**BASIC RESEARCH**

Plaque composition in plexogenic and thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension: the critical role of thrombotic material in pultaceous core formation

E Arbustini, P Morbini, A M D’Armini, A Repetto, G Minzioni, F Piovella, M Viganò, L Tavazzi

**Background:** Patients with pulmonary hypertension develop intimal plaques in large pulmonary arteries.

**Objective:** To test the hypothesis that the composition of such plaques differs depending on whether the aetiology of the disease is thromboembolic or hypertensive.

**Design:** Chronic thromboembolic and plexogenic pulmonary hypertension (primary and secondary [Eisenmenger syndrome]) were investigated. These are spontaneous human models and were used to examine the independent role of thrombus and hypertension in plaque composition.

**Setting:** A national tertiary referral centre for lung transplantation and pulmonary thromboendarterectomy.

**Patients:** Thirty nine patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension who had undergone thromboendarterectomy (n = 32) or lung transplantation (n = 7), 28 with plexogenic diseases [nine primary and 19 Eisenmenger], and three with Eisenmenger syndrome complicated by thromboembolic events.

**Interventions:** The lung and thromboendarterectomy samples were sectioned, stained with Movat pentachrome, and immunostained with antibodies for fibrin, platelets, inflammatory cells, smooth muscle cells, and erythrocyte membrane glycoprotein A.

**Main outcome measure:** Composition of the plaques affecting large pulmonary arteries.

**Results:** Two types of intimal lesion were distinguished in chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension: fibrous plaques with angioneogenesis; and core-rich atherosclerotic plaques with pultaceous cores largely consisting of glycoprotein immunoreactive material, with cholesterol clefts (61.5%), CD68 positive macrophages (84.6%), T lymphocytes (87%), and calcification (46.1%). The samples from the patients with Eisenmenger syndrome and thromboembolic complications had similar characteristics, whereas those from patients with uncomplicated primary pulmonary hypertension had core-free fibrous plaques, spotted with macrophages and T lymphocytes.

**Conclusions:** Chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension is associated with atherosclerotic plaques with glycoprotein-rich pultaceous cores, and plexogenic pulmonary hypertension with fibrous plaques. Thromboembolic material thus plays a critical role in the formation of pultaceous cores, of which erythrocyte membrane derived glycoprotein A is a major component.

Both primary and secondary plexogenic pulmonary hypertension (Eisenmenger syndrome) are spontaneous in vivo models that are useful for investigating the role of hypertension in plaque formation and composition; chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension is a unique model for investigating the corresponding role of thrombi. Both conditions generate proximal pulmonary artery plaques, the composition of which has not been specifically investigated. In plexogenic pulmonary hypertension plaques are mostly constituted of fibrous tissue, while in chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension plaques may contain pultaceous cores, layers of organising/reabsorbing thrombotic material, and fibrous tissue.

Chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension is usually characterised by a first thromboembolic event followed by the so called “honeymoon” asymptomatic phase, with possible further silent emboli, and finally the development of chronic hypertensive disease. At the time of the first thromboembolic episode, the pulmonary arteries are innocent bystanders. The current treatment for chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension is pulmonary thromboendarterectomy, which removes recent and old thrombotic endoluminal material, neo-intima, and a few elastic lamellae from the inner layers of the tunica media of pulmonary arteries.

We hypothesised that comparative studies of lung arteries from patients with plexogenic and chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension would provide useful data for investigating the independent role of thrombi and hypertension in plaque formation, and that plaque composition is influenced by the different pathogeneses.

**METHODS**

We analysed the histopathological and immunohistochemical characteristics of the endoluminal material removed at pulmonary thromboendarterectomy from the pulmonary arteries of patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension, and from lungs excised at transplantation from patients with plexogenic or thromboembolic hypertensive pulmonary disease. All the patients underwent electrocardiography and echocardiography, invasive right and left ventricular haemodynamic examinations, coronary and pulmonary angiography, and routine biochemical analyses; any risk factors for atherosclerosis were investigated and recorded. None of the patients had associated ischaemic or other heart disease.
disease, and none of those who underwent pulmonary thromboendarterectomy needed any additional surgery.

**Chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension**

There were 39 patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension (22 men, aged (mean (SD)) 43.2 (13.8) years, and 17 women, aged 44.7 (11.8) years). Of these, 32 underwent pulmonary thromboendarterectomy and seven underwent lung transplantation (performed before the introduction of the pulmonary thromboendarterectomy technique in our hospital). The time between the onset of the symptoms diagnosed as being caused by pulmonary hypertension and performance of surgery was 26 (42.6) months (range 6–264 months).

**Plexogenic primary and secondary pulmonary hypertension**

There were 31 patients with plexogenic primary and secondary pulmonary hypertension: nine with primary pulmonary hypertension (two men aged 19 years and seven women aged 43.6 (5.08) years); 19 with Eisenmenger syndrome (six men aged 27.8 (4.8) years and 13 women aged 43.6 (5.08) years); and three with Eisenmenger syndrome complicated by thromboembolic events (two men aged 54.0 (4.2) years and one women aged 51 years).

The coronary artery trees of the 13 patients with Eisenmenger syndrome who underwent heart–lung transplantation (one of whom had thromboembolic complications) contained no atherosclerotic plaques on pathological examination.

None of the hearts from the patients with primary pulmonary hypertension was available for study because they were used in domino procedures.

**Histopathological and immunohistochemical study**

All the pulmonary thromboendarterectomy material and multiple arterial samples from transplanted lungs were fixed in 10% buffered formalin and embedded in paraffin. Multiple 5 μm thick sections were cut and stained with haematoxylin-eosin and Movat pentachrome stain. Further sections were used to investigate the immunohistochemical characteristics of the thrombus components using antibodies to platelets (anti-IIb/IIIa glycoprotein complex), fibrin and erythrocyte membrane derived material (antiglycophorin A), and plaque cells (inflammatory and non-inflammatory smooth muscle and endothelial cells) (table 1). The sections were immunostained by previously described methods using the avidin–biotin peroxidase complex and diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride as chromogen. The positive controls were sections of coronary artery samples with recent thrombotic occlusion (glycoprotein IIb/IIIa and fibrin), normal spleen (macrophages, lymphocytes, glycophorin A, endothelial cells), and large bowel (smooth muscle cells); the lung samples provided further internal positive controls. The negative controls were obtained by substituting primary antibody with normal swine serum or an unrelated primary antibody.

The features that we specifically investigated were:

- pultaceous material (lipid-rich, necrotic material)
- cholesterol clefts
- fibrous tissue and “neointimal hyperplasia” consisting of smooth muscle cells and loose matrix-rich extracellular collagen
- organised/reabsorbed thrombotic material, defined by residual fibrin stands embedded in the neointimal fibrous tissue
- “recent” non-organised thrombotic material
- vascular neogenesis
- inflammatory cells (macrophages, lymphocytes, foam and non-foam cells)
- calcification.

### Table 1  Antibodies and antisera used in the immunohistochemical study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antibody</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Pretreatment and dilution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCHL-1</td>
<td>Human antigen CD45RO</td>
<td>T lymphocytes</td>
<td>Dako</td>
<td>None, 1:200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGM-1</td>
<td>Human antigen CD68</td>
<td>Macrophages</td>
<td>Dako</td>
<td>10’ Trypsin 37°C, 1:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glycophorin-A</td>
<td>Glycophorin-A</td>
<td>Erythrocytes</td>
<td>Dako</td>
<td>None, 1:100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QBEND/10</td>
<td>Human antigen CD34</td>
<td>Endothelia</td>
<td>Serotec</td>
<td>None, 1:100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFF35</td>
<td>α and γ isotypes of skeletal, cardiac, and smooth muscle actin</td>
<td>Smooth muscle cells</td>
<td>Enzo Diagnostic</td>
<td>None, 1:100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD41a</td>
<td>Ib/IIa platelet glycoprotein</td>
<td>Platelets</td>
<td>Immunotech</td>
<td>20’ Subtilysin 37°C, 1:100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD61</td>
<td>Ib/IIa platelet glycoprotein</td>
<td>Platelets</td>
<td>Immunotech</td>
<td>2x5’ MW 500 W, 1:50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibrinogen</td>
<td>Fibrinogen and fibrin</td>
<td>Fibrin network</td>
<td>Biogenex</td>
<td>None, 1:200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MW, microwave oven.

