Variant RH alleles and Rh immunisation in patients with sickle cell disease

Emilia Sippert¹, Claudia R. Fujita², Debora Machado¹, Glaucia Guelsin¹, Ane C. Gaspardi¹, Jordão Pellegrino Jr¹, Simone Gilli¹, Sara S.T.O. Saad¹, Lilian Castilho¹

¹National Institute of Science and Blood Technology, Campinas Centre Blood, UNICAMP, Campinas; ²Fujisan, Fortaleza, Brazil

Background. Alloimmunisation is a major complication in patients with sickle cell disease (SCD) receiving red blood cell (RBC) transfusions and despite provision of Rh phenotyped RBC units, Rh antibodies still occur. These antibodies in patients positive for the corresponding Rh antigen are considered autoantibodies in many cases but variant *RH* alleles found in SCD patients can also contribute to Rh alloimmunisation. In this study, we characterised variant *RH* alleles in 31 SCD patients who made antibodies to Rh antigens despite antigen-positive status and evaluated the clinical significance of the antibodies produced.

Materials and methods. RHD and RHCE BeadChipTM from BioArray Solutions and/or amplification and sequencing of exons were used to identify the RH variants. The serological features of all Rh antibodies in antigen-positive patients were analysed and the clinical significance of the antibodies was evaluated by retrospective analysis of the haemoglobin (Hb) levels before and after transfusion; the change from baseline pre-transfusion Hb and the percentage of HbS were also determined.

Results. We identified variant *RH* alleles in 31/48 (65%) of SCD patients with Rh antibodies. Molecular analyses revealed the presence of partial *RHD* alleles and variant *RHCE* alleles associated with altered C and e antigens. Five patients were compound heterozygotes for *RHD* and *RHCE* variants. Retrospective analysis showed that 42% of antibodies produced by the patients with *RH* variants were involved in delayed haemolytic transfusion reactions or decreased survival of transfused RBC.

Discussion. In this study, we found that Rh antibodies in SCD patients with *RH* variants can be clinically significant and, therefore, matching patients based on *RH* variants should be considered.

Keywords: sickle cell disease, *RH* alleles, Rh alloimmunisation, *RHD* and *RHCE* variants.

Introduction

Alloimmunisation remains a major problem in transfused patients with sickle cell disease (SCD). In an effort to reduce alloimmunisation to red blood cell (RBC) antigens some programmes have been implemented to provide RBC transfusions matched for at least Rh and K to patients with SCD who are in need of chronic transfusion support¹⁻³. However, it has been observed that despite provision of Rh phenotyped matched RBC to patients with SCD, these patients still produce Rh antibodies^{4,5} and in many cases the antibodies are considered autoantibodies because the patient's own RBC type serologically positive for the corresponding antigen.

The Rh blood group system is one of the most important and complex blood group systems with a large number of antigens and is involved in RBC alloimmunisation, haemolytic transfusion reactions and haemolytic disease of the foetus and newborn⁶. It comprises 54 antigens defined serologically and

recognised by the International Society of Blood Transfusion (ISBT)7. The most common antigens are D, C, c, E and e, defined by commercial reagent antibodies. The RH locus on chromosome 1 consists of two homologous genes: RHD encoding the D protein and RHCE encoding the Ce, ce, cE and CE proteins^{6,8}. As a consequence of the homology and opposite orientation of the two RH genes, many rearrangements occur between these two genes and result in hybrid genes. These arrangements are thought to allow "hairpin" formation and exchange between the genes (the socalled gene conversion mechanism). A large number of RH variants and low incidence antigens arise from this mechanism^{8,9}. Over of 200 RHD alleles and 80 RHCE alleles have been reported, and new alleles are still being discovered (ISBT10 and Rhesus Site11). Patients with partial antigens and/or lacking high prevalence antigens, such as hrB and hrS, may develop Rh alloantibodies12. The high prevalence of altered RH alleles in Africans contributes to the high rate of Rh alloimmunisation in

