Characterization of wild-type and STAT3 signaling-suppressed mesenchymal stem cells obtained from hemovac blood concentrates

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Background: Venous blood drained from the knee joint after total knee arthroplasty (TKA) using a hemovac line is a potential source of bone marrow components, including stem cells, from the cutting surface of cancellous bones of the knee joint. However, the function of mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs) in patients with osteoarthritis (OA-MSCs) can be disrupted by inflammation of the joint. Further, to override the invasive nature of the currently used methods to obtain stem cells, their functional modification is necessary for therapeutic applications.

Methods: The effects of signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (STAT3) signaling suppression on MSCs (iSTAT3-MSCs) were evaluated by comparative analyses of the characteristics of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs from 20 patients who underwent TKA.

Results: OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were adherent, with fibroblast-like appearance and high rates of expression of MSC-specific markers, including CD73, CD90, and CD105 (>90%). Both OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were able to differentiate into osteogenic, adipogenic, and chondrogenic cells; however, iSTAT3-MSCs showed higher levels of osteogenic and chondrogenic differentiation markers than OA-MSCs. Additionally, the anti-inflammatory and chondroprotective cytokine levels were higher in iSTAT3-MSCs than in OA-MSCs.

Conclusions: These findings indicate that iSTAT3-MSCs after TKA are potentially effective for stem cell therapy in the context of bone and cartilage disorders.

Keywords: Total knee arthroplasty (TKA); hemovac; osteoarthritis (OA); signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (STAT3); stem cell therapy

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Introduction

Total knee arthroplasty (TKA) is the gold standard treatment for end-stage osteoarthritis (OA); a large number of patients undergo this procedure every year (1-6). A large amount of venous blood in the knee joint after TKA surgery can cause pain, swelling, and delayed recovery (7-11). A hemovac line can be inserted into the joint to drain the blood and reduce joint pressure (12-14). Bone marrow
components from the cutting surface of cancellous bones of the distal femur and proximal tibia can be found in hemovac blood (HVB) (e.g., stromal cells, including stem cells) (15,16). As HVB is mostly venous blood, stromal components from the bone marrow must be isolated from HVB concentrates (HVBCs) by centrifugation (17). Importantly, stem cells isolated from HVB are multipotent, with the ability to differentiate into osteogenic, adipogenic, and chondrogenic cells (17).

However, patients who undergo TKA are typically elderly and/or have inflammatory joint conditions (18,19). Consequently, their stem cells express inflammatory signals (20,21). Therefore, to use HVB from such patients for stem cell therapy, it is necessary to modify MSCs aiming to reduce the expression of inflammatory factors.

We hypothesized that the inhibition of signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (STAT3) in MSCs derived from HVB collected from patients subjected to TKA would improve their functions in the context of OA. Therefore, in this study, to improve the therapeutic potential of MSCs, we treated OA-MSCs with STA21, a STAT3 inhibitor. The anti-inflammatory effects, marker expression, and the differentiation ability of MSCs (wild type vs. STA21-treated) were then evaluated in vitro. We present the following article in accordance with the MDAR reporting checklist (available at https://dx.doi.org/10.21037/atm-21-791).

Methods

Patients and ethical statement

HVB was collected from 20 patients who underwent TKA. The average age of the patients was 51.2 years [range, 38–66 years; standard deviation (SD), 7.52]. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (as revised in 2013) and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Uijeongbu St. Mary’s Hospital, Seoul, Korea (UC18DESI0056). Informed consent was provided by all patients prior to sample collection.

Isolation and culture of OA-MSCs from HVBCs

Just before wound closure, a hemovac line was inserted through the superolateral aspect of the patella and placed in the lateral gutter of the knee joint. The line was connected to the hemovac and an average of 300 mL blood was collected within 3 h after surgery.

HVB (40 mL), including 4 mL of ACD solution, was aseptically aspirated from the hemovac after TKA. The BMC Kit (Revmed, Seongnam, Korea) was used to concentrate the blood aspirate via two cycles of centrifugation (Figure 1). HVBCs and PBS (Gibco Invitrogen, Grand Island, NY, USA) were then mixed at a 1:2 ratio. The mixture was carefully loaded on the top of Histopaque solution (1.077 g/mL; Sigma Chemical co., St. Louis, MO, USA). Mononuclear cells were separated by density gradient centrifugation (400 ×g, 25 min, room temperature), washed three times with PBS, and filtered using a 70-µm cell strainer (Becton Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA). Resuspended cells were incubated at 37 °C with 5% CO2 in basal medium (αMEM containing 10% FBS, 100 units/mL penicillin, and 100 µg/mL streptomycin). The medium was changed at 3-day intervals and non-adherent cells were removed by gently pipetting.
The confluent cells were trypsinized (0.25% trypsin EDTA), divided into several culture flasks, expanded by passaging (2–3 passages), and used for experiments as OA-MSCs.

