The New Generation of the Ex-Vivo Lung Perfusion Systems

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Abstract

Background: The ex vivo lung perfusion (EVLP) technique is a method of preserving the lung graft between death of the donor and transplantation. Although many centers are applying the technique in their lung transplant programs and reporting good and promising results, there are some problems that impede the perfectionism of the technique.

Objective: In this paper, the author sheds the light on some of those problems and provides some innovative solutions for them.

Methods: A new system for EVLP that allows a complete antegrade perfusion of the pulmonary and bronchial arteries, and provides the potential for longer ex vivo graft preservation may potentiate the benefits of the technique.

Results: The time passes slower within a stronger gravitational field. Accordingly, preserving the graft within an increased gravity might allow for longer preservation periods. Fortunately, other advantages of hypergravity have been reported, which might favor the attenuation of inflammation and the improvement of graft regeneration.

Conclusion: Although being in need of the experimental realization, the reported data on the cellular levels show the potential of the new system to provide better and longer ex vivo graft preservation.

Keywords
Ex-vivo lung perfusion; Lung transplant; Dual-EVLP; Hypergravity in organ preservation

Introduction

At the moment lung transplant is the sole curative therapeutic intervention for end-stage pulmonary diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, pulmonary hypertension, cystic fibrosis, sarcoidosis, bronchiectasis and lung cancer [1]. Unfortunately, saving the lives through this intervention is limited by the availability of the required grafts. In addition, lung transplant has the lowest long term post-transplant graft survival rate among the other solid organs [2,3]. Moreover, the most of the available grafts are declined because of unsuitability, either in general or for the particular patient [4].

The ex vivo lung perfusion (EVLP) technique was developed trying to solve the problems of the general insuitability, where the graft could be reconditioned, monitored and rendered acceptable [5,6]. The principle of the ex vivo perfusion technique relies on the use of a hyperoncotic perfusate, which washes out the inflammatory cells in the vasculature, blood clots, and waste products and, in turn, potentially reduces the ischemia-reperfusion injury (IRI). In addition, EVLP allows the resolution of the pulmonary edema, monitoring the airway and pulmonary vascular pressures and the oxygenation capacity [5,6].

Although many centers are applying the technique in their lung transplant programs and reporting good and promising results, there are some problems that impede the perfectionism of the technique. In this paper, the author sheds the light on some of those problems and provides some innovative solutions for them.

Perfusion through the bronchial arteries (dual-EVLP)

The value of the reconstruction of the bronchial arteries during lung transplantation, as well as its surgical applicability, was previously documented, where it was found to protect the pulmonary endothelium and type II pneumocytes in the early phase after transplant [7]. The bronchial blood flow was also found to be important for the vitality of the airways, the fluid balance of pulmonary tissue, and the metabolic functions of the lungs [8]. Accordingly, the inclusion of the bronchial arteries in the ex vivo lung graft perfusion is expected to provide significant functional improvement. However, all the in-use EVLP systems and protocols concentrate on the perfusion through the pulmonary circulation, which is the main lung vasculature, neglecting the bronchial vasculature that receives 3-5% of the cardiac output, under physiological conditions. This might create the problem that, part of the graft tissue can manifest the hazards of the ischemic-reperfusion injury, increasing the chance for post-transplant graft failure and rejection. To solve this problem, the dual-EVLP system was suggested.

Thus, a dual-EVLP system has been reported that was designed for the ex vivo perfusion of rat heart-lung blocks [9], where the original pulmonary circuit, used for the perfusion through the pulmonary artery, is used, in addition to a collateral circuit, which is used for the perfusion through the bronchial arteries. However, the collateral circuit is subjected to another pump to maintain a target flow of 3-5% of cardiac output, in comparison to the 40% - 100% target flow in the pulmonary circuit. This system was experimentally studied, where the results of the study confirmed the expected significant attenuation of the cytokine production and the positive impact on the grafts [9].

However, a major risk in that system lies in the application of the retrograde flow through the aorta, which might have some hazardous effects on the vascular endothelium. The retrograde perfusion of the aorta to fill the bronchial arteries may not mimic the physiological perfusion filling, considering the change in the distribution of the maximal and minimal points of shearing forces, to which the endothelial cells of the retrieved vessels will be exposed during perfusion (Figure 1). Such alterations of shearing stress are thought to result in differential genetic expression and impaired endothelial functions in humans [10].

The increased shearing rate was found to increase the expression of endothelial adhesion molecules and the reactive oxygen species-producing enzymes (such as NADPH oxidase), as well as to decrease...
descending aorta, in Shehata’s system, the bronchial arteries are perfused through the retrograde filling of the collateral circuit, subjected to another pump and a similar set of filters, is introduced. This circuit is to be connected directly to the pulmonary artery, which is connected to the circuit using a special cannula. A pressure measuring electrode is to be connected to the lumen of the pulmonary artery, and saturation probes are to be included, for repetitive assessment in order to measure and control its pressure. An in-line gas analyzer is to be connected to the source of gravity [15].

