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Polymeric micelles for the dispersal of infectious biofilms

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Summary

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Increasing occurrence of intrinsically antimicrobial-resistant, human pathogens and the protective biofilm-mode in which they grow, dictates a need for alternative control of infectious biofilms. Biofilm bacteria utilize dispersal mechanisms to detach parts of a biofilm as part of the natural biofilm life-cycle during times of nutrient scarcity or overpopulation. In **Chapter 1**, we identify recent advances and future challenges in the development of dispersants as a new infection-control strategy. Deoxyribonuclease (DNase) and other extracellular enzymes can disrupt the extracellular matrix of a biofilm to cause dispersal. Also, a variety of small molecules, reactive oxygen species, nitric oxide releasing compounds, peptides and molecules regulating signaling pathways in biofilms have been described as dispersants. On their own, dispersants do not inhibit bacterial growth or kill bacterial pathogens. Both natural, as well as artificial dispersants, are unstable and hydrophobic which necessitate their encapsulation in smart nanocarriers, like pH-responsive micelles, liposomes or hydrogels. Depending on their composition, nanoparticles can also possess intrinsic dispersant properties. Bacteria dispersed from an infectious biofilm end up in the blood circulation where they are cleared by host immune cells. However, this sudden increase in bacterial concentration can also cause sepsis. Simultaneous antibiotic loading of nanoparticles with dispersant properties or combined administration of dispersants and antibiotics can counter this threat. Importantly, biofilm remaining after dispersant administration appears more susceptible to existing antibiotics. Being part of the natural biofilm life-cycle, no signs of “dispersant-resistance” have been observed. Dispersants are therewith promising for the control of infectious biofilms. Currently, the pace of new antibiotic discovery is falling behind the emergence of antimicrobial resistance and it is crucial to improve the killing efficiency of existing antibiotics. Therefore, the aim of this thesis was to develop novel nanoparticles to precisely deliver dispersants to infectious biofilms in order to balance dispersal with the ability of the immune system to deal with dispersed bacteria to avoid the concurrent use of antibiotics or enhance concurrent antibiotic killing.

Extracellular polymeric substances (EPS) hold infectious biofilms together and limit antimicrobial penetration and clinical infection control. In **Chapter 2**, we present zwitterionic micelles as a previously unexplored, synthetic self-targeting dispersant. First, a pH-responsive poly(ϵ -caprolactone)-*block*-

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poly(quaternary-amino-ester) (PCL-PQAE) was synthesized and self-assembled with poly(ethylene glycol)-*block*-poly(ϵ -caprolactone) (PEG-*b*-PCL) to form zwitterionic, mixed shell polymeric micelles (ZW-MSPMs). In the acidic environment of staphylococcal biofilms, ZW-MSPMs became positively charged because of conversion of the zwitterionic poly(quaternary-amino-ester) to a cationic lactone ring. This allowed ZW-MSPMs to self-target, penetrate, and accumulate in staphylococcal biofilms *in vitro*. *In vivo* biofilm targeting by ZW-MSPMs was confirmed for staphylococcal biofilms grown underneath an implanted abdominal imaging window through direct imaging in living mice. ZW-MSPMs interacted strongly with important EPS components such as eDNA and protein to disperse biofilm and enhance ciprofloxacin efficacy toward remaining biofilm, both *in vitro* and *in vivo*. Zwitterionic micellar dispersants may aid infection control and enhance efficacy of existing antibiotics against remaining biofilm.

Degradation of a specific EPS component is another possible strategy to disperse a biofilm. DNase can break down the extracellular matrix that keeps infectious bacterial biofilm together through cleavage of eDNA. Herewith, biofilm bacteria can become dispersed to assist antibiotic eradication, but this has hitherto remained an *in vitro* possibility. *In vivo* DNase is rapidly broken down in blood, impeding blood-injection of DNase combined with antibiotics to cure bacterial infections. In **Chapter 3**, we report the synthesis of pH-responsive, self-targeting micelles self-assembled from a solution of PEG-*b*-PCL and PCL-*b*-PAE with DNase conjugated to PAE-blocks. At physiological pH, this conjugation protected DNase inside the micellar shell, while PEG prevented adsorption of blood-borne proteins to the micelles. PAE became positively-charged below pH 6.4 facilitating self-targeting to an infectious biofilm. Simultaneously, PAE became hydrophilic and stretched to expose DNase upon accumulation in an infectious *Staphylococcus aureus* biofilm where it degraded the biofilm matrix. PEG/PAE-DNase micelles internally core-loaded with ciprofloxacin significantly better eradicated murine pneumonia after blood-injection than ciprofloxacin-loaded PEG-PAE micelles without conjugated DNase or ciprofloxacin free in solution. Considering that DNase is clinically approved for use in cystic fibrosis patients, this paves the way for clinical translation of ciprofloxacin-loaded, PEG/PAE-DNase micelles for the treatment of pneumonia and other infections that can be reached through self-targeting after blood-injection.

