Emerging role of hydrogen sulfide-microRNA crosstalk in cardiovascular diseases

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Hackfort BT, Mishra PK. Emerging role of hydrogen sulfide-microRNA crosstalk in cardiovascular diseases. Am J Physiol Heart Circ Physiol 310: H802–H812, 2016. First published January 20, 2016; doi:10.1152/ajpheart.00660.2015.—Despite an obnoxious smell and toxicity at a high dose, hydrogen sulfide (H2S) is emerging as a cardioprotective gasotransmitter. H2S mitigates pathological cardiac remodeling by regulating several cellular processes including fibrosis, hypertrophy, apoptosis, and inflammation. These encouraging findings in rodents led to initiation of a clinical trial using a H2S donor in heart failure patients. However, the underlying molecular mechanisms by which H2S mitigates cardiac remodeling are not completely understood. Empirical evidence suggest that H2S may regulate signaling pathways either by directly influencing a gene in the cascade or interacting with nitric oxide (another cardioprotective gasotransmitter) or both. Recent studies revealed that H2S may ameliorate cardiac dysfunction by up- or downregulating specific microRNAs. MicroRNAs are noncoding, conserved, regulatory RNAs that modulate gene expression mostly by translational inhibition and are emerging as a therapeutic target for cardiovascular disease (CVD). Few microRNAs also regulate H2S biosynthesis. The inter-regulation of microRNAs and H2S opens a new avenue for exploring the H2S-microRNA crosstalk in CVD. This review embodies regulatory mechanisms that maintain the physiological level of H2S, exogenous H2S donors used for increasing the tissue levels of H2S, H2S-mediated regulation of CVD, H2S-microRNAs crosstalk in relation to the pathophysiology of heart disease, clinical trials on H2S, and future perspectives for H2S as a therapeutic agent for heart failure.

Heart failure; inflammation; apoptosis; fibrosis; clinical trial; microRNAs

HYDROGEN SULFIDE (H2S) was first discovered in 1777 as a colorless gas with a strong “rotten egg” odor. It was thought to be a toxic substance found in sewer gas, swamp gas, and volcanic discharge. Since the discovery that H2S reacts to oxyhemoglobin similar to nitric oxide (NO) and carbon monoxide (17), a number of studies have been carried out to understand the biological functions of H2S. The obnoxious odor and toxicity discouraged the attention of researchers until it was revealed that H2S may have a possible role as an endogenous neuromodulator (1). Subsequently, a plethora of investigations were performed on potential roles of H2S in cardiovascular disease (CVD), which revealed that physiological levels of H2S have a pivotal role in maintaining cardiac function, and an exogenous supply of H2S has the potential to ameliorate heart failure in rodents. Empirical studies elucidated several potential mechanisms of H2S-mediated cardioprotection in different models of heart failure (21, 117, 123, 128, 150). However, regulation of H2S functions during heart failure is not completely understood. Recently, it was demonstrated that miRNA regulates endogenous H2S production (129, 148). MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are noncoding, regulatory RNAs that modulate gene expression mostly by translational repression (10). Interestingly, H2S also regulates miRNA transcription. However, the crosstalk between H2S and miRNAs, and its impact on CVD, is poorly understood. Considering differential expression of miRNAs in CVD (27, 133), H2S-miRNA crosstalk may have a crucial role in pathophysiology of heart failure. Therefore, H2S-miRNA crosstalk is important for understanding H2S-mediated cardioprotection. The goal of this review is to summarize the advancements made in H2S-mediated cardioprotection, highlight the inter-regulation of miRNAs and H2S, and emphasize potential future avenues of H2S-miRNA crosstalk in CVD, which will provide an impetus for developing H2S-based therapeutics for heart disease.

Regulation of H2S in vivo. H2S is toxic at high levels; therefore, the production and degradation of H2S must be tightly regulated in our body to maintain its physiological level. Multiple synthesis and degradation pathways provide a complex interdependence, which could be crucial for restoring the physiological H2S level (Figs. 1 and 2). Understanding these pathways is indispensable for developing H2S-based therapeutics.