SCD patients^{5,13}. Alloimmunisation to Rh antigens in populations of African origin is complicated by the genetic diversity of the RH locus and the limitations of serological methods to distinguish the variant antigens⁵. RH genotyping has revealed that many patients with SCD carry alleles encoding partial Rh antigens but little clinical or biological evidence related to alloimmunisation and haemolytic transfusion reactions is available for all the RH variant alleles. The identification of alloantibodies in patients with SCD carrying RH variants is important and a complete characterisation of the variants producing alloantibodies is required, because alloantibodies in those patients may be confused with autoantibodies. In this study, we characterised variant RH alleles in patients with SCD who made antibodies to Rh antigens despite their antigen-positive status and evaluated the clinical significance of the antibodies produced. We demonstrated that 65% of the patients with SCD alloimmunised to Rh antigens carried RH variant alleles and that 42% of the antibodies encountered had clinical significance.

Material and methods Patients' samples

We studied DNA samples from 48 African Brazilian patients with SCD (homozygous for haemoglobin S) who had been multiply transfused and were receiving RBC units antigen-matched for RhD, C, E, c, e and K, and made one or more antibodies with Rh specificities. All patients agreed to participate in this study by signing an Institutional Review Board-approved informed consent form.

Serology

RBC from of all alloimmunised patients were typed for D, C, c, E and e by haemagglutination in gel cards (Bio-Rad, Cressier sur Morat, Switzerland) using two different commercial sources of anti-sera (Immucor, Norcross, GA, USA; Bio-Rad). An indirect antiglobulin test was used to screen for and identify antibodies. A direct antiglobulin test and autologous control were performed in gel for all samples antigen-positive for the corresponding Rh antibody specificity. Eluate studies were performed on all samples with a positive direct antiglobulin test using an acid elution method (DiaCidel, Bio-Rad). Adsorption onto autologous RBC was also performed to aid the differentiation of autoantibodies and alloantibodies.

DNA preparation

Genomic DNA was extracted from whole blood by a manual spin column separation technique (QIAmp, Qiagen, Valencia, California, USA), according to the manufacturer's instructions. The concentration of the DNA was measured with a NanoDrop 2000c spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA).

DNA array analysis

DNA array analysis was performed using wRHCE and wRHD BeadChips from BioArray Solutions (Immucor, Warren, NJ, USA) containing 34 markers associated with altered RhD expression and 25 polymorphisms associated with altered RHCE alleles. It should be noted that wRHD and wRHCE BeadChips devices are for "research use only" to date. The two assays were performed with 8 mL of each DNA sample, containing ~10 to 80 ng/μL of genomic DNA for wRHD and ~10 ng/µL for wRHCE, according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The polymerase chain reactions (PCR) were performed in a Veriti thermal cycler (Life Technologies) and BeadChips carriers containing single-stranded amplicons and an elongation mixture were incubated at 53 °C in a high humidity hybridisation oven ([Boekel InSlide-Out, model 241000], Boekel, Feasterville, PA, USA). The fluorescence of each bead was analysed on the Bioarray Solutions® Array Imaging System to determine positive and negative reactions. BioArray Solutions Information System (BASIS) software was used to calculate the adjusted intensity of every reaction to assign a genotype and predicted phenotype.

DNA sequence analysis

DNA sequence analysis was performed on PCR products amplified from genomic DNA in all samples that were not characterized by the RHD and RHCE BeadChips in order to determine the specific allele present using *RHD* and *RHCE* specific primers as previously reported^{13,14}. PCR products were purified by elution from 1% agarose gels using a Qiaex II gel extraction kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA), and sequenced directly, without subcloning, on an ABI 373XL Perkin Elmer Biosystems sequencer, with the Perkin Elmer Biosystems Big Dye reagent BD Half-term (GenPak, Perkin Elmer Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA).

In order to determine *RH* allelic combinations on samples identified with *RHCE* variants, we performed Rh-cDNA cloning and sequencing. RNA was isolated from reticulocytes with TriZol (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA). Reverse transcription was carried out with Superscript First Strand Synthesis (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) using gene-specific primers. PCR products amplified from cDNA were purified with ExoSAP-IT (USB, Cleveland, OH, USA), cloned into a TA vector (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) and sequenced using previously reported primers¹⁵.

