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The effect of angiotensin (1-7) on bone marrow stem cells

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Chapter 6

Summary and perspectives

Myocardial infarction [MI] is the major cause of death in western countries. The loss of cardiomyocytes and insufficient blood supply are the most frequent causes for the development of chronic heart failure [CHF]. Current therapy in patients after MI is focused on shortening the time of ischemia by restoration of coronary blood flow and the prevention of ventricular remodeling and development of heart failure. Despite development of new pharmacological agents mortality rate in the patients with CHF is still very high ¹. Moreover, mechanical revascularization carries the risk of restenosis. Stem cell therapy either to regenerate myocytes or to stimulate neovascularization has opened a promising avenue for treatment of CHF. In addition, pharmacological agents such as statins, erythropoietin, and antagonists of the renin angiotensin system [RAS] show stimulation of angiogenesis or vasculogenesis via activating of bone marrow derived endothelial progenitor cells [BM-EPCs] ²⁻⁴. Therefore, the proper combined utilizations of stem cells and pharmacological treatment may give rise to synergistic effects and thus improve therapeutic outcome in CHF. Expanding research in this field has explored new pathways and mechanisms in cell-based neovascularization.

Angiotensin-(1-7) [Ang-(1-7)], an endogenous heptapeptide hormone, has been demonstrated to counteract many of detrimental actions of Ang II in the cardiovascular system ⁵. Several studies demonstrated that Ang-(1-7) promoted recovery of hematopoietic fraction in bone marrow after chemotherapy in patients ^{6, 7}. Based on above findings, one can imagine that Ang-(1-7) may beneficially affect angiogenic progenitors in bone marrow. As elucidated in introduction, the present thesis is focused on evaluation of the effect of Ang-[1-7] on BM-EPCs in the treatment of CHF. As previous studies in our group have demonstrated, Ang-(1-7) significantly improved global cardiac function and restored systemic endothelial function in a rat acute MI model and, in an aortic in-stent stenosis model, Ang-(1-7) markedly reduced neointima formation ^{8, 9}. Hence, a role for Ang-(1-7) in facilitating cell-based therapy in heart failure seems feasible, and will be the main topic of the present thesis.

Studies on the mechanism of the cardioprotective effects of Ang-(1-7) are described in **Chapter 2**. Since Ang-(1-7) influences hematopoiesis and increases neovascularization in skin wounds ¹⁰, it is possible that this peptide is a component of the regulatory system for angioblasts and further endothelial progenitor cells. To test this hypothesis, firstly, we examined *in-vitro* effects of Ang-(1-7) treatment on bone marrow derived-mononuclear cells [BM-MNCs] from normal and Mas receptor knock-out mice. Our results supported this hypothesis and showed that Ang-(1-7) treatment preferentially stimulated the EPC fraction of BM-MNCs in wild type mice, but this activation was not present in Mas-receptor knock-out bone marrow. Secondly, data from our collaborating group in Germany showed that Ang-(1-7) administration profoundly improved cardiac function in mice MI model. In order to elucidate whether Ang-(1-7) has a direct effect on cardiomyocytes, an Ang-(1-7) transgenic mouse model, specifically overexpressing Ang-(1-7) in cardiomyocytes, was used. Interestingly, Ang-(1-7) produced directly in the heart did not display the beneficial effects on recovery

from MI, as was seen with the systemically delivered peptide, suggesting that the cardiac protection of Ang-(1-7) does not directly affect the heart itself. In this study we demonstrated that systemic infusion of Ang-(1-7) markedly increased the number of c-kit⁺ and vascular endothelial growth factor [VEGF⁺] cells in cardiac tissue post MI. c-kit⁺ cells have been demonstrated to differentiate mainly into endothelial cells and smooth muscle cells and, to a lesser extent, into cardiomyocytes^{11, 12}. Thus, the cardioprotective effects of Ang-(1-7) could be attributed to a stimulated recruitment or improved differentiation of bone marrow stem cells into angiogenic cells in the cardiac tissue post MI, rather than a direct effect on cardiac tissue itself. Taken together, our data clearly showed that Ang-(1-7) can stimulate bone marrow derived progenitor cells both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, which could have contributed to the improved cardiac performance post MI.

