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NITRIC OXIDE AND SICKLE CELL-ASSOCIATED CARDIOPULMONARY DISORDERS

***Emmanuel Ifeanyi Obeagu**

Department of Biomedical and Laboratory Science, Africa University, Zimbabwe, E-mail: emmanuelobeagu@yahoo.com, obeague@africau.edu, ORCID: 0000-0002-4538-0161

ABSTRACT

Sickle cell disease (SCD) is a genetic blood disorder characterized by the presence of sickle-shaped red blood cells (RBCs), which cause impaired blood flow and lead to various systemic complications, particularly within the cardiovascular and pulmonary systems. Nitric oxide (NO), a critical vasodilator, plays a significant role in maintaining vascular homeostasis, including regulating blood vessel tone, preventing platelet aggregation, and promoting smooth muscle relaxation. In SCD, decreased NO bioavailability due to increased oxidative stress, hemolysis, and arginase activity results in endothelial dysfunction, contributing to the development of pulmonary hypertension (PH), right heart failure, and other cardiopulmonary complications. The dysregulation of NO in SCD leads to a cascade of pathophysiological changes in the vascular system, primarily affecting the pulmonary vasculature. Impaired NO signaling exacerbates pulmonary vasoconstriction and endothelial injury, which increase pulmonary vascular resistance and promote PH. Additionally, the reduction in NO levels is associated with right heart failure, as the right ventricle faces increased afterload. The combination of PH and right heart failure significantly affects the morbidity and mortality of individuals with SCD, highlighting the importance of NO in the management of these complications.

Keywords: *Nitric Oxide, Sickle Cell Disease, Cardiopulmonary Disorders, Endothelial Dysfunction, Pulmonary Hypertension*

Introduction

Sickle cell disease (SCD) is a hereditary hematologic disorder caused by a mutation in the beta-globin gene, leading to the production of sickle hemoglobin (HbS). This abnormal hemoglobin causes red blood cells (RBCs) to assume a crescent or sickle shape, impairing their ability to navigate through microvasculature. As a result, individuals with SCD experience a variety of acute and chronic complications, including vascular occlusion, organ damage, and painful episodes known as vaso-occlusive crises. Among the most serious complications of SCD are those that affect the cardiovascular and pulmonary systems. One of the key contributors to these complications is the dysregulation of nitric oxide (NO), a signaling molecule essential for maintaining vascular tone and endothelial health [1-3]. NO is produced by endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) in the endothelial cells of blood vessels. As a potent vasodilator, NO is crucial for regulating blood vessel tone, promoting smooth muscle relaxation, and inhibiting platelet aggregation and leukocyte adhesion. These functions are particularly important in maintaining blood flow and preventing thrombosis, both of which are compromised in SCD. In the healthy vascular system, NO helps to counterbalance the vasoconstricting effects of other factors, such as endothelin-1. However, in SCD, NO bioavailability is significantly reduced due to multiple factors, including oxidative stress, hemolysis, and increased arginase activity, all of which contribute to endothelial dysfunction and impaired vascular reactivity [4-6].

The reduced availability of NO in SCD plays a significant role in the pathogenesis of cardiovascular and pulmonary complications. Nitric oxide deficiency leads to a cascade of pathological changes, particularly in the pulmonary vasculature. Pulmonary hypertension (PH) is one of the most common and serious cardiovascular complications in SCD patients. It is characterized by elevated pulmonary artery pressure and increased vascular resistance, ultimately leading to right heart failure if left untreated. The dysregulated NO signaling in the lungs results in vasoconstriction, endothelial injury, and vascular remodeling, all of which contribute to the development of PH. Importantly, pulmonary hypertension in SCD is often underdiagnosed and linked to high morbidity and mortality [7-8]. In addition to pulmonary hypertension, individuals with SCD are also at risk of right heart failure. The development of PH in SCD leads to increased afterload on the right ventricle, which can eventually cause right ventricular hypertrophy and failure. The right heart is particularly vulnerable in SCD, as it is subjected to increased strain due to the reduced oxygen-carrying capacity of sickle cells and the elevated pulmonary pressures. Right heart failure in SCD is associated with significant clinical symptoms, including shortness of breath, fatigue, and fluid retention, and significantly worsens the prognosis for affected individuals [9-10].

Aim

The aim of this review article is to critically examine the role of nitric oxide (NO) dysregulation in the pathophysiology of sickle cell disease (SCD) and its contribution to the development of cardiovascular and pulmonary complications, particularly pulmonary hypertension and right heart failure.

