
195 recommendations of 2012 NCCD named mitotic catastrophe as an 'onco-suppressive mechanism',
196 not as cell death, as aberrant mitosis was proved to induce cell senescence in some cases [15].

197 **Year 2015**

198 **As it was predicted**, scientific perception about cell death has been evolving very
199 rapidly in the past decade. The publication entitled 'Essential versus accessory aspects of cell death:
200 recommendations of the NCCD 2015' did not disappoint in that sense. Just for to mention, **NCCD**
201 publication of 2009 had 'only' 30 affiliations, followed by 46 affiliations in 2012, and **listing** 125
202 affiliations in 2015. Supposedly, there had to be major improvements in the nomenclature. And yes,
203 it was.

204 **Firstly**, the article started with a confusing story **about a giant mimivirus which could**
205 **be infected by other viruses**. Such phenomenon has sparked the debates how to describe the
206 **differences between live and inert entities**. ~~that a term 'life' is much more difficult to describe than~~
207 ~~'death' and the debates about what is a living organism continues~~. What came second into the sight
208 reading this recommendation, **was** the introduction of terms 'regulated cell death' and 'accidental
209 cell death' (ACD), illustrated by a figure where ACD **was a small object compared to RCD that**
210 **contained the programmed cell death (PCD) in it**. Further, the evidence that **morphology of a dying**
211 **cell was dynamic and dependent on genetic or pharmacological interventions was presented**. In
212 **addition, the authors have summarized that usually there was no efficient cytoprotection beyond the**
213 **hypothetic *point-of-no-return* in cell commitment**. Subsequently, additional process of adaptation
214 was introduced to precede cell death initiation, during which ATP and ROS levels oscillated in an
215 anti-parallel manner as a consequence of RCD promoting and suppressing signalling. Hereafter,
216 NCCD recommended to use the term '*initiation*' to indicate the RCD-causing events that **were**
217 reversible **due to still ongoing** adaptive responses [16].

218 Another question exacerbated by NCCD in this publication was the role of damage-
219 associated molecular patterns (DAMPs) in cell death induction. Briefly, certain molecules were

220 identified to provoke specific reaction of the organism during which homing phagocytes were
 221 attracted to the DAMPs-releasing site and, more importantly, inflammation as well as DAMP-
 222 induced PCD was initiated through the activation of their receptors and signalling. Usually those
 223 **molecules** (now called alarmins) reside inside a cell; however, during infection or extreme non-
 224 physiological conditions they escape into extracellular medium as the plasma membrane of a cell
 225 ruptures. In the case of ACD, much higher levels of alarmins are released when compared to RCD.
 226 As summarized in Table 2, quite specific plasma membrane channels are intentionally formed (or
 227 activated **in e.g. autosis**) during regulated cell death for the controlled release of DAMPs.
 228

Protein	Activated by	Cell death modality	Notes
MLKL	RIP3 (phosphorylation)	Necroptosis	MLKL octamer [27]
DFNA5	Caspase-3 (proteolysis)	Secondary necrosis/ Apoptosis	
Gasdermin D	Caspase-1/5 (proteolysis)	Pyroptosis	
PANX1	Caspase-3/7 (proteolysis)	Apoptosis	
Connexins/ pannexins	N/A [28]	Apoptosis; Pyroptosis; Necrosis	
NMDA channel	Glutamate/aspartate (opening)	Excitotoxicity	Excitotoxicity is considered as a form of ferroptosis in neural cells [4]
Na ⁺ /K ⁺ ATPase	N/A [29]	Autosis/ Autophagic cell death	This ATPase is responsible for a large part of ATP consumption (>60% of cellular ATP in neurons) [29]
Lipid peroxidation *	Fenton reaction	Ferroptosis	* Non-specific leakage
Perforin **	Physiological pH and Ca²⁺	Apoptosis (when in concert with granzyme protease)	** Perforin and granzyme molecules are synthesized and secreted in granules by cytotoxic lymphocytes [30]

229
 230 Table 2: Channels in plasma membrane, responsible for cell death execution.
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232 The article ends with a stunning conclusion (quote): ‘*A growing body of data indicates*
 233 *indeed that the bona fide executioners of RCD, that is, the processes that directly drive cells across*
 234 *the boundary between life and death are less characterized, less inhibitable and perhaps more*
 235 *homogeneous than previously thought*’. Excitingly, a new term ‘anastasy’ was introduced to
 236 describe cellular function to recover from the late-stage death execution [31]. **Wow!**

237 In addition, based on 174 completely sequenced eukaryotic genomes, already in 2013
 238 other authors postulated that ancestral eukaryotic cell (the progenitor of all eukaryotes) did not have
 239 the simplified version of cell death signalling pathways, but instead it was equally complex as that
 240 of the mammals today [32].

