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Comparison of hematologic, biochemical, and coagulation parameters in α1,3-galactosyltransferase gene-knockout pigs, wild-type pigs, and 4 primate species

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Abstract

Background—The increasing availability of genetically-engineered pigs is steadily improving the results of pig organ and cell transplantation in nonhuman primates (NHPs). Current techniques offer knock-out of pig genes and/or knock-in of human genes. Knowledge of normal values of hematologic, biochemical, coagulation, and other parameters in healthy genetically-engineered pigs and NHPs is important, particularly following pig organ transplantation in NHPs. Furthermore, information on parameters in various NHP species may prove important in selecting the optimal NHP model for specific studies.

Methods—We have collected hematologic, biochemical, and coagulation data on 71 α1,3 galactosyltransferase gene-knockout (GTKO) pigs, 18 GTKO pigs additionally transgenic for human CD46 (GTKO.hCD46), 4 GTKO.hCD46 pigs additionally transgenic for human CD55 (GTKO.hCD46.hCD55), and 2 GTKO.hCD46 pigs additionally transgenic for human thrombomodulin (GTKO.hCD46.hTBM).

Results—We report these data and compare them with similar data from wild-type pigs, and the 3 major NHP species commonly used in biomedical research (baboons, cynomolgus, and rhesus monkeys) and humans, largely from previously published reports.

Conclusions—Genetic modification of the pig (e.g., deletion of the Gal antigen and/or the addition of a human transgene) (i) does not result in abnormalities in hematologic, biochemical, or coagulation parameters that might impact animal welfare, (ii) seems not to alter metabolic

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

John Bianchi, Suyapa Ball, Anneke Walters, and David Ayares are employees of Revivicor Inc. No other author has a conflict of interest.

function of vital organs, though this needs to be confirmed after their xenotransplantation, and (iii) possibly (though by no means certainly) modifies the hematologic, biochemical, and coagulation parameters closer to human values. The present study may provide a good reference for those working with genetically-engineered pigs in xenotransplantation research and eventually in clinical xenotransplantation.

Keywords

α1,3-galactosyltransferase gene-knockout; Coagulation; Genetically-engineered; Hematology; Pig; Plasma biochemistry; Swine

INTRODUCTION

Pigs have provided a valuable and popular large animal model for biomedical research, especially during the last 3 to 4 decades (1), and are the source-animal of choice for xenotransplantation (2). Pigs offer many similarities to humans in terms of anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, pathology, and pharmacology (2,3) and therefore provide a large animal model to bridge the gap between rodents and humans. Knowledge of normal hematologic and biochemical values in any species used in biomedical research is important. Normal hematologic, biochemical, and physiologic values in several breeds of wild-type (WT, genetically-unmodifed) pigs, e.g., Yorkshire, Yucatan, Landrace, have been reported by several groups (1, 3–5).

With increasing numbers of genetically-engineered pigs becoming available (Table 1), research experience obtained from small animal models (e.g., gene-knockout and/or knockin technology) can be translated to large animal models. Whereas the ultimate goal is clinical application of cells, tissues, and organs from genetically-engineered pigs for human therapeutic applications (6), it will be critical from a regulatory and safety perspective to have data available on hematologic, biochemical, and physiologic parameters in the source animals.

Measurement of these parameters essentially serves two aims, namely assessment of (i) the health status of the animals themselves, which includes the effect of the genetic modification (i.e., gene knockout or knock-in) on the respective parameter, and (ii) any molecular and/or physiologic incompatibilities following a xenogeneic transplant. While the first aim relates to safety, the second relates to the efficacy of a xenotransplantation "product".