H2S biosynthesis. H2S is predominately and primarily produced by three enzymatic pathways, which include cystathionine β-synthase (CBS), cystathionine γ-lyase (CSE), and the coupling of cysteine aminotransferase (CAT) and 3-mercaptopyruvate sulfur transferase (3-MST). CBS, CSE, and CAT are pyridoxal 5-phosphate-dependent enzymes. CBS catalyzes the β-replacement of thiosulfides such as homocysteine to cysteine, whereas CSE catalyzes the α- and γ-replacement of...
cysteine to H$_2$S. CAT deaminates cysteine to mercaptopyruvate, which is followed by transulfuration catalyzed by the zinc-dependent enzyme 3-MST that results in biosynthesis of H$_2$S. These pathways are elaborated in several excellent review articles (4, 8, 12, 20, 69, 75, 111, 113, 150) and summarized in Fig. 1. Although CBS and CSE are localized in the cytoplasm, 3-MST is localized mainly in mitochondria but has also been reported in the cytoplasm of vascular endothelial cells (106, 113).

Fig. 1. Biosynthesis of hydrogen sulfide (H$_2$S). H$_2$S production is catalyzed by cystathionine $\beta$ synthase (CBS), cystathionine gamma lyase (CSE), and the coupling of cysteine aminotransferase (CAT) and 3-mercaptopyruvate sulfur transferase (3-MST). CBS and CSE are involved in transsulfuration of homocysteine, which ultimately generates H$_2$S. Both enzymes can also convert homocysteine into homolanthionine and H$_2$S, and cysteine into lanthionine and H$_2$S. CSE converts homocysteine, cystathionine, and cysteine into H$_2$S and different by-products. 3-MST and CAT are mostly involved in converting 3-mercaptopyruvate into H$_2$S in mitochondria. The main pathway of H$_2$S generation is denoted by large print, whereas additional substrates and products by small print.

Fig. 2. Cellular catabolism of H$_2$S. In mitochondria, sulfide quinone oxidoreductase (SQR) oxidizes H$_2$S to glutathione persulfide (GSSH) with GSH as the electron acceptor or directly to thiosulfate (SO$_3^{2-}$) using co-enzyme Q (Co-Q) as the electron acceptor. The enzymes SOD, sulfur transferase (ST), and sulfite oxidase (SO) further oxidize GSSH to thiosulfate or sulfate, which is excreted via the kidneys. Expiration of H$_2$S through exhaled air and scavenging by methemoglobin to sulfhemoglobin are alternative methods of H$_2$S catabolism.
H2S is predicted to exist as 14% free H2S gas, 86% HS- options for future H2S supplementation. In fact, SG1002 succ-AP39 (138), and S-propargyl-cysteine (58, 149) are potential sulfide donors such as GYY4137 (88), SG1002 (9, 78, 118), and vasorelaxant properties (14, 94, 116, 132). Slow release trace levels of S2- in various species, and concentrations (61, 96, 142, 153).

Catabolism of H2S. High levels of H2S are toxic. H2S levels are decreased in our body by several catabolic pathways. H2S is oxidized to thiosulfate and sulfate in the mitochondria of most mammalian tissues; however, the underlying molecular mechanisms and pathways are poorly understood (11, 69). Sulfide quinone oxidoreductase, which is located on the inner mitochondrial membrane, oxidizes H2S to glutathione persulfide using GSH as the sulfide acceptor (55, 90). Persulfide dioxygenase or rhodanese catalyze the oxidation of glutathione persulfide to thiosulfate and/or sulfate, which is further oxidized to sulfate by sulfite oxidase (90). Conversely, Jackson et al. (63) have shown sulfide quinone oxidoreductase catalyzes the oxidation of H2S directly to thiosulfate using co-enzyme Q as the electron acceptor and sulfite as the acceptor of sulfate sulfur. Although the intermediate pathways involved in the oxidation of H2S are not completely understood, sulfate is the primary by-product of sulfide catabolism, which may be excreted in the urine and feces (63, 69, 90). An additional pathway for excretion of H2S may include expiration by the lungs (61, 142). H2S may be scavenged by disulfide-containing molecules and red blood cells, where H2S binds to methemoglobin forming sulfhemoglobin, which is oxidized to thiosulfate (147). The multiple pathways for reducing H2S levels are presented in Fig. 2.