Determination of RHD zygosity

For specific detection of the *RHD* gene deletion we used a PCR-restriction fragment length polymorphism (amplification of the downstream and hybrid Rhesus

box as well as digestion of the PCR products with the restriction enzyme Pst I) as previously reported¹⁶. We also used a quantitative PCR approach¹⁷ complemented by the specific detection of $RHD\Psi^{18}$.

Analysis of Rh immunisation

Records of transfusions, serological and molecular features in all antigen-positive patients with corresponding antibodies were analysed. The clinical significance of the antibodies was evaluated by retrospective analysis of the haemoglobin (Hb) levels before and after transfusion and determined by changes from the patient's baseline values calculated as the mean pre-transfusion percentage of HbS and Hb levels at the time of antibody detection.

Results Serology

Among the 48 SCD patients with Rh antibodies studied, nine were antigen-negative for the corresponding antibody specificity (3 anti-D in D-negative patients and 6 anti-C in C-negative patients) and 39 were antigen-positive with 4+ or weak agglutination reactions (15 anti-D whose RBC typed D-positive; 16 anti-e whose RBC typed e-positive; 4 anti-C whose RBC typed C-positive; 2 anti-D,-e whose RBC typed positive for both D and e; and 2 anti-D,-C whose RBC typed positive for both D and C). Autologous controls, the direct antiglobulin test and eluate were positive in 8/39 (20.5%) patients whose RBC typed serologically positive for the corresponding antibody. Adsorption

Table I - RH genotypes and predicted phenotypes in 39 SCD patients with Rh antibodies whose RBC typed positive for the corresponding antigen.

N.	RH Genotypes and Predicted Phenotypes					
	D+ patients with anti-D considered to be alloantibodies					
	Genotypes*	Predicted phenotypes				
3	DIIIa-ceS/DIIIa-ceS	partial D, C–E–, partial c, partial e				
3	DAR-ce/DAR-ceAR	partial D, C-E-c+e+				
1	DAR-ce/ceEK	partial D, C–E–c+e+				
2	DAU0-ce/D-ce	partial D, C-E-c+e+				
1	DAU3-cE/DAU5-ce	partial D, C-E+c+e+				
1	DAU4-ce48C/DAU4-ce48C	partial D, C-E-c+e+weak				
3	Weak partial 4.0-ce733G/weak partial 4.0-ce733G	partial D, C-E-, partial c, partial e				
1	Weak partial 4.0-ce/DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS	partial D, partial C, E-c+e+				
	e+ patients with anti-e consider	ered to be autoantibodies				
	Genotypes	Predicted phenotypes				
	D-ce/D-ce	D+C-E-c+e+				
l	D-Ce/ce	D+C+E-c+e+				
	D-cE/ce	D+C-E+c+e+				
	e+ patients with anti-e considered to be alloantibodies					
	Genotypes	Predicted phenotypes				
!	D-Ce/D-ce48C,733G	D+C+E-, partial c, partial e				
	ceS/ce733G	D-C-E-, partial c, partial e				
	D-ce48C/D-ceS	D+C-E-c+, partial e				
	ce48C,733G/ce733G	D-C-E-, partial c, partial e				
	D+ and e+ patients with anti-D and anti	e considered to be alloantibodies				
	Genotypes	Predicted phenotypes				
	DAR-ceS/DAR-ceAR	partial D, C-E-, partial c, partial e				
1	DAU5-ce48C/DAU0-ceMO	partial D, C–E–, partial e				
	C+ patients with anti-C considered to be alloantibodies					
	Genotypes	Predicted phenotypes				
	DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS/DAU0-ce	partial D, partial C, E-c+e+				
3	DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS/ DIVa-2-ceTI	partial D, partial C, E-c+, partial e				
	D+ and C+patients with anti-D and anti	-C considered to be alloantibodies				
	Genotypes	Predicted phenotypes				
	DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS/ DIVa-2-ceTI	partial D, partial C, E-c+, partial e				

^{*} The order of the two alleles within the RH genotypes is arbitrary and does not correspond to the presumed haplotype.

onto autologous RBs showed that these eight patients had autoantibodies.