**Inhibition of STAT3 signaling in MSCs (iSTAT3-MSCs)**

iSTAT3-MSCs were obtained by adding 10 µM STA21 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Dallas, TX, USA) to OA-MSCs for 72 h.

**Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA)**

The concentrations of IL-6 (DY206-05; R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA), IL-8 (DY206, RRID: AB_2814717; R&D Systems), IL-1β (DY201-05; R&D Systems), TGF-β (DY240-05; R&D Systems), and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF; DY293B-05; R&D Systems) were measured in the culture supernatants of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs using commercial ELISA kits, according to the manufacturer’s instructions.

**Flow cytometry**

The surface markers of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were analyzed using a FACSCalibur Flow Cytometer (BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA, USA). Briefly, the harvested cells were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde at 4 °C for 30 min and washed in cold flow cytometry buffer (BD Biosciences). Aliquots of 1×10^6 cells were incubated with specific antibodies for 20 min in the dark. After incubation, the cells were washed in PBS, and the expression of the different surface markers was assessed by flow cytometry.

The antibodies used in this study were: anti-CD73 (ecto-5'-nucleotidase; Phycoerythrin (PE)-labeled mouse anti-human CD73, clone AD2, 550257, BD Biosciences, Heidelberg, Germany), anti-CD90 (thy-1; allophycocyanin (APC)-labeled mouse anti-human CD90, clone 5E10, 17-0909, eBioscience, Waltham, MA, USA), anti-CD105 (Endoglin; PE-labeled mouse anti-human CD105, clone 266, 560839, BD Biosciences), anti-CD34 (hematopoietic progenitor cell antigen CD34; Fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC)-labeled mouse anti-human CD34, clone 581, 560942, BD Biosciences), anti-CD45 (leukocyte common antigen; PE-labeled mouse anti-human CD45, clone HI30, 555483, BD Biosciences), HLA-DR (MHC class II antigen; FITC-labeled mouse anti-human HLA-DR, clone G46-6, 555811, BD Biosciences). The corresponding isotype controls were also used: PE-labeled mouse IgG1, k (clone MOPC-21, 555749, BD Biosciences), APC-labeled mouse IgG1, k (clone P3.6.2.8.1, 17-4714, eBioscience) and FITC-labeled mouse IgG1, k (clone MOPC-21, 555748, BD Biosciences).

**Quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction**

Total RNA was extracted from OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs using the RNeasy Mini Kit (74104; QIAGEN, Hilden, Germany). The RNA samples (≥20 ng/µL) were reverse transcribed into cDNA using the Quantitect Reverse Transcription Kit (205311, Qiagen) following the manufacturer’s instructions. All samples were then subjected to qPCR using SYBR Green (A6001, Promega, Madison, WI, USA) and the Promega qPCR system. The relative expression levels were determined using the 2^-∆∆Ct method.

The sequences of primers were used: for RUNX2, 5’-CCG GTC TCC TTC CAG GAT-3’, reverse 5’-GGG AAC TGC TGT GGC TTC-3’; for ALP, 5’-CCT TGA AAA ATG CCC TGA AA-3’, reverse 5’-CTT GGA GAG AGC CAC AAA GG-3’; for osteocalcin, 5’-CCT TCA TGT CCA AGC AGG A-3’, reverse 5’-GGC GGT CTT CAA GCC ATA C-3’; for osteopontin, 5’-CTT GCC GCG AGT GAC C-3’, reverse 5’-CTG TGG CGC AAG GAG AGC AGT GC-3’, reverse 5’-ACC AGG GAG CGT GAG AC-3’; for PPARγ, 5’-TGG AGC CTA AGT TTG AGT TTG-3’, reverse 5’-ATC TTC TGC AGC ACC TTT G-3’; for SOX9, 5’-AGG AAG TCG GTG AAG AAC GG-3’, reverse 5’-AGG TGG GTG TTT GTA GGT GG-3’; for type II collagen, 5’-GTT CAC GTA CAC TGC CCT GA-3’, reverse 5’-TGA CCC TCA AAC TCA TGC CTC-3’.

