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Heme-Scavenging Role of $\alpha_1$-Microglobulin in Chronic Ulcers

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Chronic venous ulcers are characterized by chronic inflammation. Heme and iron, originating from blood cell hemolysis as well as extravascular necrosis, have been implicated as important pathogenic factors due to their promotion of oxidative stress. It was recently reported that the plasma and tissue protein $\alpha_1$-microglobulin is involved in heme metabolism. The protein binds heme, and a carboxy-terminally processed form, truncated $\alpha_1$-microglobulin, also degrades heme. Here, we show the presence of micromolar levels of heme and free iron in chronic leg ulcer fluids. Micromolar amounts of $\alpha_1$-microglobulin was also present in the ulcer fluids and bound to added radiolabeled heme. Truncated $\alpha_1$-microglobulin was found in the ulcer fluids and exogenously added $\alpha_1$-microglobulin was processed into the truncated $\alpha_1$-microglobulin form. Histochecmical analysis of chronic wound tissue showed the presence of iron deposits, heme/porphyrins in infiltrating cells basement membranes and fibrin cuffs around vessels, and $\alpha_1$-microglobulin ubiquitously distributed but especially abundant in basement membranes around vessels and at fibrin cuffs. Our results suggest that $\alpha_1$-microglobulin constitutes a previously unknown defense mechanism against high heme and iron levels during skin wound healing. Excessive heme and iron, which are not buffered by $\alpha_1$-microglobulin, may underlie the chronic inflammation in chronic ulcers. Key words: inflammation/iron/$\alpha_1$-microglobulin/oxidative stress/plasma protein. J Invest Dermatol 121:640–646, 2003
pathogenic role of heme, we have investigated concentration, distribution, and biochemical properties of \( \alpha_1m \) in wound fluids from chronic venous leg ulcers. It is shown that \( \alpha_1m \) is ubiquitously distributed in wound sections, that it is a heme-binding protein in ulcer fluids, and that \( t-\alpha_1m \) is formed. These results are consistent with a protective role of \( \alpha_1m \) in the ulcer fluids as a heme antagonist.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Patients, wound fluid, and plasma** Wound fluid and plasma were collected from patients with venous ulcers. Wound fluid was collected either by sampling on filters as described previously (Schmidtchen, 1999, 2000) or under a Tegaderm dressing (Schmidtchen, 2000). In the first procedure (used in experiments described in Fig 1; sampling from a group of 12 patients), sterilized filters (Whatman GF/D; diameter 2.5 cm) were applied to wounds for 4 h and wound fluid was extracted from the filter. Proteinase activity was blocked by the addition of the proteinase inhibitors disopropyl phosphorofluoridate, N-ethylmaleimide, and ethylenediamine tetraacetic acid (Schmidtchen, 2000). The filters did not induce degradation of \( \alpha_1m \) in human plasma (not shown). Wound fluid from 12 patients with venous ulcers (>3 mm duration) was used for the experiments. In the second procedure (used for all other experiments), Tegaderm dressings were applied on the wound and wound fluid was collected by gentle aspiration underneath the film after 2 h, centrifuged at 10,000 r.p.m. (3500 g) in an Eppendorf centrifuge, aliquoted and stored at \(-20^\circ C\) until further use. The venous insufficiency was routinely determined either by a handheld Doppler (5 MHz probe; examination of reflux in the political vein, great saphenous vein and small saphenous vein) or by color duplex examination. The patients had a systolic index of more than 0.8. Patients with diabetes or signs of general infection (malaise, fever) or local infection (cellulitis, erysipelas) were excluded. Plasma from healthy volunteers was collected by intravenous puncture. The research project was approved by the local Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from the patients.

