



Local pharmacological induction of angiogenesis: drugs for cells and cells as drugs

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Abstract: The past decades have seen significant advances in pro-angiogenic strategies based on delivery of molecules and cells for conditions such as coronary artery disease, critical limb ischemia and stroke. Currently, three major strategies are evolving. Firstly, various pharmacological agents (growth factors, interleukins, small molecules, DNA/RNA) are locally applied at the ischemic region. Secondly, preparations of living cells with considerable bandwidth of tissue origin, differentiation state and preconditioning are locally, and occasionally, systemically delivered. Based on the notion, that cellular effects might mostly be attributed factors they secrete in situ, the cellular secretome (conditioned media, exosomes) has come into the spotlight. We review here these three strategies to achieve (neo)angiogenesis in ischemic tissue with a view towards angiogenic mechanisms they tackle such as transcription cascades, specific signalling steps and cellular gases. We also include cancer-therapy relevant lymphangiogenesis, and shall seek for an explanation why there are often conflicting data between in vitro and in vivo. The lion's share of data encompassing all three approaches has been generated with experimental animal work and we shall highlight common technical obstacles in the delivery of therapeutic molecules, cells, and secretome. We look into the reasons why not more clinical studies have been forthcoming and that completed trials have yet to reveal a successful and efficacious strategy. A lack of adequate delivery vehicles and standardised assessment of clinical outcomes might play a role here, as well as regulatory, IP, and manufacturing constraints of candidate compounds. As angiogenesis is well enough understood for clinical purposes, it will be a matter of time to achieve success for well-stratified patients and most probably with a combination of compounds, and most probably all of them small molecules.

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Review Angiogenesis for Wound Healing & Scar Wars
“Local pharmacological induction of angiogenesis: drugs for cells and cells as drugs”

Dear Prof Schenke-Layland,

I am very pleased to submit on behalf of my co-authors a substantial review on angiogenetic strategies in wound healing and tissue regeneration by Gaspar et al. The review encompasses three current strategies – pharmacological, cell-based, and cell product-based. We review these strategies to achieve (neo)angiogenesis in ischemic tissue with a view towards angiogenic mechanisms they tackle such as transcription cascades, specific signaling steps and cellular gases. We also include cancer-therapy relevant lymphangiogenesis, and shall seek for an explanation why there are often conflicting data between in vitro and in vivo.

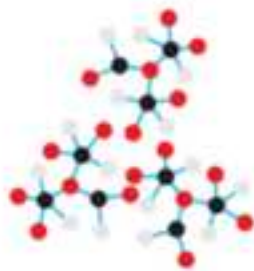


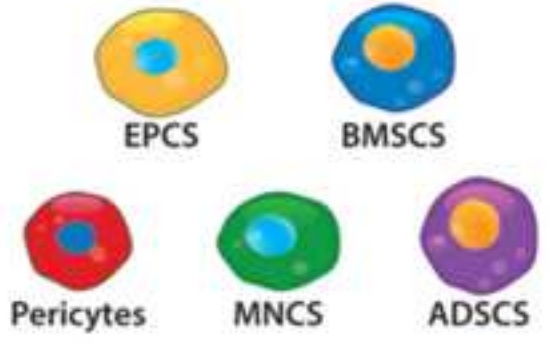
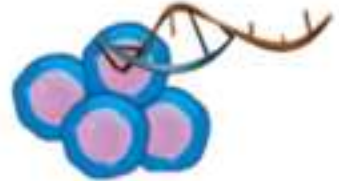




We have made sure to cover the current state of art as evidenced by clinical studies for a reality-check where we stand right now with angiogenic therapies at the bedside. With almost 500 references this review is very thorough.

I therefore hope that this manuscript meets the rigorous standards of ADDR and can be deemed acceptable.

With my very best regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'M. Raghunath'.

Michael Raghunath
Zürich University of Applied Sciences

Drugs for cells	Cells as drugs	Pre-conditioning tools for secretome modulation
 <p data-bbox="262 657 514 698">Growth factors</p>  <p data-bbox="252 1015 525 1055">Small molecules</p>  <p data-bbox="325 1412 441 1453">Genes</p>	 <p data-bbox="924 657 1113 698">Naïve cells</p>  <p data-bbox="798 1015 1239 1055">Genetically modified cells</p>  <p data-bbox="892 1412 1144 1453">Cell secretome</p>	 <p data-bbox="1606 657 1753 698">Hypoxia</p>  <p data-bbox="1449 1015 1921 1055">Electromagnetic stimulation</p>  <p data-bbox="1491 1412 1879 1453">Mechanical stimulation</p>

Title

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Abstract

The past decades have seen significant advances in pro-angiogenic strategies based on delivery of molecules and cells for conditions such as coronary artery disease, critical limb ischemia and stroke. Currently, three major strategies are evolving. Firstly, various pharmacological agents (growth factors, interleukins, small molecules, DNA/RNA) are locally applied at the ischemic region. Secondly, preparations of living cells with considerable bandwidth of tissue origin, differentiation state and preconditioning are locally, and occasionally, systemically delivered. Based on the notion, that cellular effects might mostly be attributed factors they secrete *in situ*, the cellular secretome (conditioned media, exosomes) has come into the spotlight. We review here these three strategies to achieve (neo)angiogenesis in ischemic tissue with a view towards angiogenic mechanisms they tackle such as transcription cascades, specific signalling steps and cellular gases. We also include cancer-therapy relevant lymphangiogenesis, and shall seek for an explanation why there are often conflicting data between *in vitro* and *in vivo*. We find the lion's share of data encompassing all three approaches has been generated with experimental animal work and we shall highlight common technical obstacles in the delivery of therapeutic molecules, cells, and secretome. We look into the reasons why not more clinical studies have been forthcoming and that completed trials have yet to reveal a successful and efficacious strategy. A lack of adequate delivery vehicles and standardised assessment of clinical outcomes might play a role here, as well as regulatory, IP, and manufacturing constraints of candidate compounds. As angiogenesis is well enough understood for clinical purposes, it will be a matter of time to achieve success for well-stratified patients and most probably with a combination of compounds, and most probably all of them small molecules.

Keywords

Angiogenesis; vascularisation; drug delivery; cell therapy; secretome; small compounds;
cellular gases; progenitor cells; endothelial cells

List of abbreviations

α -SMA: alpha smooth muscle actin

aFGF: acidic fibroblastic growth factor

ADSCs: adipose derived stem cells

Akt: serine /threonine specific protein kinase

Ang1: angiopoietin 1

FGF2: basic fibroblastic growth factor

BMSCs: bone marrow mesenchymal stem cells

BM-MNCs: bone marrow mononuclear cells

CABG: coronary artery bypass grafting

CAD: coronary artery disease

CAM: chorioallantoic membrane

CD: cluster of differentiation

CLI: critical limb ischemia

COX-1: cytochrome c oxidase subunit 1

CST: compressive sleeve therapy

EC: endothelial cells

ECM: extracellular matrix

ELF: extremely low frequency

EMF: electromagnetic field stimulation

eNOS: endothelial nitric oxide synthase 3

EPCs: endothelial progenitor cells

ePTFE: polytetrafluoroethylene

ERK: extracellular signal regulated kinases

GAG: glycosaminoglycan

G-CSF: granulocyte -colony stimulating factor

GF: growth factor

hB-EGF: heparin binding endothelial growth factor

HGF: hepatocyte growth factor

HIF: hypoxia inducible factor

HUVEC: human umbilical vein endothelial cells

ICAM: intercellular adhesion molecule

Id1: DNA-binding protein inhibitor

IGF-1: insulin-like growth factor 1

IL: interleukin

ISL1: insulin gene enhancer protein

iNOS: inducible nitric oxide synthase

JNK: c-Jun N-terminal kinases

LIPUS: low-intensity pulsed ultrasounds

LLLT: low-level laser therapy

miRNA: micro ribonucleic acid

MMPs: metalloproteinases

MVEs: multi-vesicular endosomes

NGF: nerve growth factor

NO: nitric oxide

NOS: nitric oxide synthase

PAD: peripheral artery disease

PDGF: platelet derived growth factor

PEG: polyethylene glycol

PEMF: pulsed electromagnetic field stimulation

PH: prolyl hydroxylase

PI3K: phosphatidylinositol-3-kinases

PLGA: poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid)

PlGF: placental growth factor

PMA: phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate

PRF: platelet rich fibrin

Prox-1: prospero homeobox protein 1

PRP: platelet rich plasma

Rac1: ras-related C3 botulinum toxin substrate 1

SDF-1 α : stromal cell-derived factor 1 alpha

SMCs: smooth muscle cells

Src: proto-oncogene tyrosine-protein kinase Src

Tie2: angiopoietin 1 receptor

TIMP: tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinase

TGF- β : transforming growth factor beta

uPa: urokinase-type plasminogen activator

VCAM-1: vascular cell adhesion protein

VE-cadherin: vascular endothelial cadherin

VEGF: vascular endothelial growth factor

VEGFR: vascular endothelial growth factor receptor

UC-MSCs: umbilical cord mesenchymal stem cells

Table of contents

1	Introduction.....	10
2	Drugs for cells.....	16
2.1	Delivery of growth factors and cytokines	16
2.2	Delivery of interleukins, ions, gases, and small molecules.....	22
2.3	Delivery of genes	27
2.4	Delivery of growth factors and genes for therapeutic lymphangiogenesis	32
2.5	Physical stimuli for secretion of angiogenic factors	33
3	Cells as drugs	36
3.1	Delivery of naïve cells.....	37
3.1.1	Endothelial progenitor cells (EPCs).....	37
3.1.2	Mononuclear cells (MNCs).....	39
3.1.3	Bone marrow (BMSCs) and adipose derived stem cells (ADSCs)	40
3.1.4	Pericytes and blood-derived angiogenic cells.....	43
3.2	Delivery of pre-conditioned cells	44
3.2.1	Biochemical pre-conditioning.....	44
3.2.2	Physical pre-conditioning	46
3.3	Delivery of genetically modified cells	50
3.4	Delivery of cell secretome and cell-derived vesicles	53
3.5	Delivery of cells for therapeutic lymphangiogenesis	56
3.6	General approaches for cell retention and survival after implantation	58
4	Conclusions and future perspectives.....	60

5	Acknowledgments.....	62
6	References.....	63

1 Introduction

For almost all human tissues, a direct vascular perfusion at the micro level (4 - 7 μm capillaries, lymphatics), derived from a network of blood vessels at the macro level (1 mm to 2 cm, arterioles, arteries, venules, veins, lymph vessels and ducts), is mandatory to sustain metabolic function for tissue maintenance, growth and repair [1, 2]. The continuous flow of blood and its corpuscular elements ensures constant exchange of nutrients, metabolic waste and gases via diffusion through capillary walls [3]. Lymphatic vessels serve as a transport system for fluid and large proteins collected from the interstitial space, immune cells and also lipid droplets after resorption in the intestine [4, 5]. Tissues that are not vascularised, such as cartilage and cornea, are dependent on the exchange of nutrients, waste and gases via diffusion from adjacent vascularised tissues [6, 7]. Microangiogenesis is a prerequisite for tissue growth. First, in the embryo, angioblasts, progenitor cells for both endothelial cells (EC) and hematopoietic cells, form clusters that are sustained via diffusion of oxygen and nutrients through the uterine wall. In these aggregates, the inner cells will become the hematopoietic precursors while the outer cells will give rise to EC [8]. The endothelial cells start forming a primitive capillary network along which tissue grows and more complex structures form. When tissue size reaches the limit of oxygen diffusion, further vessel growth is prompted through hypoxia and increased expression of hypoxia inducible transcription factors (HIF) [9]. The vascular network increasingly expands through sprouting mediated by EC, which later are covered by pericytes and vascular smooth muscle cells (SMCs) to provide strength and stability to the new vessel [8]. In adulthood, EC also proliferate in response to stimuli, (e.g. hypoxia) to initiate angiogenesis [10]. Once EC are activated, vasodilation of the parental vessel occurs, creating space between the EC, which allows them to migrate to the interstitial space and proliferate to form the elongating tip of a new capillary [11]. This process also involves activation of metalloproteinases (MMPs) to degrade the basement membrane also

releasing / activating growth factors trapped within the ECM. Furthermore, this is also mediated by RhoA/Rho kinase signalling as it involves significant cytoskeletal remodelling [12]. To stabilise the blood vessel, similarly to vasculogenesis, pericytes and SMCs are recruited and ECM is secreted. The increasing shear stress from the blood flow will contribute to vessel stability derived from further ECM remodelling and EC – pericytes / smooth muscle cell interactions [13].

As for the formation of lymphatic vessels, lymphangiogenesis, in the embryo, is only initiated after the vascular system is already established. A distinct subpopulation of EC commits to the lymphatic lineage and sprouts to form primitive structures that constitute the lymph sacs, from which peripheral lymphatic vessels are derived through centrifugal sprouting. Different lymphatic capillary networks eventually connect and undergo further remodelling and maturation [14]. In adulthood, lymphangiogenesis occurs primarily through sprouting from pre-existing vessels during wound healing and development of corpus luteum. However, growth of lymphatic vessels is also associated with various pathophysiologies including tumour metastasis and inflammation [15, 16]. Disorders in the lymphatic system can occur due to malformations, as a consequence of localised trauma and after surgery or radiation therapies for malignancies, particularly of the breast or pelvic organs [17, 18]. The impaired lymphatic fluid flow leads to lymphoedema, for which there are currently very limited treatments mostly dependent on physiotherapy [19].