The genetic modification of pigs has been essential to progress in overcoming the barriers to xenotransplantation (7–10). Early experience in the 1990s using pigs transgenic for human decay-accelerating factor (hCD55) showed significantly extended survival of pig kidneys in NHPs (7). Expression of human complement-regulatory transgenes (e.g., CD46, CD55, CD59) is now common in pigs (7,8), as is knockout of the α 1,3-galactosyltransferase gene (Table 1) (9). Islets obtained from pigs transgenic for human CD46 when transplanted into diabetic monkeys have demonstrated >1 year normalization of blood glucose and cure of diabetes (11). Casu et al. (12,13) and Graham et al. (14) have reported differences in glucose metabolism between pigs and NHPs; pigs differ from NHPs and humans by having a much lower C-peptide level, and a less rapid response to a glucose challenge and to arginine stimulation.

Extended survival was also achieved with the transplantation of organs from GTKO pigs (15,16). Recently, heart xenograft survival has been extended to 8 months using GTKO pigs expressing human CD46 (GTKO.hCD46) (17).

In our recent experience in liver xenotransplantation (18), we observed that pig alanine transaminase (ALT), but not aspartate transaminase (AST), in GTKO pigs is significantly lower than in WT pigs, but similar to human and baboon levels (19). We hypothesized that there would be other differences in hematologic, biochemical, and coagulation parameters between WT and GTKO pigs. To our knowledge, there is, hitherto, no published report of normal laboratory values of GTKO pigs in the literature.

In the present study, we report normal hematologic, biochemical, and coagulation values in healthy pigs with various genetic modifications. We compared these values with those of WT pigs and 4 primate species - (i) baboons (*Papio* species), (ii) cynomolgus monkeys (*Macaca fascicularis*), (iii) rhesus monkeys (*Macaca mulatta*), and (iv) humans, to identify possible differences and similarities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animals

Genetically-engineered and WT pigs—Genetically-engineered pigs (on a Landrace large white WT background) were obtained from Revivicor Inc. (Blacksburg, VA, USA). There were a total of 71 GTKO pigs (49 females, 22 males), 18 GTKO pigs transgenic for human CD46 (GTKO.hCD46) (14 females, 4 males), 4 GTKO.hCD46 pigs additionally transgenic for human CD55 (GTKO.hCD46.hCD55) (2 females, 2 males), and 2 GTKO.hCD46 pigs transgenic for human thrombomodulin (GTKO.hCD46.hTBM) (2 males). The number of pigs with a GTKO or GTKO.hCD46 background was 95 and 24, respectively. Their mean ages and weights are shown in Table 2.

Wild-type (Landrace large white) pigs (n=19; 9 females, 10 males) were obtained from Country View Farm, Schellsburg, PA, USA. Their mean ages and weights are shown in Table 3.

Baboons—All baboons used in our own studies (n=45; 13 females and 32 males) were obtained from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center (Oklahoma City, OK, USA). Their mean age was 2.7 ± 0.5 (range 1.8–3.6) years and mean weight was 8.5 ± 2.0 (range 5.6–15.9) kg, respectively.

All animal care was in accordance with the Principles of Laboratory Animal Care formulated by the National Society for Medical Research and the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals prepared by the Institute of Laboratory Animal Resources and published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH publication No. 86-23, revised 1985). Protocols were approved by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

Blood collection and tests

Blood was collected when the animals were surgically and immunologically naïve. Animals were sedated by an intramuscular injection of 5–10mg/kg of ketamine hydrochloride (Fort Dodge, IA USA). Blood samples were collected by venepuncture for hematologic (EDTA tube), biochemical (plain tube), and coagulation (sodium citrate tube) analysis using standard methods either in the Central Laboratory of Presbyterian Hospital of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Pittsburgh, PA, USA or of Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, Blacksburg, VA, USA.

Equipment used at the University of Pittsburgh and Virginia-Maryland Regional College were, respectively, Beckman LH750 (Fullerton, CA) and Siemens ADVIA 2120 (Tarrytown, NY) for hematologic values, Diagnostic Stago STAR Evolution (Parsippany,

NJ) for coagulation parameters, and Beckman DXC 800 (Fullerton, CA) and Olympus America AU400 (Melville, NY) for biochemical parameters.