**Evaluation of the differentiation potential of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs**

The osteogenic, adipogenic, and chondrogenic differentiation potential of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were evaluated. OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were plated at a density of 2×10^4 cells/well in 6-well plates.

For osteogenic differentiation, cells were incubated in osteogenic medium (A1007201; Gibco, Life Technologies, Karlsruhe, Germany); the medium was changed every 2–3 days. After 14 days of culture, cells were washed thrice with
Figure 2 Morphology of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs. The morphology of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs was observed under an microscope (BX51, Olympus, Tokyo, Japan), 4 (A) and 11 (B,C) days after in vitro culture. iSTAT3-MSCs attached to the well and showed no morphological differences from OA-MSCs. Scale bar =200 µm. OA-MSCs, mesenchymal stem cells in patients with osteoarthritis; STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3.

PBS (Gibco) and fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde at 4 °C for 20 min. The mineralization of the extracellular matrix as an indicator of osteogenic differentiation was determined using Alizarin red S and alkaline phosphatase (ALP) staining. For adipogenic differentiation, cells were incubated in adipogenic differentiation medium (A1007001; Gibco); the medium was changed every 2–3 days. After 14 days, the cells were washed 3 times with PBS (Gibco) and fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde at 4 °C for 20 min. The cells were then treated with the Oil red O dye to visualize the lipids. For quantitative measurement, Oil red O was dissolved in isopropanol, and the absorbance was measured at 520 nm. For chondrogenic differentiation, a pellet culture method was used. Briefly, 2.5×10^5 cells (passage 3) were resuspended in chondrogenic differentiation medium (A1007101; Gibco) in 15 mL polypropylene tubes. After centrifugation at 500 ×g for 5 min for aggregation, the cells were incubated at 37 °C in a humidified atmosphere containing 5% CO₂. The aggregates were cultivated for 21 days, and the medium was changed every 2–3 days. On day 21, the cell pellets were fixed in 10% formalin and embedded in paraffin. Then, 4-µm-thick tissue sections were obtained and stained with type II collagen (1:200, ab185430; Abcam, Cambridge, MA, USA), Alcian blue (pH 2.5), and toluidine blue to reveal the collagen and sulfated proteoglycan content in the extracellular matrix. Hematoxylin–eosin staining was also performed for morphological observations.

Expression of surface markers in OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs

The expression of different surface markers, including CD73, CD90, and CD105 (MSC-specific markers); CD34 (leukocyte common antigen cell marker); CD45 (hematopoietic stem cell marker); and HLA-DR (antigen-presenting cell marker), in OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs was evaluated by flow cytometry (Figure 3).

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed in triplicate. The results are shown as the mean ± standard deviation (SD). For comparison, the t-test and ANOVA were used (IBM SPSS, version 20.0). Statistical significance was defined as P<0.05.

Results

Morphology of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs

OA-MSCs were successfully isolated from HVBCs in all cases. The cells readily expanded in vitro, and fibroblast-like cells could be observed attached to the culture flasks, 4 to 8 days after initial plating (Figure 2A). The cells were maintained in αMEM supplemented with 10% FBS and penicillin. No morphological changes were observed after 11 days of culture (Figure 2B). Additionally, iSTAT3-MSCs showed no morphological differences (Figure 2C).

Expression of surface markers in OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs

The expression of MSC-specific markers, including CD73 (95.2% in OA-MSCs and 97.8% in iSTAT3-MSCs), CD90 (91.6% in OA-MSCs and 94.3% in iSTAT3-MSCs), and CD105 (94.9% in OA-MSCs and 93.9% in iSTAT3-MSCs), was high (>90%) in both MSC types. However,
Figure 3 Expression of surface markers in OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs. (A) OA-MSCs; (B) iSTAT3-MSCs. The expression of the typical MSC markers—CD73, CD90, and CD105—was high (>90%) in both OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs. The negative markers—CD34, CD45, and HLA-DR—were barely expressed (<4%) in OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs. Blue: Isotype control expression. Red: Surface marker expression. OA-MSCs, mesenchymal stem cells in patients with osteoarthritis; STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3.