Restriction of blood flow on the macrolevel leads to reduced perfusion of the capillary bed downstream of the feeder vessel. Thus, the affected area becomes underperfused, or ischemic, there is a shortage of oxygen, leading to hypoxia in the tissue, and metabolic waste accumulates [20]. This is characteristic of pathological conditions such as coronary artery disease (CAD), critical limb ischemia (CLI), myocardial infarction or ischemic stroke. Ischemia onset is usually gradual, caused by changes in the vessel walls leading to stenosis,

but can progress to dangerous levels (CLI, crescendo angina pectoris) and be suddenly aggravated by a blood clot that either rapidly forms at a wall lesion (thrombosis) and occludes the lumen or has formed there but is transported to another location in the vasculature where it finally occludes a vessel (embolus) [21, 22].

On the microlevel, a diffuse obliteration process of small vessels and capillaries can lead to ischemia as well, triggered by metabolic aberrances such as hyperglycaemia in diabetes, but also homocystinuria and inflammatory conditions such as lupus erythematosus [23-25]. Damage of retinal capillaries, nerves and loss of filtration function of renal glomeruli are all manifestations of capillary injury [26-28]. Furthermore, diabetes also causes a macroangiopathy which can be explained by direct damage of vessel wall constituents, but also the obliteration of capillaries nourishing the vessel wall (vasa vasorum) [29, 30].

Depending on anatomical locations vascularisation strategies tackling the macro level have to be different from those on the micro level, though in many cases pathologies on both levels occur simultaneously.

Current clinical treatments to restore blood flow are mainly focussing on the macro level with the expectation that the micro level is then served as well. In essence these strategies either seek to bypass or substitute the occlusion or directly address the stenotic lesion directly by mechanical and pharmacological means [20]. These strategies can be categorised as reperfusion therapies and encompass long term revascularisation, however, their application depends on the blood vessels to be treated or replaced, respectively. Synthetic vascular grafts, such as polytetrafluoroethylene (ePTFE), polyethylene terephthalate (Dacron[®]) or polyurethane are extensively utilised clinically but are more successful for applications with a vessel diameter larger than 6 mm , with neointimal hyperplasia being the major cause of failure when these are used in smaller calibre applications [31, 32]. For coronary bypasses, a homograft is used. The saphenous vein, internal mammary artery, or radial artery are suitable

options for small diameter grafts (< 6 mm) [31]. Alternatively to homografts, balloon dilation with subsequent stenting is also utilised. Complications of stenting are restenosis due to hyperplasia of smooth muscle cells leading to a neointima formation and restenosis [33]. To mitigate this, drug eluting stents and balloons are in clinical use [34, 35]. With regards to long term patency, coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) and stenting are comparable in clinical outcomes. Functionalisation of synthetic grafts with various molecules (e.g. proteins, glycosaminoglycans, growth factors, peptides) has also been attempted [36-38], however, clinical studies to date have focussed on larger calibre vessels (e.g. femoropopliteal bypass or aortic reconstruction procedures) [39-43].

An acute perfusion problem on the micro level occurs also when *in vitro* cultured tissue is implanted into living tissue and immediately requires vascularisation to survive. The issue in tissue engineering for regenerative procedures is the fact that standard culture runs at atmospheric oxygen, meaning 21% oxygen saturation in culture media (depending on diffusion conditions in the culture vessel) which constitutes hyperoxia. Physiological oxygen levels range from 0.5% to 9% (~1% in the intervertebral disc and certain areas of the brain [44, 45], ~6% in bone marrow [46], ~5% in cartilage [47]) and implanting a typically non vascularised hyperoxic tissue piece into a living tissue will lead to a race between central necrosis of the implant and capillaries sprouting into the implant from outside from a pre-existing capillary network. In summary, strategies on the macro level are primarily to establish reperfusion by surgical means, and to prevent restenosis by mechanical and pharmacological means [48, 49]. The obvious, yet challenging, solution lies on promoting vascular perfusion of the implanted constructs or ischemic tissue through angiogenesis, the formation of new capillaries from pre-existing blood vessels. Increasing efforts are being directed towards developing pro-angiogenic therapies that locally stimulate native or implanted cells to revascularise ischemic areas. This can involve the delivery of drugs (e.g.

growth factors, cytokines, small molecules) or cells (untreated, pre-conditioned, genetically modified, secretome). Growth factors are the most frequently used category of pro-angiogenic molecules. These can include vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), fibroblastic growth factor 2 (FGF2) and hepatocyte growth factor (HGF), which are all powerful mitogens, platelet derived growth factor (PDGF), transforming growth factor beta (TGF- β), angiopoietins (Ang) and placental growth factor 1 (PIGF-1). Nonetheless, other molecules have shown angiogenic potential, such as interleukins (IL), nitric oxide (NO), copper and calcium ions and phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA) [50-53]. Regarding cell delivery, although EC are favoured for *in vitro* testing, progenitor (e.g. bone marrow mononuclear cells [BM-MNCs], EPCs) and stem cells (bone marrow mesenchymal stem cells [BMSCs], adipose derived stem cells [ADSCs]) have been preferentially used *in vivo* and clinically [54, 55]. BM-MNCs present a significant advantage as they do not require expansion in culture, however, similarly to the EPCs, they are a heterogeneous, poorly defined population. BMSCs and ADSCs are also appealing sources due to their multipotency and ease of extraction and expansion, however, their implantation has been associated with restenosis and atherogenicity [56]. Therefore, conditioning of cells prior to implantation with hypoxia, mechanical stimulation, or genetic manipulation can be used to better control the behaviour of the cells and their secretion profile to overcome such issues [57, 58]. As an alternative to whole cell implantation, cell-derived vesicles, such as exosomes can be utilised to make use of the cell secretome, since they have been shown to contain both proteins and nucleic acids and to play a crucial role in cell-cell communication [59, 60].

Several of these approaches have been extensively assessed *in vitro*, *in vivo*, and clinically. There are well-established two- and three- dimensional *in vitro* models that allow for the assessment of the suitability of a therapeutic agent or a cell source. Two-dimensional models comprise seeding cells on tissue culture plastic coated with adhesive proteins, while three-

dimensional models typically use hydrogels (e.g. collagen, fibrin, plasma clot, Matrigel, or mixtures) and are based on the ability of EC to invade the substrate in response to a drug / treatment. Cells can be directly seeded on top of gels, sandwiched between two gel layers, seeded dispersedly, clustered as spheroids or attached to microcarrier beads and scattered throughout the gel [61, 62]. The three-dimensional models present the advantage of allowing for representation of the different stages of angiogenesis: sprouting, branching and network formation. *Ex vivo* models based on culture of rat aortic rings and assessment of outgrowths or rat mesentery for study of lymphangiogenesis alongside angiogenesis have also been described [63, 64]. More recent *in vitro* models use microfluidic channels fabricated by soft lithography [65]. Other models attempt to imitate the complexity of cell-cell interactions and their paracrine effect by resorting to co-culture methods or conditioned media [66, 67]. Nonetheless, preclinical assessment remains the most accurate way of assessing the angiogenic potential of cells or drugs. Most commonly used preclinical animal models include the chick embryo chorioallantoic membrane (CAM) assay, dorsal skinfold chamber, cornea micro-pocket assay, subcutaneous implantation, hindlimb ischemia and myocardial infarction models [68, 69].

Current advancements in pro-angiogenic therapies can be grouped as delivery of drugs and delivery of cells. Herein, we critically assess the *in vitro*, *in vivo* and clinical progress that has been made in the field of drug delivery and cell delivery for promotion of angiogenesis for micro-vascularisation.

2 Drugs for cells

The most common pro-angiogenic therapeutic approach is based on the delivery of therapeutic molecules that can include inorganic compounds, cytokines or growth factors; from the group of the latter VEGF, FGF2, PDGF and HGF, being the most frequently used [70]. *In vitro* testing of these molecules involves culture media supplementation, while *in vivo* and clinically, these molecules are typically injected directly into the tissue location of interest. Defined mixtures of different therapeutic factors have also been used or, alternatively, platelet rich plasma (PRP) or similar mixtures including various proteins, cytokines and growth factors [71].

However, injections present challenges regarding half-life and, as discussed above with cell delivery, the local retention of the active molecules [72]. To overcome these issues, sustained delivery using scaffolds (e.g. hydrogels, sponges, fibres, particles, liposomes) has been extensively tested along with binding to other molecules (e.g. peptides, glycosaminoglycans, sulphated molecules) [72, 73]. Another widely tested approach, is the delivery of DNA/RNA using vehicles for gene transfer of the cells *in situ*, thereby ensuring a more prolonged and sustained delivery of the molecule of interest. The most commonly delivered genes encode the most frequently used growth factors in peptide form, such as VEGF and FGF2, though other genes targeting relevant pathways have also been assessed [74-76]. In this section, we will focus on *in vitro*, preclinical and clinical studies that report the use of therapeutic factors to modulate cell behaviour for promotion of angiogenesis as well as their mode of delivery (e.g. injection, use of vehicle, gene transfer).

2.1 Delivery of growth factors and cytokines

The terms “growth factor” and “cytokine” often interchangeably used. Cytokines are a broad and loose category of small proteins ranging from 5–25 kDa), whereas growth factors can

generally be seen as a subset that can reach up to 100 kDa. Cytokines and growth factors are produced by a broad range of cells, and it is often/primarily non-endothelial cells that drive influence endothelial cell behaviour to promote angiogenesis by secreting growth factors or cytokines. The most frequently used growth factor to modulate angiogenesis *in vitro* and *in vivo* is VEGF due to its pivotal role in initiating angiogenesis, and as a survival factor for cultured endothelial cells [77]. *In vitro* supplementation with VEGF promotes EC proliferation, survival and capillary formation in Matrigel, collagen gels and poly(lactic-co-glycolic acid) (PLGA) / polyethylene glycol (PEG) microspheres [78, 79]. In high doses (50 ng/ml), VEGF appears to initiate endothelial differentiation of BMSCs, as evidenced by typical markers such as von Willebrand factor, and formation of capillary-like structures in a gel matrix [80]. VEGF-mimicking peptides promote endothelial sprouting and tube formation from aortic rings, promote EC proliferation, migration and survival through activation of VEGF receptor 2 (VEGFR2) [81]. To extend the half-life of VEGF in culture, sulphated molecules have been employed to emulate the physiological electrostatic interactions between growth factors and heparin and heparan sulphate proteoglycan, respectively [82, 83]. Sulphated chitosan coated PLGA scaffolds have also been employed successfully for this purpose [84]. Although the key role of VEGF in angiogenesis is beyond doubt, it also has become clear that VEGF alone is not enough to ensure cell proliferation, viability and creation of stable vascular networks *in vitro* [85-87] and *in vivo*. Animal experiments have repeatedly shown that the introduction of high VEGF concentrations locally in tissue leads to tortuous capillaries that appear to be leaky in addition [88, 89].

This has led to considering additional angiogenic factors. FGF2 is another potent inducer of angiogenesis. FGF2 stimulates proliferation, migration and VEGF expression in EC [90, 91]. BMSCs and fibroblasts are strong producers of VEGF and FGF2, particularly after hypoxic of growth factor stimulation, thus targeting EC and inducing capillary sprouting and network

formation [92-94]. When stimulated by FGF2 on the surface of collagen gels, EC produce more urokinase-type plasminogen activator (uPa), a protease involved in vascular permeability and ECM degradation [85, 95].

Furthermore, it has also been shown to promote proliferation of BMSCs [96] and increased capillary tube length in HUVEC/dermal fibroblast co-culture [97].

As with VEGF, sulphated molecules binding by electrostatic interaction with FGF2 can prolong its half-life. Suitable molecules are the glycosaminoglycans heparin and, heparin sulphate, but also sulphated polysaccharides like fucoidan that potentiate FGF2 action as evidenced *in vitro* by increased human umbilical vein endothelial cells (HUVEC) proliferation, migration and metalloproteinase 2 (MMP-2) activation in a p38 and JNK dependent-manner, pathways that are strongly associated with tubulogenic events [98]. Sustained delivery of FGF2 has also been attempted with enzymatic degradation of various carriers, such as chitosan nanoparticles [99], gelatine microspheres [96] and gelatine microspheres within collagen /nanocellulose porous scaffolds [100].

Several other growth factors contribute significantly to angiogenesis, yet do not act directly on EC. These factor recruit auxiliary cells for vessel stabilisation and maturation - fibroblasts smooth muscle cells (SMCs) and pericytes [101]. This is the case for TGF- β which inhibits EC proliferation *in vitro* while promoting angiogenesis *in vivo*. However, *in vitro*, when combined with FGF2 or VEGF, it can have a pro- or anti-angiogenic effect, depending on its concentration [102]. While this highlights the complexity of growth factor interactions during angiogenesis, it also sheds light on the influence of experimental conditions that vary widely across research groups.

Several of the above-mentioned factors have been assessed preclinically for their angiogenic potential. VEGF injection or sustained delivery using scaffolds have shown improved capillary density, maturation and neovascularisation in ischemic and subcutaneous models

[83, 103-108]. Similar results were obtained with FGF2 in subcutaneous and ischemic models using delivery systems for implantation [96, 100, 109-114]. Furthermore, HGF, although not extensively studied *in vitro*, has also shown increased capillary outgrowth in a rabbit cornea pocket model [115] and improved collateral vessel formation in a rat hindlimb ischemic model, when delivered in repeated doses [116]. PlGF1 has also shown promising results *in vivo*. Implantation in a subcutaneous rat model of a multidomain peptide hydrogel with PlGF1 loaded liposomes led to improved cell infiltration, vessel density and maturation over unloaded hydrogels [117].