**Proteins and reagents** Human plasma \( \alpha_1m \) was prepared from plasma as described previously (Akervist et al., 1995; Berggard and Bearn, 1968). Rabbit anti-\( \alpha_1m \), mouse monoclonal anti-\( \alpha_1m \), and goat anti-\( \alpha_1m \) antibodies against full-length \( \alpha_1m \) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO). Human \( \alpha_1m \) (human albumin and other chemicals were from Sigma-Aldrich Stockholm, Sweden) was prepared in this laboratory as described (Nilsson et al., 1987). \( \alpha_1m \) was purified from wound fluids by affinity chromatography and subsequently immunoblotted both with antibodies against full-length \( \alpha_1m \) and antibodies against LIPR. Affinity chromatography was performed according to an earlier description (Ahlborn et al., 2002), using mouse monoclonal anti-\( \alpha_1m \), BN1110, which had been immobilized to Affigel HR (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, California) at 20 mg per mL following instructions from the merchant. The eluted proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE and identified by immunoblotting (see above) using anti-\( \alpha_1m \) diluted 1000 times or anti-LIPR diluted 300 times. The blots were developed by incubation with \(^{125}I\)-goat anti-\( \alpha_1m \) and \( \alpha_1m \) antibody was raised as described (Nilsson et al., 1997).

**Sodium dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) and immunoblotting of \( \alpha_1m \) in wound fluids and plasma** The molecular forms of \( \alpha_1m \) in wound fluids and plasma were investigated by SDS-PAGE and immunoblotting. SDS-PAGE was performed under denaturing conditions using 12% gels in the buffer system described by Laemmli (1970). Samples mixed with sample buffer 1:1 (v/v) containing 2% (v/v) \( \beta \)-mercaptoethanol and SDS were boiled 3 mo duration) was used for the experiments. In the second procedure (used for all other experiments), Tegaderm dressings were applied on the wound and wound fluid was collected by gentle aspiration underneath the film after 2 h, centrifuged at 10,000 r.p.m. (3500 g) in an Eppendorf centrifuge, aliquoted and stored at \(-20^\circ C\) until further use. The venous insufficiency was routinely determined either by a handheld Doppler (5 MHz probe; examination of reflux in the political vein, great saphenous vein and small saphenous vein) or by color duplex examination. The patients had a systolic index of more than 0.8. Patients with diabetes or signs of general infection (malaise, fever) or local infection (cellulitis, erysipelas) were excluded. Plasma from healthy volunteers was collected by intravenous puncture. The research project was approved by the local Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from the patients.

**Affinity chromatography of wound fluids** To distinguish between full-length \( \alpha_1m \) and \( t-\alpha_1m \), i.e., the form of the protein that lacks the C-terminal tetrapeptide LIPR, \( \alpha_1m \) was purified from wound fluids by anti-\( \alpha_1m \) affinity chromatography and subsequently immunoblotted both with antibodies against full-length \( \alpha_1m \) and antibodies against LIPR. Affinity chromatography was performed according to an earlier description (Ahlborn et al., 2002), using mouse monoclonal anti-\( \alpha_1m \), BN1110, which had been immobilized to Affigel HR (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, California) at 20 mg per mL following instructions from the merchant. The eluted proteins were separated by SDS–PAGE and identified by immunoblotting (see above) using anti-\( \alpha_1m \) diluted 1000 times or anti-LIPR diluted 300 times. The blots were developed by incubation with \(^{125}I\)-goat anti-\( \alpha_1m \) and \( \alpha_1m \) antibody was raised as described (Nilsson et al., 1997).

**Cleavage of \( \alpha_1m \) by wound fluids** The cleaving activity of wound fluids was tested by adding small amounts of radiolabeled \( \alpha_1m \). One Bq of \(^{14}C\)-\( \alpha_1m \) or \(^{125}I\)-IgA–\( \alpha_1m \) was added to 1 mL wound fluid (10 mg total proteins as measured by the Bradford method) diluted in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS: 10 mM phosphate buffer, pH 7.4, 120 mM NaCl, 3 mM KCl). The reaction proceeded for 1 h at room temperature. The samples were then applied to SDS–PAGE and the dried gel analyzed with a Fuji Bas 2000 Bio-imaging analyzer (Fuji Films Co., Japan).

