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VEGF INCORPORATED INTO CALCIUM PHOSPHATE CERAMICS PROMOTES VASCULARISATION AND BONE FORMATION IN VIVO

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Abstract

Bone formation and osseointegration of biomaterials are dependent on angiogenesis and vascularization. Angiogenic growth factors such as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) were shown to promote biomaterial vascularization and enhance bone formation. However, high local concentrations of VEGF induce the formation of malformed, nonfunctional vessels. We hypothesized that a continuous delivery of low concentrations of VEGF from calcium phosphate ceramics may increase the efficacy of VEGF administration. VEGF was co-precipitated onto biphasic calcium phosphate (BCP) ceramics to achieve a sustained release of the growth factor. The co-precipitation efficacy and the release kinetics of the protein were investigated in vitro. For in vivo investigations BCP ceramics were implanted into critical size cranial defects in Balb/c mice. Angiogenesis and microvascularization were investigated over 28 days by means of intravital microscopy. The formation of new bone was determined histomorphometrically. Co-precipitation reduced the burst release of VEGF. Furthermore, a sustained, cell-mediated release of low concentrations of VEGF from BCP ceramics was mediated by resorbing osteoclasts. In vivo, sustained delivery of VEGF achieved by protein co-precipitation promoted biomaterial vascularization, osseointegration, and bone formation. Short-term release of VEGF following superficial adsorption resulted in a temporally restricted promotion of angiogenesis and did not enhance bone formation. The release kinetics of VEGF appears to be an important factor in the promotion of biomaterial vascularization and bone formation. Sustained release of VEGF increased the efficacy of VEGF delivery demonstrating that a prolonged bioavailability of low concentrations of VEGF is beneficial for bone regeneration.

Keywords: Biomaterials, calcium phosphates, drug delivery, tissue engineering, angiogenesis, bone formation.

Introduction

Loss of bone caused by trauma, resection of tumors, and total arthroplasty revision surgery represents a major problem in orthopedic surgery and traumatology. Autologous bone is widely accepted as the standard material to reconstruct skeletal defects providing essential elements such as osteogenic cells, osteoinductive factors, and an osteoconductive matrix for bone formation. However, there are critical limitations associated with the graft harvest, such as donor site morbidity, prolonged surgery time and limited supply (Finkemeier, 2002).

Calcium phosphate (CaP) based ceramics represent a promising group of biomaterials for clinical use as bone substitute materials. These materials are known for their osteoconductive properties. However, bone formation observed after implantation of CaP ceramics is often insufficient thus limiting the long-term mechanical stability of bone defect reconstructions with these materials. Most research to improve the biological properties of CaP ceramics has focused on the local delivery of osteoinductive growth factors such as bone morphogenetic proteins (BMPs). More recently, angiogenic growth factors such as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) have gained increasing attention. VEGF has been shown to promote vascularization of polymeric and calcium phosphate based bone substitute materials (Geiger et al., 2002; Huang et al., 2005; Kaigler et al., 2006). The narrow therapeutic range of VEGF complicates the efficient local delivery of the growth factor. High VEGF concentrations were shown to increase vascular permeability, cause vessel leakage and induce the formation of malformed, non-functional blood vessels (Chang et al., 2000; Drake and Little, 1995; Horowitz et al., 1997; Vajanto et al., 2006). The majority of VEGF delivery systems described previously lead to the release of high amounts of the growth factor during the initial
phase after biomaterial implantation (Ennett et al., 2006; Gao et al., 2007; Kempen et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2004; Patel et al., 2008). Short-term release of VEGF was shown to promote angiogenesis previously (Ennett et al., 2006; Kempen et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2004). However, a sustained release of the growth factor may increase the growth factor’s efficacy for bone regeneration due to its stimulatory effects on both angiogenesis and osteoblast differentiation (Gerber et al., 1999; Mayr-Wohlfart et al., 2002; Street et al., 2002). We have previously implemented a delivery system achieving a long-term release of proteins from biphasic calcium phosphate (BCP) ceramics in vitro by incorporating the proteins into a layer of calcium phosphate (Liu et al., 2001; Wernike et al., 2010). We now aimed to investigate the effects of a sustained release of VEGF from calcium phosphate ceramics on biomaterial vascularization and bone formation in vivo.

