Modelling the catabolic environment of the moderately degenerated disc with a caprine ex vivo loaded disc culture system

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MODELLING THE CATABOLIC ENVIRONMENT OF THE MODERATELY DEGENERATED DISC WITH A CAPRINE EX VIVO LOADED DISC CULTURE SYSTEM

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§ These authors contributed equally to this work

Abstract

Low-back pain affects 80% of the world population at some point in their lives and 40% of the cases are attributed to intervertebral disc (IVD) degeneration. Over the years, many animal models have been developed for the evaluation of prevention and treatment strategies for IVD degeneration. Ex vivo organ culture systems have also been developed to better control mechanical loading and biochemical conditions, but a reproducible ex vivo model that mimics moderate human disc degeneration is lacking. The present study described an ex vivo caprine IVD degeneration model that simulated the changes seen in the nucleus pulposus during moderate human disc degeneration.

Following pre-load under diurnal, simulated physiological loading (SPL) conditions, lumbar caprine IVDs were degenerated enzymatically by injecting collagenase and chondroitinase ABC (cABC). After digestion, IVDs were subjected to SPL for 7 d. No intervention and phosphate-buffered saline injection were used as controls. Disc deformation was continuously monitored to assess disc height recovery. Histology and immunohistochemistry were performed to determine the histological grade of degeneration, matrix expression, degrading enzyme and catabolic cytokine expression.

Injection of collagenase and cABC irreversibly affected the disc mechanical properties. A decrease in extracellular matrix components was found, along with a consistent increase in degradative enzymes and catabolic proteins [interleukin (IL)-1β, -8 and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF)]. The changes observed were commensurate with those seen in moderate human-IVD degeneration. This model should allow for controlled ex vivo testing of potential biological, cellular and biomaterial treatments of moderate human-IVD degeneration.

Keywords: Intervertebral disc, loaded disc culture system, goat, disease model, moderate disc degeneration.

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IL interleukin
IQR interquartile range
IVD intervertebral disc
LBP low-back pain
LDSC loaded disc culture system
MMP3 matrix metalloproteinase 3
NGF nerve growth factor
NP nucleus pulposus
PBS phosphate-buffered saline
SD standard deviation
TBS tris-buffered saline
TNFα tumour necrosis factor α
VEGF vascular endothelial growth factor
YLDs years lived with disability

Introduction

LBP is the leading cause of morbidity and YLDs worldwide (Vos et al., 2017). Several causes have been related to LBP, the main being lumbar degeneration, which is thought to account for approximately 40% of all LBP cases (de Schepper et al., 2010; Pye et al., 2004; van Tulder et al., 1997). IVD degeneration is a process in which the healthy IVD follows a vicious cycle towards joint destruction (Vergroesen et al., 2015).

The healthy IVD consists of two cartilaginous endplates that are attached to the adjacent vertebrae and confine the NP, which is the core of the IVD, and the AF, which encircles the NP (Shapiro et al., 2012). The NP contains NP cells that produce a large amount of proteoglycans and collagen type II (Ohshima and Tsujii, 1989; Roberts et al., 1991). Since proteoglycans are negatively charged, an osmotic pressure attracts water into the NP creating an intradiscal pressure (Ohshima and Tsujii, 1989). This causes tension in the collagen fibres of the AF and enables the IVD to withstand the high compressive forces imposed by gravity and muscle tension. The IDD is an irreversible process characterised by altered cell behaviour, loss of NP matrix and changed joint mechanics (Adams and Roughley, 2006; Weber et al., 2015). This vicious circle of events can be initiated by various factors of both biological and mechanical nature (Vergroesen et al., 2015). The alterations in cell biology and matrix turnover essentially leads to a fibrous NP, which can no longer sustain compressive loads and enhance structural and biomechanical failure, largely mediated by catabolic processes (Le Maitre et al., 2015; Risbud and Shapiro, 2014; Vergroesen et al., 2015; Vo et al., 2016). Ultimately, IDD can result in spinal instability, with decreased disc height, tears and clefts in the degenerating AF and bulging of the disc into the spinal canal. The IVD loses its intradiscal pressure and the hydrostatic pressure experienced by NP cells switches to shear stress, which induce catabolic and inflammatory gene expression (Emanuel et al., 2015; Iatridis et al., 1997; Paul et al., 2013). These changes lead to compression of neural tissues, neurovascular invasion of the disc and inflammation of the adjacent bone, all inducing chronic pain (Le Maitre et al., 2015).

Patients suffering chronic LBP due to IDD, who have exhausted conservative treatment (e.g. pain relief medication and physiotherapy), have no remaining options other than surgical intervention, of which the most common is spinal fusion (Yajun et al., 2010). However, in the last few years, a number of biological, cellular or biomaterial strategies have been developed that aim at the restoration of the IVD and offer promising in vitro results (Anderson et al., 2005; Schutgens, 2015; Thorpe et al., 2016; Thorpe et al., 2017; Tsujimoto et al., 2018). However, translation to clinic is currently limited by a lack of models that recapitulate the cellular and mechanical changes seen in human disc degeneration.