**Binding of \(^{14}C\)heme to \( \alpha_1m \) in wound fluids** \(^{14}C\)heme was produced using the Escherichia coli strain AN344 containing the plasmid pTyr13 as described by Schiött et al. (1997). AN344 is blocked in delta-aminolevulinic acid (ALA) synthesis and requires ALA for growth. Thus, the addition of 31 \( \mu \)M (508 Ci per mol) [4-\(^{14}C\)]ALA (New England Nuclear Inc., Boston, MA) to strain AN344/pTyr13 in Luria broth (LB) medium resulted in production of \(^{14}C\)heme with the yield 20 nmol per 60 mL culture and with a specific activity of 2.5 Ci per mmol. \(^{14}C\)heme (45 pmol) was incubated with 1.5 mL wound fluid (35 mg total proteins as measured by the Bradford method) with or without added \( \alpha_1m \) (45 pmol) or albumin (45 pmol), or incubated with these amounts of \( \alpha_1m \) or albumin alone, diluted in PBS + 0.05% Tween-20 to 10 \( \mu \)L. After 30 min at 20°C, SDS–PAGE sample buffer was added and the samples analyzed by SDS–PAGE as described above, the gels dried and the radioactivity analyzed with a Fuji Bas 2000 Bio-imaging analyzer.

Figure 1. \( \alpha_1m \) in wound fluids and plasma. Twelve samples of wound fluid (A) and plasma, diluted 200 \( \times \) (B) indicated with numbers 3 to 14, each 10 \( \mu \)g total protein, were applied on SDS–PAGE, 3% to 12%, and immunoblotted using polyclonal anti-sera against \( \alpha_1m \). Samples from one patient were collected during three visits (corresponding to lane numbers 1–3). Number 15 on (A) displays a normal plasma sample. Molecular weight standards (in kDa) are indicated to the left.
Binding of [14C]heme in HepG2 cells To measure the binding of heme to newly synthesized \( \alpha_m \), [14C]heme was added to cultures of the liver cell line HepG2, which synthesize and secrete \( \alpha_m \). HepG2 cells were grown at 37°C in RPMI 1640 medium (Gibco, Life Technologies, Gaithersburg, MD) in an atmosphere of 5% CO₂. The medium contained 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), L-glutamine, 300 µg per mL, and 100 µg per mL antibiotics (penicillin and streptomycin). In one experiment, 0.05% NaN₃ was used instead of PBS, using conditions described previously (Åkerström et al., 1995). The cells were split 1:5 or 1:10 by trypsin digestion twice a week. Fresh culture medium was added to flasks with confluent cells, and 24 h later, [14C]heme was added to a final concentration of 0.07 to 0.4 µM and the incubation proceeded for 3 h. The cells were centrifuged and the medium removed and saved for immunoblotting. Purification of \( \alpha_m \) by affinity chromatography (see above), and radioimmunoassay. The cells were lyzed by resuspension in 15 mL 20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 150 mM NaCl, 0.02% NaN₃, 1% Triton X-100, 0.25% nonidet P-40, 0.25% bovine serum albumin. The suspension was then centrifuged, 1000 r.p.m., (700g) 20 min 1 mL medium or 1 mL cell lysis was immunoprecipitated with 10 µL of polyclonal antibody (100 µg IgG) against \( \alpha_m \). As a control, 10 µL polyclonal antiporphyrin antibody (Dakopatts, Glostrup, Denmark) was used. The suspension was incubated at 4°C, 20 µL protein LG-Sepharose (50% 1:1 suspension) was added and the incubation continued for 2 h at room temperature. After centrifugation and removal of supernatant, the immunoprecipitates were washed several times with PBS. The pellets were finally solubilized in SDS–PAGE sample buffer and analyzed by SDS–PAGE. The gels were dried and analyzed with a Fuji Bio-imaging analyzer.

Biopsies Four millimeter biopsies were taken from the wound edge of a chronic venous leg ulcer. Control biopsies were taken from the edges of acute wounds or from healthy skin of the thigh. The tissue samples were fixed overnight in 4% paraformaldehyde, dehydrated sequentially in ethanol and subsequently embedded in paraffin. Tissue sections (5 µm) were cut in a microtome, mounted on slides, and air dried overnight in a 37°C incubator.