Literature search and collection of data

A literature search was carried out to identify significant reports on normal values of various parameters in healthy WT pigs, baboons, cynomolgus monkeys, and rhesus monkeys. Published reports detailed normal values in different species and considered factors such as (i) gender, (ii) age, (iii) weight, and (iv) diet. We have not subdivided the data by age, etc., as we wished to compare our data with a large number of animals from each species, as this is how normal human ranges are reported. We have included data from the literature on various parameters from a large number of WT pigs or NHPs. Normal human values and ranges were obtained from the Central Laboratory of Presbyterian Hospital of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

Data and statistical analyses

Data analyses were conducted with GraphPad Prism v5.01 (La Jolla, CA, USA). Mean values of sample subsets were calculated and compared using the Student t-test, with a p value of <0.05 being considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Normal values obtained from healthy GTKO pigs with or without added transgenes from our own study are shown in Table 2. Table 3 shows normal values in different breeds of WT pigs, such as Landrace, Yucatan, and Yorkshire, from our own center and from published studies. Healthy naïve baboon normal values from our own center and from the literature are shown in Table 4. Normal values for healthy cynomolgus and rhesus monkeys from the literature are shown in Tables 5 and 6, respectively. Table 7 compares data on GTKO and WT pigs and from baboons and monkeys with normal human values.

Hematologic parameters

White blood cell (WBC) count—GTKO pigs had a significantly lower mean WBC than WT pigs $(p<0.01)$ (Table 7). Pigs with a GTKO background appeared to have a lower WBC when young (Table 2). Mean WBC count was significantly higher in GTKO and WT pigs than in humans or NHPs ($p<0.01$) (Table 7). All NHP species tested showed a similar WBC to humans, except in cynomolgus monkeys where the WBC count was significantly higher $(p<0.01)$, though cynomolgus monkeys from Mauritius exhibited similar WBC counts to humans (Tables 5 and 7).

With regard to WBC subsets, GTKO pigs had significantly fewer neutrophils than WT pigs, humans, baboons, and rhesus monkeys $(p<0.01)$. Cynomolgus monkeys had the lowest neutrophil counts among all species tested (p<0.01 vs all other species) (Table 7), but had the highest lymphocyte counts $(p<0.01$ vs all other species). Monocyte counts were significantly higher in pigs (GTKO and WT) in comparison to other species $(p<0.01)$. Eosinophil and basophil counts were similar in all species (Table 7).

Red blood cell (RBC) parameters—RBC counts were significantly higher in GTKO and WT pigs than in humans and NHP species $(p<0.01)$. Hemoglobin values were comparable in all species, except WT pigs in which the hemoglobin was significantly lower $(p<0.01$ vs all other species). GTKO and WT pig hematocrits were significantly lower than in NHPs ($p<0.01$), but were within the human range (Table 7). GTKO and WT pigs exhibited a significantly lower mean corpuscular volume (MCV) and mean corpuscular hemoglobin (MCH) than seen in human and NHP species (p<0.01). Mean corpuscular

hemoglobin concentration (MCHC) in all species, except WT pigs, was comparable to that in humans. Percentage RBC distribution width (RDW) was significantly higher in pigs (GTKO and WT) than in primate species ($p<0.01$) (Table 7).

Renal function and electrolytes

Pigs (GTKO and WT) exhibited higher potassium, calcium, and phosphorus values than humans, baboons, and rhesus monkeys (p<0.01 in all comparisons) (Table 7). Cynomolgus monkeys showed the highest potassium, calcium, and chloride values in comparison to other species $(p<0.01)$ (Table 7). Sodium values were comparable in all species, except in cynomolgus monkeys, which had significantly higher values ($p<0.01$) (Table 7). Cynomolgus monkeys showed significantly higher urea values than other species $(p<0.01)$ (Table 7). Serum creatinine values were comparable in all species. Carbon dioxide $(CO₂)$ levels were significantly lower in rhesus monkeys (p<0.01). GTKO and WT pigs and baboons exhibited $CO₂$ levels within the human range (Table 7).