CD34 (0.21% in OA-MSCs and 0.12% in iSTAT3-MSCs), CD45 (1.6% in OA-MSCs and 2.1% in iSTAT3-MSCs), and HLA-DR (0.13% in OA-MSCs and 2.98% in iSTAT3-MSCs) expression was low (<4%). Notably, the surface marker expression profiles did not differ significantly between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs.
Multi-lineage differentiation (osteogenic, adipogenic, and chondrogenic) of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs

Osteogenic differentiation was confirmed by determining the ALP and Alizarin red S staining after 14 days of culture (Figure 4A,4B). The ALP staining was not observed in undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs [Figure 4A (a and b)]. In contrast, differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were stained purple [Figure 4A (c and d)]. As per the OD values, the ALP concentration was 1.397±0.1623 U/mL in OA-MSCs and 1.684±0.379 U/mL in iSTAT3-MSCs in the undifferentiated state and 7.189±0.379 U/mL in OA-MSCs and 9.478±0.455 U/mL in iSTAT3-MSCs in the differentiated state [Figure 4A (e)]. The OD values for the ALP assay were significantly different between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs both in undifferentiated (*) and differentiated (**, P<0.01) states. Additionally, ALP concentrations differed significantly between undifferentiated and differentiated OA-MSCs (***, P<0.001) and iSTAT3-MSCs (***, P<0.001), with increased values in differentiated cells [Figure 4A (e)]. Undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs not observed mineral deposits [Figure 4B (a and b)]. In contrast, calcium deposition and mineralization were stained red in differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs [Figure 4B (c and d)]. Moreover, with respect to Alizarin red S staining the OD values were 0.04±0.0006 nm for OA-MSCs and 0.044±0.005 nm for iSTAT3-MSCs in the undifferentiated state and 0.159±0.0014 nm for OA-MSCs and 0.171±0.0038 nm for iSTAT3-MSCs in the differentiated state [Figure 4B (e)]. The OD values were not significantly different between undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (*, P>0.05); however, they were significantly different between differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (**, P<0.01). Additionally, the OD values were significantly different between undifferentiated and differentiated OA-MSCs (***, P<0.001) and iSTAT3-MSCs (***, P<0.001), with increased values in differentiated cells [Figure 4B (e)].

Adipogenic differentiation was observed by detecting intracellular lipids (stained in red) after Oil red O staining. Expectedly, lipid droplets were not found in undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs [Figure 4C (a and b)]. In contrast, intracellular lipid droplets were observed red in differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs [Figure 4C (c and d)]. The determined OD values were 0.368±0.042 nm for OA-MSCs and 0.377±0.058 nm iSTAT3-MSCs in the undifferentiated state and 1.013±0.077 nm for OA-MSCs and 1.006±0.105 nm for iSTAT3-MSCs in the differentiated state [Figure 4C (e)]. Notably, the OD values were not significantly different between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs in either condition (*, P<0.05). However, the OD values were significantly higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs [Figure 4C (e); ***, P<0.001].

Chondrogenic differentiation was observed using hematoxylin-eosin (to evaluate the cell morphology), Alcian blue (pH 2.5) and toluidine blue (to evaluate pericellular matrix proteoglycans), and type II collagen staining. Many round cells with a lacuna-like structure were observed in the context of OA-MSCs (Figure 5A; black arrow) and iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 5B; red arrow) cultured in chondrogenic differentiation medium, as per hematoxylin-eosin staining. A rich extracellular matrix surrounding the cells was observed in both differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs. But, undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs not observed lacuna-like structure and round shape like chondrocytes (Figure 5C,5D). Differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3 OA-MSCs showed strong Alcian blue (Figure 5E; black *, Figure 5F; red *), while undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs did not show any staining (Figure 5G,5H). In toluidine blue staining, differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3 OA-MSCs showed strong purple (Figure 5I; yellow *, Figure 5J; yellow **), while undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs did not show staining (Figure 5K,5L). Notably, the Alcian blue (pH 2.5) and toluidine blue staining intensities were stronger in differentiated iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 5F,5J) than OA-MSCs (Figure 5E,5I). Type II collagen is the main collagen component of the extracellular matrix in cartilage. Here, the expression of type II collagen in OA-MSCs (Figure 5M; black *) and iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 5N; black **) was detected as brown color. In line with the above results, while type II collagen was not expressed in undifferentiated cells (Figure 5O,5P), the levels of type II collagen were detected in both differentiated iSTAT3-MSCs and OA-MSCs (to a greater extent in the former).