### Table 2  Prevalence of histopathological features found in endoluminal pulmonary thromboendarterectomy material from patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension (n=32), and in the pulmonary arteries of lungs excised at transplantation from patients with thromboembolic (n=7) and plexogenic pulmonary hypertension (n=31)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>CTEPH</th>
<th>PPH</th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>ES with thrombus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibrocollagen tissue</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising thrombus</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent thrombotic</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcification</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vascular neogenesis</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macrophages and foam</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymphocytes</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pultaceous material</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol clefts</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol clefts in</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thrombus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are n (%).

CTEPH, chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension; ES, Eisenmenger syndrome; PPH, primary pulmonary hypertension.
Statistical analysis
Univariate and multivariate logistic models were used to compare atherogenic risk factors (age, blood cholesterol, triglyceride, and glucose concentrations, systolic and diastolic systemic blood pressure, and smoking) between the patients with plexogenic and chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension, and between the patients with purely plexogenic pulmonary hypertension and those with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension or Eisenmenger syndrome with thromboembolic complications.

A paired $t$ test was used to compare the risk factors for patients aged more or less than 60 years with atherosclerotic lesions in chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension.

Further univariate and multivariate logistic models were used to assess the predictive value of factors that might contribute to the development of the recorded histopathological features: the clinical and pathological diagnosis of chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension, age, systolic, diastolic, and mean pulmonary artery pressure, pulmonary vascular resistance, and time between the onset of severe symptoms (New York Heart Association functional class III/IV) and surgery. A probability ($p$) value of 0.05 was considered significant.

RESULTS
Intimal plaques were found in the proximal pulmonary arteries of all the patients with severe pulmonary hypertension. In the patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension and plexogenic hypertension complicated by thromboembolism, part of the plaques contained pultaceous cores consisting largely of glycoprotein immunoreactive material, indicating the major contribution of red cell membranes to their formation. In the patients with plexogenic pulmonary hypertension, the plaques were fibrous and spotted with CD68 positive smooth muscle cells (brown) in a proximal vessel from a lung with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension excised at transplantation. (D) Typical “atherosclerotic” plaque from a pulmonary thromboendarterectomy sample: note the residual layers of the elastic media of the pulmonary artery (arrowheads). (E) Cluster of foam macrophages with lymphocytes in reabsorbing thrombotic material. (F) Anti-CD45RO immunostaining for T lymphocytes. A, B, D, E: Movat pentachrome stain; C, F: avidin–biotin complex; C: anti-HHF-35; F: anti-CD45RO.

Histopathological study
The results of the histopathological study are summarised in table 2.

Plaque composition
Two different types of intimal plaque were found in the patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension: fibrous lesions characterised by large numbers of...
terectomy samples) and in two of the three cases of chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension (all seven lungs excised at transplantation). Dystrophic calcifications were found in 18 of the 39 cases of chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension, with samples from six excised lungs and 18 pulmonary thromboendarterectomies (fig 1E, F).

Dystrophic calcification
Dystrophic calcifications were found in 18 of the 39 cases of chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension (four lungs and 14 pulmonary thromboendarterectomy samples), and in one of the cases of Eisenmenger syndrome with thromboembolic complications. The calcium deposits were in both the fibrous tissue and the thrombotic material.

Pulmonary artery remodelling
The pulmonary artery wall underlying the intimal plaques showed the typical remodelling of atherosclerotic systemic arteries (fig 1A, D), characterised by expansion of the arterial wall, with loss of integrity and thinning of the tunica media, and parallel plaque extension toward the arterial wall. This finding was independent of the plaque composition.

Immunohistochemistry
Immunostaining with anti-fibrin, anti-IIb/IIIa, and anti-glycoprotein A antibodies confirmed the presence of the thrombus components revealed by the Movat pentachrome stain in the plaques from the patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension. Immunostaining with anti-glycoprotein A antibodies clearly showed the prevalence of erythrocyte membrane-derived material in the pultaceous cores (fig 3A) and the organising thrombotic material (fig 3B). The intra-sample positive control was provided by red cells (fig 3C).

Topographical observations
In the patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension, atheromatous cores (fig 1C, F) were localised deeply inside the lesion and close to the tunica media, or superficially, near to or within the thrombotic material. Angioneogenesis and the pultaceous material had an inverse topographical relation, with the areas rich in new vessels being characteristically free of pultaceous material (fig 1B).

