

 <p><b>UniSR</b> Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele</p>	<p><b>APPLICATION TO ACT AS SUPERVISOR AND RESEARCH PROJECT PROPOSAL</b></p>	<p><b>MO 20-5</b> ed. 01 del 21/02/2025 PO 20 Page 4 of 9</p>
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**PROJECT**

**Supervisor:**

Mara Salomè

**Title:**

Targeted strategies for DUX4-r leukemia

**Curriculum:**

Cell and Molecular Biology

Link to the personal page of the University or relevant hospital site website: <https://research.hsr.it/en/divisions/genetics-and-cell-biology/gene-expression-regulation.html>

**Description of the Project (max 3,000 characters including spaces)**

**Background/gap of knowledge**

Cancer is the second leading cause of death in Europe, and acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) is the most common pediatric cancer and the most frequent cause of cancer-related death before the age of 20. In 10% of cases, ALL is caused by rearrangements of the transcription factor double homeobox 4 (DUX4) giving rise to the oncogenic driver DUX4-r, which maintains the DNA binding domain (DBD) of DUX4<sup>1,2</sup>. DUX4-r transcriptional ability is required for leukemia initiation and maintenance<sup>3</sup>. Since no targeted treatment is available, non-responders/relapsed patients face a dismal prognosis. Hence, novel therapeutic strategies are urgently needed.

**Rationale and hypothesis**

We and other showed that the ability to bind DNA and activate gene expression is required for DUX4-r leukemogenic potential<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, identifying inhibitors of DUX4-r transcriptional activity and test their activity in ALL could help the development of effective therapeutic strategies in a personalized medicine perspective. Through proteomics, we identified matrin 3 (MATR3)<sup>5</sup> for its ability to bind directly to DUX4-r DNA-binding domain (dbd) and inhibit its transcriptional potential. Next, through structure/function studies, we identified a Short Peptide Inhibitor (SPI) based on MATR3 that is sufficient to bind DUX4-r. Notably, we used this knowledge to generate drug-like PROteolysis Targeting Chimera (PROTAC)<sup>6</sup> recombinant SPI (rSPI) molecules able to induce DUX4-r protein degradation.

**Objectives and specific aims**

The aim of this study is to test the inhibitory potential of DUX4-r targeting strategies in cellular and animal models of DUX4-r+ ALL.

The candidate will compare the activity and specificity of rSPI candidates and test the effects on DUX4-r target genes expression, cell adhesion, migration, and proliferation in DUX4-r+ and DUX4-r- lines (O1). Then, the candidate will validate the results on a DUX4-r PDX in vitro platform, and use advanced sequencing technologies to test the effects of our lead candidates on the DUX4-r oncogenic signature (O2). Finally, safety and efficacy of the best rSPI molecules will be assessed on DUX4-r PDXs in vivo. The candidate will assess the



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RESEARCH PROJECT PROPOSAL

MO 20-5

ed. 01 del

21/02/2025

PO 20

Page 5 of 9

effects of rSPI on ALL engraftment, disease latency and dissemination to lymphoid organs, and on the DUX4-r transcriptional signature (O3).

**Expected outcomes**

Collectively, this study will provide molecular understanding of the DUX4-r/rSPI molecular and functional interaction. Moreover, the data will support the possibility to generate drug-like mimicking peptides able, within a single molecule, to inhibit both DUX4-r expression and its activity.

**Skills that the student should acquire** (max. 600 characters including spaces):

The student will acquire and refine cell and molecular biology skills, cell culture and primary cell culture techniques, flow cytometry and imaging techniques. Moreover the candidate will gain experience in animal models of patient derived xenograft of DUX4-r leukemia.

**References** (max. 15)

1. Zhang, J. *et al.* Deregulation of DUX4 and ERG in acute lymphoblastic leukemia. *Nat. Genet.* **48**, 1481-1489 (2016).
2. Yasuda, T. *et al.* Recurrent DUX4 fusions in B cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia of adolescents and young adults. *Nat Genet.* **48**, 569-574 (2016).
3. Carlet, M. *et al.* In vivo inducible reverse genetics in patients' tumors to identify individual therapeutic targets. *Nat. Commun.* **12**, (2021).
4. Campolungo, D., Salomé, M., Biferali, B., Tascini, A. S. & Gabellini, D. DUX4-r exerts a neomorphic activity that depends on GTF2I in acute lymphoblastic leukemia. *Sci. Adv.* **9**, adi3771 (2023).
5. Runfola, V. *et al.* MATR3 is an endogenous inhibitor of DUX4 in FSHD muscular dystrophy. *Cell Rep.* **42**, 113120 (2023).
6. Tsai, J. M., Nowak, R. P., Ebert, B. L. & Fischer, E. S. Targeted protein degradation: from mechanisms to clinic. *Nat. Rev. Mol. Cell Biol.* (2024) doi:10.1038/s41580-024-00729-9.