Amyloid-fibers help to maintain the structure of infectious biofilms. Disassembly of amyloid-fibers contributes to biofilm-dispersal in the blood-circulation, from which bacteria should be cleared by the host immune system. However, often the immune system is insufficiently prepared for increasing bacterial concentrations in blood, causing septic symptoms. In **Chapter 4**, we prepared PEG/PAE, pH-responsive micelles for co-delivery of (-)-epigallocatechin-3-*O*-gallate (EGCG) as a dispersant. Hydrophilic EGCG could not be loaded in the micellar core, but was cross-linked in the micellar shell through pH-reversible, boronic-ester binding. Disassembly of micelles under acidic biofilm conditions facilitated release of EGCG and dispersal of biofilm-bacteria. When core-loaded with ciprofloxacin, in-shell EGCG prevented ciprofloxacin-leakage at physiological pH. Bacterial killing by core-loaded ciprofloxacin in *S. aureus* biofilms was enhanced when released in combination with EGCG *in vitro* and *in vivo*. In mice, micelles with in-shell EGCG self-targeted after tail-vein injection to an infection site, yielding dispersal of pathogens with mild septic symptoms and bacterial killing by the immune system. Septic symptoms disappeared slightly faster when micelles were additionally core-loaded with ciprofloxacin. Thus, micelles with in-shell EGCG yield balanced biofilm dispersal inducing only mild septic symptoms, which is good news in an era of increasing antibiotic-resistance.

Infectious biofilms are glued together by a self-produced matrix composed of extracellular-polymeric-substances. Biofilm dispersal for infection control bears the risk of sepsis due to a suddenly increasing bacterial concentration in blood. Therefore, dispersal must be accompanied by antibiotic therapy or be sufficiently balanced for the host immune system to handle. However, a generally applicable biofilm-dispersal-index (BDI) for comparison of the strength of different dispersants does not exist. In **Chapter 5**, we propose a BDI, based on reductions in biomass or number of colony forming units in biofilm remaining after dispersant exposure. The BDI proposed is applied for the comparison of three micellar dispersants. Across all ESKAPE pathogens, zwitterionic PEG/PQAE micelles aiming to interact with matrix eDNA and amyloid proteinaceous fibers to break biofilm integrity, had the lowest BDI (< 0.1), while EGCG-loaded PEG/PAE micelles aiming to disassemble amyloid fibers had an intermediate BDI (0.1 – 0.3). DNase-loaded PEG/PAE micelles aiming to degrade matrix eDNA had the highest BDI (0.2 – 0.6). In previous experiments and chapters, we observed that hypothermia and death

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due to sepsis in mice with a *S. aureus* pneumonia, increased compared with a phosphate buffered saline-control after biofilm dispersal by PEG/PAE-DNase micelles. Hypothermia decreased for an intra-abdominal and implant associated biofilm after dispersal by PEG/PQAE or PEG/PAE-EGCG micelles. This suggests that PEG/PAE-DNase micelles may yield an overly, non-balanced dispersal of biofilms that the murine immune system cannot handle. Concluding, the BDI proposed allows quantitative comparison of different dispersants and will be important for selecting dispersants that perform optimally with respect to specific pathogens in absence of accompanying antibiotics.

Yet, the pathway to this goal is long and accordingly at the end of this thesis, recommendations are made on how to make biofilm removal a safe clinical tool in bacterial infection for which the metaphor of Pandora's box does not hold.