Atherosclerosis risk factors in patients with thromboembolic and plexogenic pulmonary hypertension
The patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension were significantly older (p < 0.05) than those with plexogenic disease, probably because of the earlier development of pulmonary hypertension in primary pulmonary hypertension and Eisenmenger syndrome, and the exclusion of patients older than 65 years from our lung transplantation programme. There were no significant differences in serum cholesterol, triglyceride, and glucose concentrations, or in systolic and diastolic systemic blood pressure, between the thromboembolic and plexogenic groups (table 3), or between the patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension aged more or less than 60 years. However, smoking...
was significantly less likely in the patients with plexogenic pulmonary hypertension.

**Predictive value of candidate factors for the histopathological findings**

At multivariate analysis, only chronic thromboembolism significantly predicted the presence of pultaceous material in large pulmonary arteries, with the presence of organised and recent thrombi, calcifications, and cholesterol clefts.

**DISCUSSION**

Our results show that the composition of pulmonary artery plaques in patients with chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension is very different from that in patients with pure plexogenic pulmonary hypertension, the former having large pultaceous cores that are absent in the latter. They also show that erythrocyte membrane derived glycophorin A is a major component of this pultaceous material; glycophorin immuno-reacting material was observed in deep cores surrounded by fibrous capsules and separated by thrombotic stratifications, and within the thrombotic material. Thromboembolic material is therefore sufficient on its own to induce plaque formation and influence its composition. The plaques in the patients with plexogenic pulmonary hypertension consist of fibrous tissue without pultaceous cores.

The atherogenic process seems to be independent of metabolic risk factors; blood cholesterol, triglyceride, and glucose concentrations were similar in the patients with plexogenic or chronic thromboembolic hypertension. Only smoking was significantly more frequent in the latter, probably because patients with congenital heart disease or early onset primary pulmonary hypertension are unlikely to smoke. Furthermore, the angiographically documented absence of coronary atherosclerosis and the pathological confirmation of normal coronary arteries in the hearts of the patients with Eisenmenger syndrome indirectly confirm the non-atherogenic habitus of the entire population. The large pulmonary artery pathology in our patients can therefore be attributed entirely to their thromboembolic or plexogenic hypertension.

The likelihood of finding pultaceous cores in patients with plexogenic pulmonary hypertension is extremely low. The pathological changes characterising plexogenic pulmonary hypertension are typically those seen in small arteries and capillary vessels (medial hyperplasia, intimal thickening, and plexiform lesions), whereas large proximal pulmonary arteries usually develop fibrous intimal thickening. Angioneogenesis is characteristically absent except in the presence of a thromboembolic complication. In chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension, the distal vessels are typically spared or show distal embolisation with recent thromboembolic material or a multichannel pattern; the large pulmonary arteries in our patients showed a combination of recent and organising thromboembolic material, smooth muscle cell-rich fibrous plaques with angioneogenesis, and atherosclerotic plaques with pultaceous material.

Bilayered cell membranes are lipid-rich structures and probably a major source for cholesterol clefts, as indicated by

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**Table 3** Classical risk factors for atherosclerosis in patients with chronic thromboembolic and plexogenic pulmonary hypertension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient groups</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>SAPs (mm Hg)</th>
<th>SAPd (mm Hg)</th>
<th>Blood glucose (mmol/l)</th>
<th>Total cholesterol (mmol/l)</th>
<th>Blood triglycerides (mmol/l)</th>
<th>Smokers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CTEPH (n=39)</td>
<td>22/17</td>
<td>48.2 (14.0)</td>
<td>113.8 (12.6)</td>
<td>71.4 (7.8)</td>
<td>5.18 (1.67)</td>
<td>4.07 (1.03)*</td>
<td>1.30 (0.55)</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plexo PH (n=31)</td>
<td>10/21</td>
<td>36.2 (12.2)</td>
<td>111.5 (13.8)</td>
<td>74.1 (8.9)</td>
<td>4.94 (1.53)</td>
<td>3.95 (1.06)</td>
<td>1.39 (0.73)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p Value <0.05 NS NS NS NS NS <0.05†

Values are mean (SD).

