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Ex-vivo assessment and non-invasive in vivo imaging of internal hemorrhages in *Aga2/+* mutant mice

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ABSTRACT

Mutations in type I collagen genes (COL1A1/2) typically lead to *Osteogenesis imperfecta*, the most common heritable cause of skeletal fractures and bone deformation in humans. Heterozygous *Col1a1*$^{Aga2/+}$, animals with a dominant mutation in the terminal C-propeptide domain of type I collagen develop typical skeletal hallmarks and internal hemorrhages starting from 6 day after birth. The disease progression for *Aga2/+* mice, however, is not uniform differing between severe phenotype lethal at the 6–11th day of life, and moderate-to-severe one with survival to adulthood. Herein we investigated whether a new modality that combines X-ray computer tomography with fluorescence tomography in one hybrid system can be employed to study internal bleedings in relation to bone fractures and obtain insights into disease progression. The disease phenotype was characterized on *Aga2/+* vs. wild type mice between 6 and 9 days postnatal. Anatomical and functional findings obtained in-vivo were contrasted to the ex-vivo appearance of the same tissues under cryo-slicing.

1. Introduction

Osteogenesis imperfecta (OI) is the most common heritable cause of skeletal fractures and bone deformations in humans. The more prevalent autosomal dominant forms of OI are caused by primary defects in type I collagen genes (*COL1A1*/*COL1A2*), whereas autosomal recessive forms are caused by deficiency of proteins which interact with type I procollagen for post-translational modification and/or folding [1,2]. The *Aga2* (abnormal gait 2) mouse model for human OI bearing a mutation in the corresponding terminal C-propeptide region of COL1A1 was recently discovered [3]. *Col1a1*$^{Aga2/+}$ animals demonstrated altered skeletal phenotype already at birth and possessed markedly increased bone turnover as well as disrupted native collagen network. The disease progression for *Col1a1*$^{Aga2/+}$ mice with the same genotype were not uniform. Some of the animals were severely affected (*Aga2*^{severe}) developing a lethal phenotype until the 6–11th day of life, which was characterized by thin calvaria, hemorrhages in different regions including thorax, joint cavities and brain, scoliosis, provisional rib and long bone calluses and deformities, body size deficits [3]. Other animals displayed dystrophic limb(s), long bone and pelvis fractures and moderately reduced body size, but survived to adulthood and were classified as moderately-to-severely affected (*Aga2*^{mild}). One of the hallmarks detectable on the histological sections was the appearance of internal hemorrhages in the thorax area [4], which reflected the excessive bleedings and easy formation of hemorrhages, reported for different patients suffering from OI [5].

Post-mortem methods of analysis including assessment of histological sections and immunohistochemistry typically confirms the presence of internal bleeding but cannot capture the time-course of disease development. Moreover, ex-vivo analysis is generally invasive and it therefore may induce discrepancies on the in-vivo conditions. Among various in vivo imaging techniques that could reveal lung bleeding in-vivo, Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) or Ultrasound Imaging (US) are not ideally suited for imaging the lung. Nuclear imaging methods typically utilize short-lived radio-chemicals that make longitudinal imaging challenging. Instead we selected to investigate herein a novel hybrid fluorescence molecular tomography (FMT) and X-ray computer tomography (XCT) system [6]. FMT–XCT is an imaging method developed for three-dimensional in-vivo visualization of anatomical and functional tissue parameters [7], and offers a range of new capabilities for studying biological functions. One of the key advantages for this imaging modality is the seamless co-registration of XCT anatomical and FMT functional contrast information [8,9], which could be utilized to study lung bleedings.

Correspondingly, we administered a vascular fluorescence contrast agent to evaluate internal hemorrhages in the thorax area of *Col1a1*$^{Aga2/+}$ and wild type (WT) mice in order to better understand

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the disease development between 6th and 9th days postnatal. We explored whether FMT–XCT can be employed to characterize lung bleedings in-vivo, through the intact animal and differentiate between severe and moderate disease phenotypes. To confirm the in-vivo findings we subjected animals to a three-dimensional fluorescence cryo-slicing imaging protocol recently developed [10], which imaged the animals ex vivo in high resolution.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Animals, contrast agents and validation experiments

Col1a1$^{Aga2/+}$ mice aged between 6 and 9 days postnatal [3] were used in this work. 2 nmoles of AngioSense (Perkin Elmer Waltham, MA, USA) contrast agent was injected intraperitoneally (i.p.) 1.5 h prior to the imaging through fluorescence molecular tomography coupled with X-ray computer tomography (FMT–XCT). AngioSense is a near-infrared in vivo blood pool fluorescent imaging agent, which can remain in the vasculature for several hours. During the imaging, the animals were anesthetized by isoflurane inhalation. All procedures with animals were performed in agreement with Helmholtz Zentrum Munich and Government of Bavaria as well as international laws and regulations. After in-vivo imaging, the animals were euthanized and frozen to −80 °C for further validation and analysis.