Materials and Methods

Bone substitute materials. Custom made porous BCP ceramics (pore size 150-200μm, porosity 75% ± 5%) composed of 80% hydroxyapatite (HA) and 20% β-tricalcium phosphate (β-TCP) were provided by Progentix BV (MB Bilthoven, The Netherlands). Ceramic cylinders were prepared with a diameter of 14mm for in vitro experiments and 4mm for in vivo experiments; discs with a thickness of 0.5mm were cut using a diamond saw. The BCP discs were cleaned with ethanol and UV sterilized (4 hours) prior to use.

Coating of BCP ceramics with rhVEGF and [125I]-VEGF. Recombinant human vascular endothelial growth factor (rhVEGF) was kindly provided by Genentech Inc. (South San Francisco, CA, USA). [125I] labeled VEGF ([125I]-VEGF) was purchased from Perkin Elmer (Waltham, MA, USA). 125I labeled VEGF ([125I]-VEGF) was quantified by gamma counting. [125I]-VEGF coated BCP discs were dissolved in 2ml of 1M hydrochloric acid (HCl). The gamma radiation of the solution was then measured with a gamma counter (Packard, Cobra II, TopLab GmbH, Switzerland).

Quantification of [125I]-VEGF Uptake. The uptake of [125I]-VEGF onto the BCP discs was quantified by gamma counting. [125I]-VEGF coated BCP discs were dissolved in 2ml of 1M hydrochloric acid (HCl). The gamma radiation of the solution was then measured with a gamma counter (Packard, Cobra II, TopLab GmbH, Switzerland).

Experimental protocol of time-course experiments. Investigations of the rhVEGF release from the BCP discs were performed over a period of 19 days. The release of rhVEGF was quantified by ELISA (Human VEGF ELISA Development, R&D Systems Europe, UK). Coated BCP discs were equilibrated in α-MEM culture media for 24 hours. Afterwards, the discs were incubated in α-MEM culture media for another 18 days to investigate the spontaneous release and the biological activity of rhVEGF.