Gene expression analyses

The gene expression levels in OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were evaluated on day 14 of culture after osteogenic and adipogenic differentiation and on day 21 after chondrogenic differentiation.

Various osteogenic differentiation markers were
Figure 4 Osteogenic and adipogenic differentiation of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs. [A (a-d)] Alkaline phosphatase was stained in blue. The activity of alkaline phosphatase was higher in differentiated than undifferentiated cells (blue in c and d; c; ***, P<0.001). A significant difference was also detected between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs in both the undifferentiated and differentiated states (c; *, P<0.05 and **, P<0.01, respectively). Scale bar =200 µm. [B (a-d)] Calcium deposition was observed using Alizarin red S staining (red in c and d). Calcium deposition was higher in differentiated than undifferentiated cells (e; ***, P<0.001). The absorbance results were significantly different in the context of differentiated OA-MSCs than iSTAT3-MSCs (e; **, P<0.01) but not in the context of undifferentiated cells (e; #, P>0.05). Scale bar =200 µm. [C (a-d)] The Oil red O staining of lipid droplets is shown (red in c and d). The absorbance was higher in differentiated than undifferentiated cells (e; ***, P<0.001). In contrast, no significant differences were observed between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (e; #, P>0.05). Scale bar =100 µm. OA-MSCs, mesenchymal stem cells in patients with osteoarthritis; STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3.
Figure 5  Chondrogenic differentiation of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs. Hematoxylin-eosin (A-D), Alcian blue pH 2.5 (E-H), toluidine blue (I-L), and type II collagen immunohistochemistry (M-P) staining images. Many cells aggregated to form a pellet. Chondrocyte-like cells with lacunae were observed in the differentiated state (A, black arrow; B, red arrow). Alcian blue (blue signals; E, black *; F, red *), toluidine blue (purple signals; I, yellow *; L, yellow **), and type II collagen (brown signals; M, black *; N, black **) staining indicated cartilage-like tissues in the differentiated state. The Alcian blue, toluidine blue, and type II collagen staining intensities were higher in the context of iSTAT3-MSCs than OA-MSCs in the differentiated state. Scale bar =20 µm. OA-MSCs, mesenchymal stem cells in patients with osteoarthritis; STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3.

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The expression of RUNX2 was 1.92-fold and 2.18-fold higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs, respectively (Figure 6A; **, P<0.01). Additionally, the expression of RUNX2 was higher in iSTAT3-MSCs than OA-MSCs in differentiated (Figure 6A; *, P<0.05). The expression of ALP was also 3.04-fold and 3.1-fold higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs, respectively (Figure 6A; **, P<0.01). However, ALP expression levels did not differ significantly between differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 6A; *, P>0.05). The expression of osteocalcin was also 3.56-fold and 6.94-fold higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs, respectively (Figure 6A; *, P<0.05). Additionally, the expression of osteocalcin was significantly higher in differentiated iSTAT3-MSCs than OA-MSCs (Figure 6A; ***, P<0.001). Moreover, the expression of osteopontin was 9.93-fold and 17.43-fold higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs, respectively (Figure 6A; ***, P<0.001); furthermore, it was significantly different between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs in the differentiated state (Figure 6A; *, P<0.05).

With respect to adipogenic differentiation markers, the expression levels of C/EBPa and PPARγ were 2.71- and 3.23-fold higher, respectively, in differentiated than non-differentiated OA-MSCs; the same was true in the context...
Figure 6 Comparative gene expression analysis. (A) Expression levels of osteogenic differentiation markers (*RUNX2, alkaline phosphatase, osteocalcin, and osteopontin), 14 days after osteogenic differentiation. The expression of *RUNX2*, alkaline phosphatase, osteocalcin, and osteopontin was higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (*, P<0.05; **, P<0.01; ***, P<0.001). The expression of all of these genes, except *ALP* (#, P>0.05), also differed between differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (*, P<0.05; ***, P<0.001). (B) The expression of adipogenic differentiation genes (*C/EBPa* and *PPARγ*), 14 days after adipogenic differentiation. The expression of *C/EBPa* and *PPARγ* was higher in differentiated than undifferentiated cells (***, P<0.001). However, no significant differences in *C/EBPa* and *PPARγ* expression levels were detected between differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (#, P>0.05). (C) The expression of chondrogenic differentiation markers (*SOX9*, aggrecan, and type II collagen), 21 days after chondrogenic differentiation. The expression levels of *SOX9*, aggrecan, and type II collagen were higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (**, P<0.01). Additionally, the expression of *SOX9*, aggrecan, and type II collagen was different between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs in the differentiated state (#, P<0.05; *, P<0.05; ***, P<0.001). OA-MSCs, mesenchymal stem cells in patients with osteoarthritis; STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3.
of iSTAT3-MSCs, which showed 2.88-fold and 3.3-fold higher expression in differentiated than undifferentiated cells (Figure 6B; ***, P<0.001). However, there were no significant differences in C/EBPa and PPARγ expression levels between differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 6B; *, P>0.05).

