Title: Can Therapeutically-rational Exchange (T-REX) of Thalassemic Red Blood Cells Improve the Clinical Course of Malaria Patients Infected with P. falciparum?

Running Head: Thalassemia T-REX for Malaria with P. falciparum

Authors: Ryan Philip Jajosky1,2, Audrey N. Jajosky3, Philip G. Jajosky2,4

Institutions: 1Department of Pathology, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, USA
2Biconcavity Inc., Lilburn, USA
3Department of Pathology, Case Western Reserve University, University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center, Cleveland, USA
4Retired Physician, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Correspondence to: Ryan Philip Jajosky, rjajsk@emory.edu


In 2007, a hematopoietic stem-cell transplant of “mutant” homozygous CCR5 cells successfully blocked cell-entry of the human immunodeficiency virus. Fortunately, the legacy of this historic cell therapy—“the Berlin patient” breakthrough—is still advancing in medicine. Lessons learned: We should respect and exploit genetic engineering of human evolution, identify disease-resistant cells, and create cell banks and donor registries that advance life-saving cell therapies. For malaria, “therapeutically-rational exchange” (T-REX) refers to using special malaria-resistant cell variants, such as thalassemic red blood cells (RBCs) for RBC exchange transfusions, instead of using ordinary, non-descript “standard-issue” units of blood. Regarding terms, “selective allogeneic variant exchange” (SAVE) of cell variants refers to replacing disease-susceptible “normal cells” with genetic, disease-resistant “mutant cells” that evolved to prevent human extinction. Hence, using T-REX of thalassemic RBCs for patients infected with P. falciparum represents a malaria-specific SAVE.

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As expected from malaria-driven evolution, all thalassemic RBCs are malaria-resistant (are protective); “the malaria hypothesis” emerged because thalassemic alleles were found to be prevalent where malaria has been endemic [1]. Regarding protection, the binding of parasitized RBCs to endothelial cells is reduced in malaria patients having α- or β-thalassemia [1]. For T-REX, blood banks can at the most provide three thalassemic variants because the blood-donation process excludes unqualified donors. A thalassemic individual healthy enough to donate blood may have β-thalassemia trait, a silent carrier of α-thalassemia, or an α-thalassemia trait [1, 2]. Hence, where public health officials seek to reduce malaria morbidity via T-REX, blood banks first need to identify thalassemia units or other malaria-resistant units using hemoglobin electrophoresis or high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). Fortunately, prevalence of thalassemia can be substantial: for the mild α-thalassemia, 10%-20% in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia; for β-thalassemia, 1%-20% in the Mediterranean and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa [1]. By testing tubing segments from RBC units using hemoglobin electrophoresis or HPLC, malaria-protective RBCs can be easily identified and made available for T-REX.

In conclusion, T-REX of malaria-resistant RBCs is an exceptionally simple SAVE that may substantially reduce malaria morbidity and mortality. Hence, T-REX of thalassemic and several other malaria-resistant RBC variants should be evaluated in a timely manner [3-5]. Blood-bank/transfusion-medicine specialists and technicians worldwide can easily offer T-REX if properly supported by their medical institutions in terms of staff and blood-bank enhancements. Of note, services required to perform appendectomies on patients with parasite-induced appendicitis far exceed the additional resources needed to offer T-REX. Furthermore, as with other cells, tissue, organ transplants, or exchanges, precious T-REX donors can be actively recruited to donate periodically or as required. Hence, even if the initial “passive” prevalence of local malaria-resistant RBC variants in blood banks is low, donor registries and active recruitment can increase the availability and make T-REX feasible. Historically, citizens have enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to donate blood.

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