In Vivo Experiments

Cranial window preparation. Male 10 week old Balb/c mice (BALB/cAnNCrl; Charles River Sulzfeld, Germany) were used for this study, which was approved by the local committee for animal experimentation (BVET, Berne, Switzerland) and conducted in accordance with its regulations.
BCP ceramic discs were implanted into a cranial window preparation in Balb/c mice (Klenke et al., 2008). In this animal model, critically sized calvaria defects serve as the site of orthotopic implantation of ceramic materials. The mice were anesthetized by subcutaneous injection of a mixture of fentanyl dihydrogenecitrate (50μg/kg body weight), medetomidine hydrochloridum (500μg/kg body weight), and climazolame (5mg/kg body weight). After shaving and disinfection of the scalp with 70% ethanol an oval area of the scalp (15 × 10 mm²) was removed to expose the frontal and parietal bones with the coronal, lambdoid and sagittal sutures. Using a dental drilling device, circular 4mm-diameter full-thickness defects were generated within the calvaria. Care was taken to avoid mechanical or thermal damage to the dura mater and the underlying brain tissue. If this occurred, the animal was euthanized immediately and excluded from the study. If bleeding from the bone occurred, the surgical procedure was interrupted to clear the site by swabbing with a sterile Q-tip. Ceramic discs were then inserted into the defect. To protect the tissue from dehydration and mechanical damage, the exposed site was covered with a circular, 7 mm diameter glass slip (Assistent, Sondheim, Germany), which was secured to the bone margin with cement (a mixture of ethylcanaoacrylate glue; Pattex®; Blitz Kleber, Henkel, Düsseldorf, Germany; and a methylmethacrylate polymer; GC Ostron®-powder; GC Europe, Leuven, Belgium). After hardening of the sealant, the anesthesia was antagonized by subcutaneous injection of the following antidote mixture: atipamezoli hydrochloridum (1.25mg/kg), sarmazenilum (0.5mg/kg) and buprenorphinum (0.075mg/kg). After experiments were terminated, the functional capillary density (FCD) within the implantation site was defined as the total length of the erythrocyte-perfused capillaries (in mm) per area (in mm²). This parameter was previously described to assess microvascular perfusion in various tissues (Hoffmann et al., 2004; Leunig et al., 1992; Nolte et al., 1995; Rucker et al., 2006). FCD analysis was performed on digital fluorescence images using Image J (Research Services Branch, NIH, Bethesda, Maryland; U.S.). The extravasation of low molecular weight FITC dextran into the peri-vascular tissue was used as a measure of vessel leakage. The measurement of vascular leakage has been established as a parameter to determine the maturity of blood vessels (Gerlowski and Jain, 1986; Leunig et al., 1992). Using Adobe Photoshop (Photoshop CS4, Adobe Inc.) the grey values of the peri-vascular tissue were measured before injection of FITC dextran and 1 minute after injection in 4 independent regions of interest (ROI). The percental change of the grey values within the peri-vascular tissue served as the measure of plasma extravasation of FITC dextran and was calculated as [(grey value post-injection/grey value pre-injection) x 100]. In order to achieve better vessel leakage, the functional capillary density (FCD) within the implantation site was defined as the total length of the erythrocyte-perfused capillaries (in mm) per area (in mm²). This parameter was previously described to assess microvascular perfusion in various tissues (Hoffmann et al., 2004; Leunig et al., 1992; Nolte et al., 1995; Rucker et al., 2006). FCD analysis was performed on digital fluorescence images using Image J (Research Services Branch, NIH, Bethesda, Maryland; U.S.). The extravasation of low molecular weight FITC dextran into the peri-vascular tissue was used as a measure of vessel leakage. The measurement of vascular leakage has been established as a parameter to determine the maturity of blood vessels (Gerlowski and Jain, 1986; Leunig et al., 1992). Using Adobe Photoshop (Photoshop CS4, Adobe Inc.) the grey values of the peri-vascular tissue were measured before injection of FITC dextran and 1 minute after injection in 4 independent regions of interest (ROI). The percental change of the grey values within the peri-vascular tissue served as the measure of plasma extravasation of FITC dextran and was calculated as [(grey value post-injection/grey value pre-injection) x 100].

Quantitative Histomorphometry. The embedded tissue samples were cut perpendicular to the sagittal plane. Ground sections of 300μm, separated by a constant distance of 300μm, were cut using a saw microtome from Leica (Leica SP1600, Leica Microsystems, Glattbrugg, Switzerland). Each specimen yielded five to six serial sections. The sections were polished and stained using McNeal’s tetrachrome (MacNeal, 1922; Penney et al., 2002). The volume of newly-formed bone was quantified on light microscopic images of the sections using Cavalieri’s method (Gundersen and Jensen, 1987). The volume of newly formed bone (Vbone), the bone-interface-contact (BIC) area and the volume density of bone (Vbone/ volume of ceramic pores) were determined using the cycloid test system described by Baddeley et al. (Baddeley et al., 1986). To verify the results on vessel density obtained with intravital microscopy analysis, the vessel density was also quantified morphometrically. For this purpose, the number of vessel cross-sections per volume unit (Vvess/mm³) was determined based on Cavalieri’s method (Gundersen and Jensen, 1987).