Samenvatting

Samenvatting voor de leek

Het bestrijden van een bacteriële infectie met antibiotica is lastig omdat bacteriën aan elkaar groeien en zich omhullen in een beschermende biofilm. Daar komt bij, dat het aantal antibiotica-resistente pathogene bacterie stammen voortdurend toeneemt. De groei in een beschermende biofilm, maakt dat er voedsel schaarste en overbevolking op kan treden in een biofilm. Om dit te voorkomen, hebben biofilm bacteriën een mechanisme ontwikkeld als onderdeel van de natuurlijke levenscyclus van een biofilm, waarmee ze zich los kunnen maken uit de extracellulaire matrix van een biofilm en zich door het lichaam van de gastheer verspreiden via de bloedsomloop ("*biofilm dispersal*"). In **Hoofdstuk 1** beschrijven we recente ontwikkelingen en toekomstige uitdagingen in de ontwikkeling van *biofilm dispersants* als een mogelijke wijze van infectie bestrijding. Deoxyribonuclease (DNase) en andere extracellulaire enzymen, reactieve zuurstof moleculen, stikstofmonoxide-afgeevende verbindingen en peptiden kunnen de extracellulaire matrix van een biofilm afbreken om verspreiding van bacteriën te veroorzaken. Zowel natuurlijke als synthetische *dispersants* zijn onstabiel en hydrofoob, waardoor toepassing in het lichaam inkapseling vereist in slimme nanodeeltjes, zoals pH-gevoelige micellen, liposomen of hydrogelen. Afhankelijk van hun samenstelling kunnen nanodeeltjes zelf ook als *dispersant* werken.

Biofilm dispersal als strategie om infectie te bestrijden heeft ook risico's. Bacteriën die worden verspreid vanuit een infectieuze biofilm komen in de bloedsomloop terecht waar ze moeten worden opgeruimd door immuuncellen van de gastheer. Deze plotselinge toename van de bacteriële concentratie in de bloedsomloop kan echter ook septische symptomen veroorzaken. Gelijktijdige behandeling met antibiotica kan deze sepsis tegengaan. Belangrijk is ook, dat de biofilm die achterblijft na toediening van een *dispersant* gevoeliger blijkt voor antibiotica. Juist omdat *dispersal* een onderdeel van de natuurlijke levenscyclus van een biofilm is, zijn er geen aanwijzingen dat bacteriën resistentie kunnen ontwikkelen tegen *dispersants*. Momenteel loopt het tempo van de ontwikkeling van nieuwe antibiotica achter bij de toename in antibiotica-resistente pathogene bacterie stammen en is het van cruciaal belang om de efficiëntie van bestaande antibiotica te verbeteren. Daarom was het doel van dit proefschrift om nieuwe, slimme

nanodeeltjes te ontwikkelen die *dispersants* gedoseerd in een infectieuze biofilm afgeven om de bacteriële verspreiding in evenwicht te brengen met het vermogen van het immuunsysteem om de verspreide bacteriën op te ruimen zonder gebruik van antibiotica dan wel onder de gelijktijdige afgifte van antibiotica in de biofilm.

In **Hoofdstuk 2** beschrijven we zwitterionische micellen die zelf een biofilm kunnen herkennen en als *dispersant* dienen. Eerst werd een pH-responsief poly(ϵ -caprolacton)-blok-poly(quaternair-amino-ester) (PCL-PQAE) gesynthetiseerd, teneinde met poly(ethyleenglycol)-blok-poly(ϵ -caprolacton) (PEG-*b*-PCL) een zwitterion te vormen waaruit micellen gemaakt kunnen worden (ZW-MSPMs). In de zure omgeving van stafylokokken biofilms werden ZW-MSPMs positief geladen door de omzetting van de zwitterionische poly(quaternaire-amino-ester) in een kationische lactonring. Hierdoor konden ZW-MSPMs penetreren en accumuleren in negatief geladen stafylokokken biofilms. *In vivo* werd deze accumulatie aangetoond door fluorescerende ZW-MSPMs in de staartader van een muis te injecteren en vervolgens waar te nemen in een biofilm die was gegroeid onder een geïmplanteed venster in de buikwand een muis. ZW-MSPMs braken eDNA en eiwitten in een biofilm matrix af om zo bacteriën te verspreiden. Tevens nam de werkzaamheid van ciprofloxacin tegen de achterblijvende biofilm toe, zowel *in vitro* als *in vivo*.