Physiological level of H2S. Physiological levels of H2S range between 15 nM to 300 μM in vivo (62, 84, 85, 96, 110, 140, 153, 154). The wide range of H2S levels results from variable detection methods and the tissues analyzed [see review by Liu et al.(96)]. In in vivo conditions (37°C, pH ~7.4), H2S is predicted to exist as 14% free H2S gas, 86% HS-, and trace levels of S2- (96, 153). Limitations to measuring H2S include 1) free H2S has a short half-life, ranging from 12 to 300 s in various species, and 2) detection methods may release bound sulfur from proteins, resulting in increased H2S concentrations (61, 96, 142, 153).

Exogenous sulfur donors. Sodium hydrogen sulfide (NaHS) and sodium sulfide (Na2S) are the two most commonly used sources of H2S. They are water soluble and cost efficient. However, a limitation of NaHS and Na2S is that H2S is a volatile substance resulting in evaporation from drinking water. Furthermore, they give more of a bolus effect of H2S instead of a slow, steady release (19). Diallyl disulfide and diallyl trisulfide (DATS) are organic sulfur compounds found in members of the Allium species (garlic, onions, chives, etc.) that act as H2S donors and have antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and vasorelaxant properties (14, 94, 116, 132). Slow release sulfide donors such as GYY4137 (88), SG1002 (9, 78, 118), AP39 (138), and S-propargyl-cysteine (58, 149) are potential options for future H2S supplementation. In fact, SG1002 successfully completed Phase I clinical trial and is beginning Phase II clinical trial for increasing plasma H2S levels and mitigating heart failure (clinicaltrials.gov; No. NCT01989208 and No. NCT02278276) (118). Because of the volatile nature and short half-life of H2S, a continuous, low-level H2S release may provide an extended therapeutic potential than a single bolus using high levels as used in many NaHS and Na2S studies (19).

CVD and H2S. CVD refers to any disease that leads to dysfunction in the heart and vasculature. Although many therapeutic options are available to treat CVD, the World Health Organization reports CVD remains the leading cause of death globally for both men and women, resulting in 17.5 million deaths in 2012 (155). Further research and better treatment options are necessary to reduce the incidence and burden of CVD. Evidence is mounting that H2S is important in reducing the symptoms associated with CVD. H2S reduces hypertension (2, 3), improves glucose uptake and metabolism (9, 89), protects against ischemia-reperfusion (I/R) injury (70, 81, 141, 161), and decreases cardiac hypertrophy (9, 73, 93, 97). Further evidence shows that free H2S levels are reduced in patients with CVD (64, 79, 118), suggesting H2S supplementation may be a potential therapy for mitigating CVD. However, the underlying molecular mechanisms for H2S-mediated improve-ment in cardiac function, or amelioration of cardiac dysfunction in CVD, are not completely understood.

Diabetic cardiomyopathy is mitigated by H2S. Diabetes is among the top 10 causes of death in the United States (25a). One of the many complications of this debilitating disease is myocardial dysfunction (95, 152). Diabetes increases the risk of heart failure two- to fourfold as compared with age- and sex-matched nondiabetics (25, 100). Diabetes may effect both the heart and the vasculature or it may lead to left ventricular heart failure independent of coronary artery disease, a condition known as diabetic cardiomyopathy (26, 95). Diabetic cardiomyopathy is the end result of chronic exposure to a hyperglycemic environment. The pathophysiology includes cardiac dysfunction due to increased fibrosis and left ventricular hypertrophy (48). High glucose induces cardiovascular dysfunction by activating the PKC/diacylglycerol pathway, calcium dysregulation, inducing endoplasmic reticulum stress, and deregulating autophagy and apoptosis, which have been shown to be mitigated by H2S supplementation (9, 80, 89, 156, 164). Furthermore, plasma H2S levels are decreased in type 2 diabetic patients, high-fat diet–treated mice (type 2 diabetic patients), and streptozotocin-treated rats (9, 64, 66). The decrease in H2S levels in diabetics and the ability of exogenous H2S treatment to ameliorate pathological conditions induced by type 1 and type 2 diabetes suggest that H2S may be a potential novel treatment option for mitigating cardiomyopathy in diabetics.

