Role of macrophage secretions on rat polycystic ovary: its effect on apoptosis

Florencia Figueroa¹, Alicia Motta³, Mariano Acosta², Fabian Mohamed², Liliana Oliveros¹ and Myriam Forneris¹

¹Laboratorio de Biología de la Reproducción, y ²Área Morfología, Departamento de Bioquímica y Ciencias Biológicas, Facultad de Química, Bioquímica y Farmacia, Universidad Nacional de San Luis, Argentina, and

³Laboratorio de Fisiopatología Ovárica (CEFYBO), Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina

Correspondence should be addressed to M Forneris; Email: mlforneris@gmail.com

Abstract

Polycystic ovarian syndrome is the most common endocrine disorder among women of reproductive age. Little is known about its etiology, although the evidence suggests an intrinsic ovarian abnormality in which endocrine, metabolic, neural and immune factors would be involved. In this work, the effects of macrophage (MO) secretion on ovarian apoptosis in a polycystic ovary syndrome rat model (PCO rat) induced by estradiol valerate are studied. Spleen MO secretions were used to stimulate ovaries and ovarian interstitial and granulosa cells from both PCO and control rats. Ovarian hormones and prostaglandin E₂ (PGE₂) were measured by RIA; ovarian mRNA levels of Bax, Bcl2 and NFκB by RT-PCR; and ovarian inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS) by western blot. The number of apoptotic cells was evaluated by TUNEL. In the PCO ovary, the MO secretions from PCO rats increased the Bax and NFκB mRNA expressions and increased TUNEL staining in both granulosa and theca cells. In addition, the PCO MO secretions produced a decrease of nitric oxide release, iNOS protein level and PGE₂ content in the PCO ovary, and it also induced an increase of androstenedione production by PCO interstitial cells, in comparison with control MO secretions. Considering these results and knowing that testosterone stimulates tumour necrosis factor-α production by PCO MO modifying ovarian response by increasing androstenedione, it is reasonable to suggest that the increase of androgens stimulated in ovarian cells by PCO MO secretions could in turn stimulate the cytokine production from MO, thus maintaining an apoptotic vicious cycle in the PCO ovary.

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Introduction

The bidirectional communication between the neuro-endocrine and immune system is firmly recognized. A number of hormonal and neuropeptide mediators have been shown to influence immune development and function in both healthy and diseased individuals (Bilbo & Klein, 2012). The interactions between ovary and immune cells and the products such as steroids, peptide hormones, prostaglandins, growth factors and cytokines play a pivotal role in the regulation of ovarian function (Besedovsky & del Rey 1996, Taub 2008).

The macrophages (MOs), the most abundant immune cells within the ovary, have been localized in thecal, luteal and interstitial tissue compartments and in the atretic follicle, in both animal and human. Their distribution fluctuates throughout the ovarian cycle with the highest numbers being present at proestrus and diestrus, strongly indicating hormonal regulation (Wu *et al.* 2004, 2007, Turner *et al.* 2011). MOs express functional sex hormone receptors and secrete nitric oxide (NO), along with tumour necrosis factor alpha

(TNFα), prostaglandin E₂ (PGE₂), interleukin (IL)-1, IL6, IL10, IL12 and many other cytokines and growth factors that regulate ovarian function (Gallinelli *et al.* 2003, Sirotkin 2011). There is evidence that NO decreases ovarian steroidogenesis by inhibiting the steroid acute regulatory protein, 3β-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase (3β-HSD) and cytochrome p450 side chain cleavage gene expression (Rekawiecki *et al.* 2005). Furthermore, TNFα is a multifunctional cytokine that influences the reproductive axis, inducing changes that closely resemble those found in patients with hyperandrogenism (Thathapudi *et al.* 2014). TNFα plays a key role in follicular development and atresia, decreases ovarian cell viability and proliferation and stimulates apoptosis in cultured ovarian follicles (Greenfeld *et al.* 2007). When TNFα binds to its receptor (TNFR1), caspase-8 and caspase-3 are cleaved and activated, and the induction of IκB phosphorylation and degradation activate the nuclear factor κB (NFκB). Subsequently, NFκB translocates into the nucleus where it can activate the transcription of certain genes, particularly those involved

in immune and inflammatory responses (Xiao *et al.* 2002). In addition, PGE₂ modulates a variety of physiological processes including the production of inflammatory cytokines (Kuroda & Yamashita 2003). PGE₂ and its receptor subtypes, EP2 and EP4, are involved in the rat ovarian follicle growth (El-Nefrawy *et al.* 2005).