Despite the extensive *in vitro* and preclinical efforts dedicated to delivery of angiogenic proteins, as monosubstances or in combination, their efficacy has been tested only in a few clinical trials (**Table 1**) mainly featuring VEGF [118]. Patients with CAD received intracoronary and intravenous injections of different VEGF doses. Significant improvements were observed with regards to exercise time and angina symptoms only with higher doses [119]. A few studies have assessed safety of FGF2 injection in humans [120]. The first studies investigated the efficacy of FGF2 for treatment of peripheral arterial disease [121, 122], showing encouraging results in terms of improved walking time. However, in patients with CAD, reduction of angina symptoms were observed, although improvements were not statistically significant at clinical end point due to continued recovery in the placebo group, even though no other treatment had been applied simultaneously [123, 124]. Heparin / alginate microcapsules have been used to deliver FGF2 in patients receiving surgery for coronary bypass, where a dose dependent effect was observed with only higher concentrations increasing blood perfusion in the target area [125, 126]. The sustained delivery appears to promote long-lasting effects [127]. Likewise, FGF1 has also been shown to promote sprouting of a new capillary network at injection site in patients with coronary heart disease [128]. There are two clinical trials currently registered on

www.clinicaltrials.gov that are assessing intracoronary delivery of growth factors for coronary artery disease, one where VEGF is injected alongside oral supplementation of L-arginine (phase 1) and the other is based on FGF1 injection (phase 2). Of note, human recombinant PDGF-BB has been FDA/EMEA approved for clinical since 1997 use in the form of a topical gel (becaplermin) for chronic wound repair due to its chemotactic and mitogenic effects within angiogenesis and consequent role during wound healing [129]. However, an increased neoplasm rate at the site of application has been reported in patients that have been exposed locally to more than three tubes of the gel over the treatment period. [130-132]. The amount of Becaplermin gel per application is calculated by the ulcer size, as (length in cm \times width in cm). Becaplermin gel 0.01% is distributed in a 15 g tube, and it is recommended that the amount per application be recalculated weekly by the health care provider. The Becaplermin gel product insert recommends that if there is not a 30% decrease in size after 10 weeks or complete healing in 20 weeks, the health care provider should consider the risks of continuing Becaplermin gel [133].

To better mimic spatiotemporal interaction of the various growth factors during angiogenesis and to overcome limitations using only single factors, combinations of different molecules have been tested *in vitro*. In some instances, growth factors act synergistically, as is the case with VEGF and FGF2. On their own, they promote EC invasion of gel matrices and tube formation *in vitro*, but their combination gives a larger than additive effect with a faster angiogenic response and use of lower concentrations, of both growth factors, in EC and ADSCs [134-138]. Co-delivery of VEGF and HGF in a heparin coacervate increased HUVEC proliferation as well as tube formation in a fibrin gel, presenting improved results over the individual growth factors [139]. Combined delivery of VEGF and heparin stabilised PDGF-BB in a fibrin gel, increased EC proliferation and promoted vessel outgrowth in an aortic ring assay [140]. Systems of increasing complexity can be found in the literature as

well, including cocktails composed of more than two molecules or controlled temporal delivery of multiple molecules [141]. An alternative to well-defined combinations of growth factors is the use of platelet rich plasma (PRP), as it contains important angiogenic factors such as VEGF, PDGF-BB, FGF2, angiopoietins and TGF- β [142, 143]. *In vitro*, both PRP and platelet rich fibrin (PRF), which also releases platelet derived factors, can promote EC proliferation and migration [144], likely derived from activation of ERK and serine/threonine specific protein kinase (Akt) pathway [71] and angiopoietin 1 (Ang1) – angiopoietin 1 receptor (Tie2) signalling [142].

Mixtures of bioactive molecules have also been tested in various animal models. For instance, VEGF, HGF and FGF2 have been implanted subcutaneously in rats and induced neo-capillary formation and granulation tissue formation [145]. Simultaneous delivery of VEGF and PDGF showed improved recovery of tissue in a rat myocardial infarction model over delivery of VEGF alone [146]. PDG-BB has been used in combination with both VEGF and FGF2 in a murine Matrigel plug angiogenesis assay and a myocardial infarction models and evidenced improved vessel maturation through alpha-smooth muscle actin (α -SMA) staining, highlighting the synergistic effect of these two growth factors during later stages of angiogenesis [140, 147]. Due to the intricate spatiotemporal action of growth factors during angiogenesis some studies focus on systems allowing delivery of more than two molecules. VEGF, PDGF-BB and TGF- β 1 have been delivered in a sequential manner from alginate sulphate/alginate sponges based on different binding constants of the individual factors, and shown improved results over individual growth factor use [148]. PRP and PRF have also been assessed *in vivo* and shown increased vessel formation, maturation and ECM deposition, observed by Masson's trichrome staining, in a CAM assay [144]

Considering the breadth of preclinical data on local delivery of angiogenic proteins, the amount of clinical data is quite limited. The reasons for that might be that growth factors are

more expensive to manufacture and to store, and have a short half-life after tissue delivery [149, 150]. It should not be underestimated, however, that these factors are all used in supraphysiological doses, because of the rapid decay of the protein factors once applied to a wound area or injected deeper into tissue. In the case of PDGF, safety concerns have emerged postmarketing. From the physiological point of view, it makes substantial sense to use different GF in combination to achieve angiogenic synergy and to be able to lower the concentration of each single GF locally required. The half-life issue of the GF in the host tissue can certainly be addressed by sulphated sugar moieties or manipulating amino acid sequences in the recombinant proteins. For example, dextran sulphate has been demonstrated to protect FGF2 from heat and acid inactivation and from proteolytic degradation [151]. Similarly, heparan sulphate has been shown to the selectivity and bioavailability of growth factors [152, 153]. However, they currently have to be purified from biological material (usually porcine gut) and therefore afford costly purification and manufacturing steps. Be it these stabilising factors, or sustained delivery materials, they add enormously to costs in terms of regulatory hurdles (multiple substances necessary and safety studies), and navigating of intellectual property issues.

2.2 Delivery of interleukins, ions, gases, and small molecules

Several IL appear to possess pro-angiogenic potential. While IL-17 appears to promote migration, cytoskeletal reorganisation and capillary formation through upregulation of Rac1 and RhoA, via the phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K) signalling pathway [154], IL-18 does so by proto-oncogene tyrosine protein kinase (Src) and JNK signalling [155]. On Matrigel, both IL-2 and IL-6 increase tube formation by HUVEC (increase of VEGF and PDGF) and circulating EPCs, respectively [50, 156].

Other factors supporting angiogenesis are metals, earth alkaline metals [157-159] and gases. Indeed, copper is necessary for activation of EC and angiogenic growth factors, including VEGF and FGF2 [160]. It promotes EC proliferation, even in the absence of serum [52] and increases VEGF secretion in keratinocyte culture [161]. In an aortic ring culture, copper promoted angiogenesis in a concentration dependent manner, with high concentrations suppressing angiogenesis but showing increased VEGF production [162]. The proangiogenic effect of copper has been reported *in vivo* using copper nanoparticles which promoted development of a dense vascular network [163] and also in a subcutaneously implant in mice particularly when used alongside FGF2 [164]. Nonetheless, the mechanism by which copper influences angiogenesis is still controversial. Of note, copper is an essential co-factor for the copper-dependent amino oxidases. Lysyl oxidase (LOX) stabilises collagen and elastin by paving the path for covalent crosslinks, pyridinolines and desmosines, respectively [165-167]. Interestingly, of the three currently known lysyl oxidase homologs (LOX-like enzymes, LOXL), LOXL2 can also crosslink collagen type IV and hence influence the sprouting of new blood vessels [168]. Interestingly, copper has also been implicated in stabilisation of HIF-1 α through prolyl hydroxylase inhibition, which could also explain its role in the early phases of angiogenesis [169]. Despite the interesting results and the use of copper chelators for inhibition of angiogenic response in tumours, further work is required to fully elucidate the pro-angiogenic role of copper [170].

Although not widely assessed *in vitro*, earth alkali metals appear to play a role in angiogenesis. Calcium ions, released by degradation of from a bioglass scaffold, have also shown angiogenic potential when implanted subcutaneously on rats [171]. Additionally, several publications have recognised the potential of calcium, magnesium and silicate in vascularisation for regeneration of osteogenic tissue [171-173].

Two other unlikely choices for promotion of angiogenesis are nicotine and sodium arsenite, however, both, in well-defined low concentration ranges, have been shown to accelerate capillary tube formation in EC culture, with nicotine acting through nicotinic cholinergic receptors and sodium arsenite through VEGF and NO activity [174-177]. Interestingly, nicotine has been evaluated *in vivo* alongside FGF2 in a wound healing model where it appeared to reduce wound area and improve capillary formation [178].

PMA, although also reported as a tumour promoter, can induce formation of capillaries in EC culture and increase expression of angiogenic markers, such as CD31 and VE-cadherin [53, 86, 95]. Its angiogenic activity is likely derived from triggering cell invasiveness through increased production of collagenase and uPa [179].

Although the use of alternative molecules to growth factors presents an interesting approach, there is no solid evidence to conclude regarding their pro-angiogenic behaviour, be that due to contradictory results available in the literature, the lack of in-depth *in vitro* and preclinical analysis or absence of clinical data. Furthermore, analogous issues can arise in terms of half-life and activity of these agents considering that sustained delivery systems have not been thoroughly investigated with these molecules.

Cell signalling by gases is another route that has gained wide-spread attention also with regards to angiogenesis. Nitric oxide (NO) is produced by nitric oxide synthases from L-arginine and plays a key role in angiogenesis. When NO synthase (NOS) activity is reduced, VEGF-induced angiogenesis is hindered [180, 181]. NO - stimulating substances indirectly promote EC migration, proliferation and vascular permeability [51, 182, 183]. Upregulation of eNOS and consequent release of NO in EC is heavily dependent on different growth factors such as VEGF, heparin binding EGF (HB-EGF) and TGF- β 1, and on PI3K signalling and integrin α 5 β 3 activity [184-188]. However, there is controversy regarding the role of NO in angiogenesis, as exogenous supplementation of HUVEC cultures with organic NO donors,

presented decreased cell migration [189]. Furthermore, there is *in vivo* data available that appears to substantiate the anti-angiogenic effect of NO, since it has been demonstrated that the use of NO donors in a CAM model led to decreased collagen synthesis and vascular density [181, 190]. In addition, increasing the NO metabolite concentration inhibits EC proliferation [191], indicating the concentration of NO present on the intracellular compartment may dictate the effect it has on angiogenesis.

Hydrogen sulphide (H₂S) has also been known to stimulate angiogenesis. The administration of H₂S to EC culture simulates cell proliferation, migration and tube formation [192]. Exogenous H₂S has been shown increased collateral vessel growth, capillary density, and regional tissue blood flow in a hindlimb ischaemia model [193]. Additionally, in an *in vivo* model of mice Matrigel plug, exogenously administered H₂S significantly promoted neovascularization [194]. However, H₂S does not exhibit a pro-angiogenic effect at a high concentration and it might evoke mechanisms that counteract the pro-angiogenic pathways.

2.2.1 Hypoxia mimicking strategies

Finally, a group of small molecules modulating angiogenesis deserves particular attention due to their well characterised mechanism and their potential clinical value. These are the group of prolyl hydroxylase inhibitors which offer a pharmacological approach to stimulate angiogenesis is through oxygen-independent activation of hypoxia inducible factor (HIF). Under normoxia, HIF-prolyl-4-hydroxylase (PH), which is Fe(II) and 2-oxoglutarate dependent, catalyses the hydroxylation of prolines which target HIF subunits for degradation. PH inhibitors can be used to allow for HIF activation in the absence of hypoxic conditions. Various molecules including pyridine-2, 4-dicarboxylate, 5-oxaproline, alpha alpha-dipyridyl, hydralazine have been utilised, but others broadly grouped as 2-oxoglutarate analogues or iron chelators have also been assessed [195-199].

As a transcription factor modulating a number of hypoxia response genes, HIF-1 α stabilisation will generate not only one, but a variety of angiogenic gene products. These range from VEGF, Ang-1 to erythropoietin, while preparing cells to deal with hypoxia inducing glycolysis [200]. Thus, activating this angiogenic master switch is akin to the external delivery of several angiogenic factors, as discussed earlier.

In vitro, PH inhibitors on BMSCs have been shown to increase VEGF expression and promote capillary sprouting [201] *In vivo*, promising results have also been observed in terms of increased vascularisation and bone formation, improved neovascularisation in oxygen-induced retinopathy in a mouse model, protection from ischemia cerebral lesions in a gerbil model, induction of ectopic angiogenesis in zebrafish and enhanced wound healing in diabetic mice [89, 201-204]. Furthermore, this approach has been evaluated clinically for oral treatment of anaemia, to increase haemoglobin, but was not able to significantly increase endogenous erythropoietin and VEGF [205, 206]. PHs are a isoenzyme family, of which some members are also essential for thermostability of intracellular collagen triple helices and thus control collagen secretion [207]. Concerns might arise that a general PH inhibitor impairs normal ECM deposition. Therefore, selectivity or preference of PH-inhibitors for HIF-PH or collagen PH in terms of dissociation constants for these iso-enzymes has to be considered, as well as the differential requirement of molecular oxygen of these enzymes [208, 209]. However, lack of collagen deposition and thus impaired wound healing has not been an issue so far in preclinical and clinical trials. On the contrary, an antifibrotic effect exerted by a PH inhibitor that is a so-called dirty tool might add additional benefit to the angiogenic feature [89, 195, 210]. Importantly, compounds such as hydralazine and ciclopirox were originally developed and approved for different clinical indications (arterial hypertension and skin mycosis, respectively) and have been on the market since 1953 and 1997, respectively. Interestingly, the antifungal drug ciclopirox was first shown to act as PH

inhibitor in 2002 [211] and to be antiangiogenic, and similar predictions were made towards other PH inhibitors suggesting them as anti-cancer drugs. Of note this work was done in HUVEC monocultures in Matrigel angiogenesis assays and chick aortic arch ring sprouting assay. However, in context with mesenchymal cells and unwounded or wounded tissue it became clear that angiogenic HIF1- α effects of PH inhibitors, even as so-called dirty tool, prevail. Shortly after the publication by Clement, and the mesenchymal endothelial crosstalk leading to angiogenesis was later demonstrated in greater detail in microfluidics systems [210, 212] and diabetic wounds in experimental animal models [213, 214]. The change viewpoints on PH inhibitors over time in the literature over time shows the importance of considering and implementing cellular cross-talk in angiogenic assays in vitro, as ECs are not the greatest producers of angiogenic factors, but rather the recipients of signals through them. This might explain some of the controversial findings on angiogenic factors within in vitro settings, but also in comparison of in vitro data with those obtained in animal models. From the pharmacological point of view, PH inhibitors are currently the group of small molecules that progressed farthest and that have been employed in clinical trials.