Statistics. All numerical data are presented as mean values together with the standard deviation. The data were statistically evaluated by ANOVA using ANOVA. The statistical significance of the differences was assessed by Tukey test. Differences were considered to be statistically significant if the p-value was less than 0.05.
Results

In Vitro Evaluation

Coating efficacy. The uptake of \([^{125}\text{I}]\text{VEGF}\) by BCP ceramics was quantified after dissolution of the ceramics in 2ml 1M hydrochloric acid. The coating efficacy was calculated as the percentage of the protein immobilized onto the ceramics in relation to the amount of protein within the coating solution. The absolute uptake of \([^{125}\text{I}]\text{VEGF}\) in relation to the dry weight of the ceramics (ng/mg) was determined. Two independent uptake experiments with six samples for each experimental condition were conducted. The coating efficacy and the absolute uptake were higher with the co-precipitation technique as compared to superficial adsorption of the growth factor [Coating efficacy: Adsorption 1\(\mu\text{g/ml}: 39.7 \pm 0.3\%\), Co-precipitation 1\(\mu\text{g/ml}: 46.4 \pm 1.1\%\), \(p < 0.001\)]; absolute uptake: Adsorption 11.79 ± 0.64ng/mg ceramic (ceramic weight 84.4 ± 4.3mg), Co-precipitation: 13.92 ± 0.42ng/mg ceramic (ceramic weight 83.4 ± 3.0mg), \(p = 0.009\).

Passive and cell-mediated release of rhVEGF from BCP ceramics. The passive and the cell-mediated release of rhVEGF were monitored over 19 days (Fig. 1). Co-precipitation of rhVEGF improved the retention of the protein on the ceramic materials markedly. Within 19 days, 49.6 ± 3.7\% of rhVEGF co-precipitated to BCP ceramics were released passively. In contrast, adsorption of rhVEGF to BCP ceramics resulted in a passive release of 85.8 ± 4.2\% of the protein loaded onto the materials. The decrease of the passive release achieved with the co-precipitation technique was mainly attributed to a decrease of the burst release of rhVEGF within the first 24 hours. While adsorption of rhVEGF resulted in a burst release of 63.1 ± 4.0\%, the burst release found after co-precipitation was reduced to 28.2 ± 2.5\%.

Vascularization of biomaterials and bone formation. Biphasic calcium phosphate ceramic discs were implanted into critical size defects in mice. Vessel formation was

Fig. 1. The passive release of rhVEGF was determined over the course of 19 days with ELISA. rhVEGF was loaded onto BCP discs at a concentration of 1\(\mu\text{g/ml}\). rhVEGF was adsorbed (Adsorption) and co-precipitated (Co-prec.) onto the ceramic materials using coating volumes of 2.5ml. Mean values are represented ± standard deviation (n = 6 for each group), *\(p < 0.001\) vs. Adsorption.

Fig. 2. The passive release after incubation of ceramics in α-MEM culture media and the cell-mediated release in the presence of murine bone marrow cells were investigated over 19 days. Graphs show the release of rhVEGF loaded to the ceramics at a concentration of 1\(\mu\text{g/ml}\). Adsorption (a): Release of rhVEGF adsorbed to the surface of the ceramics with a volume of 2.5ml. Co-precipitation (b): Release of rhVEGF co-precipitated to the ceramics with 2.5ml calcium phosphate solution. Mean values are represented ± SD (n = 6 for each group), *\(p < 0.05\) vs. 1\(\mu\text{g/ml}\) rhVEGF (α-MEM) and vs. 1\(\mu\text{g/ml}\) rhVEGF (BMC, +CSF-1, -RANKL).

To assess the cell-mediated release of rhVEGF, BMCs were grown on the ceramics and differentiated to monocytes/macrophages and osteoclasts, respectively. The presence of BMCs on ceramics to which rhVEGF was adsorbed did not influence the release kinetics of the growth factor (Fig. 2A). In BCP ceramics co-precipitated with rhVEGF, BMCs cultured in the presence of CSF-1 and RANKL were able to promote the release of rhVEGF (Fig. 2B). From day 10, BMCs differentiated to osteoclasts gave rise to a cell-mediated release of rhVEGF. BMCs differentiated towards monocytes/macrophages did not influence the release kinetics of co-precipitated rhVEGF.

In Vivo Evaluation

Vascularization of biomaterials and bone formation. Biphasic calcium phosphate ceramic discs were implanted into critical size defects in mice. Vessel formation was
investigated by means of intravital microscopy on days 7, 14 and 28 and was evaluated qualitatively and quantitatively.

