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Changes in the stiffness of human mesenchymal stem cells with the progress of cell death as measured by atomic force microscopy ☆, ☆☆

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ABSTRACT

This note reports observations of the change of stiffness of human mesenchymal stem cells (hMSCs) with the progress of cell death as measured by AFM. hMSC with impaired membrane, dead and viable cells were labelled with Annexin V and Propidium Iodide after 24 h cold storage, followed by AFM measurement and Young's modulus of cells was derived. Viable hMSCs have a Young's modulus (E) in the range of 0.81–1.13 kPa and consistent measurement was observed when different measurement locations were chosen. E of cells with partially impaired membrane was 0.69 ± 0.17 kPa or in the range of 2.04–4.74 kPa, depending upon the measurement locations. With the loss of membrane integrity, though there was no variation on measured E between different locations, a mixed picture of cell stiffness was observed as indicated by cells with E as low as 0.09 ± 0.03 kPa, in a mid-range of 4.62 ± 0.67 kPa, and the highest of up to 48.98 ± 19.80 kPa. With the progress of cell death, the highest stiffness was noticed for cells showing a more granular appearance; also the lowest stiffness for cells with vacuole appearance. Findings from this study indicate that cell stiffness is significantly altered with the progress of cell death.

1. Introduction

The influence of aging (Zahn et al., 2011; Lieber et al., 2004; Starodubtseva, 2011), disease pathophysiology (Lee and Lim, 2007) and chemotherapy (Targosz-Korecka et al., 2012) on the mechanical properties of primary and cancer cells (Fuhrmann et al., 2011) have been investigated by micro-rheological measurements using magnetic particles, measurement of elasticity using AFM, micropipette aspiration, and optical stretching (Di Carlo, 2012). Differences in cell mechanical properties of malignant and benign breast tumours have also been observed (Li et al., 2008), and furthermore cancer cells with a highly invasive phenotype (Hur et al., 2011), or immortalised cells (Lulevich et al., 2010), have shown different deformability when compared to primary cells. All these findings have inspired further research in label-free biophysical measurement using lab-on-chip technology to demonstrate the possibility of cell classification based on deformability used as a mechanical biomarker (Hur et al., 2011; Di Carlo, 2012).

With the development of stem cell technology, it has been recognised that cell mechanical properties are correlated with not only aging and pathophysiology of diseases but also the differentiation potential of stem cells (Gonzalez-Cruz et al., 2012). Morphological change of apoptotic cells (Hessler et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2011) and change in the mechanical properties of stem cells after osteogenic (Titushkin and Cho, 2007) and cardiac differentiation (Tan et al., 2012) have been demonstrated by AFM measurement. Our previous work (Nikolaev et al., 2012) has shown the synergistic effect of cold storage duration and vibration-induced mechanical cell damage. It is well known that prolonged cold storage induces apoptotic and necrotic cell death, but it is still not clear whether cell stiffness is also altered with the progress of cell death, hence, leading to susceptibility to mechanical cell damage. To correlate the progress of cell death with mechanical damage, in the current study AFM nano-indentation was applied to identify the stiffness of single suspended viable, dead and membrane-impaired hMSCs after cold storage. Further, all of the reported AFM measurements to date have only been carried out on immobilised cells or cells anchored to substrates. This study is the first time that AFM measurements of single suspended cells have been achieved without using any immobilisation technique to show the stiffness differences consequent on the progress of cell death.

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2. Materials and method

2.1. Cell suspension preparation for AFM

hMSC suspensions were prepared following the same procedures as in our previous work (Nikolaev et al., 2012). Bone marrow-derived hMSCs (Lonza) suspensions collected at passage 5 and stored in a fridge overnight were used for AFM (CellHesion® 200, JPK, Germany) measurement of single cell elastic modulus. Annexin V apoptosis analysis (Invitrogen, UK) was applied after the cold storage and before imaging to identify cells with impaired membranes (Annexin V+, Propidium Iodide (PI)−), dead cells (Annexin V+ and PI+), and viable cells (Annexin V−, PI−). Bright field and fluorescence images were taken with an Imaging Source camera under comparable exposure conditions of 67 ms and 550 ms, respectively.

2.2. AFM measurement of single cell mechanical properties

The AFM (CellHesion® 200, JPK, Germany) was combined with an inverted fluorescent microscope (AxioObserver, Zeiss) with Hg-lamp illumination to localise cells at different stages of death as indicated by the fluorescent staining of Annexin V apoptosis analysis and to guide the position of the tip of an AFM cantilever. Cell compression was accomplished at room temperature and in the presence of fluorescent dyes.

An MLCT AUHW cantilever (Bruker Corp.) with a nominal spring constant of $k=0.06$ N/m, and with 35° front and side angle and pyramidal tips of 2.5–3.5 μm was positioned above the selected cell and the tip approached the cell from a height of several microns. Force calibration of the sensitivity of the individual cantilever was achieved by using a thermal noise method within the JPK integrated software. Compression of selected single cells was carried out through the steps of approach, contact and retraction, and force versus distance curves were obtained for the corresponding steps. The CellHesion® 200 is a tip scanner with an extra long z-working range of up to 100 μm. The typical approach/retract settings were identical with a 10 μm extend/retract length, a pixel rate of 2048 Hz and a speed of 2 μm/s. The system was operated under closed loop control. After reaching the contact force selected the cantilever was retracted. In all cases the retraction length of 10 μm was sufficient to overcome any adhesion between tip and sample, and to make sure that the cantilever was completely retracted from the sample surface.