Nitric Oxide and Endothelial Dysfunction in Sickle Cell Disease

In sickle cell disease (SCD), the reduction in nitric oxide (NO) bioavailability plays a central role in the development of endothelial dysfunction. Endothelial cells line the blood vessels and are crucial for

maintaining vascular tone and integrity. Under normal conditions, NO, produced by endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS), maintains vascular health by promoting vasodilation, inhibiting platelet aggregation, reducing leukocyte adhesion, and preventing vascular smooth muscle cell proliferation. NO acts as a key mediator of vascular homeostasis by counteracting vasoconstrictive factors such as endothelin-1 and thromboxane A2, which help regulate blood flow and pressure. However, in SCD, the disruption of NO signaling contributes significantly to the development of cardiovascular and pulmonary complications [11-12]. The major mechanism by which NO bioavailability is diminished in SCD is through increased oxidative stress. Hemolysis, the destruction of sickle red blood cells, releases free hemoglobin (Hb), which scavenges NO directly and forms reactive species like methemoglobin, further depleting NO. The release of free heme, a byproduct of hemolysis, also activates heme oxygenase, which in turn generates reactive oxygen species (ROS), leading to increased oxidative damage and a vicious cycle that exacerbates endothelial dysfunction. The interaction of free Hb with NO leads to the formation of nitrate and nitrite, reducing the amount of bioavailable NO that is essential for proper endothelial function. In addition, hemolysis can increase the activity of arginase, an enzyme that degrades L-arginine, the substrate for eNOS, further compromising NO production [13-15].

The result of this NO depletion is endothelial dysfunction, a key feature of the vascular complications seen in SCD. Endothelial cells become less able to produce NO in response to stimuli such as shear stress from blood flow, which impairs the ability of blood vessels to dilate appropriately. As a result, SCD patients often experience vasoconstriction, reduced blood flow, and increased vascular resistance. This endothelial dysfunction is particularly prominent in the pulmonary vasculature, where it contributes to the development of pulmonary hypertension (PH), a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in SCD. Impaired NO signaling in the lungs promotes vasoconstriction and endothelial injury, resulting in vascular remodeling and increased pulmonary artery pressure, further exacerbating the disease [16-17]. In addition to pulmonary complications, endothelial dysfunction in SCD contributes to a hypercoagulable state. Reduced NO availability promotes platelet activation and adhesion to the endothelial surface, increasing the risk of thrombus formation. In this hypercoagulable environment, the formation of blood clots can further obstruct blood flow and contribute to vaso-occlusive crises, the hallmark painful events in SCD. Furthermore, endothelial dysfunction increases the adhesion of white blood cells (leukocytes) to the vessel walls, which promotes inflammation and further amplifies vascular damage [18-19].

Pulmonary Hypertension and Right Heart Failure in Sickle Cell Disease

Pulmonary hypertension (PH) and right heart failure are significant and often underrecognized complications of sickle cell disease (SCD), contributing to substantial morbidity and mortality. PH, defined as an elevated pressure in the pulmonary arteries, occurs when the pulmonary vasculature becomes stiff, leading to increased resistance and strain on the right ventricle of the heart. The pathogenesis of PH in SCD is multifactorial, with nitric oxide (NO) deficiency, hemolysis, and chronic hypoxia playing central roles. As NO is a potent vasodilator that helps to maintain vascular tone, its depletion in SCD exacerbates pulmonary vasoconstriction, promoting vascular remodeling and increasing pulmonary artery pressure. The reduced NO bioavailability, combined with

the damaging effects of oxidative stress from hemolysis, significantly contributes to endothelial dysfunction and vascular damage, further driving the progression of PH [20-21]. The clinical manifestations of PH in SCD are often subtle and nonspecific, including symptoms such as shortness of breath, fatigue, and exercise intolerance, which can be mistaken for other complications or the baseline symptoms of SCD. As the disease progresses, right ventricular hypertrophy and eventual right heart failure (RHF) can occur due to the increased afterload on the right ventricle. The right ventricle is particularly vulnerable in SCD because of the combination of pulmonary hypertension and the reduced oxygen-carrying capacity of sickle hemoglobin. Right heart failure in SCD manifests with symptoms such as peripheral edema, jugular venous distension, and ascites, signaling the inability of the heart to pump blood efficiently to the lungs and the systemic circulation. Importantly, PH and RHF in SCD are associated with worsened prognosis and significantly reduced life expectancy [22-24].

The pathophysiology of PH in SCD involves several interconnected mechanisms. First, chronic hemolysis, a hallmark of SCD, releases free hemoglobin into circulation, which scavenges NO and leads to oxidative damage. This reduces NO availability, impairing vasodilation in the pulmonary arteries. Furthermore, hemolysis also contributes to the generation of heme and reactive oxygen species (ROS), which promote endothelial dysfunction, smooth muscle proliferation, and vascular remodeling in the pulmonary vasculature. In addition to oxidative stress, hypoxia, a common feature in SCD due to impaired RBC oxygen-carrying capacity, further exacerbates vasoconstriction and pulmonary artery remodeling. These pathophysiological changes lead to a vicious cycle of increased pulmonary vascular resistance, right ventricular strain, and, ultimately, right heart failure [25-26]. Diagnosis of PH in SCD typically requires echocardiography, Doppler studies, and right heart catheterization, which allow for the measurement of pulmonary artery pressure and the assessment of right ventricular function. Early detection of PH is crucial for preventing further complications and initiating appropriate treatment strategies. While PH in SCD can often be asymptomatic in its early stages, routine screening for this condition in high-risk patients is now recommended by various guidelines to improve outcomes. Invasive testing, including right heart catheterization, remains the gold standard for confirming PH and assessing its severity, although non-invasive methods such as echocardiography can be useful for monitoring [27-29].