**Analysis of vessel formation.** All experimental groups showed similar functional capillary densities 7 days postoperatively. As shown in Figure 3, FCD increased significantly between day 7 and 14 in all experimental conditions. At day 14, ceramics adsorbed with rhVEGF at a concentration of 5 μg/mL and ceramics co-precipitated with rhVEGF at a concentration of 1 μg/mL and 5 μg/mL showed significantly higher FCDs as compared to the respective controls. rhVEGF adsorbed to BCP ceramics induced the formation of irregularly shaped, tortuous blood vessels (Fig. 4A). In contrast, the incorporation of rhVEGF into BCP ceramics resulted in the formation of less tortuous blood vessels with reduced branching (Fig. 4C). A significant increase of the FCD between day 14 and 28 was observed exclusively in ceramics co-precipitated with rhVEGF at a concentration of 5 μg/mL. Co-precipitation of rhVEGF at a concentration of 1 μg/mL and adsorption of rhVEGF at concentrations of 1 μg/mL and 5 μg/mL resulted in unchanged FCDs between day 14 and 28 postoperatively. The increase of FCD in ceramics to which rhVEGF was co-precipitated at a concentration of 5 μg/mL was not associated with a change in the morphology of the blood vessels. Between day 14 and 28, the vascular networks maintained their regularly organized conformation (Fig. 4C, D). At 28 days, ceramics co-precipitated with rhVEGF showed increased FCDs in comparison to their controls whereas adsorption of rhVEGF did not enhance FCD independent of the employed rhVEGF concentration.

**Vascular leakage.** To evaluate the functional integrity and the maturation of newly formed blood vessels, the vascular leakage was determined. The percent change of the grey values is shown in Table 1. Vascular leakage showed a significant increase between days 7 and 14 after implantation of BCP ceramics adsorbed with rhVEGF at a concentration of 5 μg/mL. The value of the vascular leakage at day 14 in this experimental group was significantly higher as compared to the values of the respective controls at the same time point. In all the other experimental groups treated with rhVEGF coated ceramics there was also a tendency towards increased values of vascular leakage after implantation of ceramic biomaterials found. However, the differences did not reach the level of statistical significance.

Quantitative Histomorphometry

**Quantitative analysis of bone formation.** The formation of new bone on the external surfaces and within the porous structure of the materials was quantified histomorphometrically as shown in Figure 5. Bone formation on the external surface of the materials did not differ among the experimental groups and between the experimental and control groups. As shown in Table 2,
Table 2: Quantitative histomorphometry of bone and vessel formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adsorption</th>
<th>Co-precipitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1μg/ml VEGF</td>
<td>5μg/ml VEGF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.08 ± 0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Bone pores (mm³)</td>
<td>0.10 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Bone external (mm³)</td>
<td>0.06 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC pores (%)</td>
<td>0.19 ± 0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC pores (%)</td>
<td>0.24 ± 0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Bone pores</td>
<td>19.7 ± 6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Bone external</td>
<td>14.2 ± 5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ρ Vessel (counts/mm³)</td>
<td>52.8 ± 14.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bone volumes, bone volume densities, bone interface contact, and vessel cross-sections were determined with quantitative histomorphometry using Cavalieri’s method. V Bone pores: volume of bone deposited within the macropores; V Bone external: volume of bone formed outside of the ceramics; VBone pores: volume density ratio of bone deposited within the macropores [bone volume in macropores/volume of macropores]; VBone external: volume density ratio of bone formed outside of the ceramics [new bone volume/defect volume-ceramic volume]; BIC pores: bone-interface contact ratio for the macropore surface, expressed as a percentage; BIC external: bone-interface contact ratio for the external surface of the ceramics, expressed as a percentage; ρ Vessel: number of vessel cross-sections per volume unit. Mean values ± standard deviation are represented (n = 6 for each group). * p < 0.05 vs. Control, † p < 0.05 vs. Adsorption 1 μg/ml rhVEGF, ‡ p < 0.05 vs. Adsorption 5 μg/ml rhVEGF, † † p < 0.05 vs. Control. Adsorption of rhVEGF co-precipitated to BCP ceramics at a concentration of 5μg/ml enhanced the formation of new bone within the pores of the materials significantly. Osseointegration of BCP ceramics was determined with the BIC ratio. 28 days after implantation of the ceramic materials, BIC was significantly higher in BCP ceramics co-precipitated with 5μg/ml rhVEGF as compared to controls and co-precipitation with rhVEGF at a concentration of 1μg/ml. At a concentration of 1μg/ml the co-precipitation of rhVEGF did not enhance bone formation and osseointegration. Superficial adsorption of rhVEGF did not promote bone formation and osseointegration irrespective of the concentration applied.

