T Lymphocyte Subsets and Cytokines in Rats Transplanted with Adipose-Derived Mesenchymal Stem Cells and Acellular Nerve for Repairing the Nerve Defects

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Objective: The aim of this study was to explore the immunity in rats transplanted with adipose-derived mesenchymal stem cells (ADSCs) and acellular nerve (ACN) for repairing sciatic nerve defects.

Methods: ADSCs were isolated from the adipose tissues of Wistar rats. Sprague-Dawley rats were used to establish a sciatic nerve defect model and then divided into four groups, according to the following methods: Group A, allogenic nerve graft; Group B, allograft with ACN; Group C, allograft ADSCs+ACN, and Group D, nerve autograft.

Results: At the day before transplantation and 3, 7, 14, and 28 days after transplantation, orbital venous blood of the Sprague-Dawley rats in each group was collected to detect the proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets and the serum concentration of IL-2, TNF-α and IFN-γ using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). At each postoperative time point, the proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets and the serum concentration of IL-2, TNF-α, and IFN-γ in group C were all near to those in group B and group D, in which no statistically significant difference was observed. As compared with group A, the proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets and the serum concentration of IL-2, TNF-α, and IFN-γ were significantly reduced in group C (p<0.05).

Conclusion: The artificial nerve established with ADSCs and ACN has no obvious allograft rejection for repairing rat nerve defects.

Key Words: Neural transplantation · Immunity · T cell subsets · Cytokines.

INTRODUCTION

Peripheral nerve defect is a common disabling disease clinically. To date, the most common and effective treatment for it is autologous nerve transplantation. However, there are still a lot of disadvantages existing in this treatment, such as the donor site dysfunction, neuroma formation, limited sources, the size being difficult to match and so on.¹ Allogenic transplantation has a wide range of sources but great immunological rejection. The histocompatibility complex existing on the surface of the nerve cells contributes to the antigens of the immunological rejection.⁴⁶ Hudson et al.⁶ reported that chemical extraction methods can remove the membrane and medulla sheath of nerve tissues, so as to eliminate the antigens including the histocompatibility complex, which can greatly reduce the immune response of the nerve graft and retain the base pipe membrane and lamellar structure of the nerve cells, providing a good bionic channel for nerve regeneration. However, a body of experiments shows that a simple transplantation with acellular nerve (ACN) cannot achieve the similarly satisfactory clinical results with autologous nerve graft. It probably results from the removal of Schwann cells.⁲² Adipose-derived mesenchymal stem cells (ADSCs) are a class of stem cells with multipotent differentiation capacity with little or no immunological rejection, because their surfaces express less or no major histocompatibility complex (MHC)-II. They can be oriented to differentiate into Schwann cells and then promote the peripheral nerve regeneration, which has been proved by in vivo and in vitro studies.⁴⁶⁷,¹⁵,¹⁶,²⁵ In this study, an artificial neural repair of rat sciatic nerve defects constructed with ADSCs and ACN was used to observe the proportion of T lymphocyte subsets and cytokine changes, so as to explore the immunological rejection of trans-
placation with ADSCs and ACN and provide an immunological evidence for its clinical application.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animals

32 healthy male Sprague-Dawley (SD) rats and 12 healthy male Wistar rats, weighing 150 g to 200 g, were offered by the Experimental Animal Center of Wenzhou Medical University, Zhejiang, China. SD rats were used as the recipients of nerve transplantation and Wistar rats were used as the donors of ADSCs and ACN.

Preparation for adipose-derived mesenchymal stem cells

After Wistar rats (n=8) were intraperitoneally anesthetized with 10% chloral hydrate (0.3 mL/100 g), the bilateral inguinal fat pads of the rats were isolated and cut into pieces. Then double volumes of 0.1% collagenase I were added into the tissue fragments and incubated at 37°C for 60 min (shaking it in every 10 minutes). The digestion was stopped by the equal volume of DMEM/F12 medium containing 15% fetal bovine serum (FBS). After filtered with a 200 mesh filter, the filtrate was centrifuged for 10 minutes at 1000 r/min. Removing the supernatant, the precipitate was resuspended in DMEM/F12 containing 15% FBS. $1 \times 10^5$ cells were seeded in the 25 cm$^2$ flasks and incubated in a CO2 incubator. The medium was changed in every 48h. As the cells adhered and grew to 80–90% of confluence, they were passaged in a ratio of 1 : 3. The third passage was observed under an inverted microscope and then harvested for detection of the surface markers CD44, CD90, and CD45 by flow cytometry.

Preparation for acellular nerve cells

ACN was also donated by the 8 Wistar rats after they donated the adipose tissues. Under the sterile conditions, about 2.0 cm bilateral sciatic nerves were cut out. Following the methods described by Hudson et al., the nerves were successively treated with distilled water, sulfobetaine-10 (SB-10), sulfobetaine-16 (SB-16) and Triton-200 to extract the acellular nerve. Part of the nerves was used for hematoxylin-eosin staining (HE) staining and electron microscopic scanning.