241 **Year 2018**

242 It was interesting for us, that in the publication of 2015 many forms of cell death were
 243 omitted and not discussed, perhaps reflecting the title of the article: ‘essential vs. accessory’.
 244 Nevertheless, in their publication of 2009, cornification was one of the main forms of cell death,
 245 and quite distinct from others. Though it might be a bit confusing, the most recent recommendation
 246 of NCCD clarified the thing.

247 The article ‘Molecular mechanisms of cell death: recommendations of the
 248 Nomenclature Committee on Cell Death 2018’ was quite exceptional. The fact that it was accepted
 249 for publication in two days after submission definitely means a lot, together with 244 affiliations of
 250 the authors [4].

251 Briefly, major cell death subroutines were summarized there: intrinsic apoptosis,
 252 extrinsic apoptosis, mitochondrial permeability transition (MPT)-driven necrosis, necroptosis,
 253 ferroptosis, pyroptosis, parthanatos, entotic cell death, netotic cell death, lysosome-dependent cell
 254 death, autophagy-dependent cell death, immunogenic cell death. Importantly, the diagram presented
 255 in the article suggests that every of the mentioned cell death modalities interplays with a neighbour
 256 one and the transitions are possible in the sequence as listed here, connecting immunogenic cell
 257 death with intrinsic apoptosis to close the circle of death (see Figure 1 in [4]). Beside, the full set of
 258 cell death-related terminology was described in an explaining manner in one sentence, along with
 259 detailed revision of published data. It is a true dictionary of NCCD terminology which was
 260 anticipated for so long. Every newly systematized cell death form was extensively covered in the
 261 recommendation – over a thousand of references have been used in this paper. Definitely, the
 262 recommendation of 2018 should be referred as the most reliable and complete document
 263 generalizing the cell death science. Here, in Table 3, current cell death modalities are described.
 264

Cell death modality	Brief description	References
Autophagy-dependent cell death	A form of RCD that mechanistically depends on the pro-survival autophagic machinery (or components thereof). Autosis is a specific instance of ADCD that critically relies on the plasma membrane Na ⁺ /K ⁺ -ATPase.	[33][34]
Entotic cell death	A type of RCD that originates from actomyosin-dependent cell-in-cell internalization (entosis) by non-phagocytic cells and is executed by lysosomes.	[35]
Extrinsic apoptosis	Specific variant of RCD initiated by perturbations of the extracellular microenvironment detected by plasma membrane death or dependence receptors, propagated by CASP8 and executed mainly by CASP3.	[36]
Ferroptosis	A form of RCD initiated by oxidative perturbations inside a cell, susceptible to inhibition by iron chelators and lipophilic antioxidants, and under constitutive control by glutathione peroxidase GPX4.	[37]
Immunogenic cell death	A form of RCD that is sufficient to activate an adaptive immune response to viral infection in immunocompetent hosts. It is	[38]

	mediated by DAMP release.	
Intrinsic apoptosis	Type of RCD initiated by perturbations of the extracellular or intracellular microenvironment, demarcated by mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilization (with implication of BH3 domain proteins), and precipitated by executioner caspases, mainly CASP3. Plasma membrane integrity in vivo is retained through the process. A specific variant of intrinsic apoptosis elicited by the loss of integrin-dependent attachment to the extracellular matrix is known as anoikis.	[39][40]
Lysosome-dependent cell death	A type of RCD demarcated by primary lysosome membrane permeabilization and precipitated by cathepsins, with optional involvement of mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilization and caspases.	[41]
Mitochondrial permeability transition (MPT)-driven necrosis	RCD triggered by perturbations of the intracellular microenvironment (severe oxidative stress and Ca overload) and relying on peptidylprolyl isomerase F.	[42]
Necroptosis	A modality of RCD triggered by perturbations of extracellular or intracellular homeostasis that critically depends on MLKL, RIPK3, and (at least in some settings) on the kinase activity of RIPK1.	[43]
NETotic cell death	A ROS-dependent modality of RCD restricted to cells of hematopoietic derivation, intended for pathogen neutralization and associated with neutrophil extracellular traps (NET) extrusion.	[44]
Parthanatos	A modality of RCD initiated by PARP1 hyperactivation and precipitated by the consequent bioenergetic catastrophe coupled to AIF-dependent and MIF-dependent DNA degradation.	[45]
Pyroptosis	A type of RCD that critically depends on the formation of plasma membrane pores by members of the gasdermin protein family, often as a consequence of inflammatory caspase (CASP1) activation in response to pathogen invasion.	[46]