Tissue regeneration is essentially a biological process that requires a living IVD to evaluate safety and efficacy of interventions. Animal models have been developed and used for this purpose (Hoogendoorn et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2014; Wuertz et al., 2009), but animal models have limitations of practical, ethical and mechanical nature. In the last decade, there has been a strong urge in science to limit the use of experimental animals, not only for ethical reasons, but also because animal models are often moderate to poor models of the human condition that is simulated. Reduction, replacement and refinement (3Rs) is a policy strongly embraced by grant agencies throughout the world. As for the validity of the model, quadrupeds have been presented as relevant for human spine research (Smit, 2002), but the diurnal loading regime and biology in humans is quite different from what is seen in a sheep or goat, making it difficult to predict the benefit of a treatment for humans. Finally, the induction of a relevant disc degeneration in the IVD of a quadruped is far from trivial. Puncture of the AF with a needle is often used, but essentially differs from normal disc degeneration in humans, which usually starts with the loss of proteoglycans and water from the NP. To simulate this, Hoogendoorn et al. (2007) have used cABC, inducing a reproducible, mild disc degeneration in a goat model, similarly to what was done by Gullbrand et al. (2017). However, in both studies, it took 12 weeks to produce these conditions. As such, this is an expensive and impractical model for the evaluation of innovative treatments during early stage development.

To overcome these issues, LDSCs have been proposed and developed (Alini et al., 2008; Gantenbein et al., 2015; Lang et al., 2018; Paul et al., 2012; Pfannkuche et al., 2019; Rosenzweig et al., 2016; Walter et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2020). As the disc is considered to be an immune-privileged site (Sun et al., 2020), with inflammatory cell migration only seen following annular or endplate rupture during end stage degeneration or herniation, studies of isolated discs ex vivo can be appropriate models for testing potential regenerative strategies. IVDS are excised from sheep, cattle or goat spines or tails from a slaughterhouse and placed in a bioreactor. Such IVDSs are generally in good condition and, therefore,
Table 1. Features of human disc degeneration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cellular changes during human disc degeneration</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Method of measurement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cellular clusters</td>
<td>Boos et al., 2002; Gries et al., 2000; Rutgès et al., 2013; Sive et al., 2002</td>
<td>Histological examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fissures</td>
<td>Boos et al., 2002; Gries et al., 2000; Rutgès et al., 2013; Sive et al., 2002</td>
<td>Histological examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demarcation between NP and AF</td>
<td>Boos et al., 2002; Gries et al., 2000; Rutgès et al., 2013; Sive et al., 2002</td>
<td>Histological examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of matrix staining, particularly pericellular matrix within the NP</td>
<td>Boos et al., 2002; Gries et al., 2000; Rutgès et al., 2013; Sive et al., 2002</td>
<td>Histological examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased matrix synthesis</td>
<td>Le Maitre et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2001; Roughley, 2004</td>
<td>IHC for classical NP matrix proteins: collagen type II and aggrecan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased matrix-degrading enzymes</td>
<td>Le Maitre et al., 2007; Pockert et al., 2009; Séguin et al., 2006</td>
<td>IHC for MMPs and ADAMTs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased expression of catabolic cytokines by NP cells</td>
<td>Hoyland et al., 2008; Le Maitre et al., 2005; Phillips et al., 2013</td>
<td>IHC for cytokines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nerve ingrowth (driven by increased production of neurotrophic factors by NP cells)</td>
<td>Binch et al., 2015; Lama et al., 2018</td>
<td>IHC for neurotrophic factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angiogenesis (driven by increased production of VEGF by NP cells)</td>
<td>Binch et al., 2014; Doita et al., 1996; Lama et al., 2018; Rätsep et al., 2013</td>
<td>IHC for VEGF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased mechanical properties</td>
<td>Emanuel et al., 2015; Korecki et al., 2008; McMillan et al., 1996; Walter et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2007; Wuertz et al., 2009</td>
<td>In-line mechanical properties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To this end, the study’s hypothesis was that the injection of collagenase and cABC (col/cABC) would quickly degrade the matrix of the disc, providing an altered mechanical environment. In turn, this would induce an altered response to load, stimulating catabolic mediator (such as IL-1) production as well as leading to an increase in catabolic and inflammatory enzymes and a decrease in matrix synthesis and markers of native disc degeneration, hence mimicking the cellular processes seen in moderate human-disc degeneration (Table 1).