Hepatic function

AST and ALT values were comparable in all species, except that WT pig ALT was significantly higher than in other species $(p<0.01)$ (Table 7). Alkaline phosphatase (ALP) and lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) were higher in pigs and NHPs than in humans (Table 7). ALP was highest in cynomolgus monkeys (10-fold more than in humans) and baboons (5 fold more than in humans). WT pigs exhibited the highest LDH values (5-fold higher than in humans, and 2-fold higher than in GTKO pigs) (Table 7). Total, direct, and indirect bilirubin values were comparable in all species. Total protein and albumin levels were significantly lower in pigs than in NHPs and humans (p<0.01) (Table 7). Levels of total protein and albumin appeared to be lower in younger than in older GTKO pigs $(p<0.01)$ (Table 2). In contrast, WT pigs did not show significantly different total protein and albumin levels between low (young) and high (older) weight pigs (Table 3). Total cholesterol, triglyceride, and glucose levels were comparable in all species (Table 7), except in rhesus monkeys, which exhibited higher cholesterol and triglyceride and lower glucose levels (p<0.01) (Table 7).

Coagulation profiles

WT pigs and cynomolgus monkeys had significantly lower prothrombin times (PT) and partial thromboplastin times (PTT) than GTKO pigs, baboons, rhesus monkeys, and humans (p<0.01 in all comparisons). GTKO pigs exhibited similar PT and PTT to humans. Rhesus monkeys had significantly prolonged PTT compared with other species $(p<0.01)$ (Table 7). While GTKO pigs had international normalized ratio (INR) and d-dimer comparable to humans, baboons showed significantly increased INR and d-dimer (p<0.01). GTKO pigs showed positive fibrinogen degradation products (FDP). Fibrinogen levels were comparable in GTKO pigs, cynomolgus monkeys, and humans, but baboons had significantly lower fibrinogen levels than other species $(p<0.01)$ (Table 7).

Other parameters

Although lipase levels were comparable in humans, GTKO pigs and baboons, amylase levels were significantly lower in humans than in other species $(p<0.01)$. GTKO pigs showed a 13-to-45-fold increase in amylase in comparison to humans and baboons, but only a 4-fold increase in comparison to cynomolgus monkeys (Table 7). Younger GTKO pigs showed significantly higher levels of amylase in comparison to older GTKO pigs $(p<0.01)$ (Table 2). In contrast, amylase levels were higher in older baboons (p<0.01) (Table 4). Iron levels were comparable in all species.

its relative index, and troponin I were measured only in pigs of GTKO.hCD46 background (Table 2). Total CPK and CPK-MB were significantly higher in GTKO.hCD46 pigs than in humans ($p<0.01$). However, the CPK-MB relative index and troponin I values were comparable in GTKO.hCD46 pigs to humans (Table 7).

DISCUSSION

In biomedical research, it is essential to compare pre-treatment values (i.e., in a surgically and immunologically naïve animal) with post-treatment values. Therefore, knowledge of normal hematologic, biochemical, and coagulation parameters is important. The present study reports, for the first time, the mean values in genetically-engineered pigs important to xenotransplantation research, all on a GTKO background. Moreover, the study compares these values with those in WT pigs and 4 species of primate, including humans.

