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Submission date: 29-Sep-2022 11:18AM (UTC+0800)

Submission ID: 1911788777

File name: on_Full-Thickness_Wound_Applied_with_Topical_Erythropoietin.pdf (1.43M)

Word count: 3537

Character count: 19253



Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor, Epidermal Growth Factor, and Epithelialization Analysis on Full-Thickness Wound Applied with Topical Erythropoietin

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3894/mjms.2022.16.8.915>
Keywords: Vascular endothelial growth factor; Epithelialization rate; Medical care; Vascular endothelial growth factor; Wound healing

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Received: 12-July-2022
Revised: 31-Aug-2022
Accepted: 26-Feb-2023

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: Skin wounds are a major challenge, such as full-thickness wounds that need a long time to heal. However, the addition of erythropoietin can accelerate the wound healing process.

AIM: This study was aimed to determine the effect of topical erythropoietin administration on vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), epidermal growth factor (EGF), and epithelialization in the wound healing process.

METHODS: This was randomized controlled trial. Full-thickness wounds were created on the back of each white rat. No treatment was administered in the control group (n=10), and topical erythropoietin was applied in the treatment group (n=10). The rats were euthanized on day 3 and day 6 post-surgery, respectively. The expression levels of VEGF, EGF, and microscopic epithelialization rate were examined.

RESULTS: The level of EGF expression in the treatment group increased significantly on day 3 by 2.94 times compared to the control group and on day 6 increased to 4.69 times compared to the control group ($p < 0.001$). The level of VEGF expression in the treatment group on day 3 increased 2.18 times compared to the control group and on day 6 increased to 2.65 times compared to the control group ($p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, epithelialization in the treatment group on day 3 increased 1.3 times compared to the control group and on day 6 increased up to 7.62 times compared to the control group ($p < 0.001$).

CONCLUSION: Topical administration of erythropoietin could increase the expression of VEGF, EGF, and epithelialization in both early inflammatory and proliferative phases.

Introduction

Skin wounds provide a significant challenge to the medical system as well as a significant societal burden in the United States and around the world. Wounds have an impact on nearly 2.5% of the U.S. population's quality of life. They also cost more than \$25 billion each year in the United States and contributes significantly to health-care costs [1], [2]. Skin wounds that have been affected by an underlying illness, such as vasculopathy or diabetes, frequently fail to heal, resulting in persistent ulcers, or full-thickness wounds [3], [4].

The problem with full-thickness wounds is that the exposed structures are frequently dysvascular and blocked. Wound closure must occur in layers and takes a long time [5]. Optimal full-thickness wound management requires thorough knowledge of wound healing principles and practices [6]. The wound healing process can be divided into numerous stages, including direct hemostasis, acute inflammation, proliferation, and maturation. The development of new blood vessels,

known as angiogenesis, is a critical action associated with the proliferative stage [2].

Levi-Montalcini and Cohen found growth factors beginning in 1,500 and agreed that growth factors play a significant function in increasing the process of tissue wound healing [7]. Vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) and epidermal growth factor (EGF) are two growth factors that are strongly associated with the angiogenesis process [8]. VEGF promotes angiogenesis, endothelial cell proliferation, and vasculogenesis. EGF works mainly to stimulate the growth of epithelial cells along the wound area as well to fight fibroblasts and smooth muscle cells [9], [10].

In recent years, a growth factor that is undergoing increasing research is erythropoietin. Erythropoietin is a glycoprotein hormone that can stimulate angiogenesis [11]. Various studies have been conducted to prove that the administration of erythropoietin accelerates the speed of wound healing [12], [13], [14]. In 2010, Hamed et al. found that topical erythropoietin treatment quadrupled the speed of wound repair in diabetic rats with full-thickness wounds and reduced cell apoptosis [15]. Topical erythropoietin

administration has been found to promote wound healing by increasing skin regeneration and inducing granulation tissue development through neovascularization [16], [17]. However, several of these trials are still limited to diabetes circumstances, and no definitive study on full-thickness wounds has been conducted.

As a result, the purpose of this study was to demonstrate the effect of topical erythropoietin administration on full-thickness wounds of Wistar rats on the levels of VEGF and EGF, as well as epithelialization during the wound healing phase.

Materials and Methods

This study had been approved from the Ethics Committee of Dr. Soeicmo General Academic Hospital Surabaya, Indonesia. This was an experimental study with a randomized post-test only control group design. Thirty-six white rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) were randomly assigned into two groups equally. Full-thickness wounds with a size of 2 cm were created on the backs of each white rat. No treatment was administered in the first group as a control group, and topical erythropoietin was applied in the second groups as a treatment group. Each wound from both groups was covered with hydrocolloid dressing as peri-wound management and transparent dressing (Figures 1 and 2). In this study, with effective topical doses varying from 100–600 IU/time [15], [18], [19]. Erythropoietin was applied topically to wounds at 100 IU or around 0.05 mL (1 drop) (Figure 2). The rats will be euthanized on day 3 and day 6 post-surgery. The other nine rats from each group were examined on day 3 (the inflammatory phase) and the other nine rats from each group on day 6 (the proliferation phase). The expression levels of VEGF, EGF, and microscopic epithelialization rate were examined. Variance equality data will be analyzed statistically using SPSS 21 with level at $p = 0.001$.