Materials and Methods

Optimisation of enzyme degradation

Prior to the ex vivo loading studies, the concentration of cABC and collagenase type II was determined. The spine of one skeletally mature milk goat (between 3 and 5 years old) was obtained from the local abattoir (Sheffield, UK). Thirteen IVDs were randomly assigned to the following treatment groups (cABC, COL3667, Sigma-Aldrich; collagenase type II, 17101015, Gibco):  

- non-injected control;  
- PBS-injected control;  
- 0.5 U/mL cABC;  
- 1 U/mL cABC;  
- 2 U/mL cABC;  
- 1 mg/mL collagenase;  
- 2 mg/mL collagenase;  
- 4 mg/mL collagenase;  
- 1 mg/mL collagenase + 0.5 U/mL cABC;
- 1 mg/mL collagenase + 2 U/mL cABC;
- 2 mg/mL collagenase + 0.5 U/mL cABC;
- 2 mg/mL collagenase + 1 U/mL cABC;
- 4 mg/mL collagenase + 2 U/mL cABC.

The IVDs were injected as described above using a 29G needle and incubated for 2 h at 37 °C. Following digestion, the IVDs were isolated from the spine using a scalpel blade and fixed in 10 % v/v neutral-buffered formalin (Leica) and embedded in paraffin wax. 4 µm-thick sections were cut and mounted on to positively charged slides and stained histologically with haematoxylin and eosin, Masson’s trichrome and alcian blue to determine the level of matrix degradation and identify the enzyme degradation methodology able to induce moderate degradation of the healthy IVD matrix. The IVDs were inspected for signs of matrix degradation (by two researchers, CLM and AT), namely presence of micro fissures and decreased proteoglycan and collagen staining, but whilst avoiding large defects or voids within the disc space. Microscopical images were captured to document changes.

**Caprine samples and IVD isolation**

Nine lumbar spines from skeletally mature female Dutch milk goats (3-5 years old) were obtained from a local abattoir (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). The spines were sterilised using medical grade iodide-alcohol solution. Within 24 h after slaughter, the excessive soft tissue and muscles were removed and the IVDs with adjacent cartilaginous endplates were dissected in two parallel planes using an oscillating surgical saw, all under sterile conditions. Once dissected, the IVDs (n = 33) were cleaned using sterile gauzes to remove muscle or ligament tissue and rinsed in PBS and 70 %v/v ethanol to remove sawing debris.

**LDCS**

The LDCS consists of individual culture chambers that are placed in an incubator at 37 °C (Paul et al., 2012). The total culture period of the IVDs was 10 d and the IVDs were cultured in standard DMEM (Gibco) supplemented with 10 % FBS (HyClone), 4.5 g/L glucose (Merck), 25 mmol/L HEPES (Invitrogen), 50 µg/mL ascorbate-2-phosphate (Sigma-Aldrich), 10,000 U/mL penicillin, 10 mg/mL streptomycin and 25 µg/mL amphotericin B (Gibco). Each culture chamber contained 50 mL of culture medium that circulated continuously at the velocity of 3 mL/h by using a peristaltic pump. Medium was changed every 3-4 d, after flushing using 25 mL of PBS per culture chamber.

During the whole culture period, the IVDs were loaded with dynamic axial loading consisting of simulated physiological loading (Paul et al., 2012). This loading pattern started with 16 h of a sinusoidal load of 1 Hz that alternated in magnitude every 30 min (between 0.09-0.11 MPa and 0.1-0.6 MPa), followed by 8 h of a low sinusoidal load of 1 Hz (0.09-0.11 MPa), reflecting loading magnitudes and frequency derived from *in vivo* measurements of pressure in a goat lumbar spine (Paul et al., 2012).

**Degeneration**

After 3 d of pre-loading with simulated physiological loading to establish dynamic equilibrium, loading was paused and culture chambers were removed from the LDCS. The IVDs (n = 33) were randomly divided into three experimental groups to ensure disc levels and animals were mixed into the groups to account for biological variance:

- no injection (i.e. control group; n = 9);
- injection with PBS (n = 12);
- injection with 1 mg/mL collagenase and 2 U/mL cABC (n = 12).

The IVDs were removed from their culture chamber under sterile conditions and injected using a 29G needle with 50 µL of 1 mg/mL collagenase and 2 U/mL cABC or PBS, as appropriate. Following injection, the IVDs were placed back into their individual culture chamber and in the LDCS again. Following 2 h digestion, fresh medium was applied and the IVDs were subjected to simulated physiological loading, as described above, for 7 d.

**Biomechanical data analysis**

Changes in disc height were measured using an OADM 12U6430/S35A optoelectric sensor (Baumer, Berlin, Germany) and a Kam-e load cell K-1613 (Bienfait, Haarlem, the Netherlands) measured the forces applied on to the disc. Signals were digitised at 100 Hz. Customised programs in MATLAB (MathWorks) were used for data analysis. To investigate biomechanical properties, outcome parameters included disc height loss over time, time constants of axial decompression and stiffness per day. To calculate disc height changes, the disc height at the end of the final day was subtracted from the disc height at the end of the first day after injection. Time constants were calculated by fitting of a stretched exponential on the recovery data (van der Veen et al., 2007):

\[
\delta(t) = \delta_{\infty} (1 - e^{-t/\tau})^\beta
\]

Where \(\delta\) is the change in disc height in mm; \(t\) is time; \(\delta_{\infty}\) is the disc height at equilibrium; \(\tau\) is the time constant; \(\beta\) is the stretch constant.