We report differences in certain parameters between GTKO and WT pigs and/or pigs between primates and/or between NHPs and humans, which may prove important in xenotransplantation research and, ultimately, in clinical xenotransplantation. It should be kept in mind that the health status of the animals may affect a specific parameter. For example, designated pathogen-free pigs may have lower white blood cell counts than pigs housed under routine circumstances. Differences in normal levels of potassium or other electrolyte may be problematic after pig kidney xenotransplantation. After the transplantation of a pig kidney or liver into a NHP, the level of a parameter may reflect the normal level in the NHP (e.g., WBC count), or the normal level in the pig (e.g., serum potassium or albumin). In fact, prominent proteinuria has been underlined by several groups after pig-to-NHP kidney xenotransplantation (16,20). The loss of protein may reflect the physiologic ability of the pig kidney to reduce the albumin levels of the NHP to the normal pig albumin level, which is significantly lower (Table 7). Alternatively, it could reflect an inability of pig kidneys to retain NHP albumin, or reduced synthesis of albumin in the pig liver. Soin et al previously reported severe hypophosphatemia and persistent hypoalbuminemia due to increased proteinuria after pig-to-NHP renal xenotransplantation (21). Whether this was related to a physiologic incompatibility between pig and primate or was the result of a low-grade immune response remains unknown. In our experience, healthy pigs do not have proteinuria (Hara H, personal observation). The topic of physiologic incompatibilities has been reviewed elsewhere (22).

After pig liver xenotransplantation, a great number of parameters may reflect those in the pig, since the liver is the major site of production of many proteins. After pig heart xenotransplantation, the knowledge of normal values of CPK and troponin I is important to monitor damage to the transplanted heart.

GTKO pigs had significantly lower WBC counts than WT pigs, which may be related to the cleanliness of the housing in which they are reared (though GTKO pig values fell within the range of published normal values for WT pigs). Pigs (both GTKO and WT) have higher WBC counts than the primates we tested (Table 7). As important as high WBC count could be, the higher percentage of lymphocytes in the recipient NHPs may also be important with regard to successful lymphocyte depletion. Cynomolgus monkeys have the highest lymphocyte count among four primate species and pigs (Table 7). This high lymphocyte count may result in an increased need for of lymphocyte-depleting agents to achieve the desired outcome.

It should be kept in mind that the health status of the animals may affect a specific parameter. For example, designated pathogen-free pigs may have lower white blood cell counts than pigs housed under routine circumstances.

Cynomolgus monkeys are also special in respect to RBC. It is well known that CD52 is expressed on erythrocytes of most NHP species. As a result, alemtuzumab (anti-CD52 monoclonal antibody) can be used only in cynomolgus monkeys of Indonesian origin, which do not express CD52 on their RBCs (23). The RBC MCV in humans is almost 30–50% greater than that in GTKO pigs, and the MCV of baboon RBC is 30–40% greater than in pigs. Theoretically, this discrepancy could well adversely impact the perfusion of a pig organ after transplantation into a primate. However, evidence from numerous pig-to-NHP organ transplantation studies suggests that this is not the case, and that organ perfusion is satisfactory (unless affected by rejection, etc.). Furthermore, biopsies obtained after pig-to-NHP kidney, heart, and liver xenotransplantation have not shown unequivocal defects in the microcirculation (except when thrombosis occurs following fibrin and platelet aggregation) $(15–18,20)$.

These observations illustrate how baseline (pre-treatment) knowledge of parameters is key to success in biomedical research. Attention has been drawn to the importance of knowing normal parameters in NHP by recent publications by the Emory Group (24,25) with particular regard to MHC typing as a key to successful outcome.

Although our study did not detect any significant difference in total, direct, or indirect bilirubin levels among the species tested (Table 7), the relevance of these data should be interpreted cautiously. Kobayashi et al reported that hepatic bile was significantly less viscous in baboons compared with that in humans and pigs, with pig and human hepatic bile viscosity being similar (26). In our experience of GTKO pig-to-baboon liver xenotransplantation, we observed cholestatic damage on liver histopathology without structural obstruction of the bile ducts, but with the presence of viscous bile (18,27). However, bile stasis may not be a significant problem after pig liver Tx into humans (25).