In **Chapter 3** and **Chapter 4** of this thesis, we explored therapeutic potential of cultured BM-EPCs and Ang-(1-7) pretreated BM-EPCs in postinfarction remodeling. The pivotal point of cell therapy relies on a safe delivery approach with high cell density and homogeneous cell distribution in the targeted organ. To address this issue, we developed a delivery technique to transplant BM-EPCs into healthy rat hearts via the intracoronary route. We tracked BM-EPCs by labeling with Brdu before transplantation. *In-vivo* cell distribution was evaluated 15 mins and 3 days posttransplantation, respectively, and compared to the more commonly used routes in rats; intramyocardial injection. Our results demonstrated that intracoronary delivery of BM-EPCs generated more homogeneous cell distribution and higher cell density in cardiac tissue when compared to intravenous or intramyocardial injection. Next, we transferred this delivery method to a myocardial infarction model. Since we showed in Chapter 2 that Ang-(1-7) stimulated bone marrow derived progenitors both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, in order to avoid potential stimulation of endogenous bone marrow cells and to track transplanted cells *in vivo* as well, we chose to activate BM-MNCs *in vitro* before cell treatment. For this purpose, we utilized in **Chapter 4** ROSA26 human placental alkaline phosphatase (hPAP) transgenic rats as bone marrow donors and pretreated BM-MNCs with Ang-(1-7) before transplantation. Thirty mins post MI, untreated or Ang-(1-7) pretreated BM-MNCs were intracoronarily transplanted into rats. Three weeks later, cardiac function and neovascularization were tested. The results from this study revealed that Ang-(1-7) expanded the EPC fraction from BM-MNCs and improved EPC's tube formation *in vitro*. BM-EPC transplantation markedly attenuated cardiac hypertrophy and increased angiogenesis post MI, that could be associated with neovasculogenesis through paracrine effects of the homed EPCs. Interestingly, the improved cardiac function was related to the number of recruited hPAP⁺ cells (transplanted cells) at 3 weeks posttransplantation, suggesting that the survival of BM-EPCs in the ischemic cardiac tissue played a pivotal role in cardiac function recovery. Unexpectedly, Ang-(1-7) pretreated BM-MNCs, despite a higher percentage of EPCs, did not display an additional improvement in cardiac function, when compared with untreated BM-MNCs, indicating that although BM-EPCs are stimulated *in vitro*, therapeutic potential of the stimulated BM-EPCs *in vivo* could not be further enhanced. Nevertheless, the results point out that the combined

utilization of Ang-(1-7) infusion and BM-EPCs transplantation is rational and could produce a synergistic effect in cardiac function. This needs to be addressed in the future study.

As the pivotal initiator of vasculogenesis, BM-EPCs can be influenced by many cytokines, hormones and beneficial agents as well. Numerous studies show that BM-EPCs, as therapeutic targets, are involved in pharmacological interventions. Moreover, the identification of signal-transduction pathways will provide molecular targets for pharmacological treatments to enhance functional activity of endogenous stem cell niches or to enhance therapeutic efficiency of the transplanted cells. In **Chapter 5**, such issues are systemically reviewed and discussed. In the first part of this chapter, we highlighted the definition of endothelial progenitor cells and alterations of stem cell niches in both bone marrow and cardiac niches during occurrence of ischemic heart disease. Then, in the second part of this chapter, first of all, we addressed beneficial factors on BM-EPCs-based neovascularogenesis. Secondly, we raised the point that beneficial factors on BM-EPCs and stem cells niches should be treated as a pharmacological target entity when consider to administrate cell therapy. This chapter also illustrates recent developments of stem cell therapy and point out the future direction.

Future recommendations

The studies presented in this thesis clearly point out the effect of the pleiotropic angiopeptide-Ang-(1-7) on bone marrow-derived progenitor cells. Therefore, it goes one step further in the application of Ang-(1-7) in cardiovascular disease. Our results demonstrated that Ang-(1-7) plays an essential role in progenitor cells' differentiation, proliferation, recruitment or surviving *in vitro* and *in vivo*. Although these effects seem presumably mediated by Mas-receptors, we can not exclude that the interactive effects between the Mas-receptor and angiotensin type 1 (AT₁) and AT₂ receptors play a role as well. The specific role of the Ang-(1-7) /Mas receptor axis in stimulation of BM-EPCs, as well as the underlying signal transduction pathways, should be investigated in future studies, since the effect of Ang-(1-7) on BM-EPCs is intimately related with its dosages and, moreover, AT₁ and AT₂ receptors are also detected in EPC colony¹³.