The quality of fit was checked by visual inspection and linear regression analysis with a cut off of R2 > 0.98 for analysis, which was always the case. Stiffness was calculated by dividing the amplitude of the force signal by the amplitude of the disc height signal during the final high load phase of the day (Emanuel et al., 2015).

**Determination by histology and IHC of degeneration induction as compared to human disc degeneration**

Following completion of loading in the LDCS for 10 d (i.e. 3 d pre-load and 7 d post-enzyme digestion), the IVDs were removed from their...
culture chamber and fixed in 10% neutral-buffered formalin for 1 week and, thereafter, decalcified for 1 week using Decalcifier II (Leica). ~3 mm-thick tissue slices were cut paramidsagittally from the IVD using a scalpel and embedded in paraffin wax. Thin slices (4 µm) were cut and mounted onto positively charged slides (Leica). The extent of histological disc degeneration was determined by histological grading commonly utilised to assess the degree of human disc degeneration, namely investigating key features of demarcation, fissures, loss of matrix staining and cellular clusters (Fig. 1; Table 1) following haematoxylin and eosin, Masson’s trichome and alcian blue stainings (Le Maitre et al., 2004; Sive et al., 2002). IHC was used to assess the characteristic proteins that change during human disc degeneration (Table 1) in order to determine the cellular changes induced by degradation in goat discs as compared to the gold standard (human disc degeneration). Proteins representative of matrix, matrix degrading enzymes, key cytokines and factors that in vivo lead to nerve and blood vessel ingrowth were investigated: collagen type II, aggrecan, MMP3, ADAMTS 4, IL-1β, IL-8, VEGFA and NGF, as described previously (Le Maitre et al., 2005; Thorpe et al., 2016). Briefly, tissue sections were de-waxed in Sub-X Clearing Medium (Leica) and rehydrated in industrial methylated spirit (IMS; Sigma-Aldrich). Endogenous peroxidases were blocked for 30 min at room temperature in IMS containing 3% (v/v) H₂O₂ (Sigma-Aldrich). Antigen retrieval was performed by incubating the slides for 30 min at 37 °C in TBS (20 mM tris, 150 mM NaCl, pH 7.5) containing 0.1% (w/v) CaCl₂ and 0.01% (w/v) α-chymotrypsin (Sigma-Aldrich). Following antigen retrieval, slides were blocked for 1 h at room temperature in TBS containing 1% (w/v) BSA and 25% (v/v) serum (rabbit or goat, Abcam, matched to the host species of the secondary antibody) before primary antibody incubation overnight at 4°C: collagen type II (1:100, ab3092), aggrecan (1:200, ab3778), MMP3 (1:400, ab53015), ADAMTS4 (1:200, ab185722), IL-1β (1:100, ab53732), IL-8 (1:200, ab106350), VEGFA (1:100, ab52917) and NGF (1:100, ab52918) (all Abcam). All antibodies were diluted in TBS containing 1% (w/v) BSA. IgG controls were used in the place of

![Fig. 1. Histological features of human degenerations utilised for histological grading.](image-url)
primary antibodies at equal protein concentrations (mouse IgG control: ab170190; rabbit IgG control: ab37415; Abcam). Following washes in TBS, slides were incubated with biotinylated secondary antibody (1 : 500, goat anti-rabbit, ab6720 or 1 : 500, rabbit anti-mouse, ab7074, Abcam). Antibody binding was detected by adding VECTASTAIN® Elite ABC-HRP Kit, Peroxidase (Vector Laboratories) for 30 min at room temperature before incubation for 20 min at room temperature with TBS containing 0.08 % (v/v) H₂O₂ and 0.65 mg/mL DAB (Sigma-Aldrich). Nuclei were counterstained using Mayer’s haematoxylin (Leica) and sections were finally dehydrated in IMS, cleared in Sub-X Clearing Medium and mounted using Mounting Medium Pertex® Histolab (Leica). Slides were visualised using an Olympus BX60 microscope and images captured using CellSens software (Olympus). Analysis was restricted to morphologically distinct NP tissue: an area of NP tissue was identified histologically and cells were counted using a panning method to ensure regions were not double counted. To avoid selection bias, all cells within the field of view were counted as immunopositive (brown) or immunonegative (purple nuclei only) until a total of 200 NP cells had been counted. Then, percentage immunopositivity for NP cells was determined.

Statistics
The assumption of normality of the biomechanical data was checked by visual inspection of histograms, Q-Q plots and box plots of the data within the groups.