H2S mitigates I/R injury. Ischemia is the restriction of blood to tissues leading to a decrease in oxygen and glucose. Reperfusion injury occurs when blood flow returns to an area following ischemia and can further exacerbate cell damage (23, 146). I/R injury leads to increased cardiomyocyte apoptosis (81). H2S reduces reactive oxygen species (ROS) associated with I/R injury as well as decreases in cardiomyocyte apoptosis during ischemia (36, 56, 70, 81, 135, 141, 161) (Table 1). A major complication following I/R injury is the occurrence of cardiac arrhythmias (37). H2S released by α-lipoic acid treatment activates the potassium ATP-sensitive channels (KATP channels) (37, 67) and decreases post I/R arrhythmias (37). It was further demonstrated that lower plasma H2S levels are associated with greater arrhythmia scores following I/R injury in Wistar rats (137). NaHS treatment inhibited the L-type Ca2+...
channels, activated the K_{ATP} channels, and increased the action potential duration in these rats, all of which may result in decreased arrhythmias (137). During myocardial I/R injury, delivery of H\textsubscript{2}S at the time of reperfusion reduces infarct size and preserves left ventricular function. Moreover, overexpression of cardiac CSE mitigates myocardial I/R injury (39). H\textsubscript{2}S may protect the heart from I/R injury by increasing NO bioavailability and signaling (76). These findings suggest that H\textsubscript{2}S treatment may provide protective benefits following I/R injury by decreasing ROS and by mitigating cardiac arrhythmia.

**H\textsubscript{2}S is hypotensive.** Hypertension (high blood pressure) is defined as having a systolic blood pressure >140 mm mercury (mmHg) or a diastolic pressure >90 mmHg (107a, 109). Hypertension is a major medical concern affecting ~30% of the United States population (109). Chronic high blood pressure creates excessive stress on the vasculature, leading to cardiac hypertrophy over time. An initial response to elevated blood pressure is activation of the renin angiotensin aldosterone system (RAAS) (124, 167). However, chronic activation of the RAAS leads to heart failure (98, 167). H\textsubscript{2}S inhibits activation of the RAAS in Dahl rats fed with a high-salt diet, resulting in vasodilation and increasing vascular tone through multiple mechanisms (77, 125). H\textsubscript{2}S also induces vasorelaxation by opening K_{ATP} channels (136, 162) and increasing NO production (38). Contrary to vasorelaxation, Na\textsubscript{2}S and NaHS increased intracavernoosal pressure by opening potassium channels in penile tissue (68), suggesting that H\textsubscript{2}S may cause vasoconstriction in other tissues. Therefore, the role of H\textsubscript{2}S for vasorelaxation or vasoconstriction depends on the different conditions and tissues. Nevertheless, H\textsubscript{2}S has multiple mechanisms for reducing hypertension, suggesting a possible therapeutic role for H\textsubscript{2}S supplementation in treating hypertension.

**Molecular mechanisms of H\textsubscript{2}S-mediated cardioprotection.** The cardioprotective effects of H\textsubscript{2}S are related to several important signaling and regulatory pathways including antioxidant, anti-apoptotic, anti-fibrotic, and anti-inflammatory regulation (Fig. 3).

**Antioxidant effects of H\textsubscript{2}S.** ROS refer to small reactive molecules such as superoxide (O\textsubscript{2}·−), hydrogen peroxide (H\textsubscript{2}O\textsubscript{2}), hydroxyl (OH·), and hypochlorite (OCl·), which react readily with other cellular molecules (29, 51). ROS are important signaling and regulatory pathways including antioxidant, anti-apoptotic, antifibrotic, and anti-inflammatory regulation (Fig. 3).