265 Table 3. Cell death modes according to NCCD 2018 [4].

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For example, previously undiscerned mode called lysosome-dependent cell death (LDCD) was described as a type of regulated cell death demarcated by primary lysosomal membrane permeabilization and precipitated by cathepsins, with optional involvement of mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilization and caspases. It is a bit confusing as lysosomes were discovered in late 1950's, and already in 1960's cytolytic enzymes have been demonstrated to play a role in programmed cell death [47]. As we know now, Autophagy is also dependent on lysosomes, but additional and separate cell death modality – LDCD – which is implicated in inflammation, tissue remodelling (e.g., mammary gland involution after lactation), aging, neurodegeneration, cardiovascular disorders, intracellular pathogen response, as well as in physiological elimination of a fraction of emerging male germ cells, was a surprise.

277 As mentioned above, since 2015, cornification was retracted from the list of cell death
278 modes. Instead of naming it a 'cell death' subtype, with an exceptional involvement of caspase-14
279 in the fate of keratinocytes, NCCD re-qualified this process as 'terminal differentiation' because
280 dead corneocytes were neither disposed off nor phagocytised, but became an integral part of an
281 organism and continued serving a function. Interestingly, the surface of plants is covered with dead
282 cells that grant the organism protection from harsh environment conditions including sun radiation
283 [2]. In NCCD nomenclature, cell senescence, mitotic catastrophe and cornification are sub-grouped
284 under a category of 'non-lethal processes'. Alternatively, neural cell death upon over-stimulation
285 with neurotoxic amino acids (glutamate and aspartate), previously known as oxitosis or
286 excitotoxicity, recently has been assigned to ferroptosis. Indeed, it is known that iron is
287 accumulated in the brain where it is under a risk to catalyze the Fenton reaction in the presence of
288 hydrogen peroxide [48]. The latter in turn accumulates when glutathione concentration drops as a
289 result of glutamate-dependent inhibition of the C_x^- system (cystine-glutamate antiporter) [4].

290 However, NCCD has repeated many times, that the field is constantly evolving, and
291 that the nomenclature may be reconsidered. E.g., recent publication draws a connection of
292 autophagy with entosis (cell cannibalism) through a shared molecular mechanism involving
293 TM9SF4, mTORC and AMPK proteins [33]. We can recall and repeatedly emphasize that
294 autophagy and entosis are defined as non-lethal processes, unless they culminate in cell death.
295 Hence the correct names for cell demise are 'entotic cell death' and 'autophagy-dependent cell
296 death' (ADCD) [4].
297

298 **ROS, cancer and cell death**

299 Depending on concentration, there is a difference in what ROS do to a cell. It is
300 known that hydrogen peroxide is a signalling molecule. It means that even in no ROS conditions
301 cells purposely produce ROS to engage the required signalling which in turn results in certain
302 biological function. It is called physiological condition and homeostasis. However, sometimes ROS
303 production accidentally increases and cells experience an oxidative stress. To manage the stress, cells
304 possess intrinsic measures to restore the balance. In addition to canonical ROS scavenging enzymes
305 (superoxide dismutase, catalase, glutathione peroxidase) as well as many reducing enzymes, a
306 known tumour suppressor p53 has been demonstrated to exert antioxidant function through the
307 transcription of antioxidant genes. As a ROS sensor p53 may coordinate stem cell differentiation,
308 induction of cell senescence or cell death. However, when cells dismiss ROS control (e.g. cells with
309 mutated p53) they acquire condition in which genetic instability occurs, as DNA alkylation by free
310 radicals results in double strand breaks and mutations that frequently evoke cancer transformation.
311 It is well documented that cancer cells manage moderate ROS concentrations, suppress cell death
312 mechanisms and even activate proliferation in harsh microenvironment. Molecular mechanisms,
313 involving cancer cell resistance to cell death induction by ROS (they include PTEN/Akt, MAPK,
314 NF- κ B and other signalling pathways) are known and possibly can be targeted in cancer therapy.
315 Though functional p53 in cancer cells may suggest a better outcome of the therapy, various p53-
316 independent cell death forms are known (at least apoptosis, necroptosis, autophagic and
317 immunogenic cell death).