Quantitative analysis of vessel formation. To verify the results of biomaterial vascularization obtained from in vivo functional capillary density measurements, vessel formation was quantified histomorphometrically. As shown in table 2, the number of vessel cross-sections per mm³ was similar in ceramics adsorbed with rhVEGF at concentrations of 1μg/ml and 5μg/ml and the respective control group. rhVEGF co-precipitated to BCP ceramics at a concentration of 5μg/ml significantly promoted the formation of new blood vessels within the implantation site. Co-precipitation with rhVEGF at a concentration of 1μg/ml showed a trend towards enhanced vessel formation but the differences did not reach the level of statistical significance.

Discussion

Angiogenesis is a prerequisite for bone formation. The newly formed vasculature supplies the site of bone formation with oxygen, nutrients, soluble factors, and cells. (Guenther et al., 1996; Harper and Klagsbrun, 1999). Vascularization also seems to be of particular importance for the healing process following the implantation of bone substitute materials (Kaczler and Oreffo, 2008). The establishment of a dense vascular network is essential for bone formation, osseointegration and the subsequent material replacement by newly formed bone.

Due to the pivotal contribution of angiogenesis during bone healing, the local application of angiogenic growth factors such as VEGF has gained increasing attention. Local delivery of VEGF from growth factor loaded biomaterials was shown to promote angiogenesis and the healing of critical size bone defects (Clarke et al., 2007; Geiger et al., 2005; Kaigler et al., 2006). However, the mode of VEGF delivery seems to influence the efficacy of local VEGF administration critically. The formation of poorly perfused fragile capillaries without connection to the pre-existing circulation as well as the development of angiomata due to immoderate VEGF stimulation has been reported (Chang et al., 2000; Drake and Little, 1995). Diffusive VEGF release from PEG-hydrogels induced malformed capillary growth in chick chorioallantoic assays (CAM). In contrast, prolonged release of hydrogel matrix conjugated VEGF induced the formation of regularly organized vasculature demonstrating the benefits of a sustained exposure of the vasculature to the growth factor (Zisch et al., 2003).

We have previously shown that the incorporation of bovine serum albumin into a layer of calcium phosphate increased the retention of the protein on calcium phosphate ceramics (Liu et al., 2001; Wernike et al., 2010). Consistent with the previous study, the incorporation of rhVEGF into a layer of calcium phosphate reduced the initial burst
release of the growth factor found with superficial adsorption from 63% to 28%. Furthermore, a sustained osteoclast-mediated release of low concentrations of rhVEGF was achieved with the co-precipitation technique. In contrast, monocytes/macrophages did not induce the release of rhVEGF. The release of rhVEGF in the presence of BMCs treated with CSF-1 only was identical to that found after incubation of the ceramics in α-MEM culture media indicating that preformed osteoclasts did not contribute to the release of rhVEGF in vitro. The cell-mediated release depended on the presence of RANKL initiating the differentiation of BMCs towards the osteoclast lineage on the ceramic materials. These results demonstrate that the incorporation of rhVEGF into calcium phosphate ceramics provides the possibility to retain the protein on the material sufficiently and supply the implantation site with low concentrations of VEGF for a prolonged period of time.