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Table 1. Disease models and signaling mechanisms showing the cardioprotective role of H\textsubscript{2}S in cardiovascular diseases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease and Role of H\textsubscript{2}S</th>
<th>Pathways Regulated by H\textsubscript{2}S</th>
<th>Reference (No.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ischemia-reperfusion</td>
<td>Anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>miR-1, Bcl-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-inflammatory and anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>inflammatory and anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>CD11b-GFP cells, Bcl-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-inflammatory</td>
<td>miR-21, Inflammase induction</td>
<td>Tolo et al. (141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>Erk1/2 signaling BCl-3X, Bcl-2</td>
<td>Lambert et al. (81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>Na+/H+ exchanger-1, pH</td>
<td>Hu et al. (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoke-induced cardiomyopathy</td>
<td>Anti-inflammatory, anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>p38, JNK, caspase 3, Bcl-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-inflammatory</td>
<td>PI3K/Akt, Nrf2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hyperglycemia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antioxidant</td>
<td>p38-MAPK, ERK1/2</td>
<td>Liang et al. (89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>p-AMPK, Mammalian target of rapamycin</td>
<td>Xu et al. (156)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-apoptosis Antioxidant</td>
<td>p-JNK, p-cJun, NF-\textsubscript{kB}, ROS</td>
<td>Wei et al. (151)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antioxidant, anti-apoptosis, antifibrosis</td>
<td>Estrogen receptor ROS, caspase-12, JNK,</td>
<td>Kuo et al. (80)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antioxidant, anti-apoptosis</td>
<td>ROS, caspase-3, PI3K/Akt, Nrf2</td>
<td>Barr et al. (9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>Vasorelaxation</td>
<td>K_{ATP} channels, Endothelin-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasoconstriction</td>
<td>Nitric oxide</td>
<td>Eberhardt et al. (38)</td>
</tr>
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GLUT, glucose transporter; H\textsubscript{2}S, hydrogen sulfide; PI3K, phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase; ROS, reactive oxygen species.
the nuclear localization of Nrf2 and protects the ischemic heart from injury (21). These studies suggest that H2S regulates several signaling molecules to suppress oxidants in the heart (Fig. 3).

H2S promotes cell survival. Apoptosis or “programmed cell death” can be a protective mechanism at physiological levels for removing damaged cells. However, in pathological conditions, apoptosis is deregulated, which causes increased cell death and tissue damage. As previously mentioned, ROS induces apoptosis and ROS can be mitigated by the antioxidant properties of H2S (see H2S mitigates I/R injury). In addition, H2S inhibits apoptosis by suppressing autophagy (65, 163). Autophagy is lysosome-mediated degradation and recycling of damaged and/or unnecessary cellular components (84). NaHS treatment suppresses cigarette smoke-induced upregulation of the autophagy inducers: Beclin-1, LC3II, and AMPK (163). H2S not only downregulates autophagy but it also induces PI3K and GSK3β. PI3K and GSK3β upregulate Nrf2 for cardioprotection (65, 143, 165). In an in vivo I/R model, NaHS (100 μM) increased phosphorylated mTOR complex 2, resulting in inactivation of cell death initiator Bim (Bcl-2 interacting mediator of cell death) for cell survival (166). Conversely, GYY4137 (100 μM) increases phosphorylated AMPK and decreases mTOR, which prevented high glucose-induced cardiac hypertrophy (151).

Members of the MAPK family, p38-MAPK and ERK1/2, are upregulated in response to cellular stress, leading to cardiomyocyte apoptosis (50, 156). p38-MAPK is induced in several disease conditions including hyperglycemia, I/R injury, and hypoxia (16, 49, 50, 134, 156). NaHS (400 μM) inhibits the activation of p38-MAPK in response to the antitumor drug doxorubicin, resulting in decreased apoptosis (50). Furthermore, pretreatment of H9c2 cardiomyocytes with NaHS (400 μM) reduces the cytotoxicity associated with hyperglycemia by inhibiting p38-MAPK and ERK1/2 (156).

These findings demonstrate that H2S provides cardioprotection by promoting cell survival via suppressing autophagy and inhibiting multiple proteins involved in apoptosis signaling (Fig. 3).

H2S mitigates pathological cardiac remodeling by inhibiting fibrosis and hypertrophy. Cardiac fibrosis results from the proliferation of myofibroblasts, leading to increased extracellular matrix deposition in the muscle (34, 47). Excessive fibrosis decreases contractility and cardiac output and is often associated with cardiomyopathy. NaHS (100 μM) reduces fibroblast proliferation in human atrial fibroblast cells (130). Furthermore, it decreases NADPH oxidase 4, a stimulator of cardiac fibrosis (33), resulting in decreased levels of the profibrotic markers α-smooth muscle actin and connective tissue growth factor (114). Oral supplementation of SG1002 (20 mg·kg⁻¹·day⁻¹) reduces fibrosis in a transverse aortic constriction model as assessed by Masson Trichrome and Picrosirius Red staining (78). These findings suggest that H2S inhibits fibrosis (Fig. 3), and H2S supplementation has a therapeutic potential for decreasing cardiac fibrosis.