Moreover, with respect to chondrogenic differentiation-specific markers, the expression levels of SOX9, aggrecan, and type II collagen were higher in differentiated than undifferentiated OA-MSCs (8.13-fold, 3.08-fold, and 16.26-fold, respectively) and iSTAT3-MSCs (7.08-fold, 7.35-fold, and 19.24-fold, respectively) (Figure 6C; ***, P<0.001). Additionally, there were significant differences in the expression levels of aggrecan and type II collagen between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 6C; *, P<0.05 and ***, P<0.001). But, the expression level of SOX9 was not significant between OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 6C; *, P>0.05).

**Inhibition of STAT3 signaling induces the anti-inflammatory response of OA-MSCs**

The levels of different cytokines in the culture supernatants of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were evaluated using ELISA (Figure 7). The levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines, including IL-6, IL-1β, IL-8, and VEGF, were significantly lower in the supernatants of iSTAT3-MSCs than in those of OA-MSCs (IL-6 and IL-1β; ***, P<0.001; IL-8 and VEGF; ***, P<0.001). In contrast, the levels of the anti-inflammatory cytokines, IL-10 and TGF-β, were significantly higher in the culture supernatants of iSTAT3-MSCs than in those of OA-MSCs (***, P<0.001). Altogether, these data show that STAT3 signaling inhibition may increase the anti-inflammatory response and improve the therapeutic effects of MSCs.

**Discussion**

Stem cells collected from different sources, including the bone marrow, adipose tissue, cord blood, and synovium have clearly established clinical applications (22-24). To utilize autologous cells, surgical or invasive procedures are necessary to obtain the tissues. Traditionally, the bone marrow has been an important source of stem cells; however, bone marrow aspiration is a very painful procedure (25). Nevertheless, clinical studies with bone marrow aspirates are ongoing owing to their simple culture process and favorable stemness characteristics (26-29).
Additionally, large numbers of cells can be isolated from the adipose tissues, with a higher chondrogenic potential than MSCs from other sources; however, an invasive procedure is still required to harvest these cells (30,31). To avoid such procedures, allogenic cells are a commercially available alternative. Nonetheless, it is difficult and time-consuming to obtain approval from the FDA and there are many ethical concerns associated (32).

HVB can be obtained easily after bone surgery, such as TKA, without special procedures, pain, or related ethical issues. The volume of HVB obtained varies among patients; nevertheless, a sufficient number of MSCs can be obtained by concentration and cultivation. Accordingly, HVB is a potential stem cell source. Importantly, HVB has bone marrow components, although stromal components are less abundant in these samples than in bone marrow aspirates. However, the issue of low numbers of stem cells or stromal cells in HVB can be resolved by repeated concentration after sample collection following TKA. As the stromal component of the bone marrow can be used for the treatment of musculoskeletal diseases, centrifugation and concentration of the stromal component are inevitable.

The hemovac allows the collection of up to 400 mL of blood; the kit used in this study handled a volume of 40 mL. Theoretically, 800 mL from the first and second hemovac drains can be concentrated (8). Contrastingly, the contents of the third hemovac drain are dominated by venous blood; therefore, concentration is not effective. Notably, through the method used in this study, it is possible to produce 4 mL of HVBC and obtain 20-fold increased cell counts, allowing the culture of HVBC cells for clinical applications.

OA is a degenerative joint disease that presents with inflammation and, consequently, with elevated levels of proinflammatory cytokines (33,34). MSCs can modulate the inflammatory response; nonetheless, their application for the treatment of OA may be associated with a few problems (35,36). For instance, it has been reported that MSCs can differentiate into several proinflammatory cells, failing to decrease the inflammatory immune response (37). Therefore, the development of optimization strategies to regulate the immunomodulatory function of MSCs, such as the inhibition of STAT3 signaling, may be necessary before the clinical application of MSCs in the treatment of OA can be implemented.