In accordance with previous studies, VEGF promoted biomaterial vascularization in a dose dependent manner in vivo (Ennett et al., 2006; Geiger et al., 2005; Kleinheinz et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2004; Patel et al., 2008). Furthermore, the promotion of angiogenesis by VEGF depended on the mode of growth factor delivery. The stimulation of angiogenesis by VEGF released from ceramic materials superficially adsorbed with the growth factor was temporarily restricted to the first 2 weeks after biomaterial implantation. Implants adsorbed with 5μg/ml rhVEGF strongly promoted vessel formation between days 7 and 14. However, there was no significant promotion of

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**Fig. 4.** Vessel formation was visualized with intravital microscopy. Fluorescence images of BCP ceramics implanted into the cranial window preparation were taken after intravenous injection of FITC dextran. BCP ceramics were superficially adsorbed (a,b) or co-precipitated (c,d) with rhVEGF at a coating concentration of 5μg/ml. Images show the time course of vessel formation at day 14 (a,c) and at day 28 (b,d), respectively. Scale bars represent 1mm.
Fig. 5. Light micrographs of 300-μm-thick vertical sections through cranial defects, 28 days after surgery. The sections were surface-stained with McNeal’s tetrachrome. Ceramic (cer); newly-formed bone (*); fibrous tissue (#). (a) Control ceramic (co-precipitation technique performed with vehicle control solution, no rhVEGF loading). The pores of the materials contained only small deposits of newly-formed bone. Large parts of the porous structure were filled with fibrous tissue. (b) Ceramic adsorbed with rhVEGF at a concentration of 5 μg/ml. The extent of new bone formation was similar to that observed in control animals. (c) Ceramic co-precipitated with rhVEGF at a concentration of 5 μg/ml. Bone formation within the pores of the materials was more pronounced as compared to the respective control group. Scale bars: 100 μm.
angiogenesis found subsequent to day 14, which was most likely due to the lack of biologically active VEGF at the implantation site. In contrast, the long-term release of rhVEGF achieved with protein incorporation induced a sustained promotion of angiogenesis. rhVEGF co-precipitated onto calcium phosphate ceramics at a concentration of 5μg/ml induced a significant enhancement of FCD between days 7 and 14 as well as between days 14 and 28 after biomaterial implantation. Hence, the sustained induction of angiogenic processes seemed to depend on the long-term availability of VEGF at the biomaterial implantation site.

During physiological bone healing, the peak expression of VEGF is reached around day 10. Afterwards, VEGF expression decreases gradually (Komatsu and Hadjiargyrou, 2004; Uchida et al., 2003). This pattern of VEGF expression is accompanied by the formation of new blood vessels at the fracture site and a subsequent vessel regression after day 14 (Kleinheinz et al., 2005). VEGF delivery over a period of more than 2 weeks does not reflect the physiological expression pattern of the growth factor and may interfere with the physiological cascade of bone healing. Long-term administration of VEGF may impair ossification and subsequent remodeling of the primary woven bone to lamellar bone. However, it has been shown previously that the promotion of angiogenesis with local delivery of VEGF increased bone density in mandible defects although vessel regression was protracted (Kleinheinz et al., 2005). With respect to bone defect repair in association with bone substitute materials, a prolonged stimulation of angiogenesis may be required to achieve sufficient vascular supply within the 3-dimensional structure of the implant.

The mode of VEGF delivery did not only influence the extent of blood vessel formation but also the morphology and the functionality of the new vasculature. Within the first 14 days rhVEGF adsorbed to BCP ceramics induced the formation of tortuous, immature blood vessels with distinct vascular leakage. In contrast, blood vessels formed upon implantation of ceramic materials co-precipitated with rhVEGF had a more organized and mature appearance. During the entire course of investigation newly formed vessels were well organized and vessel leakage was not enhanced indicating advanced maturation and improved functionality. These findings are in accordance with previous studies investigating VEGF-mediated angiogenesis. Unregulated overexpression of VEGF induced hemangioma formation and fatal vascular leakage whereas the prolonged presence of low concentrations of VEGF resulted in the formation of normal blood vessels (Lee et al., 2000; Zisch et al., 2003).