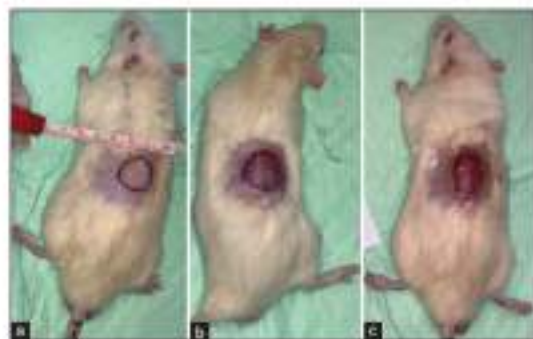


Figure 1. Making wounds on the backs of the control group rats. (a) Size of the wound; (b) full-thickness wound; and (c) closed with hydrocolloid on the margins and transparent dressing over the wound



Figure 2. Making wounds on the backs of the treatment group rats. (a) Design and size of the wound; (b) full-thickness wound; (c) topical erythropoietin application; and (d) closed with hydrocolloid on the margins and transparent dressing over the wound

Results

The level of VEGF expression in the treatment group on day 3 increased 2.18 times compared to the control group and on day 6 increased to 2.65 times compared to the control group. There was a significance in the level of VEGF between rats without and with topical erythropoietin ($p < 0.001$; Table 1). From immunohistochemical staining, it can be seen that the amount of VEGF appears to be higher in the treatment group (Figure 3).

Table 1: Level of VEGF among groups from ImageJ Software

Group	No.	VEGF expression (%) Mean \pm SD	p
1 (a) Control day 3	9	19.48 \pm 4.974	<0.001
1 (b) Control day 6	9	21.74 \pm 7.660	
2 (a) Treatment day 3	9	51.72 \pm 13.992	<0.001
2 (b) Treatment day 6	9	47.41 \pm 13.200	

VEGF: vascular endothelial growth factor

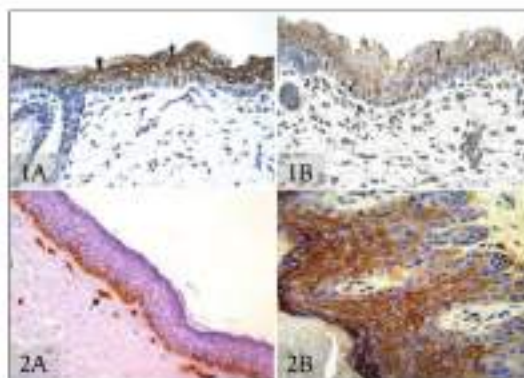


Figure 3. Immunohistochemical staining for vascular endothelial growth factor on each group. (1A) control day 3; (1B) control day 6; (2A) treatment day 3; and (2B) treatment day 6

The level of EGF expression in the treatment group was significantly increased on day 3, increasing 2.84 times compared to the control group, and on day 6, increased to 4.89 times compared to the control group. There was a significant difference in the level of EGF between rats without and with topical erythropoietin ($p < 0.001$; Table 2). From immunohistochemical staining, it can be seen that the amount of EGF appears to be higher in the treatment group (Figure 4).

Table 2: Level of EGF expression among groups from ImageJ Software

Group	No.	EGF expression (%)(Mean ± SD)	p
1 (a) Control day 3	8	19.22 ± 2.991	<0.001
1 (b) Control day 6	8	17.72 ± 4.733	
2 (a) Treatment day 3	8	55.96 ± 11.627	
2 (b) Treatment day 6	8	55.56 ± 8.235	

EGF: epidermal growth factor

Epithelialization rate in the treatment group on day 3 increased 1.3 times compared to the control group and on day 6 increased up to 7.62 times compared to the control group.

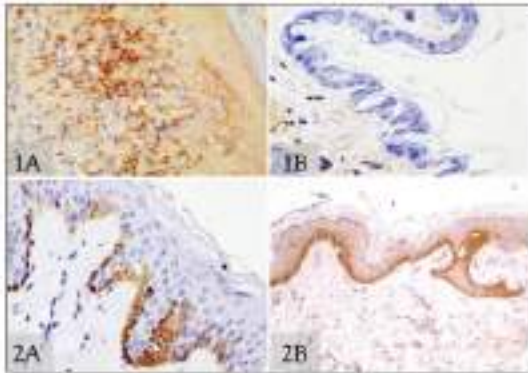


Figure 4: Immunohistochemical staining for epidermal growth factor on each group. (1A) control day 3; (1B) control day 6; (2A) treatment day 3; and (2B) treatment day 6

There was a significant difference in the epithelialization rate between rats without and with topical erythropoietin ($p < 0.001$; Table 3). From immunohistochemical staining, it was seen that the epithelialization rate seemed to increase more in the treatment group (Figure 5).