A concern regarding this newly developed method is that the quality of stem cells from old individuals and patients with severe inflammation may be low (38-40). STAT3 is a transcription factor belonging to the STAT protein family (41,42) that is activated by inflammatory cytokines, including in diseases associated with chronic inflammation and fibrosis (42-47). The restoration of stem cell function by STAT3 signaling inhibition has been previously evaluated (48-51). For instance, STAT3 signaling inhibition in MSCs from the adipose tissue resulted in improved anti-inflammatory response and reduced inflammation (50). Reduced OA severity in a rat model and pain relief have also been reported (50). However, these studies were based on cells from the adipose tissue or other sources; studies using HVBs have not been conducted to date. Notably, the stem cell characteristics or function could differ according to the source or environmental conditions of the harvested tissue (e.g., with respect to age and degree of inflammation) (20,37,52,53).

Importantly, to consider the use of STAT3 signaling-suppressed HVB cells for stem cell research, three key points must be addressed. First, stem cell marker expression should be maintained to ensure the lack of changes in the characteristics of stem cells after STAT3 signaling suppression. In this study, we showed that iSTAT3-MSCs maintained the expression levels of stem cell markers (high expression of CD73, CD90, and CD105) as well as the fibroblast-like morphology observed in the context of the “mother cells” (OA-MSCs) (Figures 2,3). Therefore, these results suggest the above pre-requisite can be fulfilled.

Second, iSTAT3-MSCs should maintain a multi-lineage differentiation potential. In this study, the osteogenic, adipogenic, and chondrogenic differentiation potentials of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were evaluated (Figure 4,5). Higher expression levels of RUNX2, ALP, osteocalcin, and osteopontin (osteogenic markers) were observed in OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs in the differentiated state than in the undifferentiated state (Figure 6A). Additionally, the ALP activity (Figure 4A) and Alizarin red S staining intensity (calcium deposition and mineralization; Figure 4B) of OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs were higher in differentiated than undifferentiated cells. Moreover, the expression of PPARγ and C/EBPα, adipocyte differentiation marker levels (Figure 6B), and lipid droplet formation (as per Oil red O staining) were increased in differentiated OA-MSCs and iSTAT3-MSCs (Figure 4C). The same was true in the context of the expression of different chondrogenic markers, including SOX9, aggrecan, and type II collagen (Figure 6C) as well as Alcian blue (pH 2.5), toluidine blue, and type II collagen staining (Figure 5). Altogether, these results support the notion that iSTAT3-MSCs show a multi-lineage differentiation potential. Interestingly,
both osteogenic and chondrogenic potentials were higher in iSTAT3-MSCs than in OA-MSCs (Figure 6A,6C). Therefore, our data support the future clinical applications of iSTAT3-MSCs. If iSTAT3-MSCs, generated after TKA surgery are stored in a freezer, they can be used to resolve bone disorders, including fractures, non-union fractures, and avascular necrosis (51,54-56). Furthermore, since after TKA, patients mainly use the non-operated leg, which can lead to injury in the articular cartilage of the knee joint, iSTAT3-MSCs, with enhanced chondrogenic potential, can be used to treat potential cartilage defects of non-operated knees.

Third, similar to iSTAT3-MSCs from other sources, such as the adipose tissue (50) anti-inflammatory properties must be demonstrated. Here, iSTAT3-MSCs obtained from HVBCs showed lower pro-inflammatory and higher anti-inflammatory activity than OA-MSCs, as per the determined cytokine levels (Figure 7). Therefore, these results indicate that STAT3 suppression is effective for the optimization of MSCs isolated in the context of inflammatory and degenerative conditions.

To the best of our knowledge, no studies on MSCs with STAT3 signaling suppression derived from HVB have been conducted to date. Overall, the results of the current study show the advantages of iSTAT3-MSCs over OA-MSCs with respect to osteogenic and chondrogenic differentiation ability as well as anti-inflammatory potential. Therefore, in conclusion, our results suggest that iSTAT3-MSCs obtained from HBV after TKA are promising for stem cell research purposes and the treatment of musculoskeletal diseases.

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Footnote

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Ethical Statement: The authors are accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (as revised in 2013). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Uijeongbu St. Mary’s Hospital, Korea (UC18DESI0056) and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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