In the contrary to the other dual-EVLP system, where the bronchial arteries are perfused through the retrograde filling of the descending aorta, in Shehata’s system, the bronchial arteries are to be secured as proximal as possible during the retrieval of the graft from the donor, and are to be connected using special cannulas to the collateral circuit, in a similar way to that of the pulmonary artery stump (Figure 3). This would not be technically impeded by the anatomical variations in the origins of the bronchial arteries, and would ensure the avoidance of the retrograde flow through the aorta.

The need for longer ex vivo graft preservation

The longest period of successful EVLP was reported by the Toronto team and lasted for 12-18 hours after 18 hours of cold static preservation (total of 30-36 hours). Longer preservation might result either in graft deterioration or the potential of unsuccessful transplant [3]. To significantly extend the preservation period, an additional modification of the system can be applied, which relies on the relative relationship between gravity and time, which was introduced by Albert Einstein, stating that the time passes slower within the increased gravity field [13].

Gravitational time dilation (GTD), which simply refers to the observation that the stronger the gravity, the slower the time passes, is one of the predictions of the general relativity theory. GTD was first tested in Pound–Rebka experiment that measures the redshift of light moving in a gravitational field [13]. Accordingly, the equivalence principle says that time runs slower at lower altitudes in a gravitational field. The GTD equation is expressed as following:

\[ t_f = t_0 \sqrt{1 - \frac{2GM}{rc^2}} \]

Where:
- \( t_f \) is the proper time for a slow-ticking observer within the gravitational field
- \( t_0 \) is the coordinate time for a fast-ticking observer at large distance from the massive object
- \( G \) is the gravitational constant
- \( M \) is the mass of the object creating the gravitational field
- \( r \) is the radial coordinate of the observer
- \( c \) is the speed of light, and
- \( r_s = 2GM/c^2 \) is the Schwarzschild radius of M.

The principle of the relationship between gravity and time is also confirmed in the special relativity theory of Einstein [13,14], where the graft preservation within a strong gravitational field might have the potential to slow down the time passing by the graft, allowing for relatively longer time of preservation, which has the potential to increase the number of performed transplants.

Although the effects of hypergravity on the human lung was previously investigated, showing that the effects are mainly related to the perfusion-ventilation matching, where the lung diffusing capacity was found to decrease by 33% when the gravity is 3 times the magnitude of the gravitational force at the surface of the earth (3G), these effects were significantly dependent on the lung position, where the application of 5G has been associated with 46% and 25% decrease in the lung diffusing capacity in the supine and prone positions, respectively. The application of hypergravity (3G) results also in the increase of lung tissue volume by about 38%, which is related to the increased blood sequestration in the dependent parts that are closer to the source of gravity [15].

In the case of EVLP, the application of hypergravity is ex vivo,
which enables the control of any perfusion-ventilation mismatching through the controlled ventilation, controlled perfusion pumping, the frequent graft repositioning and/or the use of a uniformly applied gravitational field. Accordingly, the principle itself could be safe and applicable.

**Effects of hypergravity on lung graft during ex vivo perfusion**

The reveal of the precise effects of hypergravity on the graft needs preclinical and clinical studies, however, previously published results can give us a provisional conclusion. Versari et al. [16], Spisni et al. [17], and Sumanasekera et al. [18,19] studied the effects of hypergravity for 24-48 hours on the primary human umbilical vein endothelial cells (HUVEC) and reported the following:

- ↑ migration
- ↑ NO
- Altered distribution of actin fibers
- ↑ cav-1 (tumor suppressor gene)
- ↑ distribution of caveolae in the cell interior
- ↑ COX-2, NO, and PGI2 production
- ↓ angiogenesis (through a pathway not involving apoptosis)
- ↓ MAPK phosphorylation
- ↑ Paracellular permeability
- ↓ Transendothelial electrical resistance
- ↓ MAPK activation
- ↓ Extracellular barrier function

Morbidelli et al. [20], and Koyama et al. [21], tested the effects of hypergravity on the bovine aortic endothelial cells and reported the following:

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**Figure 2:** Diagrammatic representation of Shehata’s ex vivo lung perfusion system. The deoxygenated perfusate flows through the pulmonary vasculature to return oxygenated through the reconstructed left atrium. The oxygenated perfusate flows to both the pulmonary and the bronchial circuits, to be deoxygenated again before entering the pulmonary vasculature.

