Journal of Research in
Orthopedic Science
August 2025. Volume 12. Number 3

Letter to Editor

The Future of Orthopedics is Immuno-regenerative: Rethinking Inflammation as a Therapeutic Target

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Citation Mokhtari Kh. The Future of Orthopedics is Immuno-regenerative: Rethinking Inflammation as a Therapeutic Target. Journal of Research in Orthopedic Science. 2025; 12(3):107-108. http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/JROSJ.12.3.2718.1

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Introduction

For decades, inflammation in orthopedics has been regarded as an adversary—an undesirable consequence of trauma, surgery, or degeneration. Postoperative swelling, cytokine release, synovitis, and osteolysis have traditionally been viewed as pathological processes to suppress. Yet emerging evidence from osteoimmunology suggests a more nuanced reality: inflammation is not merely a complication of musculoskeletal injury; it is a central regulator of tissue repair and regeneration.

The time has come to reconsider inflammation not solely as a target for suppression, but as a biological process to be intelligently modulated.

Fracture healing provides a clear illustration. The initial inflammatory phase, characterized by hematoma formation and recruitment of immune cells, is not incidental; it is essential. Macrophages, neutrophils, and T cells coordinate the transition from debris clearance to callus formation. Experimental models have repeatedly shown that excessive suppression of early inflammatory signaling may impair osteogenesis. Conversely, prolonged or dysregulated inflammation contributes to delayed union or nonunion [1]. Thus, the problem is not inflammation per se, but imbalance.

This concept extends beyond fracture healing. In osteoarthritis, synovial inflammation is intricately linked with cartilage degradation and subchondral bone remodeling. Pro-inflammatory cytokines, such as interleukin-1 beta (IL-1β) and tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNFα) activate catabolic pathways within chondrocytes, while simultaneously altering osteoblast–osteoclast coupling [2]. However, inflammation in osteoarthritis is not uniform. Low-grade, chronic inflammatory states differ biologically from acute inflammatory cascades following injury. Treating both scenarios with identical anti-inflammatory strategies oversimplifies a biologically complex condition.

Periprosthetic osteolysis further exemplifies the immunobiological interface. Wear particles from implants activate macrophages and trigger cytokine-mediated osteoclastogenesis [3]. Here again, the issue is not merely mechanical wear but immune activation. Future implant design may need to consider immunocompatibility as seriously as mechanical durability.

These insights challenge a long-standing paradigm in orthopedic practice: that better outcomes are achieved by broadly suppressing inflammation. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, corticosteroids, and generalized cytokine blockade remain widely used. Yet indiscriminate suppression risks interfering with regenerative

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signaling pathways, such as bone morphogenetic protein (BMP) and wingless-related integration site (WNT), both of which intersect with inflammatory mediators.

The emerging field of immuno-regenerative orthopedics proposes a different strategy. Rather than eliminating inflammatory signaling, we should aim to guide its trajectory. Macrophage polarization offers a compelling example. The transition from pro-inflammatory M1 phenotypes to pro-repair M2 phenotypes appears critical for successful tissue regeneration. Biomaterials, scaffolds, and biologic agents capable of directing this polarization shift may enhance healing without compromising early defense mechanisms [4].

Similarly, mesenchymal stromal cells (MSCs) may exert therapeutic effects less through direct differentiation and more through immunomodulation. Their secretome—particularly extracellular vesicles—can attenuate excessive inflammation while promoting angiogenesis and matrix synthesis. This dual action suggests that future biologic therapies should be evaluated not only for regenerative capacity but also for immune-regulatory precision [5].

Importantly, mechanobiology and immunobiology are not separate domains. Mechanical loading influences cytokine expression, and inflammatory states alter mechanotransduction pathways. The integration of these systems reinforces the need for interdisciplinary thinking. Orthopedic interventions—whether surgical fixation, osteotomy, or arthroplasty—inevitably alter the biological microenvironment. Understanding these effects at a molecular level may explain variability in patient outcomes that cannot be accounted for by radiographic alignment alone.

Personalized orthopedics may ultimately depend on inflammatory phenotyping. Not all patients with osteoarthritis share the same synovial cytokine profile. Not all fractures exhibit identical immune responses. Stratifying patients based on biological markers rather than solely on structural assessment could refine therapeutic decisions and reduce overtreatment.

This paradigm shift carries implications for research and publication standards. Studies evaluating biologic therapies must move beyond descriptive outcomes and incorporate mechanistic endpoints. Quantifying immune modulation, cytokine dynamics, and cellular phenotype transitions should become integral to clinical investigation. Editorial leadership in orthopedic journals plays a critical role in elevating methodological rigor within this rapidly expanding field.

Orthopedics stands at a conceptual crossroads. We can continue to view inflammation as an obstacle to be suppressed, or we can embrace its role as a central architect of musculoskeletal regeneration. The latter approach demands deeper biological literacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cautious innovation. Yet it also offers the possibility of transforming how we treat fractures, degenerative joint disease, implant complications, and even sports injuries.

The future of orthopedics may not lie solely in stronger implants or more precise alignment techniques. It may lie in learning how to orchestrate the immune response with the same precision that we currently apply to mechanical correction.

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