Ook DNase kan moleculen (eDNA) in de extracellulaire matrix afbreken, die infectieuze bacteriële biofilms bij elkaar houdt. *In vivo* wordt DNase echter snel afgebroken in het bloed, waardoor toepassing van DNase als *dispersant* in het lichaam onmogelijk is. In **Hoofdstuk 3** wordt de synthese van pH-responsieve micellen van PEG-*b*-PCL en PCL-*b*-PAE met DNase geconjugeerd aan PAE-blokken beschreven. Bij fysiologische pH beschermde de micel het geconjugeerd DNase, terwijl PEG de adsorptie van eiwitten uit het bloed aan de micellen verhinderde. PAE werd positief geladen bij pH 6,4 waardoor accumulatie in een negatief geladen infectieuze biofilm mogelijk werd. Tegelijkertijd werd PAE hydrofiel en strekte zich uit, waardoor het DNase aan het oppervlak kwam en de biofilm matrix kon afbreken. PEG/PAE-DNase-micellen die met ciprofloxacin waren geladen, bestreden een bacteriële pneumonia in een muis aanzienlijk beter dan met ciprofloxacin geladen PEG-PAE-micellen zonder geconjugeerd DNase of ciprofloxacin vrij in oplossing. Aangezien DNase klinisch is goedgekeurd

voor gebruik bij patiënten met cystische fibrose, maakt dit de weg vrij voor de klinische toepassing van met ciprofloxacine geladen, PEG/PAE-DNase-micellen voor de behandeling van longontsteking en andere infecties.

In **Hoofdstuk 4** hebben we PEG/PAE, pH-responsieve micellen gesynthetiseerd en beladen met (-)-epigallocatechin-3-O-gallaat (EGCG) als *dispersant*, die eiwit structuren in een biofilm matrix afbreekt. Hydrofiel EGCG kon niet worden geladen in de kern van de micel, maar werd gebonden in de schil van de micel door een pH-reversibele, boorzuresterbinding. Het afbreken van micellen in een zure biofilm vergemakkelijkte de afgifte van EGCG en verspreiding van biofilm bacteriën. Ook deze micellen zochten na injectie in de staartader van een muis zelf een bacteriële infectie op. Verspreiding van pathogenen gaf milde septische symptomen, die iets sneller verdwenen wanneer de micellen ook met ciprofloxacine waren beladen. Netto leverden micellen met EGCG in de schil een biofilm verspreiding op die goed door het immuun systeem kon worden opgevangen ook zonder het gebruik van antibiotica. Gezien de toenemende antibiotica-resistentie, mag dit als de weg van de toekomst gezien worden. Het achterwege laten van antibiotica, vereist echter wel dat de *dispersal* goed in evenwicht is met wat het immuun systeem aan kan. Er bestaat echter geen algemeen toepasbare “biofilm-dispersal-index (BDI)” voor het vergelijken van de sterkte van verschillende *dispersants*.

In **Hoofdstuk 5** stellen we daarom een BDI voor, gebaseerd op de afname in biomassa of het aantal kolonievormende eenheden in de biofilm dat achterblijft na blootstelling aan een *dispersant*. De voorgestelde BDI werd toegepast voor de vergelijking van drie verschillende *dispersants* op basis van micellen, zoals in voorafgaande hoofdstukken beschreven. *In vitro*, werd de BDI bepaald voor een verzameling pathogene bacteriën (de ESKAPE-pathogenen). Zwitterionische PEG/PQAE-micellen die gericht waren op degradatie van eDNA en eiwit structuren hadden gemiddeld over alle ESKAPE pathogenen de laagste BDI ($< 0,1$), terwijl EGCG-geladen PEG/PAE-micellen gericht op het afbreken van eiwit structuren een BDI tussen de 0,1 en 0,3 hadden. Met DNase geladen PEG/PAE-micellen hadden de hoogste BDI (0,2 – 0,6). In eerdere experimenten en hoofdstukken hebben we waargenomen dat hypothermie en overlijden als gevolg van sepsis bij muizen met een *S. aureus* pneumonie, toenamen na *biofilm dispersal* door PEG/PAE-DNase-micellen in vergelijking met een buffer controle.

Samenvatting

Hypothermie nam af voor een intra-abdominale en implantaat-geassocieerde biofilm na *dispersal* door PEG/PQAE- of PEG/PAE-EGCG-micellen. Dit suggereert dat PEG/PAE-DNase-micellen een *biofilm dispersal* veroorzaken die het immuunsysteem van de muis niet aankan. Concluderend, de voorgestelde BDI maakt kwantitatieve vergelijking van verschillende *dispersants* mogelijk en zal belangrijk worden voor het selecteren van optimale *dispersants* met of zonder toepassing van aanvullende antibiotica.

Het doel van klinische toepassing is echter nog niet bereikt en daarom worden aan het einde van dit proefschrift aanbevelingen gedaan over hoe *dispersal* van biofilms een veilig klinisch hulpmiddel kan worden bij bacteriële infecties en geen doos van Pandora.

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Acknowledgement

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