Cardiomyocyte hypertrophy occurs in response to chronic increases in pressure or stress. NaHS (100 μM) prevents phenylephrine- and isoproterenol-induced hypertrophy in cultured cardiomyocytes and in rat hearts. Furthermore, it downregulates mitochondrial ROS production, apoptosis, and improves glucose uptake through upregulation of the glucose transporters Glut-4 and Glut-1 (89, 97). The H2S donor SG1002 prevents cardiac hypertrophy and cardiac dysfunction by reducing endoplasmic reticulum stress in high-fat diet–fed mice (9). Our laboratory has demonstrated that H2S treatment mitigates cardiac hypertrophy by upregulating miR-133a (73), an antihypertrophy (24, 41) and antifibrosis (28, 101) microRNA. To increase the levels of miR-133a, H2S activates myosin enhancer factor-2c (MEF2C), a transcription factor of miR-133a, by releasing MEF2C from MEF2C-HDAC1 complex (inactivated state) (73). These studies suggest that H2S plays a crucial role in inhibiting cardiac hypertrophy (Fig. 3).

Anti-inflammatory role of H2S. H2S treatments reduce inflammation by multiple mechanisms. NaHS and Na2S (100

Fig. 3. Cardioprotective effects of H2S. The pathways involved in H2S cardioprotection and the signaling mechanisms that have been shown to be induced (↑) or downregulated/blacked (↓) by H2S are indicated. The signaling molecules involved in each pathway and their references are included. CTGF, connective tissue growth factor; NOX, NADPH oxidase; SMA, smooth muscle actin; NO, nitric oxide; ROS, reactive oxygen species; ER, endoplasmic reticulum.
miR-1 and miR-21, which is a prohypertrophic miRNA but protects the heart during late-stage heart failure with H2S supplementation will provide insight on H2S-mediated cardioprotection in the failing heart.

MiR-1 is a bicistronic transcript with miR-133a and is upregulated in response to I/R stress (70). I/R-induced apoptosis is mediated through upregulation of miR-1 (70). MiR-1 is pro-apoptotic and directly suppresses anti-apoptotic proteins including Bcl-2 (70, 139), heat shock protein 60 (127), and heat shock protein 70 (138).

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miR-21 in primary cardiomyocytes and heart tissue. However, levels translate into significant benefits in treating or preventing shock protein 70 (159). The preconditioning of myocardial I/R with H2S decreases miR-1-mediated apoptosis (70). Dietary garlic has a cardioprotective effect, which is mediated through generation of H2S in cardiomyocytes and endothelial cells (45, 74). DATS releases H2S (120) and downregulates anti-neovascu-

logic miR-221 in a dose-dependent manner (31). Because miR-

221 is upregulated in patients with coronary artery disease, garlic or H2S supplementation could be a potential therapeutic strategy for reducing the levels of miR-221 to mitigate the effects of coronary artery disease. The above studies show that H2S is involved in regulating miRNAs (Fig. 4).

**H2S-miRNA crosstalk.** The interaction of H2S with miRNA is recently uncovered and is an emerging area of investigation. An example of H2S-miRNA crosstalk is that H2S downregulates miR-21 to mitigate phenylephrine-induced cardiomyocyte hypertrophy (93), and miR-21 targets SP1 to decrease CSE transcription and H2S production (157). Furthermore, increased miR-21 levels and decreased CSE levels are found in placental tissue from high risk pregnancy as compared with normal pregnancy, suggesting that low H2S level may induce miR-21 and contribute to increased pregnancy complications (32). Perfusion of placental extracts with NaHS improves vasodilation; however, it is unclear whether NaHS perfusion alters miR-21 levels. Although these studies demonstrate that miR-21 may have a negative impact as it reduces H2S levels, several studies show the beneficial effects of miR-21 in cardiac cells, including inhibiting apoptosis (30, 121), protecting cardiomyocytes from H2O2 (30) and I/R damage by suppressing phosphatase and tensin homolog (158). Na2S (10 μM) induces miR-21 in primary cardiomyocytes and heart tissue. However, it had no effect on miR-21 knockout mice even though it reduces infract size and attenuates inflammation in response to I/R injury (141). These findings suggest that H2S-miRNA crosstalk may vary in a context-dependent manner and may have different roles in different disease conditions (Fig. 4). Therefore, more research using different models of heart failure is required to elucidate H2S-miRNA crosstalk in CVD.