Young's modulus was derived by fitting curves extracted from 10 to 20 measurements on two locations on a single cell with a Hertz model. Typically, a contact force between 1 to 5 nN, and a speed of 2 μm/s was applied. The standard approach was to probe the geometric centre of the cell first. The adjustment of the position of the cantilever above the sample was carried out under the microscope by controlling the position of the AFM-Head via micrometre precision screws. Usually, the second probe location was selected 2–3 μm away from the first position, or one bleb on the cell surface observed was selected as the second position.

2.3. Data analysis

The Hertz model is based on the assumption that samples are isotropic linear elastic solids and that the indentation depth is much smaller than the characteristic radius of the body (Rosenbluth et al., 2006). Such an assumption is usually not adequately met for individual cells due to the presence of structural components and spatial heterogeneity, especially for anchored cells (Jacobs et al., 2013). However, in the current study an individual cell in suspension was used and the spatial variation due to the presence of stress fibres in the cytoskeleton of anchored cells was avoided. Diameters of suspended viable hMSCs were in the range of 10 to 13 μm, consequently the small indentation assumption was valid for the indentation depth of 400 nm, equivalent to less than 4% of the height of the cells, and could be treated as having infinite depth and width. In this study the selection of indentation depth of about 400 nm also ensured clearance between the cantilever and the surface of the cell (Harris and Charras, 2011).

The original Hertz model was an approximation for the elastic contact and small deformations of two spheres in contact. In the AFM literature, however, the term is often used to refer to a family of different models that have been adapted for simple indentation geometries. The key parameter that is usually adapted is the radius of the contact region for a pyramidal indenter, in this case the Bilodeau model was used (BILODEAU, 1992). Since the Hertz models also have circular symmetry, a further approximation was made for an ideal regular four-sided pyramid square-shaped tip through a modification to the cone model with an effective radius of contact $a=0.709\delta \tan\alpha$ (Rico et al., 2005; JPK Instrument AG, 2012) and the following equation used to process the data.

$$F = 0.7453\frac{E}{1-\nu^2}\delta^2 \tan\alpha$$

where F is force, E is Young's modulus, ν is Poisson's ratio, δ is indentation (tip sample separation), and α is face angle of a pyramid.

Usually a Poisson's ratio of 0.3 (soft tissue), 0.4 or 0.5 (an incompressible material) is used and the best-match of experimental and modelling data has been reported when both cytoplasm and nucleus are treated as incompressible (Ofek et al., 2009), thus a Poisson's ratio of 0.5 was applied in the data analysis for the current study. The curve is fitted using a least squares fit with the Levenberg–Marquardt algorithm. The contact point, baseline and Young's modulus values are all fitted simultaneously. Since the contact point is a crucial parameter, the extend curve is generally used. In some cases there is a tilt in the baseline that is corrected by the function of "Offset And Tilt Correction" built into the JPK data processing software usually up to 2 μm away from the contact point.

3. Results and discussion

Whilst most of the research on the mechanical properties of a single cell has measured when cells are attached to surfaces, Hur et al., propose that single cells in suspension behave more like viscous droplets rather than rigid elastic objects (Hur et al., 2011). Also, when compared to cells attached to substrates, suspension cells are much sub-cellular homogenous due to the lack of cytoskeletal tension fibres and there should be little lateral dependence of measured Young's modulus. However, the validity of the assumption that the cell is a homogenous object depends on the indentation depth and with the increase of indentation depth this assumption becomes less valid due to the presence of cellular components and compliance of sub-cellular layers, especially the cortical actin organisation, and this could result in a variation of Young's modulus observed (Kasas et al., 2013). To avoid such situations, spherical indenters were initially used to apply force to a wider sample area to obtain an overall perspective of the behaviour of the whole cell body. To avoid any artificial effect from non-controllable bias, a total of 33 cells were measured 10–20 times at one or two locations on the cell membrane surface. Analysis from 166 data points (see the online supplementary materials Fig. S1) indicated the change of cell stiffness with the progress of cell death and the awareness of variation of stiffness with the location of measurement for early apoptotic and blebbing cells (300–500 Pa and 1100–1500 Pa). In order to capture information at a higher resolution and with more precise control of location on single cells, the pyramidal indenter was applied at different locations (Harris and Charras, 2011). Hence, the pyramidal indenter fitted the Hertz model with a small indentation no larger than 400 nm was used to derive the stiffness of cells rather than those determined from a large indentation.

Typical examples of force distance curves of indentation for viable cells and stiffer, least stiff and stiffest cells within the sub-

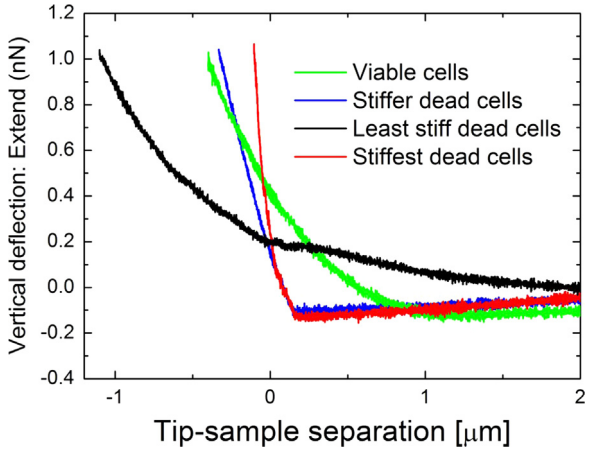

Fig. 1. A typical force distance curve measuring the stiffness of a human mesenchymal stem cell. Working from the right hand edge, the linear portion shows the approach of the cantilever followed by its deflection when in contact with the cell. This shows the stiffness of viable cells, and stiffer, least stiff and stiffest cells within the sub-population of dead cells.