Immunohistochemistry Sections were deparaffinized by routine procedures and endogenous peroxidase activity was blocked with 3% H₂O₂ in methanol for 10 min. After rinsing in distilled water, followed by PBS, the slides were subsequently permeabilized with TWEEN 20 (0.05%) in PBS. Thereafter, sections were rinsed in PBS. After preincubation with normal goat serum (1%) for 30 min at room temperature, (Dakopatts, Glostrup, Denmark) was used. The primary antibody was incubated 1:500 in PBS (containing 0.05% Tween 20, 0.2% bovine serum albumin) overnight at 4°C. Control sections were incubated in the same PBS solution without antibody. Antibody detection was performed with a standard avidin–biotin complex detection system after which they were developed with 3,3′-diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride as chromogen (Vector Laboratories, Burlingame, California). Sections were counterstained with Mayer's Hemalum (Diagnostica Merc, Darmstadt, Germany), mounted with Pertex (Histolab Products AB, Gothenburg, Sweden) and examined and photographed (Olympus BHS photomicrographic system).

Iron and porphyrin staining For iron staining, paraffin-embedded skin sections were dewaxed and rehydrated. Iron deposition was examined using Perl's Prussian blue staining. The sections were incubated in a solution containing 1% potassium ferrocyanide in 1% HCl for 1 h. After several washes in H₂O the sections were incubated with a 1% neutral red solution for 5 min and washed again in H₂O. Dehydrated and differentiated sections were mounted in DPX-type mountant. Porphyrins were stained using Fouchet technique, the method of choice for demonstration of bile pigments. After 5 min incubation in a reagent containing 12.5% trichloroacetic acid and 5% aqueous ferric chloride, the sections were washed in distilled water and counterstained with van Gieson's solution: saturated picric acid, 0.1% acid fuchsin, and 0.1% glacial acetic acid, for 3 min. The sections were washed in alcohol before dehydration.

Determination of \( \alpha_m \), porphyrin, and iron concentrations in wound fluids and plasma Specific concentrations of \( \alpha_m \) were measured by a soluble competitive radioimmunoassay (Åkerström, 1985). Protoporphyrin IX was detected using the pyridin-hemochromogen method as described by Falk (1964). Iron concentrations were determined by a spectrophotometric procedure with hydroxyamine and thioylglucose as the reducing agents and ferrozine as the ferrous ion complexing agent, at the Department of Clinical Chemistry, Malmö General Hospital, Malmö, Sweden. The assays were performed with SYNCHRON LX Systems, Beckman Coulter, Inc., Fullerton, California.

RESULTS

\( \alpha_m \) in wound fluids The wound fluids from 12 patients with chronic venous ulcers contained three variants of \( \alpha_m \): free monomeric \( \alpha_m \), t-\( \alpha_m \), and \( \alpha_m \) complex-bound to IgA (IgA-\( \alpha_m \)) when analyzing by SDS–PAGE (Fig 1). The IgA-\( \alpha_m \) complex appears on SDS–PAGE as a nonreducible 90 kDa protein band containing \( \alpha_m \) covalently linked to the \( \alpha \)-chain. A large variation in the relative concentrations of the three forms was noted. In contrast, plasma from the same patients contained no t-\( \alpha_m \) and displayed less variation between individuals. Furthermore, the various high-molecular-weight \( \alpha_m \) complexes described previously (Berggård et al, 1997) could be seen in plasma samples but were absent in wound fluids. T-\( \alpha_m \) in wound fluids was identified by purification of \( \alpha_m \) on anti-human \( \alpha_m \) affinity chromatography, followed by immunoblotting with anti-LIPR (Fig 2). The results obtained confirmed that the protein band corresponding to t-\( \alpha_m \) on SDS–PAGE lacked the C-terminal tetrapeptide.