Therapeutic Interventions Targeting Nitric Oxide Signaling in Sickle Cell Disease

Therapeutic strategies aimed at restoring nitric oxide (NO) signaling are emerging as a promising approach for managing complications in sickle cell disease (SCD), particularly pulmonary hypertension (PH), endothelial dysfunction, and vaso-occlusive crises. Given the central role of NO in regulating vascular tone, platelet aggregation, and immune responses, targeting the NO pathway can help mitigate the vascular complications and improve outcomes in SCD patients. There are several therapeutic interventions being explored, ranging from NO donors to pharmacological agents that modulate the underlying mechanisms of NO depletion, such as oxidative stress, endothelial dysfunction, and L-arginine metabolism [30-31]. One of the most direct methods of enhancing NO signaling is the administration of nitric oxide donors. Inhaled NO is the most well-established approach, particularly in the management

of acute pulmonary hypertension in SCD patients. Inhaled NO acts directly on the pulmonary vasculature to induce vasodilation, reduce pulmonary artery pressure, and improve gas exchange in the lungs. It has been shown to provide symptomatic relief in patients with acute respiratory distress or acute chest syndrome. While effective in acute settings, the use of inhaled NO is limited by its short duration of action and the need for specialized delivery systems. However, prolonged use in patients with chronic PH may require adjunctive therapies or continuous delivery methods, and research into sustained-release formulations is ongoing [32-33].

Another promising therapeutic approach is the supplementation of L-arginine, the substrate required for NO production by endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS). In SCD, the availability of L-arginine is often reduced due to increased activity of the enzyme arginase, which degrades L-arginine. Supplementing with L-arginine has been shown to improve endothelial function, reduce vasoconstriction, and enhance NO production in SCD. Several clinical studies have demonstrated that L-arginine supplementation improves pulmonary hemodynamics, exercise tolerance, and symptoms of PH in SCD patients. However, the clinical efficacy of L-arginine is still under investigation, and more studies are needed to determine the optimal dosing and long-term benefits of this therapy [34-35]. Phosphodiesterase-5 (PDE5) inhibitors are another class of drugs being explored for their ability to enhance NO signaling. PDE5 inhibitors, such as sildenafil and tadalafil, work by preventing the breakdown of cyclic guanosine monophosphate (cGMP), a downstream effector of NO signaling. By inhibiting PDE5, these drugs increase the effects of endogenous NO and promote vasodilation in both pulmonary and systemic vasculature. Clinical trials have shown that PDE5 inhibitors can reduce pulmonary artery pressure and improve functional capacity in patients with SCD-related pulmonary hypertension. These drugs are particularly promising for managing chronic PH in SCD, as they have a well-established safety profile in other forms of pulmonary hypertension. Ongoing studies are assessing the long-term efficacy of PDE5 inhibitors in SCD patients and exploring their potential in preventing or alleviating vaso-occlusive crises [36]. In addition to NO donors and PDE5 inhibitors, antioxidants that reduce oxidative stress are also being investigated as potential therapies for improving NO bioavailability in SCD. Oxidative stress in SCD results from the breakdown of sickle red blood cells (RBCs) and the release of free hemoglobin, which scavenges NO and generates reactive oxygen species (ROS). Antioxidants such as ascorbic acid (vitamin C) and N-acetylcysteine (NAC) have been shown to mitigate oxidative damage and restore endothelial function by increasing NO bioavailability. These therapies can help reverse the vicious cycle of NO depletion and oxidative stress, potentially reducing the risk of vaso-occlusive crises, pulmonary hypertension, and endothelial dysfunction. However, the role of antioxidants in managing SCD-related complications requires further validation through well-designed clinical trials [37].

Conclusion

Nitric oxide (NO) plays a critical role in maintaining vascular health and regulating several physiological processes that are disrupted in sickle cell disease (SCD). The dysregulation of NO signaling, due to factors such as hemolysis, oxidative stress, and endothelial dysfunction, contributes to a range of cardiovascular and pulmonary complications in SCD, including pulmonary hypertension and right heart failure. As NO deficiency exacerbates these conditions,

therapeutic strategies aimed at restoring NO bioavailability have shown significant promise in improving clinical outcomes. Current therapeutic interventions targeting NO signaling—such as NO donors, L-arginine supplementation, phosphodiesterase-5 inhibitors, antioxidants, and arginase inhibitors—have demonstrated potential in alleviating the vascular complications of SCD, particularly pulmonary hypertension and right ventricular dysfunction. These treatments aim to restore endothelial function, reduce pulmonary artery pressures, and improve overall vascular tone. However, while these therapies are promising, further research is necessary to establish their long-term efficacy, optimal dosing strategies, and safety profiles in SCD patients.

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