Fig. 2. Enzyme degradation optimisation. Caprine IVDs were injected with different concentrations and combinations of collagenase and cABC and histologically stained with (a,b) Masson trichrome and (c,d) alcian blue to detect collagen and glycosaminoglycan deposition, respectively, within the IVDs. More than 1 mg/mL collagenase destroyed the NP tissue, whereas 1 mg/mL collagenase combined with 2 U cABC induced mild degradation of the collagens and proteoglycans in the disc whilst preserving overall tissue structure. This was chosen as the optimised degenerative treatment (red box). PBS was injected into caprine IVDs as a control. (a,c) Scale bar: 500 µM. (b,d) Scale bar: 100 µM. Red arrows indicate regions of decreased matrix staining. Asterisks indicate tissue destruction.
Shapiro-Wilks tests were also performed on the data. To test whether the biomechanical data appeared to be normally distributed, a one-way ANOVA on the effect of treatment group with post-hoc Bonferroni correction was applied. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to test for differences in time constants, with post-hoc Mann-Whitney U test for differences between the three groups. IHC immunopositivity data was not normally distributed and, thus, a Kruskall-Wallis test was used to identify significant differences in immunopositivity across treatment groups. Statistical tests were performed using SPSS (IBM Software, Armonk NY, USA, version 20 for Windows) or Stats Direct (Warrington, UK). A \( p < 0.05 \) was considered statistically significant.

**Results**

**Optimisation of enzyme degradation**
The IVDs accepted a maximum injection volume of 50 \( \mu \)L. In all treatments, the outer AF was maintained, however, the highest concentration of enzymes applied to the IVDs obliterated the NP. Where collagenase concentrations exceeded 1 mg/mL, destruction of the NP was noted (Fig. 1). Thus, such concentrations were deemed not suitable for further testing within the LDCs. However, at 1 mg/mL of collagenase most of the tissue was intact, although fissures were observed in the AF, mimicking those seen during human disc degeneration, whilst at 0.5 mg/mL only limited fissures were seen. cABC treatments did not induce major defects within the tissue but displayed decreased alcian blue staining in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 2). Following visual inspection, both researchers (CLM and AT) noted that the combination of 1 mg/mL collagenase and 2 U/mL cABC (col/cABC) induced features similar to those seen during histological examination of human discs, mimicking a moderate degradation of collagens and proteoglycans in the disc whilst preserving overall tissue structure, with the presence of small fissures in the NP and AF (Fig. 2).

**Biomechanical evaluation**
The injection of cABC and collagenase decreased the mechanical stability of the IVDs, especially in diurnal creep behaviour (Fig. 3). Disc height decreased progressively over time, whereas control and PBS-injected groups remained in stable dynamic equilibrium over the duration of the culture period. The mean ± SD loss of disc height between day 1 and 5 after injection was 0.278 ± 0.16 mm, significantly more when compared to 0.029 ± 0.019 mm (\( p < 0.001 \)) in the control group and 0.036 ± 0.034 mm (\( p < 0.001 \)) in the PBS group (Fig. 3). No difference was found between the control and PBS group (\( p = 1.00 \)). There was also an increase in time constant 5 \( d \) after injection (median \( \tau = 5.95 \) h; IQR: 5.10, 10.47) when compared to the final day before injection (median \( \tau = 3.75 \) h; IQR: 3.24, 6.28; \( p = 0.002 \)) for the enzyme-injected discs (Table 2). This was also significantly increased when compared to control (median \( \tau = 3.18 \) h; IQR: 2.39, 5.94; \( p = 0.011 \)) and PBS groups (median \( \tau = 2.60 \) h; IQR: 2.12, 3.44; \( p = 0.002 \)), which did not differ from each other significantly (\( p = 0.394 \)). No significant changes in stiffness were found after cABC and collagenase injection when compared to non-injected (\( p = 0.657 \)), and PBS-injected discs (\( p = 0.136 \)) (Fig. 3).

**Morphological appearance and histological grading**
The average histological grade of enzyme-injected IVDs (6.2 ± 0.84), with the presence of fissures, demarcation, cell clusters and loss of pericellular matrix (Fig. 4) indicated that these discs showed features similar to moderately degenerated human discs, whereas the average histological grades of non-injected (2.9 ± 0.96) and PBS-injected (2.6 ± 1.65) control IVDs indicated features similar to non-degenerate human discs. Masson's trichrome and alcian blue staining demonstrated that enzyme-injected discs displayed lower levels of healthy extracellular matrix as compared to non-injected and PBS-injected controls (Fig. 4).