Cleavage of \( \alpha_m \) The appearance of t-\( \alpha_m \) on SDS–PAGE prompted a further investigation of the cleaving activity of wound fluids. Thus, \( ^{125}I \)-\( \alpha_m \) or \( ^{125}I \)-IgA-\( \alpha_m \) was added to wound fluid samples and the mixtures were then analyzed on SDS–PAGE. The results obtained revealed the presence of a radioactive protein band corresponding to t-\( \alpha_m \), approximately 3 to 4 kDa smaller compared with native \( \alpha_m \) (Fig 3). \( ^{125}I \)-IgA-\( \alpha_m \) was also processed, which caused disappearance of the 90 kDa band and appearance of free \( \alpha_m \).

Binding of [14C]heme to \( \alpha_m \) \( \alpha_m \) was added to wound fluid and the binding to exogenously added [14C]heme was tested (Fig 4). A clear binding of radio labeled heme to \( \alpha_m \) in the wound fluids could be seen (lane 1) and to \( \alpha_m \) alone without wound fluid present (lane 2). Albumin, a known physiologic heme-binding protein, also bound the added heme when added to wound fluid (lane 3). The binding of [14C]heme to wound fluid without previous addition of \( \alpha_m \) or albumin was not detected (not shown), possibly due to low concentrations of the proteins and/or because endogenous \( \alpha_m \) is saturated with pre-existing heme in the wound fluids.

Binding of [14C]heme in HepG2 cells To examine the heme-binding properties of newly synthesized \( \alpha_m \) not...
Figure 3. Cleavage of exogenously added α1m in wound fluid. One bequerel of 125I-plasma α1m (A) or 125I-IgA-α1m (B) was added to wound fluid, 5 µg total proteins, in PBS. Lanes 1 and 2 correspond to samples before and after addition of wound fluids, respectively. After 1 h incubation at room temperature, the samples were separated by SDS-PAGE.

Figure 4. Binding of [14C]heme to α1m in wound fluid. Wound fluid (1.5 µL = 15 µg protein), with added 45 pmol plasma α1m (1.5 µg), was incubated with 15 pmol [14C]heme in PBS, 0.05% Tween (lane 1). In lane 2, the same amount (45 pmol) of purified plasma α1m was incubated with [14C]heme (15 pmol) without wound fluid. As a control, 45 pmol human albumin was incubated with 15 pmol [14C]heme in 1.5 µL wound fluid (lane 3). The samples were incubated for 30 min and then applied to SDS-PAGE and the dried gel analyzed in a Fuji Bas 2000 Bio-imaging analyzer.

Figure 5. Binding of [14C]heme by α1m in HepG2 cells. (A) Medium from HepG2 cells, grown in the presence of 1 nmol [14C]heme, was immunoprecipitated with polyclonal antiserum (lane 1) or anti-orosomucoid (lane 2). The α1m samples were then loaded on SDS–PAGE. (B) Five nanomol [14C]heme were added to HepG2 cells grown in medium supplemented with 0.03 M Na2SeO3 (lane 1). The medium was then purified on an affinity column with immobilized monoclonal antibodies against α1m and the eluates analyzed by SDS–PAGE.

previously exposed to heme, human hepatoblastoma (HepG2) cells were used. These cells synthesize α1m as a precursor protein, α1m/bikunin, which is cleaved intracellularly and the proteins are secreted separately. Thus, [14C]heme was added to the culture medium containing newly synthesized and secreted α1m. This medium was then immunoprecipitated with polyclonal antisera. The results displayed in Fig 5(A) show that the [14C]heme added to HepG2 cells bound to α1m, but not to orosomucoid also synthesized by the HepG2 cells. Medium was also applied to a monoclonal affinity chromatography column and α1m isolated by affinity chromatography could be seen as a radioactive band on SDS–PAGE (Fig 5B). The lyzed cells from the same cultivation did not show any radioactivity on SDS–PAGE, suggesting that there were too small amounts of [14C]heme bound intracellularly to be detected (not shown). To exclude the possibility that [14C]heme bound to proteins from the FBS in the medium, FBS was replaced by Na2SeO3. In this case the binding of [14C]heme to α1m was even more pronounced, as indicated in Fig 5(B), possibly as a result of the absence of competing heme-binding factors in FBS. The synthesis rate of α1m was similar with or without FBS (not shown).