1. Ventilator
2. Box enclosing the lung graft
3. The reconstructed left atrium around a special cannula, supplemented with pressure electrode and connected to the perfusion circuit
4. The perfusion circuit
5. Centrifugal pump (pulsatile or continuous flow)
6. Temperature adjustor
7. Membrane gas exchanger
8. Leukocytes and cytokines filters
9. The pulmonary artery stump connected to the circuit through a special cannula and a pressure electrode to measure and adjust the pulmonary artery pressure
10. The collateral circuit, connected to the stumps of the bronchial arteries, using special cannulas
11. The source of the gravitational field, placed under or around the graft.
protective within 48 hours, the rat lung fibroblasts behaved similar
anoxia/reoxygenation injury in the acute phase followed by being
adapt for hypergravity, so that, the hypergravity worsened their
non-exposed cells. While smooth muscle cells required time to
where the exposed cells retained higher viability than the control
reoxygenation injury, the exposure to hypergravity (6G) protected
effective resolution of the pulmonary edema [25].

extracellular endothelial barrier functions might help the rapid and
pathways, and the enhanced ATP release. Moreover, the decreased
production, the increased expression of tumor suppressor genes,
In addition to the decreased apoptosis, the increased nitric oxide
continuity), the overall results confirm the marked cytoskeletal
the application of hypergravity (various sources, strengths and
Figure 3: Diagrammatic representation of the method of the inclusion of
the bronchial arteries into the collateral circuit of Shehata’s dual-EVLP
system. The bronchial arteries would be secured as proximal as possible
during the retrieval of the graft from the donor, and would be connected
using special cannulas to the collateral circuit, in a similar way to that of
the pulmonary artery stump.

• Modified integrin distribution
• Reorganization of cytoskeletal network
• ↓ genes controlling vasocnstriction and inflammation
• ↓ Proapoptotic signals
• ↑ ATP release
• ↑ actin reorganization via RhoA activation and FAK
phosphorylation
• ↑ cell proliferation and migration

Meanwhile, Monici et al. [22], tested the effects of hypergravity on
the bovine coronary venular endothelial cells and reported the following:
• ↓ Proapoptotic genes (FADD, Fas, Fas-L)
• ↑ Antiapoptotic gene NF-xB
• Change in cytoskeleton organization
• Alteration of cell energy metabolism

More recently, Grosse et al. [23], and Wehland et al. [24], used
the human endothelial cells (line EA.hy926) to test the effects of
hypergravity and vibration, and reported no significant changes on
gene expression and morphology of the cells.

Although these experiments involved various techniques for
the application of hypergravity (various sources, strengths and
continuity), the overall results confirm the marked cytoskeletal
upregulation and the enhanced cellular migration and proliferation.
In addition to the decreased apoptosis, the increased nitric oxide
production, the increased expression of tumor suppressor genes,
the decreased expression and signaling of the proinflammatory
pathways, and the enhanced ATP release. Moreover, the decreased
extracellular endothelial barrier functions might help the rapid and
effective resolution of the pulmonary edema [25].

Under the influence of the ischemic/anoxic – perfusion/
reoxygenation injury, the exposure to hypergravity (6G) protected
the bovine aortic endothelial cells during the first 24 hours,
where the exposed cells retained higher viability than the control
non-exposed cells. While smooth muscle cells required time to
adapt for hypergravity, so that, the hypergravity worsened their
anoxia/reoxygenation injury in the acute phase followed by being
protective within 48 hours, the rat lung fibroblasts behaved similar
to the endothelial cells, where the hypergravity showed significant
protection [26].

Those experiments reffered the protective effects of hypergravity
to the increased induction of the heat shock protein family that have
been known to protect the cells against wide range of stresses [26].
Accordingly, the application of hypergravity can be beneficial from
many aspects.

Methods for generating artificial gravity

Rotation: A rotating object can produce the feeling of gravity in
its inside. The rotation drives any object inside the object toward the
hull, thereby giving the appearance of a gravitational pull directed
outwards. The artificial gravity by rotation behaves in some ways
similarly to the natural gravity, but has the following effects [27]:
• Centrifugal force: unlike the natural gravity, which pulls
towards a center, a rotational gravity pushes away from the
axis of rotation. Artificial gravity levels vary proportionately
with the distance from the center of rotation.
• The Coriolis effect: which gives an apparent force that acts
on objects that move relative to a rotating reference frame.

Linear acceleration: Linear acceleration can force objects inside the
accelerating object in the opposite direction of the acceleration [27].

Magnetism: A similar effect to gravity can be created through the
use of extremely powerful magnets, such as neodymium magnet
[27,28].

The selection of the most appropriate method for the generation of
the gravitational field and its incorporation in the system will be
further studied and performed. However, the idea of introducing a
gravitational field in the EVLP - system is firstly introduced and
registered in this system (Figure 2).

Description of the Shehata’s EVLP system with this
modification

In addition to the above described components of the innovative
dual - EVLP system, the graft containing box is to be placed on or
within a gravity source (e.g. strong magnets) to create a strong
uniform gravitational field (for example 5G or more) (Figure 2).

Conflicts of Interest

The intellectual properties and the system included and described in this
manuscript belong solely to the author. All rights are registered and protected
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