**Matrix synthesis**
Following treatment and culture within the LDSC, the number of NP cells in enzyme-injected caprine...
Table 2. Median (Q1, Q3) values of the time constants and mean ± SD values of loss of disc height between day 1 and 5 after injection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time constants of pre-load day 3</th>
<th>Time constants of treatment day 1</th>
<th>Time constants of treatment day 5</th>
<th>Change in disc height between treatment day 1 and 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.03 (2.61, 4.96)</td>
<td>3.19 (2.66, 5.67)</td>
<td>3.18 (2.39, 5.94)</td>
<td>0.029 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>3.36 (2.91, 5.47)</td>
<td>3.10 (2.23, 5.60)</td>
<td>2.60 (2.12, 3.44)</td>
<td>0.036 ± 0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coll/cABC</td>
<td>3.75 (3.24, 6.28)</td>
<td>4.59 (3.33, 7.79)</td>
<td>5.95 (5.10, 10.47)</td>
<td>0.278 ± 0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4. Matrix deposition within no-injection (control), PBS-injected (PBS) and enzyme-injected (col/cABC) IVDs. (a) Masson trichrome staining highlighted collagen deposition and (b) alcian blue staining glycosaminoglycans within the extracellular matrix of the NP tissue. Scale bar: 50 µm. (c,d) Microscopically tiled image of control and enzyme-injected discs stained with Masson’s trichrome to demonstrate matrix destruction in enzyme-injected degenerate discs. Scale bar: 500 µm.
IVDs expressing collagen type II was significantly reduced when compared to non-injected \( (p = 0.022) \) and PBS-injected \( (p = 0.027) \) IVDs (Fig. 5). The number of NP cells expressing aggrecan was also significantly decreased in enzyme-injected IVDs as compared to non-injected \( (p = 0.024) \) and PBS-injected \( (p = 0.025) \) IVDs (Fig. 5, isotype controls Fig. 7).

**Catabolic enzyme and cytokine expression**

The number of NP cells expressing proteins associated with IVD degeneration – MMP3 (no-injection vs. enzyme \( p = 0.01 \); PBS vs. enzyme \( p = 0.038 \)), ADAMTS4 (no-injection vs. enzyme \( p = 0.014 \); PBS vs. enzyme \( p = 0.029 \)), IL-1β (no-injection vs. enzyme \( p = 0.006 \); PBS vs. enzyme \( p = 0.038 \)), IL-8 (no-injection vs. enzyme \( p = 0.043 \); PBS vs. enzyme \( p = 0.018 \)) and VEGFA (no-injection vs. enzyme \( p = 0.028 \); PBS vs. enzyme \( p = 0.006 \)) – was significantly increased in enzyme-injected discs compared to non-injected and PBS-injected discs (Fig. 5,6; isotype controls Fig. 7). The proportion of NP cells expressing NGF was slightly increased in enzyme-injected discs when compared to non-injected and PBS-injected discs, despite not significantly (no-injection vs. enzyme \( p = 0.064 \); PBS vs. enzyme \( p = 0.161 \)).

**Discussion**

The study aimed to develop a fast, reproducible ex vivo model for disc degeneration representing the phenotype seen during moderate human degeneration and usable as a disease model for testing regenerative therapeutics such as biologics, biomaterials or cell therapies. The data presented demonstrated that injection of 50 µL of 1 mg/mL collagenase and 2 U/mL cABC into healthy, caprine IVDs, followed by application of dynamic biomechanical loading for 7 d, induced a cellular phenotype with decreased matrix synthesis (collagen II, aggrecan) and increased production of catabolic enzymes (MMP3, ADAMTS4), cytokines and...
growth factors (IL-1β, IL-8, VEGFA), thus mimicking the features seen during moderate human disc degeneration. Furthermore, altered biomechanical behaviour of the IVDs was observed with increased time constants and decreased creep behaviour over time.

The changes observed in biomechanical properties are similar to those seen previously in moderate IVD degeneration in humans (Emanuel et al., 2015). In a similar ex vivo loaded disc culture system, Emanuel et al. (2015) have investigated the mechanical response of human IVDs with mild to end-stage degeneration, based on Pfirrmann-score (Pfirrmann et al., 2001), to diurnal load. In moderately degenerated discs (i.e. Pfirrmann grade 3), there was less subsidence during a day of loading and a lower subsidence rate at the end of the day, with higher stiffness, as compared to a less degenerated disc. These changes were even more distinct in severely degenerated discs (i.e. Pfirrmann grade 4 and 5) (Emanuel et al., 2015). Overall, the alterations in mechanical behaviour in the ex vivo caprine IVD model were reflected by the changes identified in the extracellular matrix, as seen by histological staining and grading, thereby demonstrating the induction of moderate degeneration.

Preclinical models of disc degeneration are essential tools to evaluate safety and efficacy of new clinical treatments. To mimic the disease as much as possible, it is important to take characteristic features of the human IVD into account, such as the absence of notochordal cells in human discs and the size of the animal disc relative to the human disc (Daly et al., 2016; Thorpe et al., 2018). Since the IVDs of goats do not contain notochordal cells (Hoogendoorn, 2009), have the same proportions as human discs (albeit 2-fold smaller) (Krijnen et al., 2006) and are mainly loaded by axial compression (Smit, 2002), the caprine IVD is an acceptable representative model of the human IVD, maybe more so than...
other models that are much smaller (murine, rat) or have much lower disc height (porcine) and contain notochordal cells (Daly et al., 2016). The use of an ex vivo model allows for a better control of boundary conditions, including nutrient supply and mechanical loading conditions, as well as the characterisation of the mechanical properties of the healthy and degenerated discs. At the same time, it should be recognised that the organ culture system lacks an inflammatory system (similar to an intact IVD); therefore, the exclusion of surrounding tissues removes any potential immune infiltration or systemic effect. The ex vivo model presented would be best utilised in the short-term to rapidly screen the initial effects of potential treatments, before performing long-term studies to determine full repair in living animal systems that aim to ensure safety matters prior to clinical trials.