Molecular analyses

Molecular analyses revealed *RHD* and *RHCE* alleles associated with variant D, C and e antigens in 31/48 (65%) of SCD patients with Rh antibodies (Table I). Except for *RHD*DAU0*, found in three samples by sequencing, the other *RH* variants were identified by wRHD and wRHCE BeadChips. Homozygous, heterozygous and compound heterozygous alleles were found by cDNA analysis. Allelic associations showed that five patients (2 with anti-D, -e; 1 with anti-C and 2 with anti-D, -C) were compound heterozygotes for *RHD* and *RHCE* variants (Table I).

Rh immunisation

All 39 patients with "unexplained" Rh antibodies had received ten or more units of RBC cells within the preceding 6 months. Autologous adsorption results associated with molecular findings of *RH* variants in 31 patients showed that eight patients had autoantibodies and 31 had alloantibodies. Retrospective analysis showed that 13/31 alloantibodies (4 anti-D, 5 anti-e and 4 anti-C) were involved in delayed haemolytic transfusion reactions or decreased survival of transfused RBC as verified by the change from the patients' baseline pre-transfusion Hb and percentage of HbS at the time of antibody detection. Those antibodies were associated with worsened anaemia and/or an increase in HbS (Table II).

Discussion

In our institution matching in patients with SCD includes, in addition to ABO, phenotyping for Rh, K1,

Fy^a, Jk^a, S and Di^a prior to RBC transfusion, with the aim of preventing alloimmunisation to these RBC antigens and as part of the antibody identification process. In this study, we performed *RH* genotyping in 48 patients with SCD immunised to Rh antigens to determine *RH* variants and evaluated the clinical significance of the antibodies by change in Hb levels at the time of antibody detection.

We report here variant RH alleles associated with Rh alloimmunisation in 31/48 of African Brazilian patients with SCD. RHD variants were found in 23/31 patients, RHCE variants in 28/31 and RHD and RHCE allele combinations in 20/31 patients. The most frequent RHD alleles found in our group of patients were RHD*DAR, RHD*weak partial 4.0, RHD*DIIIa and RHD*DAU0. With regards to RHCE alleles carried by these SCD patients, the most frequent alleles were RHCE*ceS, RHCE*ce48, RHCE*ce733G, RHCE*ceAR and RHCE*ceTI. Variant RHD alleles were present in the homozygous and in the heterozygous state in 44% of cases and in the hemizygous state in 12% of patients. Variant RHCE alleles were found in the homozygous state in 25% of cases, in compound heterozygosity in 43% and in heterozygosity with a conventional allele in 29% of patients.

The *RH* variants characterised herein have already been associated with Rh alloimmunisation in SCD patients^{5,12,13,19}. The main difference in this study is the inclusion of patients with Rh antibodies only. The majority of patients had single Rh antibodies although four (13%) had more than one Rh antibody. In 31 cases, antibodies occurred in patients whose RBC were positive for the antigen and were associated with Rh variants by *RH* genotyping. Thirteen of the Rh antibodies associated

Table II - RH genotypes found in 13 patients with SCD associated with clinically significant antibodies involved in decreased survival of transfused RBC.