Iron, heme, and α1m in wound fluids and sections The skin sections from patients with chronic ulcers and from healthy individuals were investigated histologically using polyclonal anti-sera directed against α1m. The results revealed a global distribution of α1m in the dermis layer, with more intense staining in basement membranes and fibrin cuffs surrounding the blood vessels (Fig 6B). The normal skin section prepared from a healthy individual also displayed a ubiquitous distribution of α1m with increased amounts around vessels (Fig 6A). Porphyrin-specific staining showed the presence of porphyrins in basement membranes and fibrin cuffs surrounding vessels, i.e., a colocalization with α1m, as well as in infiltrating blood cells (Fig 6C). In contrast, much less porphyrins were found in sections from patients with acute wounds (Fig 6E) or normal skin sections. Furthermore, pronounced iron deposits were seen in chronic ulcers (Fig 6D), as opposed to acute wounds or skin sections from healthy individuals, which were negative with respect to iron (not shown). These results suggest that tissue deposition of heme and iron is accentuated in chronic ulcers as compared with acute wounds and normal skin, whereas α1m is ubiquitously present both in normal skin and chronic ulcers.

Heme (protoporphyrin IX), free iron, and α1m concentrations were determined in wound fluids and plasma from patients with chronic ulcers (Table 1). The heme content was estimated to
19.8 μM (SEM 6.7) in wound fluids and 13.4 μM (SEM 3.6) in plasma. The iron concentration was 6.5 μM (SEM 2.7) in wound fluids and 7.3 μM (1.5) in plasma. The α1m concentration was 1.7 μM (SEM 0.8) in wound fluids and 1.9 μM (SEM 1.5) in plasma. As a control, the heme, iron, and α1m concentrations were determined in plasma from normal donors. The heme and α1m concentrations were 12.1 μM (SEM 3.6) and 1.8 μM (SEM 0.3), respectively (Table I), i.e., similar values as in plasma from patients with chronic ulcers. The iron concentration in normal plasma was 13.9 (SEM 0.7), which is higher than in plasma and ulcer fluids from patients with chronic wounds.

**DISCUSSION**

Recent results indicate that the lipocalin α1m is a heme scavenger, and that it participates in protection against toxic effects of extracellularly exposed heme. Heme has been proposed as an inducer of inflammation and constitutes one of several pathogenic factors in chronic leg ulcers. Chronic venous ulcers, characterized by accumulated heme, may therefore serve as a relevant model for investigation of physiologic interactions between α1m and heme. The results in this study show the simultaneous presence of heme, iron, and α1m in chronic wound fluids and a colocalization of α1m and heme in tissue sections to basement membranes and fibrin cuffs around vessels. Moreover, α1m binds heme in the wound fluids and is processed into the truncated form t-α1m, which has heme-degrading properties. The results obtained here

**Table I. Concentrations of heme (protoporphyrin IX), free iron, and α1m in chronic wound fluids and in plasma from patients with chronic ulcers and normal donors.** Mean values of determinations on five samples (n = 5) and SEM values in each category are shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Heme (μM)</th>
<th>Iron (μM)</th>
<th>α1m (μM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chronic ulcers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wound fluid</td>
<td>19.8 (6.7)</td>
<td>6.5 (2.7)</td>
<td>1.7 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasma</td>
<td>13.4 (3.6)</td>
<td>7.3 (1.5)</td>
<td>1.9 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal plasma</td>
<td>12.1 (36)</td>
<td>139 (0.7)</td>
<td>1.8 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Histochemical distribution of α1m, porphyrins, and free iron in chronic venous ulcers. α1m, porphyrins and iron in skin sections from chronic ulcers, acute wounds and normal skin, including epidermis and dermis. (A) α1m in normal skin (× 20). (B) α1m in skin from a patient with chronic ulcers (× 20). The sections were immunostained for α1m using polyclonal anti-serum against α1m followed by peroxidase/diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride incubation as described in Materials and Methods. α1m appears in high density in basement membranes and fibrin cuffs surrounding the blood vessels (arrows). (C, × 40) and (D, × 40) show porphyrins and iron depositions, respectively, in the tissue from chronic leg ulcers. Porphyrins were stained with Fouchet technique and iron with Perls’ Prussian blue stain. High-density depositions are marked with arrows. (E) Porphyrin staining in the skin section from a patient with acute wound (× 40). The magnification bars in the lower-right corner in each panel represent 0.02 mm. FC, fibrin cuffs, v, vessel.
thus support a view of $\alpha_m$ as a heme scavenger during inflammation.