Establishment of artificial nerves with ADSCs and ACN

ADSCs were prepared into $1.0 \times 10^7$ mL with DMEM/F12 medium containing 15% FBS and 1% penicillin-streptomycin. Then 10 μL ADSCs suspension were injected into the ACN with micro-syringe, every 2 μL and every other 3 mm to each injection point, then incubated in the 5% carbon dioxide incubator at 37°C overnight to construct artificial nerve.

Establishment of nerve defects rat model and treatment

32 SD rats were intraperitoneally anesthetized with 10% chloral hydrate (0.4 mL/100 g) and then 1.5 cm of the right sciatic nerve was cut out under the piriformis to make sciatic nerve defect model. Then the rats were randomly divided into four groups (n=8) and underwent immediate nerve transplantation, secured with a 8-0 suture according to the following programs:
group A was treated with allogenic nerve; group B was treated with ACN extracted chemically; group C was treated with artificial nerves constructed with ADSCs and ACN (Fig. 1), and group D was treated with nerve autograft.

Flow cytometry assay
At the day before the transplantation and 3, 7, 14, and 28 days after the transplantation, orbital venous blood of SD rats in each group was collected to detect the proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets using flow cytometry. 7 μL anti-rat CD3, CD4, and CD8 antibodies were added into 50 μL orbital venous blood, respectively. After the cells were mixed thoroughly and incubated in dark for 30 min, 600 μL solution A (0.12% formic acid, prepared before use) was added into each tube and mixed thoroughly. 15 s later, solution B (NaCl 14.5 g, Na₂SO₄ 31.3 g, and Na₂CO₃ 6.0 g in 1000 mL distilled water, prepared before use) was also added. After mixed, cells were centrifuged at 1500 rpm for 5 min. The cells were washed with PBS buffer once again and centrifuged for 5 minutes. Then the labeled cells were resuspended in 500 μL PBS buffer and detected on a FACSArial digital cell sorter (BD Biosciences Pharmingen, San Jose, CA, USA).

Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay
The serum concentration of IL-2, TNF-α, and IFN-γ of rats in each group at the day before the transplantation and 3, 7, 14, and 28 days after the transplantation were determined using the Ready-SET-Go ELISA kits (Lianke Bio Co. Ltd., Hangzhou, China), following the manufacturer’s instructions.

Statistical analysis
Data were expressed as mean±standard deviation and analyzed using SSPS16.0 statistical software. The pairwise comparisons between groups were carried out using LSD t-test. \( p<0.05 \) was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS
ADSCs
ADSCs showed fibroblast-like cells under an inverted microscope. Their phenotypes were CD45 (-), 90 (+), and 44 (+) (Fig. 2).

ACN
The ACN extracted chemically showed milky white and intact shape. As stained with hematoxylin-eosin, ACN revealed intact nerve membrane but its components had disappeared. As scanned by a scanning electron microscopy, medulla sheath and Schwann cells could not be observed any more. However, the three-dimensional structure of the acellular nerve cells was kept better, as observed with a transmission electron microscopy (Fig. 3).

The proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets
The proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets of group C...
at 3, 7, 14, and 28 days after the transplantation increased slightly, as compared with those before the transplantation, but there was no significant difference ($p>0.05$). They were also not significantly different from those of group B and group D ($p>0.05$). The proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets of group A began to increase at 3 days after the transplantation, but showed no significant difference from those before the transplantation. However, they increased continually and reached a peak at 7–14 days after the transplantation and then decreased at 28 days after the transplantation, showing a significant difference from those before the transplantation. The postoperative proportion of CD3⁺, CD4⁺, and CD8⁺ subsets of group A were also significantly different from those of group B, C, and D ($p<0.05$, Table 1–5) (Fig. 4).

**Serum concentration of IL-2, TNF-α, and IFN-γ**

The serum concentration of IL-2, TNF-α, and IFN-γ of group C at 3, 7, 14, and 28 days after the transplantation showed similar increasing trend with the proportion of T lymphocyte subsets as compared with those before the transplantation ($p>0.05$) or those of group B and group D ($p>0.05$, respectively). IL-2, IFN-γ, and TNF-α in group A began to increase at 3 days after the transplantation, in which IL-2 level showed significant difference ($p<0.05$) but IFN-γ and TNF-α showed no significant difference ($p>0.05$), as compared with those before the transplantation. IL-2, IFN-γ, and TNF-α also increased to a peak at 7–14 days after the transplantation. IL-2, IFN-γ, and TNF-α were also not significantly different from those before the transplantation ($p>0.05$).