318 One of the ten hallmarks of cancer, together with sustaining proliferating signalling,
319 evading growth suppressors, enabling replicative immortality, activating invasion, inducing
320 angiogenesis, avoiding immune destruction, deregulating cellular energetics, genome instability and
321 tumour promoting inflammation, is resistance to cell death induction. At the same time it means
322 that cancer cells readily acquire resistance to chemotherapeutic drugs that normally induce cell
323 death, the same with resistance to ionizing radiation. However, as discussed in a recent review, no
324 cell can withstand the extreme overproduction of ROS. Such situation happens when cellular
325 mitochondria lose control and respiratory system enzymes only partially reduce incoming oxygen,
326 or in other cases when cytoplasmic enzymes and plasma membrane bound enzymes such as
327 NADPH oxidase do the same. At the extreme edge of oxidative stress stands necrosis. Thus, there
328 are two options: either to prevent initial transforming adaptation of a cell, or to compromise the
329 antioxidative defence in already malignant cells. However, there are data that such manipulation is
330 not easy in vivo and in both cases may have adverse side effects.

331 Perspectives

332 It becomes clear that mandatory component of life is the biological barrier, i.e. the
333 plasma membrane and the regulating molecules which support its integrity. Therefore, a eukaryotic
334 cell may be called 'dead' when its plasma membrane loses integrity and continuously permits
335 uncontrollable flux of ions as well as larger than usual molecules. However, it is still too far from
336 the final answer how to control it in pathological conditions.

337 The field of cell death types, forms or modalities continues developing and may grant
338 us major surprises in the future. For example, a new role for a well-known apoptosis-inducing
339 protease caspase-8 has been discovered. It appears that caspase-8 is active in certain living cells,
340 negatively regulates a lytic form of cell death necroptosis, participates in the cleavage of
341 inflammatory interleukin-1 β to its mature bioactive form, and regulates cytokine transcription [49].
342 Furthermore, in 2018, some authors have introduced a new name – oxeiptosis – to describe a novel
343 cell death pathway which is independent of caspases, initiated by oxygen radicals and different
344 from those of ROS-induced apoptosis, necroptosis and ferroptosis. This discovery is important as it
345 identified a new ROS-sensing molecular switch – signalling molecule KEAP1 which leads to
346 activation of AIFM1 (Apoptosis-Inducing Factor 1 Mitochondrial) and starts with oxidation of
347 cysteines in C-terminus of KEAP1 [50]. Alternatively, the associations between apoptosis,
348 autophagy and regulated necrosis have been discovered [51], compromising the pioneer three-type
349 classification of cell death described in [1], and perhaps similar findings in the future may have an
350 impact on upcoming NCCD recommendations.

351 In addition, recent publication of Seehawer et al. may start a new page in our
352 knowledge about cancer, namely how neighbouring cells epigenetically react to different cell death
353 modalities in the vicinity. The authors discovered that certain drugs (HDTV and Epo) induced
354 different cell death types in mouse liver and also resulted in different expression of cytokine
355 mRNAs. Depending on that, different types of liver cancer – hepatocellular carcinoma or
356 intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma – developed in mosaic mouse models [52]. The findings described
357 in the paper bring additional complexity to cancer progression, at the same time they shed some
358 light on fundamental aspects of cell behaviour.

359 Generally, there should be ways to overcome cancer cell resistance to RCD induction
360 by initiating other cell death modes which probably are suppressed less than other within the
361 malignant cell. Alternatively, neoplastic cells may be guided to terminally differentiate and thereby
362 stop growing as a tumour. However, we have to realize that there are more than 20.000 genes in the
363 human genome and only less than a half of them are recognized in performing a known biological
364 function. Moreover, the genes are regulated epigenetically and the majority of genes produce
365 alternatively-processed proteins which in turn may have pleiotropic functions during different
366 developmental stages of a cell life. And death.

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370 **Declaration of conflicting interest**

371 The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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