*Mean values of 32 cases.

†Plexogenic PH included young patients with longstanding disease (congenital heart disease or primary pulmonary hypertension) who are unlikely to start smoking.

CTEPH, chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension; M/F, male/female; plexo PH, plexogenic pulmonary hypertension; SAPd, systemic artery pressure, diastolic; SAPs, systemic artery pressure, systolic.
their presence in recently deposited thrombotic material. The lipid content of plasma membranes is very different from that of endoplasmic reticular membranes (highest) or mitochondrial membranes (lowest, and different in the inner and outer membrane). All the thrombus cells (white cells, red cells, and platelets) are membrane bound, and platelets and white cells contain other membrane bound structures (granules, lysosomes, reticular structures, mitochondria, and so on). The large number of red cells in thrombi and their abundant glycophorin-A content contribute to the formation of pultaceous material, which was immunostained by specific glycophorin-A antibodies. As glycophorins are exclusively erythrocyte membrane components, the presence of glycoprophorin immunoreactive material in pultaceous cores indicates that at least some of it comes from erythrocyte membranes.

The pultaceous material seems to localise remote from the angioneogenesis that usually occurs during thrombus resorption/organisation. Angioneogenesis was typically surrounded by newly deposited fibrous tissue and was never seen in the pultaceous material. These findings suggest an inverse relation between angioneogenesis and the accumulation of pultaceous material, and deserve further investigation of the mechanisms that govern thrombus organisation.

Inflammation and the immunophenotype of inflammatory cells (T lymphocytes and macrophages) were common to plexogenic and thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension; however, inflammatory infiltrates were sparse within the fibrous tissue in the former and often clustered in groups in the latter. This distribution probably reflects the inflammatory trigger: the endothelial insult is caused by high pressure levels (the latter). This distribution probably reflects the inflammatory trigger: the endothelial insult is caused by high pressure levels in plexogenic pulmonary hypertension but by thrombotic material in chronic thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension. The effects of hypertension in both plexogenic and thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension also reflect on arterial wall remodelling: like systemic arteries affected by atherosclerosis, pulmonary arteries undergo vessel wall remodelling regardless of plaque composition. Inflammation and remodelling are therefore further elements that make the plates observed in our study similar to those affecting systemic arteries.

The spontaneous human models of chronic thromboembolic and plexogenic pulmonary hypertension suggest that systemic arterial atherosclerotic plaques may be a partial result of thrombotic or haemorrhagic events; at least in some patients or in some lesions. The potential origin of plaque cores from thrombotic material may explain why pultaceous core-rich plaques can be found in the systemic arteries of patients without any of the classical risk factors for atherosclerosis. Both thrombosis and haemorrhages imply the presence of blood cells in a given lesion, thus extending the number of episodes that may contribute to core/plaque formation during life. These observation do not undermine the proven role of metabolic and mechanical contributors to the pathogenesis of multifactorial atherosclerosis, but may help to refocus attention on the role of thrombus in atherogenesis.

Conclusions
The human model of thromboembolic pulmonary hypertension shows that thrombotic material can provide the basic elements for the pultaceous material characteristically present in the core of atherosclerotic plaques, whereas hypertensive non-thromboembolic arterial conditions induce fibrous neointimal plaque formation in which foam cells and lymphocytes are common, but the pultaceous-rich cores commonly seen in atherosclerotic plaques are exceptional. Although these data do not undermine our consolidated knowledge of atherosclerotic plaque composition or pathogenetic theories, or exclude other mechanisms underlying the formation of pultaceous material, they may help future studies of the clinical and pathological correlates of systemic atherosclerosis.

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Authors’ affiliations
E Arbustini, Transplant Research Area, Molecular Diagnostic Cardiovascular and Transplant Pathology Laboratory, IRCCS Policlinico S Matteo, Pavia, Italy
P Morbini, Department of Pathology, IRCCS Policlinico S Matteo
A M D’Armini, M Vigano, Department of Cardiac Surgery, IRCCS Policlinico S Matteo
F Piovella, Thromboembolism Unit, IRCCS Policlinico S Matteo
A Repetto, L Tavazzi, Department of Cardiology, IRCCS Policlinico S Matteo
G Minzioni, Cardiac Surgery Unit, Spedali Civili, Brescia, Italy

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