The capacity of VEGF to improve the vasculization of polymeric and calcium phosphate based bone substitute materials has been shown previously (Clarke et al., 2007; Geiger et al., 2005; Geiger et al., 2007; Kaigler et al., 2006; Peng et al., 2002). However, reports on the effect of local VEGF on bone formation are controversial. Some studies described VEGF to enhance the formation of bone; others were not able to demonstrate significant effects of VEGF on bone formation (Clarke et al., 2007; Geiger et al., 2005; Geiger et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2005; Kaigler et al., 2006; Peng et al., 2005; Samee et al., 2008). In the present study, quantitative histomorphometry revealed that adsorption of rhVEGF at concentrations of 1μg/ml and 5μg/ml and co-precipitation of the growth factor at a concentration of 1μg/ml did not improve material osseointegration nor bone formation. Solely the incorporation of rhVEGF into BCP ceramics at a concentration of 5μg/ml enhanced bone formation in vivo. These results demonstrate that the local amount as well as the release kinetics of VEGF is of crucial importance for the efficacy of local VEGF delivery to induce bone formation. The mechanisms by which VEGF promotes osseous defect repair include enhanced vascularization leading to an increased supply with osteoprogenitor cells, an increased expression of endothelial cell derived soluble factors regulating osteoblast differentiation, and the direct stimulation of osteoblast migration and differentiation by VEGF (Bouletreau et al., 2002; Clarkson et al., 2005; Berber et al., 1999; Grellier et al., 2005; Mayr-Wolffart et al., 2002; Street et al., 2002). These mechanisms were not investigated within the scope of the present study. It is likely that the increase in bone formation found with the sustained release of VEGF was not only mediated via the stimulation of angiogenesis but also by the stimulatory effects of VEGF on osteoblast migration and differentiation. The present results indicate that VEGF primarily promoted biomaterial vascularization while the impact of the growth factor on bone formation was less distinct. Clarkson et al. showed that VEGF did not directly stimulate osteoblast function but that VEGF promoted the activity of osteoblasts via the stimulation of endothelial cells (Clarkin et al., 2008). This indirect action might be a rationale for the requirement of higher concentrations of VEGF to induce bone formation compared to the promotion of angiogenesis.

The sustained release of VEGF appears to be an important factor in the promotion of vascularization and bone formation. At concentrations of 5μg/ml, rhVEGF significantly enhanced the formation of new bone within the pores of the ceramic materials. However, only 23 % of the total pore volume of the materials was filled with newly formed bone although vascularization was well established. These results indicate that the exclusive delivery of a single angiogenic agent may not be sufficient to promote bone formation effectively. A co-delivery of angiogenic and osteogenic factors may be required to promote both biomaterial vascularization and bone formation efficiently without the need for dose escalation of a single agent. BMP-2 may be well suited for a co-delivery with VEGF. The growth factor is known for its osteoinductive activity. Furthermore, BMP-2 was shown to promote angiogenesis via the stimulation of VEGF expression by osteoblasts (Deckers et al., 2002). Additionally, VEGF may act synergistically with BMP-2 by indirectly stimulating osteoblast activity through the expression of soluble osteogenic factors by endothelial cells (Clarkin et al., 2008). Recent in vivo studies showed that the combination of VEGF and BMPs synergistically enhanced the effects of either growth factor on bone formation and healing of critical size defects of mice calvariae (Huang et al., 2005; Peng et al., 2005; Peng et al., 2005; Peng et al., 2005; Peng et al., 2005; Peng et al., 2005;
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al., 2002). Future experiments will therefore aim to apply the co-precipitation technique to the co-delivery of VEGF and BMP-2 in order to achieve a long-term delivery of both agents and use their therapeutic potential more efficiently.

In conclusion, the co-precipitation technique improved the retention of rhVEGF on BCP ceramics and achieved a sustained cell-mediated liberation of the growth factor in vitro. In vivo, the modification of the release kinetics increased the efficacy of rhVEGF delivery in the promotion of biomaterial vascularization and bone formation. The data demonstrate that a prolonged bioavailability of VEGF is beneficial for bone regeneration.

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