Frozen animals were sliced through the thorax area and imaged every 250 μm using a Multispectral Epi-Illumination Cryoslicing Imaging system as described elsewhere [10]. The multispectral epi-fluorescence imaging system included a 250 W white light source (KL2500 LCD, Carl Zeiss AG, Oberkochen, Germany) coupled via a flexible fiber bundle to a filter wheel (FW102B, Thorlabs, Newton, NJ, USA), which controlled the selection of excitation filters. A sensitive, high-resolution CCD camera (PCO AG, Donaupark, Kelheim, Germany), a zoom objective (Nikkor 24–85 mm, Tokyo, Japan), and a custom 10-position filter wheel (Cairn Research Ltd., Kent, UK) capture reflectance and fluorescence images at multiple spectral bands with a field of view that can range from 64 × 46 to 18 × 13 mm. The imaging system was mounted onto a rotary cryotome (CM 1950, Leica Microsystems GmbH, Wetzlar, Germany). Specially designed software and algorithms developed using Matlab (Mathworks, Natick, MA, USA) and LabView (National Instruments, Austin, TX, USA) control the sectioning procedure of the cryotome and trigger the image acquisition of the optical system [10]. The fluorescence images were normalized with respect to the exposure time for all the animals studied. Fluorescence images obtained from each slide are presented as color overlays over grayscale photographs of the same slice.

2.2. FMT–XCT hybrid system

The imaging of the mice was done using a prototype FMT–XCT hybrid imaging system developed by our group [8,9,11]. Briefly, the hybrid imaging system integrated a fluorescence molecular tomography FMT [7] into a commercial micro X-ray computed tomography system (eXplore Locus, General Electric HealthCare, London, ON, Canada). The FMT and XCT components were mounted on a common rotating gantry of 1 m diameter. FMT imaging could be performed in two wavelengths, by employing two laser diodes sources at 670 nm and 750 nm (B&W Tek, Newark, DE) with maximum optical power of 300 mW. Fluorescence images at different wavelengths were obtained by switching appropriate band-pass filters in-front of a CCD camera (Pixis 512; Roper Scientific Princeton NJ) which was placed on the opposite site of the optical source to image mice in transillumination mode, over 360° angles. The mice were anesthetized by isoflurane inhalation during all in-vivo FMT–XCT imaging experiments. Image reconstruction was based on an inversion technique that utilizes XCT priors in modeling photon propagation in tissues and during the inversion process in order to improve the accuracy of the FMT problem, as reported in Ref. [6].

3. Results

AngioSense is a fluorescent in-vivo blood pool imaging agent, which enables visualization of blood vessels and angiogenesis. In case of bleeding event AngioSense leaves the vasculature and labels the blood depots, which are being developed at the time of experiment, i.e. active bleeding sites. Initially, we experimentally defined the AngioSense application scheme suitable for the analysis of internal hemorrhages in *Aga2/+* mice (for the details, see Section 2).

Fig. 1 shows ex-vivo analysis of AngioSense fluorescence distribution in 6-day-old mouse pups (red color superimposed on the black and white cross sections; the color intensity corresponds to the fluorescence signal intensity, see the scale). Sites of rib breakages and remodeling as a primary hallmark of OI were never found in WT, but were clearly visible in *Aga2/+* mice (Fig. 1, asterisks). Detectable levels of AngioSense fluorescence were also not found in the thorax area of WT animals. Intensive active bleeding sites on the contrary were shown in *Col1a1*$^{Aga2/+}$ mice by AngioSense fluorescence signal, as was depicted on Fig. 1, AngioSense. The *Col1a1*$^{Aga2/+}$ mice with identical genotype demonstrated variability in spatial signal distribution. Mildly affected *Aga2*^{mild} showed the tendency to the localization of the bleeding sites in the edges of lungs and in the vicinity of bone remodeling (Fig. 1, *Aga2*^{mild}, arrows) along with lower bleeding intensity in the rest of the thorax. *Aga2*^{severe} mice, which showed signs of severe phenotype, e.g. reduced weight and ataxic behavior demonstrated higher AngioSense intensity and more diffuse bleeding pattern showing massive internal bleedings in the whole thorax area (Fig. 1, *Aga2*^{severe}). The major bleedings could be seen as blood depots (Fig. 1, arrows), but analysis of color images (Fig. 1, Color) did not show the active hemorrhage distribution, which confirms the discrepancies between blood depots and the bleeding sites specifically visualized upon application of the contrast agent.

Fig. 2 summarizes the AngioSense fluorescence distribution analysis ex vivo in 9-day-old pups. Similar to 6-day-old ones, neither bone remodeling areas nor AngioSense fluorescence were detected in the WT. Profound difference in the distribution of active bleedings visualized by the contrast agent was observed for *Col1a1*$^{Aga2/+}$ mice. Fig. 2 shows that contrast agent level in thorax of mildly affected *Aga2*^{mild} mice was lower than for the 6-day-old mice (AngioSense panel). Major bleedings (Fig. 2, the arrows and the color for the signal intensity) were concentrated in the vicinity to the bone remodeling sites (Fig. 2, asterisks) and on the edge of the lungs. Different pattern was seen for the *Aga2*^{severe} mice. Intensive fluorescence was found in the periphery of thorax area (Fig. 2, AngioSense, *Aga2*^{severe}, arrows), but not in the middle of thorax area as it was observed for the 6-day-old animals.

The difference in bleeding pattern could be best recognized on the 3D reconstruction of the cryo-slicing image stacks. The fluorescence signal was concentrated in the vicinity of bone remodeling for *Aga2*^{mild} mice and very intense fluorescence was present through the periphery of the whole thorax area for *Aga2*^{severe} animals (Fig. 2, AngioSense: 3D reconstruction). The lower panel of the Fig. 2 shows the corresponding color images. The analysis of the color images along with visual control during the slicing experiment showed a lot of blood in the lungs of severely affected mice (Fig. 2, *Aga2*^{severe}), which also corresponded with histological analysis. As for 6-day-old pups, color images did not reveal active bleeding sites visualized upon AngioSense application.