2.3 Delivery of genes

Issues associated with the localisation and half-life of growth factors and cost associated with production of human recombinant proteins have fuelled interest into delivering genes rather than proteins. Genetic transfer, similarly to sustained delivery through an engineered construct, can facilitate overexpression of a molecule of interest in a localised manner for a longer period. Gene delivery for pro-angiogenic purposes has been performed using viral (adenoviruses, retroviruses) and non-viral vectors (plasmids, liposomes, oligonucleotides, peptides) [215]. Furthermore, scaffolds have also been used as carriers to try and promote localisation of delivery vehicles and sustained transfer [216]. In most cases, the targeted

genes encode the therapeutic molecules that were used in peptide form. *In vitro*, VEGF overexpression has been promoted in EPCs, through adenoviral transfer, and has increased cell proliferation, adhesion and incorporation into tube-forming HUVEC monolayers [217]. Similarly, delivery of a VEGF gene to HUVEC has also been performed alongside Ang1, which is known to interact on EC and SMCs, and promoted cell migration [76]. Co-delivery of VEGF and eNOS to SMCs through plasmids also promoted capillary tube formation in a fibrin matrix [218]. Similar results have been observed through FGF2 overexpression in HUVEC [75]. Another recurrent target via genetic manipulation is the NO signalling pathway. Non-viral delivery of eNOS to BMSCs promoted endothelial differentiation through VEGF /PDGFR and FGF2 / FGF2R signalling pathways, resulting in upregulation of CD31, VEGF and FGF2 [219]. Transfer of iNOS into EC can also inhibit apoptosis [220]. Contradictorily, NOS delivered to SMCs and EC has shown reduced proliferation and tube formation *in vitro* [221] and eNOS transfected into EPCS from patients with CAD impaired tube formation in Matrigel but did promote migration and proliferation alongside VEGF stimulation [222]. As discussed above, these partially contradictory results might largely reflect the lack of a mesenchymal cellular element in the *in vitro* assays and therefore assays considering including such an element might lead to more consistent data across the board.

Although some *in vitro* studies have been performed to assess for safety of gene delivery, interestingly, the majority of the work has been performed preclinically and clinically.

Preclinical delivery has focussed on several of the same therapeutic targets in mice, rat, rabbit, porcine and canine models of wound healing, myocardial infarction and hindlimb ischemia. Intramuscular injections of VEGF gene in rodent and rabbit models have shown increased vessel density and blood perfusion [223]. Plasmids have also been used to deliver VEGF using scaffold carriers such as PLGA nanospheres [224], which successfully transferred the gene into the skeletal muscle of mice ischemic limbs, and porous collagen scaffolds, which

promoted neo-vessel formation in the surrounding area of the construct in a subcutaneous model [225]. Similarly, viral vectors have also been applied in combination with other materials such as macro-porous PEG hydrogels, which facilitated cell infiltration *in vivo* and consequently improved vascularisation in mice [226]. Additionally, injectable fibrin matrices have also been shown to facilitate intramuscular delivery of the VEGF gene to ischemic limbs, where a dose-dependent effect was observed, with lower doses leading to formation of aberrant structures [227]. Interestingly, in this study, sustained delivery was achieved by incorporating aprotinin into the scaffold to inhibit degradation. Similar issues have been reported in the literature regarding inducing overexpression of VEGF. Upregulated expression of VEGF in an unregulated manner has been associated with haemangioma formation and fatal vascular leakage and it has been proposed that these effects are dose-dependent [228-230]. Several studies have highlighted the potential for exogenous VEGF supplementation or overexpression for excessive cell proliferation, hyperplasia, vessel leakage and malformation [229, 231-234] as these approaches typically result in supraphysiological dosages of VEGF.

Another study investigating the transduction of mouse and human VEGF in myoblasts proposed that angioma formation is not only associated with dose but with species-dependent VEGF receptor activation, since high doses of mouse VEGF induced angiomas in mice while human VEGF led to normal capillary formation [235]. In addition to VEGF, the transfer of several other genes has shown promising results *in vivo*. In hindlimb ischemic models, SFD-1 α , for instance, carried by a plasmid through an intramuscular injection, has been able to induce significant blood flow recovery, expression of CD31 and mobilisation of EPCs; effects mediated by VEGF regulation, eNOS and Akt signalling pathways [236]. Using a similar model, intramuscular delivery of secretoneurin also contributed to reduced necrosis, upregulation of FGF2 and PDGF and vessel maturation, assessed by the presence of CD31

and α -SMA. It was observed that these results were highly dependent on NO signalling, since secretoneurin induces activation of eNOS [237]. Regarding myocardial infarction and heart ischemia, viral delivery of IGF-1 has shown improved remodelling mediated by activation of α 5 integrins [238]; transfection of HGF can also promote functional recovery after intramuscular delivery [239]; Ang1 viral delivery also facilitated regression of hypertrophic tissue, though it did not affect cardiac function [240]. Remarkably, both HGF and Ang1 genes have been delivered using ultrasound mediated microbubble disruption. With HGF, naked plasmids were applied to the left ventricle and reduced scar tissue and improved vessel density were observed after infarction [241]. Ang1 gene delivery was successfully performed using bubbles with ICAM-1 antibodies in the surface to target specifically for overexpressing ICAM-1 EC in ischemic regions [242]. Analogous ultrasound mediated delivery has also been utilised with the VEGF [243, 244] and Akt genes. Akt gene delivery was achieved resorting to cationic microbubbles with enhanced DNA binding capacity. This led to reduced infarct size and apoptosis while increasing vessel density and function, mediated by survivin and phospho-BAD which are targeted by phosphorylated Akt and suppress apoptosis and enhance angiogenesis [245]. Acidic FGF (aFGF), although less utilised in the protein form and not extensively tested *in vitro*, has also been used for therapeutic recovery of myocardial infarction through viral vectors [246]. However, unlike most preclinical studies, the delivery was performed two weeks before induction of myocardial infarction as a preventive treatment. Although the time lapse between disease induction and therapeutic delivery is highly variable in the investigation of pro-angiogenic molecules, this is an unlikely scenario that hardly mimics the clinical setting, making results from such studies difficult to translate.

Dual gene delivery has also been achieved. For instance, delivery of polyplexes encoding for VEGF and FGF2 in electro-spun mats improved cell infiltration and blood vessel formation in a subcutaneous model. However, there was no significant advantages *in vivo* in utilising

two genes over their individual use [247]. However, co-delivery of VEGF and HGF genes improved blood perfusion in a mouse hindlimb ischemic model, with dual delivery having presented improvement over individual delivery of either growth factor [74]. Furthermore, transduction with PDGF-BB and VEGF genes proved that the relative amount of each growth factor is key in inducing normal angiogenesis more than the absolute level of VEGF [248].

In contrast to previous sections where the clinical data are somehow limited, there are extensive studies on angiogenic gene delivery in humans (**Table 2**). Several phase 1 and 2 clinical studies have assessed mostly plasmid and viral delivery of genes including VEGF, HGF, FGF1, FGF-4, with the majority focussing on VEGF. There seems to be a consensus in the literature regarding the safety of gene delivery in humans, with no major complications or permanent side effects arising. In terms of treatments for CAD, different VEGF splice variants have been utilised. It has been proposed that VEGF gene transfer therapeutic effect derives from improved EPCs recruitment and increased expression of markers such as VEGFR2, CD34, $\alpha 5\beta 3$ integrin and E-selectin [249]. Intramyocardial injection of adenovirus containing VEGF₁₂₁ has been reported to improve angina symptoms and exercise time however, without benefiting blood perfusion to ischemic areas [250-252]. VEGF₁₆₅ has been the most used in plasmid-mediated delivery, through intramyocardial or percutaneous route and results have been mixed. While several trials report improvements in angina and / or blood perfusion and collateral vessel formation [253-255], others failed to report statistically significant improvements [252, 256]. Furthermore, adenoviral delivery of FGF-4 has also failed to lead to significant improvements in patients with CAD. As for CLI, most investigations have also focussed on VEGF₁₆₅ delivery through intramuscular injection into affected limb. Adenoviral transfer of VEGF₁₂₁ has failed to produce significant improvements [257] whilst the use of plasmids with VEGF₁₆₅ have shown mixed results with regards to ulcer healing, rest pain, walking time, collateral vessel formation and limb survival [258-260].

Other less studied genes include FGF1 and HGF. Intramuscular plasmid mediated delivery of the FGF1 gene has shown improvements in ulcer healing and limb survival in a phase 1 study [261], whilst a phase 3 trial has failed to improve limb survival [262]. Overexpression of HGF has also shown decreased rest pain and increased walking time [263-265]. Furthermore, adenoviral delivery of hypoxia inducible factor 1 alpha (HIF-1 α) has failed to show therapeutic effects in ischemic limbs, although it appeared to lead to a trend in improved ulcer healing, there was also a high amputation rate in the treatment group [266].

Delivery of genes presents advantages over growth factors as it allows for a continued therapeutic effect. However, despite extensively assessments in both preclinical and clinical settings, a clear benefit in delivering a particular gene has not evolved yet, and further investigations are required to ensure safety of the transferred genes and vehicles.

2.4 Delivery of growth factors and genes for therapeutic lymphangiogenesis

Although pharmacologic therapies for lymphangiogenesis are still very much in their infancy when compared with angiogenesis, several targets of interest have been identified [19]. VEGF-C and VEGF-D are known to act on lymphatic EC through VEGFR-3 activation. In fact, VEGFR-3 and transcription factor prospero homeobox protein 1 (Prox-1) are essential for embryonic lymphatic development [267, 268]. Irreversible lymphatic phenotype commitment is characterised by simultaneous expression of not only VEGFR-3 and Prox-1 but also lymphatic vessel endothelial hyaluronan receptor (LYVE-1) and secondary lymphoid organ chemokine (SLC) [19]. *In vitro*, it has been shown that VEGF-C and VEGF-D play an important role in lymphatic EC proliferation and organisation. Furthermore, IGF-1 and IGF-2 have been reported to stimulate proliferation of primary lymphatic EC *in vitro* [269]. Most efforts have been focussed on *in vivo* testing using various models with particular emphasis on growth factor and gene delivery. Injections of VEGF-C have been shown to improve

lymphatic vessel formation and function in a rabbit ear model [270]. Delivery of VEGF-C has also been performed using carriers, such as fibrin, which has led to improved lymphangiogenesis in skin wound healing in a diabetic model [271]. IGF-1, IGF-2 and HGF have also shown increased lymphatic vessel density in mouse cornea assay model [269, 272]. As for gene delivery, VEGF-C transduction improved lymphatic network repair in an epigastric mouse model [273], while VEGFR-3 transfer enhanced lymphatic drainage in a lymphoedema skin mice model without collateral effects on the vascular system [274]. Interestingly, VEGF-C localised transduction has also led to improved lymph drainage in an inflammatory arthritis mice model [275]. Transfection with VEGF-C was also shown to improve lymphatic function in rabbit ear and mouse tail lymphoedema models [276]. Additionally, HGF gene transfer decreased lymphoedema thickness in a rat tail model [277]. Although particular interest has developed around VEGF-C, clear advantages for its use are still unclear, given that it has also been associated with lymphatic hyperplasia and side effects with regards to blood vessel growth and leakiness [278, 279]. Considering the limited data available for *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies, it is no surprise that these approaches are yet to be translated to a clinical setting.

2.5 Physical stimuli for secretion of angiogenic factors

Among the strategies to promote angiogenesis, external physical stimulation gained interest due to its non-invasiveness, the ease of use and promising preclinical data. Various types of stimuli have been tested with the rationale that localised physical stimulation can influence the angiogenic secretome, therefore becoming an important alternative to delivery of therapeutic molecules.

Ultrasound is clinically used for therapeutic applications, including tumour ablation, thrombolysis, bone regeneration, and facilitated drug delivery [9]. Therapeutic angiogenic

effects of low-intensity ultrasound are hypothesised to stimulate secretion of angiogenic factors, such as VEGF and FGF2 [280]. Ultrasound irradiation significantly improved limb perfusion and increased blood vessels formation and cell proliferation in a rat model of hindlimb ischemia. Moreover VEGF mRNA was significantly higher in moderate ischemia [281]. It has also been demonstrated that exposure of EC to safe levels of ultrasound irradiation causes a down-regulation and redistribution of the VEGFR-2, increased proliferation and enhanced migration and sprouting in 3D culture [282].

The effects of low-intensity pulsed ultrasounds (LIPUS) were also investigated in a porcine model of chronic myocardial ischemia. LIPUS therapy normalized global and regional myocardial function *in vivo*, increased capillary density and regional myocardial blood flow of the chronically ischemic region without any adverse effects, and enhanced protein levels of VEGF, eNOS, and FGF2 in the ischemic myocardium without affecting those in the non-ischemic myocardium [283].