It was previously noted that the C-terminal processing of $\alpha_m$ is induced by purified hemoglobin or by membranes from ruptured erythrocytes (Allhorn et al., 2002). It was speculated that an oxidized form of hemoglobin, which can be found deposited in erythrocyte membranes, may be responsible for the cleavage. The identity of the cleaving factor(s) in the leg ulcer fluids was not determined in this investigation; however, hemoglobin is usually found in this type of chronic leg ulcers (Blomgren et al., 2001) and this paper as well as others (Wenk et al., 2001) has shown the presence of heme and iron. It is therefore possible that the processing of $\alpha_m$ in chronic leg ulcers is induced by hemoglobin, hemoglobin variants, or free heme. We have previously shown that $\alpha_m$ is excreted in normal urine and that urinary $\alpha_m$ may be elevated in urine from hemolytic patients (Allhorn et al., 2002). In analogy, an increased $\alpha_m$ formation in patients with chronic ulcers may be reflected as an elevated urinary $\alpha_m$ concentration in these patients, and therefore, it is interesting to speculate that the urinary $\alpha_m/\alpha_m\tau$ ratio could be a useful parameter for evaluation of the clinical status of the ulcer patients.

About 50% of $\alpha_m$ in blood is complex bound to monomeric IgA (Grubb et al., 1986; Berggård et al., 1997). The IgA-$\alpha_m$ complex is also found in extravascular compartments (Berggård et al., 1999; Bouic et al., 1985; Vincent and Revillard, 1987). It was shown that IgA-$\alpha_m$ is processed by erythrocyte membranes and hemoglobin, forming intact IgA and $\alpha_m$ (Allhorn et al., 2002). IgA-$\alpha_m$ may therefore be regarded as a depot from which the activated $\alpha_m$ is released. Leg ulcer fluids cleaved exogenously added IgA-$\alpha_m$, suggesting that a mobilization of activated, heme-binding and heme-degrading $\alpha_m$ from the IgA-$\alpha_m$ depot takes place in leg ulcers in vivo. IgA is a normal component of skin, and granular deposits containing various forms of IgA were found in skin from patients with dermatitis herpetiformis (Egelrud and Back, 2004), suggesting a role of this molecule in homeostasis and pathology of the skin. It should therefore be of interest to investigate the normal distribution of IgA-$\alpha_m$ as well as the presence of the complex in the pathologic granular deposits.

Another product of heme degradation is, of course, free iron. The results in this paper, in agreement with previous reports, demonstrate the presence of iron in the ulcer fluids, as well as iron deposits in chronic wound sections. Interestingly, the levels of iron (free + protein bound) were lower in wound fluids and plasma from chronic ulcer patients than in normal plasma, whereas iron deposits were seen in chronic wound tissue but not in acute wound or normal tissue. This suggests that the iron-chelating mechanisms are insufficient in the inflammatory tissue. Iron represents an oxidative threat to the tissue components, but heme oxygenase has been suggested to promote sequestering of the iron into the storage protein ferritin, which serves a dual role by hiding the iron and itself possesses a cyto-protective and anti-oxidative activity (Balla et al., 1992; Otterbein and Choi, 2000; Ryter and Tyrell, 2000). It may be speculated that $\alpha_m$, which seems to have its heme-degrading property in common with heme oxygenase (Allhorn et al., 2002), affects heme in a similar way giving rise to these anti-oxidative mediators.

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Unlike heme oxygenase, $\alpha_m$ operates extracellularly, possibly providing the main source of protection against unsequestered heme in the extracellular space. In conclusion, our results support the concept of $\alpha_m$ as part of a novel endogenous defense mechanism against heme-induced oxidative stress.

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