As ex vivo studies in bioreactors are limited to 3-4 weeks for practical reasons, the main challenge of the study was to induce a fast and reproducible IVD degeneration, to allow a sufficient time for the regenerative treatment to show its efficacy. To assure reproducibility, healthy IVDs were taken from not too old adult goats (3-5 years). Such healthy discs have similar characteristics and serve well as a reference, both for degeneration and regeneration studies. A complicating factor for creating a degeneration model is that the cause of disc degeneration in humans is generally unknown (Urban and Roberts, 2003). Indeed, various mechanisms have been described, varying from genetic to purely mechanical (Kandel et al., 2008; Schnake et al., 2006; Urban and Roberts, 2003), although the presence of a catabolic phenotype is well characterised within human disc degeneration (Table1) and, thus, can be a useful cellular process to mimic in an ex vivo model. This implies that a disc degeneration model may look like human disc degeneration but does not necessarily represent the physiological induction of degeneration of specific patients. Furthermore, human discs generally degenerate over a relatively long period of time. This implies that induction of disc degeneration must not only be directed to mechanics and cells but also to the extracellular matrix, which is inherently related to mechanical behaviour and cell properties (Vergroesen et al., 2015).

The mechanism of degeneration by cABC is attributed to the degeneration of the chondroitin sulphate chains of proteoglycans, whereas collagenase induces disc degradation by breaking the peptide bonds in collagen (Eckhard et al., 2014; Prabhakar et al., 2005). Thus, the combined effects modulate the key matrix components of the NP (i.e. proteoglycans and collagens). There are several other studies that have used cABC or collagenase as inducers of IVD degradation in vivo. For example, Ghosh et al. (2012) have injected cABC intradiscally in the lumbar discs of male adult sheep and have observed a decrease in disc height of 45-50 % after 3 months in vivo. Sasaki et al. (2001) have used relatively high doses of cABC (i.e. up to 50 U) and have demonstrated a decrease in ovine IVD height of 15 % after 1 week and 30 % after 4 weeks. In a rhesus monkey model, Stern and Coulson (1976) have identified a loss of disc height 7 d after collagenase injection. The same findings were observed by Growney Kalaf et al. (2014), who have shown decreased disc height 48 h after injecting collagenase into young bovine IVDs. Hoogendoorn et al. (2007) have found disc degeneration without signs of severe degeneration after injection of 0.25 U/ mL cABC at 12 weeks. The same effect was shown by Gullbrand et al. (2017), who have demonstrated that the injection of cABC and nucleotomy cause moderate disc degeneration in goats, with a follow-up after injection of 12 weeks. A follow-up study by Zhang et al. (2020) has recently demonstrated that this model induces also a catabolic phenotype similar to that observed in the present study. In a study involving the same bioreactor as the one used in the present study as well as using cABC to induce IVD degeneration (Paul et al., 2018), disc degeneration was identified graded on the Pfirrmann scale as 2-4. However, this induction was only following 20 d of culture and, thus, not suitable for application of regenerative therapy investigation. Furthermore,

![Fig. 7](https://www.ecmjournal.org)

**Fig. 7. Negative control IHC staining of caprine IVD tissue.** (a) Mouse monoclonal IgG1, kappa) isotype control staining. (b) Rabbit polyclonal IgG isotype control staining. IgG controls were used at the same protein concentration as primary antibodies. Inlets show magnified images demonstrating clear negative IHC for isotype controls on caprine IVD tissue. Cell nuclei counterstained with Mayer’s haematoxylin. Scale bar: 50 µm.
Paul et al. (2018) have not determined whether a true catabolic phenotype was induced. Therefore, the current study utilised a slightly higher dose of cABC combined with collagenase to induce a more rapid degenerative effect, whilst also decreasing both proteoglycans and collagens within the disc, and determine the cellular phenotype following load. The study demonstrated the induction of moderate degeneration with cellular changes akin to those seen during human disc degeneration (Boos et al., 2002; Gries et al., 2000; Rutges et al., 2013; Sive et al., 2002). Importantly, the induced changes in cellular phenotype with increased expression of the catabolic cytokine IL-1 and its downstream targets, such as MMPs, ADAMTS and other catabolic cytokines, nerve inducers and angiogenic factors provided a model in which not only effects on matrix synthesis and biomechanical factors could be determined. This provided a potential model that mimicked more closely the degenerative cascade seen during human disc degeneration (Binch et al., 2014; Le Maître et al., 2005; Le Maître et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2015; Risbud and Shapiro, 2014; Vo et al., 2016) and, thus, could be utilised to investigate therapies targeting the cellular changes seen during disc degeneration as well as supporting tissue regeneration.