Among non-invasive techniques to promote angiogenesis, low-level laser therapy (LLLT) have shown promising results in skin wound healing and ischemic animal models.

Illumination with both blue and red light emitting diodes (LEDs) light can enhance the wound healing process in a skin flap model in rats by improving angiogenesis. Blue laser irradiation improves local tissue perfusion in a controlled manner by stimulating NO release from NO-haemoglobin complexes [284]. It has been shown that NO stimulates angiogenesis via stimulation of VEGF expression.

Another study showed that the LLLT enhanced the skin wound-healing effect of human ADSCs by enhancing survival of the ADSCs and stimulating secretion of growth factors in the wound bed in mice. The light-treated group was evaluated to exhibit rapid wound closure, a higher histological score and increased numbers of hair follicles and sebaceous glands in wound bed compared with the non-treated ADSCs [285]. Similarly LLLT treatment of

ADSCs spheroids enhanced the functional recovery of the ischemic hind limb area in mice with respect to the regeneration of muscle tissue [286].

Pulsed electromagnetic fields (PEMF) have shown to enhance acute hindlimb ischemia-related perfusion and angiogenesis, associated with up-regulating FGF-2 expression and activating the ERK1/2 pathway in diabetic rats [287]. PEMF therapy improved postnatal neovascularization using murine model of hindlimb ischemia. PEMF therapy enhanced ischemia-mediated angiogenesis, through up-regulating VEGF expression and activating the PI3K-Akt-eNOS pathway [288]. PEMF therapy was examined also in a rat myocardial infarction model. PEMF treatment prevented cardiomyocytes against hypoxia-induced apoptosis and preserves cardiac systolic function. Moreover PEMF induced angiogenesis and vasculogenesis through activating VEGF-eNOS system and promoting EPCs mobilized to the ischemic myocardium [289].

Currently, an ongoing clinical trial aims to induce cardiac functional regeneration in patients with ischemic CAD by combining the ability of extracorporeal shock waves to increase growth factor secretion and induce homing of progenitor cell to the target tissue for intracoronary cell therapy (source: www.clinicaltrialsregister.eu).

3 Cells as drugs

The use of single or combinations of therapeutic molecules has produced promising outcomes *in vitro*, preclinically, and clinically. However, in view of the various cell types involved in angiogenesis and their continuous molecular cross-talk, this appears as a quite limited approach in comparison to the plethora of molecules comprising the entire cellular secretomes involved, and potentially available. By adding a relevant cell source to an ischemic tissue site, a modulating secretome will be introduced, influencing cellular responses in the immediate vicinity [290-292]. This therapeutic mode can be investigated by delivering conditioned media, cells (preconditioned or not), cell-derived vesicles (e.g. exosomes) or cells overexpressing a molecule of interest to the site of interest [293-295]. Relevant cells for angiogenic strategies not only comprise EC and EPCs but also BMSCs, which have been hypothesised to function as pericytes, ADSCs and BM-MNCs [54, 55, 296, 297]. An important aspect in this regard is the presence of external microenvironmental factors that steer cell behaviour and, consequently, their secretome. Therefore, different modulators, such as hypoxia, mechanical stimulation and electromagnetic field stimulation can be used to pre-condition cells for subsequent *in vivo* and clinical use. As with pharmacological agents, the same challenges arise, namely that of generating locally efficacious levels of active substances. Therefore, local retention of cells and their secretome need to be tackled, either by preventing the emigration of cells from the site of action into surrounding tissue, or simply retrogradely leaking out of puncture canals. To overcome this, materials such as collagen and fibrin, have also been utilised to ensure not only confinement of cells but also to promote their survival by providing initial attachment support structures [298-300]. In this section, we will analyse *in vitro*, preclinical and clinical studies that have investigated the delivery of untreated and pre-conditioned cells, and cell secretome delivery.

3.1 Delivery of naïve cells

Cell delivery is an attractive approach for pro-angiogenic therapies, where a range of paracrine factors is secreted locally in response to host tissue signals. Similarly, locally administered pharmacological agents, cells have been delivered topically in animal models of hindlimb ischemia, myocardial infarction, stroke, and skin wound healing. The majority of cell based therapeutic approaches for angiogenesis tested clinically have been focused on peripheral arterial disease, though some studies have also investigated coronary artery disease (**Table 3**). The preferred cell types investigated in these models include progenitor cells, EPCs, BM-MNCs, MSCs or ADSCs [301].

3.1.1 Endothelial progenitor cells (EPCs)

Since EPCs directly contribute to revascularisation by differentiating into EC, they are a promising source, though their extraction procedure is more laborious than other stem cell sources. They can be harvested from human umbilical cord blood, adult bone marrow, peripheral blood and human foetal liver [302, 303]. The mechanism of action of EPCs in promoting angiogenesis occurs by homing and direct incorporation into the existing vasculature, facilitating the growth of new capillaries, and by paracrine effects, through the secretion of cytokines and other proangiogenic growth factors, thus stimulating resident EC to proliferate within the vascular wall [304, 305]. These cells express CD133, CD34 and VEGF receptor-2 (VEGFR-2), also called Flk-1 [306, 307]. They also produce survival factors for EC such as platelet endothelial cell adhesion molecule-1 (PECAM-1 or CD31), VE-cadherin, von Willebrand factor and eNOS and encourage endogenous EC to migrate and proliferate [308-310]. Upon entry into the circulation, EPCs transform into differentiated mature EC by expressing CD144 (VE-cadherin) and von Willebrand factor, while losing CD133 and subsequently CD34 [308, 311].

Cultured and expanded EPCs demonstrated positive results when transplanted into ischemia murine models. Blood flow recovery and capillary density were noticeably improved and the rate of limb loss was significantly reduced after transplantation of human peripheral blood-derived EPCs [312-314]. These cells have also been transplanted in a bioactive nanofibrous scaffold, composed of collagen, polycaprolactone and bioactive glass nanoparticles, to full-thickness wound model in rats and significantly enhanced the formation of blood vessels by upregulating expression of HIF-1 α , VEGF, and stromal cell-derived factor 1 alpha (SDF-1 α) [315].

Some studies have translated the therapeutic potential of EPCs seen in animal models into human clinical trials using population of EPCs CD34+ or CD133+ enriched. In a phase 1/2 clinical trial, autologous CD34+ cells were injected into the severely ischemic leg of patients with atherosclerotic peripheral artery disease. CD34+ cell treated patients demonstrated significant recovery in the primary endpoints, including the efficacy score, toe brachial pressure index, pain score and total walking distance 12 weeks after cell transplantation [316]. Another pilot study assessed the efficacy and safety of autologous CD34+ cells injected intramuscularly in patients with moderate- or high-risk critical limb ischemia, verified a reduction in amputation rates without adverse events associated with the treatment at 6 and 12 months. However, toe brachial index, ankle-brachial index, pain and walking distance did not show significant differences [317]. The effect of autologous CD133+ cell implantation was also evaluated in a phase 1 trial in patients with Buerger's disease (1 patient), atherosclerosis (7 patients) or thromboembolic disorder (1 patient) [318]. The cell injection prevented leg amputation in seven of the nine patients and improved pain-free treadmill walking time and exercise capacity at 12 months.

3.1.2 Mononuclear cells (MNCs)

Mononuclear cells constitute mixed populations that can be derived from bone marrow, peripheral blood or umbilical cord and can contain lymphocytes, monocytes, MSCs or EPCs, depending on their origin. They are particularly attractive for cell therapy because they can be extracted in large numbers and be used in autologous applications without further expansion [319]. These cells can give rise to functional EPCs as well as secrete a broad spectrum of angiogenic factors (VEGF, FGF2 and Ang-1) or angiogenic cytokines (interleukin 1β and tumour necrosis factor α) [320].

The use of autologous BM-MNCs containing EPCs augmented neovascularisation and collateral vessel formation in a rabbit ischemic limb [305]. It was also reported the enhancement of angiogenesis by direct transplantation of BM-MNCs in mini swine coronary artery ligation ischemic area [321]. A study revealed that nitric oxide synthase, which is induced by VEGF, contributes to the angiogenesis that follows BM-MNCs transplantation in a mouse model of cerebral hypoperfusion [322]. Furthermore, injection of autologous BM-MNCs to ungraftable areas of the myocardium (no graftable coronary arteries were available, although the target myocardium remained viable) led to increased coronary perfusion in 3 out of 5 patients [323]. During coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG), the mononuclear cell fraction was prepared with a COBE Spectra Apheresis System and injected (0.1 mL; 5×10^7 to 1×10^8 cells/point) into the area of ischemic myocardium where was no graft.

UC-MNCs have been evaluated in combination with a hyaluronic acid hydrogel in a porcine myocardial infarction model. They showed significantly decreased scar area and promoted vessel formation in the infarcted region [324].

MNCs have also been tested clinically. In a trial comparing BM-MNCs and PB-MNCs mobilized by granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF) in patients with Buerger's disease, PB-MNC patients showed significantly higher ankle-brachial index and reduced rest

pain than BM-MNC after 12 weeks [325, 326]. However, no difference was found in TcPO₂, ulcer healing rate and amputation frequency. It has been suggested that the successful results obtained with PB-MNCs are related to the secretion of angiogenic cytokines VEGF and HGF [327, 328]. Further clinical studies have suggested that the therapeutic outcome of BM-MNCs closely correlates with the absolute number of cells injected, which can involve multiple injections [329, 330]. A phase 2 clinical trial showed that intra-arterial injections of BM-MNCs appear to improve limb perfusion as measured by ankle-brachial index, reduction of rest pain and improved ulcer healing in patients with critical limb ischemia [329]. The beneficial effects of BM-MNCs injections have also been observed in diabetic patients with limb ischemia [28, 331].

3.1.3 Bone marrow (BMSCs) and adipose derived stem cells (ADSCs)

BMSCs and ADSCs also constitute relevant sources for angiogenic cell therapies due to their ease of extraction, accessibility in large numbers and endothelial differentiation potential. The therapeutic effect of BMSCs in angiogenesis includes the paracrine effects associated with the secretion of various cytokines like VEGF, IL-6, platelet-derived growth factor, FGF, HGF and SDF-1, and the stimulation of EC to migrate, differentiate and proliferate [332-334]. Direct injections of BMSCs into infarcted myocardium and ischemic thigh muscle have shown improved blood vessel formation in rat myocardial infarction and hindlimb ischemia models [335, 336]. In the latter study, BMSCs, isolated utilising the adherence method and expanded until passages 4-5, were compared to BM-MNCs, extracted with a Ficoll density gradient centrifugation. Both BMSCs and BM-MNCs induced angiogenesis, but BMSCs induced higher capillary density and stronger perfusion than BM-MNCs. The transplanted BMSCs highly differentiated into EC compared with transplanted BM-MNCs (when looking into the number of PKH26 / von Willebrand factor -double-positive cells) and only BMSCs

differentiated into vascular muscle cells in ischemic tissue. Additionally, *in vitro* studies showed that BMSCs secreted larger amounts of angiogenic factors compared with the amounts secreted by BM-MNCs and, when incubated under serum-free and hypoxic conditions, the majority of cultured BM-MNCs revealed cytoplasmic shrinkage, disintegration into small vesicles, and membrane blebbing. In contrast, these morphological changes were rarely observed in BMSCs. Furthermore, BMSCs have also been shown to promote vascularisation when injected intradermally in a mouse splinted skin wound model [337]. BMSCs were not found in the vascular structures, but in close proximity. This led the researchers to evaluate the paracrine effect of these cells in angiogenesis and found that BMSCs-conditioned medium promoted endothelial tube formation and that BMSCs expressed high levels of VEGF and Ang-1 but not Ang-2, suggesting that BMSCs engrafted in the wound released pro-angiogenic factors, which were partially responsible for MSC-mediated enhanced angiogenesis.

Different biomaterials have been employed to ensure local retention of cells at the ischemic site. Specifically with BMSCs, a collagen scaffold and a temperature responsive hydrogel improved healing, neovascularisation and MMP-9 expression in a rat full thickness wound model and in a mouse diabetic ulcer model [338, 339]. The promising data seen with BMSCs *in vitro* and *in vivo* has prompted clinical studies.

BMSCs have been shown to reduce rest pain and improve ulcer healing after intramuscular injection in patients with critical limb ischemia [340]. Patients that have received BMSCs through intracoronary injections after myocardial infarction have shown reduced infarct size and improved left ventricular ejection fraction [341-343], however, such therapeutic outcome has not been achieved in other studies focussing on cardiac function [344-346]. BMSCs have also been assessed as therapeutic modality in ischemic stroke. In a study of BMSC transplantation for ischemic stroke [347], patients were randomly divided into experimental

(intravenous BMSC infusion) and control groups (no treatment). The study found that BMSCs markedly improved the modified Rankin score and Barthel index, a scale that measures the degree of independence of stroke victims when performing daily activities. No adverse effects, such as venous thromboembolism, abnormal cell proliferation, systemic cancer, systemic infection, or neurological decline, were identified after BMSC transplantation [348, 349]. These findings provide suggest safety and function improvement of and after BMSC transplantation in ischemic stroke.

Other studies examined the safety and effectiveness of autologous and allogeneic BMSC transplantation, explored methods to shorten BMSCs cultured times, sought to determine the best time window for the administration of cells stroke after the stroke, and assessed therapeutic effects of various doses, and protocols aimed at additional improvements [350-353].