Nowadays angiogenic cell therapy in cardiovascular disease encounters several challenges. One of predominant challenges is generated from the observation that stem cell treatment raises successful angiogenic effects via paracrine routes, rather than major direct effects on vasculogenesis or lateral arteriogenesis. It is recognized that angiogenesis i.e. the growth of capillaries, does not have the potential of adequate flow restoration, while vasculogenesis or arteriogenesis are more suitable for this purpose. Therefore, for stem cell therapy, one single-factor approach most probably is too good to be true. Using proper activated progenitor cells as the cell of choice, or combined utilization of pharmacological agents with BM-EPCs may achieve greater success. By this way, the plasticity of a committed progeny is modified for the needs of the damaged heart and ultimately leads to cardiac regeneration.

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Nederlandse samenvatting

Hartinfarcten vormen een van de belangrijkste oorzaken voor de ontwikkeling van hartfalen in de westerse wereld. Therapie na infarct is vooral gericht op zo spoedig mogelijk herstel van de doorbloeding, en preventie van cardiale remodeling en hartfalen. Stamceltherapie om enerzijds hartspiercellen te regenereren en anderzijds de groei van nieuwe vaten te stimuleren zou nieuwe therapeutische mogelijkheden kunnen openen in de behandeling na een hartinfarct. Echter tot nu is het regenereren van hartspiercellen en nieuwe bloedvaten nog erg beperkt, en geven de klinische onderzoeken op dit gebied inconsistente resultaten. Aan de andere kant lijken een aantal gunstige farmacologische interventies in hartfalen, zoals statines, erythropoïetin en remmers van het renine-angiotensine systeem, hun effect op neovascularisatie deels te danken te hebben aan effecten op endogene beenmergafkomstige cellen; de endotheelvoorlopercellen. Een goed gekozen combinatie van stamceltherapie en farmacologische interventie zou een synergistisch effect kunnen hebben, en zo de therapeutische efficiëntie en daarmee de prognose van hartfalen verbeteren. Onderzoek op dit gebied is nu vooral gericht op het vinden van nieuwe paden en mechanismes voor celtherapie-geïnduceerde neovascularisatie.

Het renine-angiotensine systeem is een van de belangrijkste systemen die betrokken zijn bij de ontwikkeling van hartfalen. De belangrijkste factor van dit systeem wordt gevormd door angiotensine II; een potente vasoconstrictor en groeifactor. Angiotensin-(1-7) [Ang-(1-7)] is een endogene tegenhanger van veel effecten van angiotensine II en heeft zijn werking via een eigen receptor; de Mas-receptor. Eerdere studies van onze afdeling hebben aangetoond dat Ang-(1-7) behandeling de hartfunctie verbetert en de endotheelfunctie herstelt in ratten met een hartinfarct en in een model voor in-stent stenosis de neointimaformatie remt. Daarnaast hebben studies aangetoond dat Ang-(1-7) een positief effect heeft op het herstel van het beenmerg na chemotherapie. Een additioneel effect van Ang-(1-7) via stimulatie van beenmerg, en van endotheelvoorlopercellen in het bijzonder, zou mogelijk bij kunnen dragen aan de gunstige effecten van Ang-(1-7), en vormt de basis van de studies zoals beschreven in dit proefschrift.

Het onderliggend mechanisme van de effecten van Ang-(1-7) zijn onderzocht en beschreven in **hoofdstuk 2**. Aangezien gevonden is dat Ang-(1-7) de hematopoïese beïnvloedt en zorgt voor verhoogde neovascularisatie in huidwonden, zou dit peptide een regulerende factor kunnen zijn voor angioblasten en de latere endotheelvoorlopercellen. Om deze hypothese te testen hebben we eerst in vitro de effecten van Ang-(1-7) op beenmergafkomstige mononucleaire cellen onderzocht van normale en Mas-receptor knock-out muizen. De hypothese werd bevestigd; Ang-(1-7) stimuleerde voornamelijk de endotheelvoorlopercelfractie uit het beenmerg, en dit effect was verdwenen in de Mas-receptor knock-out muizen. Vervolgens liet een studie, gezamenlijk met de onze Duitse collega's, zien dat Ang-(1-7) een sterke verbetering van de hartfunctie in muizen met een