The lower values for PT and PTT in WT pigs and in cynomolgus monkeys need particular attention as they may impact a coagulopathic state and related complications. A significantly shorter PTT in WT pigs could be related to intrinsic pathway coagulation factors, such as FXII, FXI, and FIX. We have previously reported data suggesting that FXII (initiator of the intrinsic coagulation pathway) in WT pigs is significantly higher (2-fold) than in GTKO pigs (27,28). We have also documented the production of pig coagulation factors after GTKO pig liver xenotransplantation in baboons (27). Knowledge of baseline coagulation values in both organ-source pig and recipient NHP is of importance when monitoring post-transplantation changes. We previously reported the baseline extended coagulation profile in nine healthy baboons (29).

There are other observations from our data that cannot be explained. For example, in GTKO pigs with added transgenes, serum amylase was high when compared with GTKO pigs (Table 2). However, at necropsy, no features suggestive of pancreatitis were observed in these pigs. Similarly, serum cholesterol was particularly low in these pigs. Larger numbers of pigs will need to be studied to confirm, and possibly explain, these observations.

While differences have been observed in various parameters between WT and geneticallyengineered pigs, there is no evidence that such differences would lead to an increased risk profile, as compared to the significant benefits that genetically-engineered pigs may provide in overcoming the challenges for human clinical application.

A minor weakness of our comparative study is that data from different centers may have been obtained using different laboratory equipment. However, our own and most other studies have been carried out in hospital laboratories in which standard equipment is used. We suggest there are unlikely to be wide or significant differences in the data obtained. Furthermore, our own data, and we strongly suspect the vast majority of data in the literature, were obtained using equipment equilibrated and validated with respect to human material, not to nonhuman primate material. We do not see this as a major problem. If data from various centers are to be compared, it could be argued that this provides some uniformity to the data as they will all have been obtained on equipment validated to human material.

In conclusion, it appears that genetic modification of the pig (e.g., deletion of the Gal antigen and/or the addition of a human transgene) (i) does not result in abnormalities in hematologic, biochemical, or coagulation parameters that might impact animal welfare, (ii) seems not to alter metabolic function of vital organs, though this needs to be confirmed after their xenotransplantation, and (iii) possibly (though by no means certainly) modifies the hematologic, biochemical, and coagulation parameters closer to human values. The present study may provide a good reference for those working with genetically-engineered pigs in xenotransplantation research and eventually in clinical xenotransplantation.

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Abbreviations (in text and tables)

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Table 1

Common genetically-engineered pigs currently available for biomedical research

Pigs with multiple gene modifications exist (e.g., GTKO.hCD46.hCD55 or GTKO.hCD46.hTBM or GTKO.hCD55.hCD59.hCD39.hTBM)

Normal hematologic, biochemical and coagulation values in healthy GTKO pigs Normal hematologic, biochemical and coagulation values in healthy GTKO pigs

Table 2

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Table 3

Normal hematologic, biochemical and coagulation values in healthy WT pigs

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* Klem et al (4), Egeli et al (5), Rispat et al (3), Hannon et al (1).

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Table 4

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Schuurman et al (30), Havill et al (31), Harewood et al (32), Hainsey et al (33).

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Table 5

Normal hematologic, biochemical and coagulation values in healthy Cynomolgus monkeys (Macaca fascicularis) Normal hematologic, biochemical and coagulation values in healthy Cynomolgus monkeys (Macaca fascicularis)

Bonfanti et al (34), Schuurman et al (35), Koga et al (36).

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Xenotransplantation. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2013 November 12.

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Chen et al (37), Smucny et al (38), Buchl et al (39).

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Comparison of normal GTKO and WT pig mean values with 4 primate species Comparison of normal GTKO and WT pig mean values with 4 primate species

GTKO = α1,3-galactosyltransferase gene-knockout pigs; WT = wild-type pigs; Cyno = cynomolgus monkeys; Rhesus = rhesus monkeys. n.a. = not available. GTKO values indicated in bold are statistically different from human values.