ADSCs can also secrete multiple angiogenic growth factors or cytokines such as VEGF and HGF that activate migration and proliferation of EC for new vessel formation [354, 355]. Research shows that ADSCs use their paracrine potential for induction of angiogenesis and support collateral vessel remodelling [356]. ADSCs have been found to improve cardiac function, attenuate anterior wall thinning, reduce fibrosis and increase peri-infarct density of both arterioles and nerve sprouts in a rat myocardial infarction model [357]. In hindlimb ischemic mouse models, ADSCs injected intravenously restored blood flow to the affected limb [138, 358, 359]. The implantation of ADSCs induced angiogenesis not through endothelial differentiation of these cells, but by chemokines such as SDF-1. Additionally, ADSCs in a fibrin scaffold improved arteriole density and heart function in infarcted rat hearts [360].

In a clinical phase 1/2 study, intracoronary infusion of ADSCs was performed in patients with acute anterior wall myocardial infarction [361]. At 6 months follow up, cardiac

magnetic resonance imaging showed a trend towards an improved left ventricular ejection fraction as compared to the placebo group, accompanied by a significant reduction in the perfusion defect and infarct size. Another clinical trial regarding transendocardial injection of ADSCs in patients with refractory ischemic cardiomyopathy was also performed. Injection of ADSCs preserved left ventricular mass and the regional wall motion and improved myocardial perfusion [362]. Moreover, a phase 1 study used intramuscular injection of autologous ADSCs to treat patients with critical limb ischemia. The ADSC injection resulted in improvement of transcutaneous oxygen pressure (TcPO₂), pain free walking time and ulcer size [363].

3.1.4 Pericytes and blood-derived angiogenic cells

Pericytes are specialised cells that can be found wrapped around capillaries and are crucial for vessel maturation and proper function [364, 365]. Although there are no fully pericyte-specific markers, a PDGFR- β and/or α -SMA, desmin, PDGFR- β , aminopeptidase N and high molecular weight melanoma antigen (known as NG2 in mice) have been proposed as pericyte signature in combination with their perivascular location [366, 367].

The origin of pericytes is controversial [366]. Some research groups have proposed that pericytes are a differentiated subpopulation of MSCs [296, 368], others have found monocyte-derived cells to express pericyte-markers and to attain a typical location around blood vessels [297, 369].

The intramyocardial transplantation of mesenchymal pericytes, derived from skeletal muscle, into a myocardial infarct has shown reduced fibrosis and improved cardiac function in mice [370]. Simultaneously, pericytes, purified from the saphenous vein, supported cardiac function and modulated cardiac wall thinning, while also enhancing angiogenesis in the peri-infarct and infarct area by reducing endothelial cell apoptosis and supporting endothelial cell

proliferation [371]. Blood-derived pericyte like cells have been described and as such can be derived from MNCs derived from buffy coats [297]. With a specific culture protocol (exposure of buffy coats to fibronectin coating and application of pulsed macromolecular crowding) blood-derived angiogenic cells (BDACs) with pericyte characteristics have been produced that in Matrigel assays tend to cluster at branch points of HUVEC tubular networks and migrate along endothelial tubes in this system. Moreover, the injection of BDACs in the calf muscle of mice with hind limb ischemia reduced the inflammation, fibrosis and adipose replacement in the affected muscle tissue.

3.2 Delivery of pre-conditioned cells

Delivery of naïve cells (cells that have not been exposed to any form of pre-conditioning or external stimuli during *in vitro* culture and expansion) are an appealing approach due to simplicity and low regulatory thresholds, but they can present issues related with low cell survival, inadequate secretion profile and differentiation towards other lineages which are not relevant to pro-angiogenic applications, therefore compromising functional recovery [372, 373]. Microenvironmental pre-conditioning *in vitro* can help with overcoming some of these issues as means to modulate cell phenotype and secretion pre-implantation.

3.2.1 Biochemical pre-conditioning

One of the most common stimuli assessed is hypoxia, given its prominent role of in initiating angiogenesis. Adult tissues experience oxygen tensions that are considerably different from the inhaled ambient oxygen tensions of 21%. Oxygen concentrations between 2%–9% are considered to constitute physiologic normoxia [374]. However, conventional *in vitro* conditions expose the cells to a non-physiological hyperoxic environment. Indeed, low oxygen tensions maintain undifferentiated states of embryonic, hematopoietic, mesenchymal,

and neural stem cell phenotypes and also influence proliferation and cell-fate commitment [45]. Therefore the *in vitro* hypoxic preconditioning of stem cells can increase their motility and therapeutic potential prior to transplantation [375]. Hypoxia is known to stimulate VEGF expression in EC culture [376] but pro-angiogenic effects have also been reported on other cell sources. Hypoxic pre-conditioning (anoxia) of peripheral blood MNCs improved their differentiation towards EPCs, as shown by increased expression of CD31, VEGFR-2 and VEGF. Furthermore, supplementation with VEGF under hypoxia also promoted the migration of newly differentiated EPCs and improved blood flow in an ischemic hindlimb rat model [57]. Furthermore, 2% oxygen tension also contributed for improved resistance to oxidative stress and cell viability, when transplanted into a rabbit hindlimb ischemia model, and induced new vessel formation and improved limb blood flow [377]. Hypoxic pre-conditioning of human umbilical cord-derived mesenchymal stem cells (UC-MSCs) increased levels of pro-angiogenic genes, such as COX-2, VEGF, Tie-2, and TGF- β 1, when compared to cells in normoxic conditions. Moreover the injection of hypoxic (1% oxygen tension) UC-MSCs in a mouse hindlimb ischemia models triggered the upregulation of gene such as Ang-1, COX-1, PIGF, and MCP-1 and reduced the expression of proinflammatory genes such as IL-1 and IL-20 [378].

Furthermore, hypoxic pre-conditioning (0.5% oxygen tension) of BMSCs upregulated pro-survival and pro-regenerative genes and it has also been associated with improved vascular endothelial differentiation, leading to a better functional recovery after ischemic stroke in rats [379]. Additionally, hypoxia (2% oxygen tension) can enhance release of growth factors which, through promotion of angiogenesis, provide an effective strategy for treatment of osteonecrosis [380]. It has also been seen that pre-conditioned UC-MSCs (1% oxygen tension) may promote angiogenesis better than untreated UC-MSCs, as they secrete higher amounts of VEGF and enhance the proliferation and migration capacity of EC [381]. Hypoxic pre-

conditioning of BMSCs (0.5% oxygen tension) increased expression of HIF-1 α , VEGF, VEGFR2 and Ang1 *in vitro* and increased cell survival after implantation in a rat myocardial infarction model. Furthermore, hypoxic pre-conditioning (2% oxygen tension) promoted endothelial differentiation *in vivo*, evidenced by the presence of CD31, and reduced infarct area [382]. New capillary vessel formation has also been observed in BMSCs grown under hypoxia implanted in a rat cornea pocket model [383].

Hypoxic pre-conditioning (1.5% oxygen tension) of a tissue-engineered oral mucosa improved its capacity to support EC migration and proliferation. Engineered mucosa constructs produced soluble mediators that are upregulated under hypoxia including VEGF, PlGF, tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinase 1 and 2 (TIMP-1, TIMP-2), MMP-2, and MMP-9 [384].

Although hypoxia has shown promising results when used to pre-condition EC, EPCs UC-MSCs and BMSCs, the oxygen tensions used vary considerably, even when the same cell source is utilised, highlighting the need for optimisation studies and protocol standardisation.

3.2.2 Physical pre-conditioning

3.2.2.1 Mechanical stimulation

In blood vessels, EC are exposed to various mechanical stimuli internally and externally which regulate angiogenesis [385, 386]. Mechanical forces regulate capillary morphogenesis and modulate EC phenotype, cytoskeletal reorganisation and vascular remodelling through shear stress from blood flow cyclic strain and from circumferential vessel deformation [387, 388]. Cyclic strain also inhibits EC apoptosis, increases EC proliferation and enhances MMPs and membrane-type MMPs expression suggesting it modulates vessel formation, because survival, alignment, and proliferation of EC and degradation of basement membrane are essential for neo-vessel formation. The use of cyclic stretch in HUVEC seeded in a collagen

gel significantly increased formation of invasive structures *in vitro* [58]. Combining stretching with growth factor supplementation, demonstrated an additive effect when higher strains were combined with FGF2. Interestingly, VEGF was also tested at the same concentration and did not show an increase comparable to FGF2. However, when VEGF concentration was reduced alongside cyclic stretching, there was a significant increase of invasive sprouts in the gel over the static, VEGF supplemented group, demonstrating a synergistic effect between the mechanical forces and growth factor activity. Furthermore, mechanical stimulation of BMSCs enhanced tube formation in a three-dimensional matrix by upregulating the pro-angiogenic MMP-2, which is involved in early angiogenic events associated with ECM remodelling and EC migration, particularly through the exposure of a cryptic epitope of collagen IV or cleavage of growth factors, such as pro-TGF- β or VEGF. [389].

Transplantation of mechanically stimulated muscle-derived stem cells (MDSCs) into mice with acute myocardial infarction showed improved cardiac contractility, increased numbers of host CD31⁺ cells, and decreased fibrosis, in the peri-infarct region, compared to the hearts treated with non-stimulated MDSCs [390]. Mechanical strain prevented apoptosis and increased the adhesive ability of dermal fibroblasts *in vitro*, conferring a survival advantage *in vivo* after transplantation into full-thickness wounds of diabetic mice. Cyclic stretch stimulated cellular survival mediated by the activation of extracellular signal-regulated kinases (ERKs), c-Jun N-terminal kinases (JNKs) and the Akt. The stretched fibroblasts also showed increased expression of VEGF and stromal cell-derived factor-1 α (SDF-1 α) [391], which would support local angiogenesis.

3.2.2.2 Electromagnetic stimulation

Electromagnetic field stimulation (EMFs) and pulsed electromagnetic field (PEMFs) pre-conditioning promote angiogenesis. EMF facilitates EC proliferation and formation of sprout-like structures *in vitro* in a 2D scratch assay [392]. PEMF increases EC proliferation and tube formation *in vitro* in fibrin gels. Moreover, the addition of conditioned media from PEMF-treated HUVEC to both fibroblasts and HUVEC cultures increased proliferation and migration, even though when applied directly to fibroblasts, PEMF had not induced any changes. The authors proposed that the pro-angiogenic effects were related with increased FGF2 secretion [393]. Another study demonstrated that extremely low frequency (ELF) EMFs increased HUVEC proliferation and tube formation in Matrigel system by acting on VEGF transduction pathways. In particular after EMF exposure, there was an increase in phosphorylation alongside expression of VEGFR2 [394]. Similar reports have shown that PEMF inhibited the process of hypoxia-induced apoptosis and augmented tube formation, migration and proliferative capacities of HUVEC acting on the Akt-eNOS-VEGF pathway [67, 395].

PEMFs have also been tested preclinically, though not many studies are available. Wound closure was accelerated in normal and diabetic mice splinted wound models after PEMFs were applied [396]. The use of PEMFs alongside ultrasound treatment has also been shown to improve blood perfusion, capillary density and decreased apoptosis in rats with hindlimb ischemia [397].

Preclinically and clinically, EMF is typically applied directly to the site of interest to stimulate local cell populations, its use as a pre-conditioning tool is yet to be fully explored. It has been proposed that PEMF act by mediating activity of voltage gated calcium channels, through stimulation of NO synthesis, facilitated by Ca^{2+} and calmodulin or through transient receptor potential channels (TRPs), similarly to other forms of mechanical stimulation [398,

399]. This explains some of the working mechanisms of PEMF and provides a rationale for exploring this technology further.

3.3 Delivery of genetically modified cells

Certain factors such as donors age, comorbidities and effects of *ex vivo* culture can affect cell potency, phenotype and consequently the secretion profile [400]. However, the efficacy can be improved by manipulating cellular paracrine activity by genetic manipulation to increase the expression of a molecule of interest. Pre-implantation genetic transfer has been explored in both permanently differentiated cells and stem cells. The most common approaches are based on viral gene delivery (retroviral, adenoviral and lentiviral) and are currently under evaluation for several clinical indications. Given its key role in initiating angiogenesis, VEGF is still a preferred target. Myoblasts transduced with VEGF were injected in a porcine myocardial infarction and implanted in mice ischemic limb models where they were shown to promote increased vessel density and blood perfusion [401, 402]. Keratinocytes overexpressing VEGF in a collagen / GAG material have also been utilised to accelerate wound healing through enhanced blood vessel formation, expression of CD31 and improved blood flow recovery [403]. Viral transfection of Id1 has been performed in HUVEC which were subsequently injected intramuscularly in a mouse ischemic hindlimb model. Id1 is a helix-loop-helix transcription factor that plays a key role in embryonic vascular development and is highly expressed in tumour vasculature. Its overexpression in HUVEC has led to improved limb salvage over unmodified HUVEC, through Ang1 regulation [404].

Although differentiated cells have been utilised, most of the efforts have focussed on delivery of modified stem or progenitor cells with particular emphasis on BMSCs. In BMSCs, VEGF transfer using biodegradable polymeric nanoparticles, improved capillary density and limb salvage in the mouse ischemic hindlimb [405]. Furthermore, adenoviral delivery of VEGF to BMSCs has shown increased capillary density, reduction of infarct size and presence of cardiomyocytic phenotype with implanted cells integrated in the vasculature following intramyocardial injection in rat infarction models [406-408]. Additional studies focussing on

myocardial infarction models have utilised retroviral delivery of protein Akt1, plasmid delivery of sonic hedgehog (Shh) and lentiviral delivery of LIM-homeobox transcription factor islet 1 (ISL-1) BMSCs. Akt1 has been associated with promotion of cell survival by acting through the phosphatidylinositide 3' -OH kinase (PI3K)/c-Akt kinase cascade. Injected Akt1-modified BMSCs were shown to reduce inflammation, myocyte hypertrophy, reduction of infarct size and improved cardiac function, although neo-vessel formation and blood flow recovery were not assessed [409]. Shh transfection into BMSCs was also shown to improve myocardial infarction recovery through improved cell survival post-injection mediated by protein kinase C (PKC) signalling, since upregulation of netrin-1 and iNOS were also observed, but also through subsequent upregulation of VEGF and angiopoietins [410]. ISL-1 overexpression in BMSCs has also been shown to improve cardiac function, decrease apoptosis and inflammation after intramyocardial injection in a rat model [411]. ISL-1 has an important role during cardiac development, is a marker for cardiac progenitors and is believed to promote vascularisation.