hartinfarct geeft. In transgene dieren met cardiospecifieke overexpressie van Ang-(1-7) leidde deze cardiospecifieke overexpressie niet tot verbeterde hartfunctie, waarmee aangeven wordt dat het gunstige Ang-(1-7) effect mogelijk niet direct via cardiomyocyten loopt. Bij systemische toediening van Ang-(1-7) werd een verhoogd aantal c-kit+ en vascular endothelial growth factor+ cellen gevonden. Deze c-kit+ cellen differentieren hoofdzakelijk tot endotheel cellen en vasculaire gladde spiercellen. De cardioprotectieve effecten van Ang-(1-7) zouden dus terug te voeren kunnen zijn op een gestimuleerde mobilisatie of differentiatie van beenmerg afkomstige stamcellen in angiogenetische cellen, en zo bijdragen aan een verbeterde hartfunctie.

In **hoofdstuk 3 en 4** van dit proefschrift zijn de potentiële mogelijkheden van gekweekte beenmergafkomstige voorlopercellen onderzocht als celtherapie na een hartinfarct. Omdat voor angiogenetische therapie een homogene verdeling van de cellen en een relatief hoge celdichtheid nodig is, is eerst een techniek ontwikkeld om deze gekweekte cellen via intracoronaire injectie, in plaats van de bij ratten gebruikelijke intraveneuze toediening of lokale intracardiale injecties, in het hart te krijgen. In gezonde ratten zijn deze toedieningsroutes vergeleken en bleek de intracoronaire route na 15 minuten en na 3 weken de hoogste celdichtheid op te leveren, met de meest homogene verdeling. Daarna is deze techniek toegepast in ratten met een hartinfarct, de uiteindelijke doelgroep. In vitro gekweekte transgene endotheelvoorlopercellen, intracoronair toegediend 30-40-minuten na een infarct, gaven een significante verbetering van de hartfunctie, die gerelateerd kon worden aan de hoeveelheid transgene cellen in het hart 4 weken na infarct. Deze verbetering ging gepaard met significante neovascularisatie. Om vervolgens de rol van Ang-(1-7) hierin te bepalen werden de transgene beenmergcellen tijdens kweek behandeld met Ang-(1-7). Dit leidde tot een significante proliferatie en differentiatie naar endotheelvoorlopercellen die gemedieerd werd door activatie van de Mas receptor. Deze in vitro stimulatie van endotheelvoorlopercellen bleek echter niet te leiden tot additionele functionele verbetering bij toepassing als celtherapie in vivo in infarct ratten; het effect was vergelijkbaar met dat van niet voorbehandelde gekweekte beenmergcellen. Omdat voor deze opzet van het in vitro stimuleren van de stamcellen door Ang-(1-7) is gekozen om effecten van Ang-(1-7) op endogene beenmerg te voorkomen, kan een eventueel effect langs deze laatste route als verklaring voor de eerder gevonden gunstige effecten van systemisch toegediend Ang-(1-7) niet uitgesloten worden. Dit zal moeten blijken uit vervolgstudies waarbij de rat en niet de gekweekte voorlopercellen farmacologisch behandeld worden.

Als mogelijke initiator van angiogenese, kunnen beenmergafkomstige endotheelvoorlopercellen beïnvloed worden door tal van endogene hormonen, groeifactoren en ook gelijktijdige farmacologische behandeling. Veel studies laten zien dat beenmergafkomstige endotheelvoorlopercellen, als therapeutisch doel, betrokken zijn in farmacologische interventies. Daarnaast zullen identificatie van moleculaire signaaltransductie paden leiden tot nieuwe farmacologische aangrijpingspunten, om de

efficiëntie van stamceltherapie te verhogen. In **hoofdstuk 5** is het angiogenetische proces via endotheelvoorlopercellen beschreven en zijn dergelijke oude en nieuwe paden die hierop een gunstige invloed kunnen uitoefenen uitgebreid bediscussieerd. Dit hoofdstuk kan nieuwe wegen openen voor verbetering van de efficiency van stamceltherapie door gebruik te maken van een synergisch effect van gelijktijdige goed gekozen (farmaco)therapie.