ID	Antibody specificity*	9 7 71		Haemoglobin S (%) at antibody detection		Haemoglobin (g/dL) at antibody detection	
			N.	Pre- transfusion	Post- transfusion	Pre- transfusion	Post- transfusion
375	Anti-e	ceS/ce733G	64	23.8	45.8	7.8	6.9
509	Anti-e	ceS/ce733G	38	24.3	58.1	8.5	6.4
510	Anti-e	D-ce48C/D-ceS	142	29.6	42.1	9.8	8.1
516	Anti-e	ceS/ce733G	94	25.3	40.8	8.9	7.5
517	Anti-e	ce48C,733G/ce733G	18	28.9	46.1	9.5	8.2
534	Anti-D	DIIIa-ceS/DIIIa-ceS	103	19.6	44.6	8.4	7.2
536	Anti-D	DIIIa-ceS/DIIIa-ceS	32	29.3	47.2	9.0	7.8
538	Anti-D	DAR-ce/DAR-ceAR	14	26.1	34.6	7.9	6.8
562	Anti-D	DAU4-ce48C/DAU4-ce48C	16	23.1	43.6	8.6	8.0
711	Anti-C	DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS/ DIVa-2-ceTI	84	24.1	45.3	7.9	6.8
722	Anti-C	DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS/ DIVa-2-ceTI	114	44.3	54.8	6.9	5.9
738	Anti-C	DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS/ DIVa-2-ceTI	62	27.6	58.1	8.6	7.6
752	Anti-C	DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D-ceS/DAU0-ce	321	26.4	50.7	7.3	6.5

^{*} Rh antibodies considered to be alloantibodies. RBC: red blood cells.

with altered D, C and e antigens due to homozygous or compound heterozygous RHD and RHCE variant alleles were found to be clinically significant, as shown by a worsened anaemia and/or increase in HbS when the patients were transfused with the corresponding antigens. Patients who are homozygous, hemizygous or compound heterozygous for RH alleles therefore require a different approach to transfusion management. For example, two patients who developed clinically significant anti-C had the hybrid DIIIa-CE(4-7)-D that encodes a partial C antigen associated with variant RHD alleles encoding partial D: for these patients strategies to provide D-, C- should be implemented. Although, antibodies against high-prevalence antigens, such as Hrs (RH18) and HrB (RH34) were not identified in our SCD cohort, they have been documented in SCD patients with variant RHCE alleles in a homozygous state¹⁹. It has also been demonstrated by other authors that the Rh antibodies produced by patients with some of the variants found among our patients or antibodies against high-prevalence antigens can be involved in the occurrence of delayed haemolytic transfusion reactions or deaths5,13.

Furthermore, in patients with SCD there is a strong association between autoantibody development and alloimmunisation^{5,12}. In this study, the *RHCE* gene analysis together with serological analysis led to the prediction of autoantibodies against e antigen in 8/48 (17%) of the patients, whereas alloantibodies against D, C and e antigens were detected in 31/48 (65%). Knowledge of the prevalence of *RH* variants and reports such as this one on the clinical significance of antibodies produced in individuals carrying such variants support the development of strategies to match *RH* to avoid Rh alloimmunisation and the risk of haemolytic transfusion reactions and/or poor transfusion outcomes.

Molecular Rh typing has been used to identify altered RH alleles and to predict whether an antibody is an autoantibody or alloantibody and is playing an important role in expanding matching of the RH system in SCD patients and donors^{5,8,12}. Transfusion therapy could be improved in such patients if donor centres performed molecular screening in large numbers of donors to identify donors with *RH* variants for matching²⁰. As blood group genotyping is becoming part of laboratory routine and platforms targeting a large number of *RH* polymorphisms are becoming available we believe that molecular analysis of RH variants in patients and donors would be feasible.

In conclusion, we characterised a cohort of SCD patients prone to alloimmunisation and delayed haemolytic transfusion reactions and demonstrated that some variant RH alleles were frequent in these

patients. With this information, a strategy to prevent Rh alloimmunisation can be implemented. Our finding reinforces the importance of recognising SCD patients with *RH* variants in order to provide them with Rh genetically-matched RBC units.

Acknowledgment

This study was supported by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP) grant n. 2013/01426-1 (to ES) and 2012/04651-3 (to LC).

The Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Tahhan RH, Holbrook LR, Braddy LR, et al. Antigenmatched donor blood in the transfusion management of patients with sickle cell disease. Transfusion 1994; 34: 562-9.
- 2) Ambruso DR, Githens JH, Alcorn R, et al. Experience with donors matched for minor blood group antigens in patients with sickle cell anaemia who are receiving chronic transfusion therapy. Transfusion 1987; 27: 94-8.
- Castro O, Sandler SG, Houstoun-Yu P, Rana S. Predicting the effect of transfusing only phenotype-matched RBCs to patients with sickle cell disease: theoretical and practical implications. Transfusion 2002; 42: 683-90.
- Chou ST, Westhoff CM. Molecular biology of the Rh system: clinical considerations for transfusion in sickle cell disease. Hematology Am Soc Hematol Educ Program 2009; 1: 178-84.
- Chou ST, Jackson T, Vege S, et al. High prevalence of red blood cell alloimmunization in sickle cell disease despite transfusion from Rh-matched minority donors. Blood 2013; 122: 1062-71.
- Avent ND, Reid ME. The Rh blood group system: a review. Blood 2000; 95: 375-87.
- Storry JR, Castilho L, Daniels G, et al. International Society of Blood Transfusion Working Party on red cell immunogenetics and blood group terminology: Berlin report. Vox Sang 2011; 101: 77-82.
- 8) Flegel WA. Molecular genetics and clinical applications for RH. Transfus Apher Sci 2011; 44: 81-91.
- 9) Chou ST, Westhoff CM. The Rh and RhAG blood group systems. Immunohematology 2010; **26**: 178-86.
- 10) ISBT-Blood Group Allele Terminology. Available at: http://www.isbtweb.org/working-parties/red-cell-immunogenetics-and-blood-group-terminology/blood-group-terminology/blood-group-allele-terminology/. Accessed on 05/11/2013.
- 11) Wagner F, Flegel WA. RhesusBase V2. Available at: http://www.uni-ulm.de/~fwagner/RH/RB/. Accessed on 05/11/2013.
- Noizat-Pirenne F, Tournamille C. Relevance of RH variants in transfusion of sickle cell patients. Transfus Clin Biol 2011; 18: 527-35.
- 13) Noizat-Pirenne F, Lee K, Pennec PY, et al. Rare RHCE phenotypes in black individuals of Afro-Caribbean origin: identification and transfusion safety. Blood 2002; 100: 4223-31.
- 14) Legler TJ, Eber SW, Lakomek M, et al. Application of RHD and RHCE genotyping for correct blood group determination in chronically transfused patients. Transfusion 1999; 39: 852-5.
- 15) Hipsky CH, Lomas-Francis C, Fuchisawa A, et al. RHCE*ceCF encodes partial c and partial e but not CELO, an antigen antithetical to Crawford. Transfusion 2011; 51: 25-31.

- 16) Wagner FF, Flegel WA. RHD gene deletion occurred in the Rhesus box. Blood 2000; **95**: 3662-8.
- 17) Chiu RW, Murphy MF, Fidler, et al. Determination of RhD zygosity: comparison of a double amplification refractory mutation system approach and a multiplex real-time quantitative PCR approach. Clin Chem 2001; 47: 667-72.
- 18) Singleton BK, Green CA, Avent ND, et al. The presence of an RHD pseudogene containing a 37 base pair duplication and a nonsense mutation in Africans with the Rh D-negative blood group phenotype. Blood 2000; 95: 12-8.
- 19) Pham B-N, Peyrard T, Juszczak G, et al. Analysis of RhCE variants among 806 individuals in France: considerations for transfusion safety, with emphasis on patients with sickle cell disease. Transfusion 2011; 51: 1249-60.
- Keller MA, Horn T, Crowley J, et al. Genotype compatibility tables for matching patients and donors for Rh variants. Transfusion 2013; 53 (2S): 174A (SP304).

Arrived: 5 December 2013 - Revision accepted: 1 April 2014 **Correspondence:** Lilian Castilho

Haemotherapy Department Hemocentro, Unicamp

Rua Carlos Chagas, 480 - CP 6198

CEP 13081-970 Barão Geraldo, Campinas, SP, Brazil

e-mail: castilho@unicamp.br