Discussion

Topical erythropoietin was chosen as the treatment in this study, because it is one of the various non-surgical therapeutic modalities currently available, which means that it has been shown to have a good effect on wound healing. What distinguishes this study from the previous studies is that this study using topical erythropoietin for acute wound healing is the first study in Indonesia to be conducted. The expression levels of VEGF, EGF, and epithelialization were chosen as the research parameters because these parameters are considered to best describe the wound healing process.

Table 3: Epithelialization rate among groups

Group	No.	Median (Min - Max)	p
1 (a) Control day 3	8	23.9 (13.17.5)	<0.001
1 (b) Control day 6	8	12.9 (13.14.8)	
2 (a) Treatment day 3	8	17.9 (16.819.5)	
2 (b) Treatment day 6	8	80.3 (62.6-145.5)	

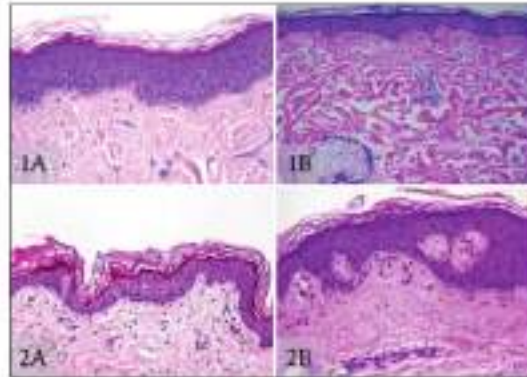


Figure 5: Immunohistochemical staining for epithelialization on each group. (1A) Control day 3; (1B) control day 6; (2A) treatment day 3; and (2B) treatment day 6

Erythropoietin is an angiogenic agent that induces endothelial cells to mitosis. The activation, migration, and proliferation of endothelial cells, as well as the maturation of cell junctions and the surrounding basement membrane, all contribute to the development of new functional capillary structures. VEGF influences each of these phases [14]. Hence, indirectly, giving erythropoietin can trigger the emergence of VEGF. Increased levels of VEGF and EGF in the treatment group on day 6 (representing the beginning of the proliferative phase). In addition to activating cells, it stimulates angiogenesis and endothelial cell proliferation and plays a vital role in vasculogenesis. Epithelial cells grow along the wound area, as well as against fibroblasts and smooth muscle cells [20]. Platelets and macrophages release VEGF in response to tissue injury early in wound healing. Furthermore, hypoxia caused by metabolic dysfunction is a significant inducer of VEGF release into the wound microenvironment. Another clinical trial found that VEGF promotes re-epithelialization of diabetic foot ulcers by increasing blood vessel development [21], [22].

Erythropoietin receptor can also influence and activate macrophages. EGF is a growth factor that is produced by platelets, macrophages, and monocytes [23], [24]. Hence, indirectly, the addition of erythropoietin to the wound can increase the formation of EGF. EGF began to be produced by platelets since the beginning of the inflammatory phase (hemostasis), as evidenced by an increase in EGF levels of more than 2 times on day 3, which was produced by macrophages. Platelets in this phase activate macrophages to start producing other growth factors [25]. This phase overlaps with the proliferative phase and is characterized by increased production of VEGF on day 3 and 6. The levels were not significant on the 6th day. This is because the wound that has undergone epithelial closure or the wound on the subject indicates that the proliferative phase has begun and the remodeling phase has begun [23], [26].

Epithelialization through the wound margin occurs early in the inflammatory phase and rapidly at the end of the proliferative phase [27]. That is evidenced by the significant difference in the number of cells per field of view on days 3 and 6, where on day 6 showed proliferation. The phase has begun to end and the remodeling phase has begun to progress, as reflected by an increase of up to 7.62 times compared to the control. The increase in epithelializing activity on day 6 indicated that topically administered erythropoietin stimulated epithelial mitotic activity in the wound area. Re-epithelialization is regarded as a key component of wound healing. It is critical that epithelialization occurs as soon as feasible after tissue injury and epithelial disruption. The keratinocytes begin migrating into the defect after around 24 h. This occurs as a result of different interactions between cells and the extracellular matrix, as well as various growth factors and cytokines [19].

Full-thickness wounds have their own difficulties in the wound healing process. The wound healing process that must be in layers causes the process to take longer. Combined with some problems that may be encountered during the wound healing process, such as the possibility of infection and the appearance of pus between the layers, so, speeding up the process of closing the wound is one solution [1], [6], [5]. From the results of this study, it can be seen that the addition of erythropoietin for 6 days can accelerate the process of full-thickness wound healing in rats through the process of increasing growth factors such as VEGF and EGF which are correlated with wound epithelialization.

Conclusion

Levels of VEGF, EGF, and epithelialization in full-thickness wounds of rats given topical erythropoietin increased more than those without erythropoietin. These results indicate that topical application of erythropoietin can accelerate the wound healing process, especially in full-thickness wounds. This study is the first study to use topical erythropoietin as a treatment modality for acute full-thickness wound healing in Indonesia. This positive result can be a new hope for patients and medical personnel in accelerating the wound healing process so as to reduce morbidity due to full-thickness wounds.

Acknowledgment

The author is grateful to the Research and Innovation Institute, Universitas Airlangga who has

helped in proofreading the manuscript and improving the Grammarly spelled.

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