To a lesser extent, ADSCs have also been utilised. Overexpression of VEGF in ADSCs, following intramuscular delivery led to increased Ang1 secretion, improved neovascularisation and reperfusion in a hind limb ischemic model [412]. Transfection of Ang1 showed improved capillary density, infarction size reduction and enhanced ventricle function after intramyocardial injection in a rat infarction model [413]. It was proposed that Ang 1 protected cardiomyocytes from oxidative stress induced apoptosis, since, *in vitro*, Ang-1 overexpressing ADSCs were shown to promote proliferation and survival of cardiomyocytes after exposure to hydrogen peroxide.

Similarly to BMSCs and ADSCs, EPCs have also been a target of interest. EPCs overexpressing IGF-1 have shown increased capillary formation and cardiomyocyte proliferation and survival contributing to improved cardiac functional recovery in a rat

myocardial infarction model, confirming previous reports of antiapoptotic and proliferative activity of IGF-1 [414]. In ischemic hindlimb models, overexpression of VEGF and kallikrein in EPCs has also led to increased capillary density and blood flow [217, 415]. Expression of kallikrein has been associated with promotion of angiogenesis in skeletal muscle [416].

While there is extensive preclinical analysis available for genetically modified cells and clinical data regarding gene delivery, very little has been translated to the clinical setting in terms of genetically modified cells. Nevertheless, autologous EC and SMCs modified by transfer of angiogenic genes (VEGF₁₆₅, Ang-1, eNOS) are being evaluated in patients with peripheral arterial disease. Preliminary results suggest the administration is feasible and safe and has no apparent drug-related adverse events (NCT00390767; www.clinicaltrials.gov). A phase 2 study currently being performed is assessing the safety and efficacy of EPCs transfected with human endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) to restore functional tissue in regions that otherwise would form only scar (NCT00936819; www.clinicaltrials.gov). Another phase 2 trial is also evaluating EPCs transfected with eNOS. This study aims to enhance lung microvascular repair and regeneration in patients with severe symptomatic pulmonary arterial hypertension (NCT03001414; www.clinicaltrials.gov).

Genetic engineering can increase the potential of therapeutic cell delivery by facilitating overexpression of angiogenic genes or anti-apoptotic factors. However safe and efficient gene delivery has been challenging since transduction raises safety concerns such as immunogenicity, toxicity or mutagenesis [417], whereas the transfer efficiency of non-viral methods is still low [418]. Although overexpression of pro-angiogenic factors is relevant, current efforts are directed towards single gene transfer, which is likely to present similar issues to single growth factor delivery, particularly if VEGF or PDGF are used, given their association with formation of aberrant vascular structures and tumours. There is also a need for improvement of delivery strategies that improve cell survival. Several approaches were

focussing of transfer of anti-apoptotic or mitogenic factors. However, the preferred method of delivery of genetically modified cells is still the injection, which is associated with poor cell localisation and survival and relies on cells attaching to site of injury for *in situ* action. The use of scaffolds, for instance, which facilitates cell localisation, is more widespread for the delivery of naïve cells, than with genetically modified cells.

3.4 Delivery of cell secretome and cell-derived vesicles

As opposed to the local transfer of whole living cells, the local delivery of their secretome – either from conditioned media or cell-derived extracellular vesicle – is currently explored as a scalable and standardisable alternative. Conditioned media allow to evaluate the effects of a whole range of secreted soluble molecules, while exosomes not only carry proteins, lipids and nucleic acids, but also, as membrane derivatives, channels and receptors. Their cargo is not extensively characterised [295], but their receptor pattern will depend on the cell type they are derived from. For instance, UC-MSCs conditioned media promotes HUVEC migration, network and branch point formation in Matrigel [67, 419]. Conditioned medium has also been used to improve proliferation of stem cell sources [420]. BMSCs pre-treated with medium from healthy cardiomyocytes exposed to oxidative stress and high glucose, showed enhanced survival, proliferation, angiogenic ability and improved function in diabetic hearts [421]. Furthermore, the angiogenic effects of ADSCs and their conditioned media has been evaluated in a rodent hindlimb ischemia model. Even though ADSCs conditioned media was not as effective as injected ADSCs on restoring blood flow, it still led to neo-vessel formation in the ischemic hindlimbs. Analysis of these conditioned media revealed presence of TGF- β , VEGF, granulocyte colony stimulating factor (G-CSF), FGF2 and HGF [354]. Nonetheless, most approaches utilised *in vivo* based on the cell secretome are focussed on cell-derived vesicles or genetically modified cells that overexpress a factor of interest. Cell

secretome can also be applied using injectable carriers to further prolong the half-life of its factors. ADSC secretome delivered together with an injectable nanocomposite hydrogel showed increased capillary density, reduced scar area and improved cardiac function after myocardial infarction in a rat model [422].

As with complete cells, microenvironmental pre-conditioning plays a pivotal role in modulating the cell secretome and is therefore a useful tool to manipulate it. For instance, media from BMSCs cultured under hypoxia has been shown to improve HUVEC adhesion *in vitro*, whilst conditioned media from EPCs supported HUVEC proliferation independently of the oxygen tension used, indicating that BMSCs and EPCs have different roles during angiogenesis [423]. Additionally, conditioned media derived from EPCs cultured under hypoxia (1.5% oxygen tension) has also improved blood flow and restored muscle function in a rat hindlimb ischemic model in a comparable manner to injection of EPCs [63]. Conditioned media from mechanically stimulated BMSCs enhanced tube formation of EC in Matrigel. The paracrine effect of BMSCs was mediated by an upregulation of VEGFR and FGFR signalling cascade [424].

Exosomes are endosomal membrane vesicles with diameters of ~40–150 nm. They originate in the late endosomal compartment from the inward budding of endosomal membranes, which generates intracellular multi-vesicular endosomes (MVEs). Pools of exosomes are packed in the MVEs and released into the extracellular space after the fusion of MVEs with the plasma membrane. Although exosomes are present in conditioned media, various methods have been developed to isolate and concentrate them for various subsequent applications. There is emerging evidence that exosomes play important roles in intercellular communication by serving as vehicles for transferring various cellular constituents between cells [425-428].

Exosomes have advantages over the use of naked growth factors or conditioned media as they possess a lipid bilayer that protects them from proteolytic degradation, which greatly prolongs the half-life of their cargo. Several studies demonstrated that exosomes derived from EPCs enhanced migration, proliferation and tube formation of EC *in vitro*. Furthermore exosomes treatment increased the expression of angiogenesis-related genes such as FGF1, VEGFA, VEGFR-2, eNOS, IL-8 by activating Erk1/2 signalling [429, 430]. It was demonstrated that miR-214, which controls endothelial cell function and angiogenesis, plays a dominant role in exosome-mediated signalling between EC. Similarly, exosomes secreted by human ADSCs carrying miR-125a have been taken up by EC and significantly promoted angiogenesis *in vitro* and *in vivo*. miR-125a can repress the expression of the angiogenic inhibitor delta-like 4 (DLL4) and modulate endothelial cell angiogenesis through promotion of formation of endothelial tips [431]. BMSC exosomes were shown to enhance tube formation in HUVEC *in vitro* and to activate Akt, ERK 1/2 and STAT3 pathways in dermal fibroblasts which led to increased expression of HGF, IL-6, IGF-1, NGF and SDF-1 [432]. Additionally, BMSCs-derived exosomes have been shown to increase capillary network formation, blood flow, improved limb salvage and reduced necrosis in mice and rat hindlimb ischemic models [433, 434]. Similarly to BMSCs, UC-MSCs - derived exosomes have also promoted the proliferation, migration, and tube formation of EC in a dose-dependent manner [435]. Moreover, BMSCs-derived exosomes restored bioenergetics, reduced oxidative stress and activated pro-survival signalling, thus enhancing cardiac function and geometry after myocardial ischemia model [436]. When injected into mouse ischemic hindlimb tissue, CD34⁺ mononuclear cells derived exosomes improved ischemic limb perfusion and capillary density. These exosomes increased miR-126-3p levels, which enhanced angiogenesis by modulating the expression of angiogenic genes such as VEGF, Ang1, Ang2, MMP-9 [437].

In terms of wound healing, UC-MSCs – derived exosomes have improved healing and new blood vessel formation in a rat skin burn model. The exosomes promoted β -catenin nuclear translocation and increased expression of proliferating cell nuclear antigen, cyclin D3, N-cadherin, β -catenin and the decreased expression of E-cadherin, all mediated by Wnt / β -catenin signalling pathway [435].

Although the potential of cell secretome and cell-derived vesicles has been established in preclinical studies, their clinical evaluation it is still scarce. An ongoing phase 1 clinical trial aims to evaluate the effect of exosomes derived from autologous plasma on intractable cutaneous ulcers (NCT02565264; www.clinicaltrials.gov). Another phase 1 study is underway to assess the administration of BMSCs-derived exosome enriched with miR-124 on improvement of disability of patients with acute ischemic stroke. It was hypothesised that intravenous administration of BMSC-generated exosomes post-stroke will improve functional recovery and enhance neurite remodelling, neurogenesis and angiogenesis (NCT03384433; www.clinicaltrials.gov).

The use of conditioned medium and exosomes still requires further characterisation, because their cargo and resultant therapeutic effect will vary depending on the cell source, culture method and use of pre-conditioning. However, they still present advantages over delivery of cells, considering the potential for upscaling if bioreactors are utilised for culturing the cells of interest. Furthermore, exosomes offer the possibility of targeted delivery, due to the presence of membrane receptors, and of additional encapsulation of other relevant molecules [438].

3.5 Delivery of cells for therapeutic lymphangiogenesis

The lymphatic system is a blood vessels system that is generally under-researched but its physiological function becomes dramatically evident when there is a local loss function as

evident in parasitosis, such as filariasis, in lymphatic obstruction after irradiation for cancer treatment and following localised trauma or surgery [17, 18, 439]. Impaired lymphatic flow leads to lymphoedema, for which there are currently only limited treatments available, typically focussed on physiotherapy [19].

Cell therapy for lymphangiogenesis has been gaining interest and, although there are results from *in vivo* and clinical studies, further investigations are still required in terms of optimal cell sources and lymphatic phenotype control [440]. Microvascular EC and lymphatics EC have shown to induce reduction of lymphoedema and increase in lymphatic vessel density in a rat tail model [441]. However, stem cells appear to be the favoured cell source for most studies. ADSCs have shown increased VEGF-C expression and enhanced recruitment of M2 macrophages in a rat tail model [442] and increase of vessel density and expression of LYVE-1, VEGF-C and VEGFR-3 in a mouse hind limb oedema model [443]. Pre-conditioning of ADSCs *in vitro* with VEGF-C prior to implantation increased expression of VEGF-A, VEGF-C and Prox-1 which led to improved lymphangiogenesis in mice. Further enhancement of lymphangiogenesis was observed after TGF- β 1 signalling inhibition, given its association with decreased proliferation and migration of lymphatic EC [444]. Culture of BMSCs with lymphatic EC supernatant led to enhanced expression of VEGFR-2, VEGFR-3 and podoplanin and decreased oedema in a rat model [445]. Cells have also been delivered together with growth factors. ADSCs and BMSCs have been combined with VEGF-C and showed improved lymphatic vessel density in mouse dermal oedema and rabbit hindlimb oedema, respectively [446].

Given the promising results seen in preclinical tests, clinical testing of delivered cells has also been performed in women with secondary lymphoedema derived from breast cancer surgery and radiotherapy. Intramuscular injection of ADSCs was conducive to a similar reduction of limb swelling when compared with compression sleeve therapy (CST). However, CST led to

reoccurring swelling, while ADSCs injection promoted a more stable outcome [447]. Conversely, delivery of BMSCs reduced pain and lymphoedema volume significantly when compared with decongestive physiotherapy [448].

3.6 General approaches for cell retention and survival after implantation

Delivery of cells to the site of interest presents therapeutic advantages, however, there are still drawbacks that need to be overcome. Currently the main issues include poor local cell retention, cell death due to the lack of attachment or presence of adequate survival factors. Nonetheless, several methods have been developed as potential solutions. There are basically two options, systemic intravenous or intraarterial administration, or direct tissue injection of cells suspension with or without a carrier material. In a porcine myocardial infarction model, intracoronary infusion and endocardial injection gave better local cell retention in the heart than intravenous administration up to 14 days post-delivery [449]. Nonetheless, around 20% of injected cells were still found in the lungs after intracoronary and intravenous infusions. This clearly shows the need for development of different approaches that do not rely on infusion of cell suspensions. For instance, BMSCs in agarose, collagen and fibrin microcapsules have been delivered to the rat infarcted myocardium to further promote their localisation and survival [300]. Although scaffolds present a relevant alternative, other methods have focussed on utilising cell secreted ECM as a support structure for the implanted cells. This has the advantage of maintaining intact cell-cell and cell-matrix interactions. Cardiac cells have been grown *in vitro* in temperature responsive dishes to fabricate cell sheets, which, when placed directly on the infarcted area in a rat myocardial infarction model, led to improved cell survival, localisation and higher number of mature capillaries than cell injections [450]. Temperature sensitive gels with RGD adhesive peptides have also been investigated for myoblast sheet culture and were shown to lead to improved cell retention and

survival and perfusion recovery after implantation in a hindlimb ischemic model [451]. Magnetic nanoparticles can also be used *in vitro* to force cells into an organised cell sheet that can be implanted. BMSC sheets fabricated as such, showed increased VEGF secretion and further increased capillary density and blood perfusion to ischemic muscle [452]. It was also observed that the BMSC sheets contributed to increase skeletal muscle cell survival in the vicinity and it was suggested that this derived from intrinsic anti-oxidative peroxidase-like activity of the magnetic nanoparticles.