The current study had several limitations. Firstly, loading was restricted to 7 d post-enzyme injection, which followed 3 d of preload. This time course may be too short to develop a new equilibrium after inducing degeneration, which was suggested from the continual decline in creep behaviour. However, IDD is a dynamic process of matrix degradation and altered biomechanical behaviour (Vergroesen et al., 2015) and the biomechanical response of cABC- and collagenase-degenerated discs might reflect this. This was supported by the increased expression of matrix-degrading enzymes, suggesting that natural degeneration was ongoing and, thus, an equilibrium might not be possible, as may be the case for human disc degeneration. Also, the study did not investigate the injection of collagenase or chondroitinase alone within the LDCS; however, single injections were investigated in preliminary studies to determine enzyme concentrations for further investigation. The combination of both enzymes demonstrated disruption of both collagens and proteoglycans, mimicking more closely what seen during early human disc degeneration and, thus, were selected for investigation within the LDCS. Whilst the objective of producing a rapid, reproducible ex vivo model of IVD degeneration was still achieved, any specific effect of each enzyme or dose response cannot be inferred within the LDCS. Secondly, an increase in time constants for the enzyme-degenerated discs was seen, while there were decreases in time constants for the control group. However, this was not significant and might be explained by the small sample size of the control group.

This caprine model for moderate IVD degeneration, which combined the use of cABC and collagenase to induce a rapid onset of degeneration that simulated human disc degeneration, provided a good base for further research, suggesting its suitability as an ex vivo model for regenerative therapeutics that aim to interfere with the vicious cycle of disc degeneration (Thorpe et al., 2018; Vergroesen et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The study of restorative therapeutics for IVD degeneration is hindered by the lack of fast, reproducible ex vivo models that closely represent human IVD degeneration, prior to the use of expensive, time-consuming animal models. The present study established a fast and reproducible, large-animal ex vivo model of disc degeneration. This model system has the potential for use in the rapid screening of novel restorative therapeutics, such as biologics, biomaterials and cell therapies, enabling short-term predictors of repair that may reduce the dependence on animal studies.

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References


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Discussion with Reviewers

Reviewer 1: Do the authors believe this model system would reduce or fully eliminate the use of live animal testing?

Authors: We feel that this model will be particularly useful in enabling the screening of potential new therapies under loading environments more closely matching clinical applications. This will enable only the most promising therapies to be selected to go forwards for animal testing as a pre-requisite to human clinical trials. This approach would enable reduced numbers of animal experiments in line with the 3Rs principle and reduce associated development costs for early stage therapies.

Reviewer 1: Please clarify what clinical conditions this model is trying to simulate? Why did the authors prioritise catabolism over induction of defects?

Authors: The aim of the study was to develop a model mimicking the cellular, matrix and mechanical changes seen during human disc degeneration. These features are described in Table 1 and Fig. 1 and provide a range of effects, including loss of normal matrix, presence of cellular clusters, fissures and demarcation and cellular changes, including induction of catabolic enzymes, cytokines and factors that are known to regulate angiogenesis and nerve ingrowth in human disc degeneration.

Reviewer 1: Does this intervention allow for sufficient loosening of the collagenous network to enable injection of a hydrogel? How much volume?

Authors: As can be seen in the images of the whole disc in Fig. 4, cracks and fissures are induced within this model and, thus, we would predict that a similar volume for disc area would be able to be injected. When similar cracks have been seen in in vivo goat models, around 200-500 µL of hydrogels or other substances have been able to be injected. With naturally degenerate human discs, around 1-1.5 mL has been shown to be injected.

Reviewer 2: Please discuss advantages and limitations of this model. Specifically address similarities and differences between caprine, bovine and human IVDs with regards to size, diffusion distance, cell type and cell number. Also, please discuss treatment strategies that would be most suitable to be tested in the three species.

Authors: Bovine, caprine and human IVDs display similar cell types as they all lose the early NP progenitor cells (notochordal cells) early in development and, thus, are useful model systems to mimic human degeneration. Whilst bovine and caprine discs are generally smaller than lumbar human discs and more similar in size to human thoracic discs, with consequently reduced diffusion distances, cell numbers within caprine discs are similar to those seen in human discs. The use of bovine or caprine discs within model systems offers the advantage of a reduced variability between discs. Therefore, the model system described in the present study, which enables a reproducible moderate disc degeneration to be generated, will enable the exploration of new therapeutic options. This model could be utilised to perform ex vivo experiments and test treatment strategies targeting and modifying the IVD through gene, biological, cellular or biomaterial approaches or a combination thereof. Then, promising therapies could be further explored in whole human LDCS and in vivo animal models prior to clinical trials. The inclusion of the present model in the therapeutic development pipeline will enable fine tuning and targeting of therapies before progression to the clinic, reducing cost and increasing chance of success.

Editor’s note: The Scientific Editor responsible for this paper was Mauro Alini.