| Groups            | CD3⁺ (%) | CD4⁺ (%) | CD8⁺ (%) | IL-2 (pg/mL) | IFN-γ (pg/mL) | TNF-α (pg/mL) |
|-------------------|----------|----------|----------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Nerve allograft   | 57.90±1.36 | 32.89±1.23 | 17.69±1.17 | 34.82±1.81 | 110.51±4.35 | 55.69±1.86 |
| Acellular nerve graft | 57.92±1.62 | 33.31±1.60 | 17.70±1.84 | 34.43±1.32 | 107.37±4.97 | 56.43±1.83 |
| Artificial nerve graft | 57.06±1.49 | 32.90±1.41 | 18.05±1.55 | 34.53±1.35 | 108.55±5.99 | 54.85±2.51 |
| Nerve autograft   | 57.36±1.36 | 32.75±1.32 | 17.39±1.76 | 35.08±2.24 | 108.65±5.27 | 55.89±1.74 |

IL-2 : interleukin-2, TNF-α : tumor necrosis factor-α, IFN-γ : interferon-γ

| Groups            | CD3⁺ (%) | CD4⁺ (%) | CD8⁺ (%) | IL-2 (pg/mL) | IFN-γ (pg/mL) | TNF-α (pg/mL) |
|-------------------|----------|----------|----------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Nerve allograft   | 57.90±1.36 | 32.89±1.23 | 17.69±1.17 | 34.82±1.81 | 110.51±4.35 | 55.69±1.86 |
| Acellular nerve graft | 57.92±1.62 | 33.31±1.60 | 17.70±1.84 | 34.43±1.32 | 107.37±4.97 | 56.43±1.83 |
| Artificial nerve graft | 57.06±1.49 | 32.90±1.41 | 18.05±1.55 | 34.53±1.35 | 108.55±5.99 | 54.85±2.51 |
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IL-2 : interleukin-2, TNF-α : tumor necrosis factor-α, IFN-γ : interferon-γ
on the surface of all of the mature T cells, which is also an im-
portant indicator for the body's transplantation immunity. CD3 antigen is expressed
inhibitor/killer T cells, whose balance is an important indicator to
clude cytotoxic T cells (CTL) and T helper cells (THL). CTL
The effector cells of cell-mediated immunological response in-
organ transplantation, which is a typical cell-mediated rejection.
7 to 14 days after the transplantation and then declined after 28
days, which were all significantly different from those before
transplantation (p<0.05). Similarly, they were also significantly
higher than those of group B, C, and D (p<0.05).

DISCUSSION

The counts and types of lymphocyte subsets in vivo are sensi-
tive indicators to reflect the graft rejection and immune status
in vivo. Normally, the number of T lymphocyte and its subsets
are relatively stable in the peripheral blood. However, if there
were immune dysfunction or graft rejection happening, the
number of T lymphocyte would increase accordingly. CD4+ T
cells are helper/inducer T lymphocytes and CD8+ T cells are in-
hibitor/killer T cells, whose balance is an important indicator to
reflect the transplantation immunity. CD3 antigen is expressed
on the surface of all of the mature T cells, which is also an im-
portant indicator for the body’s transplantation immunity. Arti-
ficial nerves constructed with Schwann cells that orientedly
induced from acellular nerve and ADSCs by tissue engineering
are non-vascularized before they are transplanted. Its transplan-
tation differs from the allograft rejection of vascularized solid
nerve and ADSCs were not significantly different in immuno-
ological rejection, suggesting that topical application of ADSCs
in vivo can induce a host immune tolerance, which may
be able to survive in vivo to induce a host immune tolerance, which may
have immunomodulatory effects on T lymphocytes (105), B cells (107),
and natural killer cells (108), but rarely cause immunological rejec-
tion (109). Since neither acellular nerve nor ADSCs have signifi-
cant immunogenicity, co-graft of acellular nerve and ADSCs
does not cause immunological rejection. Kuo et al. (11) found that
ADSCs can inhibit the proliferation of T cells. The infusion of
donor ADSCs in combination with other immunosuppressive
therapy can significantly prolong the survival time of allogenic
limb transplantation and reduce the tissue rejection. However,
if the topical application of allogeneic ADSCs would affect the
immunological response of the host is rarely reported yet. In this
study, the acellular nerve graft and the co-graft with acellular
erve and ADSCs were not significantly different in immuno-
logical rejection, suggesting that topical application of ADSCs
has no obvious effect on the host immunological response. The
weakness of this experiment is that we didn’t trace the trans-
planted ADSCs to show it survived in the host or differentiated
into Schwann-like cells? However, there were reports show the
transplanted ADSCs survived for a long time. Santiago et al. (18)
reported that human uASCs enhanced peripheral nerve regen-
eration and decreased muscular atrophy when transplanted into
caprolactone nerve guides to repair a 6-mm nerve gap in
athymic rats; cells survived up to 12 weeks after transplantation
but did not differentiate into Schwann cells.

Fig. 4. The proportion of CD3+, CD4+, and CD8+ subsets and the serum
concentration of IL-2, IFN-γ, and TNF-α. IL-2 : interleukin-2, TNF-α :
tumor necrosis factor-α, IFN-γ : interferon-γ.
CONCLUSION

In summary, artificial nerve graft established with ADSCs and acellular nerves for repairing the rat sciatic nerve defects would not induce a significant allograft rejection. It will be safe to be used as a new artificial nerve for clinical application.

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