In an attempt to create more complex assemblies than sheets, cells have also been organised into spheroids. HUVEC spheroids implanted in a mouse ischemic hindlimb model increased cell survival over monolayer-grown cells and expression of VEGFR1 and VEGFR2 [453]. In an analogous model, UC-MSC spheroids also improved limb survival, decreased necrosis and increased expression of von Willebrand factor and NG2, indicating vessel maturation [454]. The use of such methods also allows for implanting co-cultured cells and positive results in terms of limb survival and blood perfusion recovery were observed in limb ischemic models when HUVEC and UC-MSCs aggregates were applied [455]. It was suggested that the encouraging outcome derived from the UC-MSCs starting to differentiate into SMCs and stabilising the newly formed HUVEC tubular network, however, further work is needed to confirm these assumptions.

4 Conclusions and future perspectives

Therapeutic angiogenesis is based on an exciting body of literature furthering the understanding of relevant mechanisms. There have been discrepancies between *in vitro* angiogenesis assays and *in vivo* data which can be partially attributed to using endothelial cells solely *in vitro*, while they are in reality influenced by cross-talk with non-endothelial cells *in vivo*. Nevertheless, remarkable progress has been made in the last decades with drug and cell delivery. As a new option, the use of the cell secretome has been gaining increasing interest. Although growth factors are unquestionably the most researched option due demonstrated efficacy in preclinical setting, issues arise regarding their cost, activity and need of suitable carriers. Their instability necessitates supraphysiological local concentrations and that can lead to undesired side effects in clinical settings, as exemplified by the case of PDGF. The use of small molecules should overcome most of those issues. As a scientifically attractive approach gene delivery has attracted much attention due to the promise of *in situ* sustained delivery of a protein of interest. However, previous fatal outcomes with adenoviral transfer have led to a re-evaluation of clinical gene therapy approaches. While this has not prevented continued animal experimentation, clinical evidence for efficacious angiogenic gene delivery has to be gathered yet. Regarding cell delivery, different permanently differentiated, progenitor and stem cell sources, undifferentiated, pre-conditioned or genetically modified, have been assessed. Although clinical evidence appears promising, additional efforts are required to evaluate the advantages of cell manipulation prior to implantation in full. Similarly, for the use of exosomes, significantly more *in vitro*, preclinical and clinical work is required to justify the labour and cost intensive extraction process. Additionally, given the complexity of angiogenesis, it is likely that further advancements will only come about with multicomponent delivery. In this regard, the most promising drug calls still might be prolyl hydroxylase inhibitors. Besides being stable small

molecules, they tackle an angiogenic master switch (HIF-1 α) and thus bring a variety of angiogenic factors into play simultaneously. This is a situation akin to multidrug/multigene or secretome application. Of note, some members of this compound class are already approved for clinical use and can be re-purposed in an indication-discovery approach for angiogenesis. While some encouraging results support the use of drugs and cells, their wider application is currently constrained to use as last resort in otherwise intractable patients. This, and high variability of treatment conditions (e.g. experimental treatments delivered alongside surgical grafting procedures) severely compromise the proof of clinical efficacy and statistical significance of the studies. There does not appear to be a clear consensus on the efficacy of some therapeutic agents and there is controversy over the use of others. The overarching need we see arising is the development of appropriate delivery vehicles to ensure local retention and continued biologic activity at the site of interest of angiogenic compounds.

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Table 1: Clinical studies describing growth factor delivery

Phase	Growth factor	Delivery method	Condition	Outcome	Reference
Phase 1	bFGF	Intra-arterial injection	Atherosclerotic peripheral arterial disease	Improved blood flow in ischemic leg	[121]
Phase 1	bFGF	Intracoronary injection	Angina pectoris	No symptomatic improvements	[124]
Phase 2	bFGF	Intra-arterial injection	Myocardial and limb ischemia	Improved walking time	[122]
Phase 1	bFGF	Epicardial implantation of heparin / alginate capsules	Coronary artery disease	Reduced angina, improved blood perfusion.	[127]
Phase 1	bFGF	Intracoronary injection	Coronary heart disease	No significant long term symptomatic improvements.	[123]
Phase 1	bFGF	Intracoronary or intravenous injection	Coronary heart disease	Improved resting perfusion.	[456]
Phase 1 / 2	VEGF	Intracoronary and intravenous injections	Exertional angina	Reduced angina with high dose VEGF at 120 days post-treatment.	[119]
Phase 1	VEGF	Intracoronary injection	Coronary artery disease	Trend for improved blood perfusion a high dose VEGF	[457]
Phase 1	FGF-1	Intracoronary injection	Chronic myocardial ischemia	Improved vascularisation	[128]
Phase 1	GSK1278863	Oral	Peripheral artery disease	No symptomatic or performance benefit ensued	[458]
Phase 2	GSK1278863	Oral	Chronic kidney disease	GSK1278863 produced dose-dependent effects on haemoglobin; no differences in VEGF levels	[459, 460]

Phase 2	FG-4592	Oral	Chronic kidney disease	Increased haemoglobin levels	[461, 462]
Phase 2	AKB-6548	Oral	Chronic kidney disease	Increase haemoglobin levels and enhanced iron mobilization	[463]

Table 2: Clinical studies describing gene delivery.

Phase	Gene	Delivery method	Condition	Outcome	Reference
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₂₁	Adenovirus, intramyocardial	Coronary artery disease	Improvement in angina and treadmill exercise time	[250, 251]
Phase 2	VEGF ₁₂₁	Adenovirus, intramyocardial	Chronic myocardial ischemia	Improved angina and exercise time. No significant difference in perfusion	[464]
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₆₅	Plasmid, intramyocardial	Chronic myocardial ischemia	Improvement in angina and myocardial perfusion	[253]
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₆₅	Plasmid, intramyocardial	Coronary artery disease	No difference in perfusion though ischemic area reduced significantly in all groups	[252]
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₆₅	Plasmid, intramyocardial	Angina pectoris	Improved angina, reduce nitroglycerin intake, improved ischemia, improved collateral perfusion	[254]
Phase 2	VEGF ₁₆₅	Plasmid, percutaneous and intramyocardial	Angina pectoris	Angina improved without significance , no differences in perfusion	[256]
Phase 1 / 2	VEGF2	Naked plasmid, percutaneous	Chronic myocardial ischemia	Angina improved significantly	[255]
Phase 0 / 1	VEGF2	Plasmid, percutaneous and intramyocardial	Chronic myocardial ischemia	Decrease episodes of angina, reduced ischemic area, improved perfusion	[465]
Phase 1	FGF-4	Adenoviral, intracoronary	Angina pectoris	Exercise time and angina increased but not significantly	[466]
Phase 3	FGF-1	Plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	No significant difference in limb survival	[262]
Phase 1	FGF-1	Plasmid, intramyocardial	Critical limb ischemia	Decreased pain, improved ulcer healing, increased transcutaneous oxygen pressure and ankle-brachial index	[467]
Phase 1	FGF-1	Plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Improved ulcer healing and limb survival	[261]
Phase 1 / 2	HGF	Plasmid, intramuscular	Peripheral artery disease	Reduced ulcer size, increase ankle-brachial index, improved rest pain and walking time. No dose-dependent	[263, 468]

				effect observed.	
Phase 1	HGF	Plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Improvement of rest pain and ulcer size	[264]
Phase 1	HGF	Plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Improved ankle-brachial index and ulcer healing, decreased pain	[265]
Phase 1	HGF	Plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Decreased pain	[469]
Phase 1	HGF	Naked DNA, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Improved ulcer healing and pain, increased oxygenation of limb	[470]
Phase 2	VEGF ₁₂₁	Adenoviral, intramuscular	Peripheral artery disease	No significant improvements	[257]
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₆₅	Plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Higher doses led to improved healing of ulcers and less rest pain	[258]
Phase 2	VEGF	Plasmid and liposome, percutaneous	Critical limb ischemia	Significant improved vascularity in VEGF-treated groups. No significant difference in ulcers, amputations or pain.	[259]
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₆₅	Naked plasmid, intramuscular	Peripheral artery disease	Inconclusive regarding dosage. Improved ulcer healing, pain and collateral neo-vessels	[471]
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₆₅	Plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Improved skin ulcers and haemodynamic improvement. Limb survival and pain did not change significantly	[260]
Phase 1	VEGF ₁₆₅	Naked plasmid, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	Increase walking time	[472]
Phase 1	HIF-1 α	Adenoviral, intramuscular	Critical limb ischemia	High amputation rate but high adverse effects on placebo too, vision disorders, though improved ulcer healing is described	[266]
Phase 2	HIF-1 α	Adenoviral, intramuscular	Peripheral arterial disease	No significant differences in claudication, ankle-brachial index or quality of life measurements	[473]

Table 3: Clinical studies describing cell delivery.

Phase	Cells	Delivery method	Disease	Outcome	Reference
Pilot	Autologous bone marrow (BM) cells	Local implantation into the ungraftable area	Severe ischemic heart disease	Improved coronary perfusion	[323]
Pilot, Phase 1	BM-MNCs vs Peripheral blood-MNCs (PB-MNCs)	Intramuscular injection	Unilateral ischaemia of the leg	Improved ABI, TcPO ₂ , rest pain, pain-free walking with BM MNC vs. PB MNCs	[474]
Pilot	BM-MSCs vs BM-MNCs	Intramuscular injection	Diabetic critical limb ischaemia	Improved ulcer healing, ABI and TcO ₂ in BM MSC	[475]
Phase 2	BM-MNCs	Intramuscular injection	Chronic limb ischaemia	Improved rest pain and ulcer healing	[476]
Phase 1/2	BM-MNCs	Intramuscular injection	Critical limb ischaemia	Reduced amputation rate	[477]
Pilot	BM-MNCs	Intramuscular injection	Critical limb ischaemia	Non-significant trend for reduced amputation rate vs. placebo	[478]
Pilot, Phase 1, Phase 1/2	BM-MNCs	Intramuscular/intra-arterial injection	Critical limb ischaemia	Improved rest pain, ulcer healing, ABI with BM MNC	[329, 479-481]
Phase 1	BM-MNCs	Intramuscular injection	Critical limb ischemia	Comparable improvements in rest pain and in TcO ₂ with cell therapy and control groups	[482]
Phase 2	BM-MSCs	Intramuscular injection	Critical limb ischaemia	Reduced rest pain and improved ulcer healing with high dose BM-MSCs	[340]
Phase 1/2	BM-MSCs	Intracoronary injection	Acute myocardial infarction	Improved left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), infarct size and remodelling with BM-SCs transplantation compared to standard therapy	[341-343]

Phase 1/2	BM-SCs	Intramyocardial vs intracoronary injection	Acute myocardial infarction	Changes in the LVEF were significantly higher than at baseline in both groups, but not significantly difference between groups	[344]
Phase 2	BM-SCs	Intracoronary injection	Myocardial infarction	BM-SCs did not augment recovery of global LV function, but could favourably affect infarct remodelling.	[483]
Phase 2	BM-MNCs	Intramyocardial injection	Ischemic heart failure	Cell therapy failed to improve LVEF, but reduced myocardial scar size	[345]
Phase 1	BM-MNCs + VEGF	Intramuscular injection	Critical limb ischaemia	Cell therapy group exhibited increased ABI and ulcer healing	[484]
Phase 1/2	MSCs	Trans-endocardial injection	Ischemic cardiomyopathy	MSCs reduced infarct size but did not increase LVEF	[346]
Phase 1	ADSCs	Trans-endocardial injections	Ischemic cardiomyopathy	No significant changes	[362]
Pilot, Phase 1	Granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF)-mobilized PB-MNCs vs placebo	Subcutaneous injections	Critical limb ischaemia of diabetic patients	Improved rest pain, ulcer healing, blood perfusion	[331, 485]
Phase 1/2	G-CSF-mobilized PB-MNCs vs BM-MNCs	Intramuscular injection	Lower limb arteriosclerosis obliterans	Improved rest pain and ABI with G-CSF-mobilized PB-MNCs vs. BM	[325]
Pilot	Peripheral blood CD34 ⁺ cells	Intracoronary transfusion	End-stage diffuse coronary artery disease	Significantly and progressively increased neovascularization	[486]
Pilot	CD34 ⁺	Intramuscular injection	Critical limb ischaemia	Decreased amputation rate	[317]
Phase 1	Circulating blood PCs	Intra-arterial injection	Critical peripheral arterial occlusive disease	A significant increase in the ABI, TcO ² was seen in the CPCs group	[487]
Phase 1	Autologous skeletal myoblasts	Intramyocardial injection	Left ventricular dysfunction or myocardial infarction	Myoblast transfer did not improve regional or global LV function beyond that seen in control group	[488]

Phase 2/3	Cardiopoietic stem cells	Endomyocardial injections	Chronic heart failure	LVEF was improved by cell therapy vs standard care alone	[489]
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