**Potential new areas for investigation on H2S-miRNA crosstalk.** H2S and miRNA are relatively new research areas in CVD, and there is a lot of potential inter-regulation between H2S and miRNAs. Although miR-21, miR-22, and miR-30 are demonstrated to modulate CSE gene expression (Fig. 4), no miRNAs are reported that control CBS or 3-MST expression, suggesting a gap in knowledge. There are ample opportunities for investigations on potential miRNAs regulating genes involved in H2S biosynthesis. Furthermore, many miRNAs have been shown to regulate CVD, yet the effect of H2S on only a few miRNAs is reported. This provides an avenue to explore the effect of H2S on crucial miRNAs involved in the regulation of heart failure. For example, miR-24 is upregulated following MI, and it directly inhibits endothelial NO synthase (102). H2S provides cardioprotective effects through upregulating endothelial NO synthase (76, 78), yet it is unclear whether H2S suppresses miR-24. Interestingly, H2S may regulate anti-apoptotic Bcl-2 by either directly upregulating it or by suppressing miR-1, an inhibitor of Bcl-2. Similarly, H2S may regulate Akt directly or by regulating miR-21 (Fig. 4). Future studies in these areas will elucidate the complex regulatory network of H2S-miRNA crosstalk in CVD.

**H2S involved in clinical trials.** Clinical trials with SG1002 will be exciting to follow and to see if the increase in H2S levels translate into significant benefits in treating or preventing heart failure. Results from the initial clinical trial with SG1002 have recently been reported, demonstrating that SG1002 increases H2S and nitrite levels with few, mild adverse events (118). Furthermore, sulfur donors are being attached to current drug treatments, such as naproxen, improving their anti-inflammatory effectiveness and decreasing gastrointestinal and cardiovascular side effects (13, 19, 35, 42, 105). H2S has beneficial effects in other organs including neurons, kidney, pancreas, and gastrointestinal and in arthritis (15, 43). This suggests organ-specific delivery systems for H2S may need to be developed to localize therapeutic effects. As H2S levels are decreased in diabetics and MI patients, H2S may be a useful biomarker for CVD. A clinical trial has been recently completed where H2S was measured as a biomarker for peripheral artery disease (clinicaltrials.gov; No. NCT01407172). Another clinical trial is recruiting to measure H2S levels in women with CVD (clinicaltrials.gov; No. NCT02180074).

**Future directions.** Many mechanisms of H2S signaling have been elucidated; however, there are still a lot of unknowns on how H2S levels influence cardiovascular health. As detection methods improve for more accurate measurements of H2S and for measuring real-time H2S generation, we will get a better understanding of how cells maintain H2S balance. H2S mitigates many pathologies associated with CVD, and the therapeutic benefits of H2S are currently being explored in other organ systems. For example, H2S levels are decreased in the neurodegenerative disorders Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases (40, 57), and H2S treatments have mitigated renal dysfunction by many of the same pathways as involved in cardiomyopathy (115).

The inter-regulation of H2S and miRNAs suggests H2S may have a greater role in maintaining cellular homeostasis than previously thought. For example, H2S may directly regulate Bcl-2 and Akt, or it may control these genes by regulating miR-1 and miR-21, respectively. Besides, H2S may have a synergistic effect using direct regulation and indirect regulation via miRNAs (Fig. 4). More mechanistic studies are required to elucidate the growing role of H2S on miRNA regulation and its potential to regulate epigenetic modifications. MiRNAs regulate pathological remodeling in the heart and may be important treatment options for mitigating CVD (103). Two miRNAs or anti-miRNA therapies are undergoing clinical trial for non-CVD including anti-miR-122 (Miravirsen) for treatment of Hepatitis C (clinicaltrials.gov; No. NCT01200420) (112) and a miR-34 mimic for the treatment of primary liver cancer and other solid tumors (clinicaltrials.gov; No. NCT01829971). The role of these miRNAs on H2S or role of H2S in the regulation of miRNAs is awaiting.

Long noncoding RNAs (lncRNAs), RNAs with >200 nucleotides, are emerging as regulators of genes, miRNAs, and proteins involved in CVD (5, 60, 71, 119). Transcriptome analyses show distinct patterns of lncRNA profiles in heart failure conditions (82, 86), yet lncRNA-mediated regulation of H2S or any effect of H2S on lncRNAs is an open area for investigation. Future studies exploring the crosstalk among lncRNAs, miRNAs, and H2S may elucidate novel regulatory mechanisms for CVD and provide new strategies for treatment of heart failure.

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