It is known that a fine balance between pro- and anti-apoptotic factors may determine whether a follicle will continue developing or undergo atresia. Regulation of apoptotic signalling in the ovary is achieved by the Fas system and Bcl2 family, including Bcl2 (anti-apoptotic) and Bax (pro-apoptotic) proteins. The increased expression of the Bax death susceptibility gene coincides with the induction of apoptosis in granulosa cells during atresia *in vivo* and *in vitro* (Tilly 2001). Several studies suggest a cross-talk between the Fas/FasL system-induced apoptosis and the nitric oxide-mediated anti-apoptotic pathway in ovarian follicle atresia (Chen *et al.* 2005, Krysko *et al.* 2008). Also, it has been shown that androgen and androgen receptors promote Bax-mediated apoptosis in prostate cancer cells (Lin *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, it is known that PGE₂ promotes the proliferation and survival of cells through apoptosis inhibition (Sheng *et al.* 1998, Rask *et al.* 2006).

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) is a common endocrine and metabolic disorder in women of reproductive age, characterized by anovulation, hyperandrogenemia and/or hyperandrogenism and, frequently, insulin resistance and hyperinsulinemia (Goodarzi *et al.* 2011). Ovaries from most women affected by PCOS are characterized by thecal/interstitial hyperplasia and increased expression of steroidogenic genes leading to greater androgen biosynthesis and cytochrome P450c17 α gene expression (Nelson-Degrave *et al.* 2005).

Several studies suggest that the immune regulation may be involved in the etiology of PCOS (Amato *et al.* 2003, Niccoli *et al.* 2011). Furthermore, neuroimmunomodulatory factors such as dopamine have been associated to this disorder etiology (Gómez *et al.* 2011). We have shown a functional relationship between the ovarian androgens and immune cells in a rat model of PCOS induced by estradiol valerate (EV). The differential steroidogenic ability of MO secretions from those rats is associated to the *in vitro* testosterone environment. Testosterone, probably acting on MO androgen receptors, induces a greater release of TNF α , modifying ovarian response by increasing androstenedione and slightly decreasing estradiol without affecting progesterone (Figueroa *et al.* 2012).

There is evidence that the dysfunction of granulosa cells may contribute to abnormal folliculogenesis, although the underlying mechanism remains to be determined. It has been demonstrated that there are significant differences in the rate of cell death and proliferation in granulosa cells in PCOS patients

compared to women with regular ovulatory cycles. This was associated with decreased expression of apoptotic effectors and increased expression of a cell survival factor (Das *et al.* 2008). However, the role of immune cells on the apoptosis of the polycystic ovary remains obscure.

It is known that the EV-polycystic ovary syndrome rat model (PCO) is characterized by acyclicity, anovulation, hyperandrogenemia and polycystic ovarian morphology and associated with increased sympathetic activity resembling PCO (Brawer *et al.* 1986, Lara *et al.* 1993, Forneris *et al.* 2003), without metabolic disturbances such as dyslipidemia, insulin resistance or obesity (Stener-Victorin *et al.* 2005). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate in a rat model of PCOS induced by EV (PCO rats) whether secretions of MOs induce apoptosis in the ovary and if MO secretions modify the ovarian PGE₂ and nitric oxide levels, and consequently the androstenedione response, to establish their relationship with the ovarian apoptosis. For that, secretions of MOs from the spleen were used to stimulate isolated ovarian cells and ovaries from PCO rats.

Materials and methods

Reagents

EV, fetal bovine serum and RPMI 1640 medium were purchased from Sigma. TRIzol reagent was obtained from Invitrogen/Life Technology. 1,2,6,7-[³H]-Prostaglandin E (107.0 Ci/mmol) was provided by New England Nuclear Products (Boston, MA, USA). Other reagents and chemicals were of analytical grade.

Animals and treatment

Adult Holtzman cycling rats showing at least two regular 4-day cycles were used. They were housed in a controlled environment (22–24 °C, 12 h light:12 h darkness cycle). They were allowed to eat and drink *ad libitum*. Animals were handled according to the procedures approved in the UFAW Handbook for the Care and Management of Laboratory Animals: Vol 1. Terrestrial vertebrates, 7th ed. (T Poole ed. (1999)), and the experimental protocol was approved by the Committee for the Use and Care of Animals of the National University of San Luis.

Two groups of rats were used. The first group consisted of PCO rats to which the PCOS model was induced at 60 days of age. This was accomplished by the administration of EV as a single i.m. injection (2 mg/rat diluted in 0.2 ml corn oil) to resemble, in some aspects, the human syndrome (Brawer 1986). The second group, non-PCO rats (control rats), was injected with vehicle alone. All experiments were performed 2 months after EV injection, at which point cystic follicles were observed by light microscopy. Cystic follicles were devoid of oocytes and exhibited a large antral cavity, an enlarged thecal cell layer and a thin granulosa-cell compartment. Because PCO rats predominantly showed cornified vaginal smears, control

rats were sacrificed by decapitation on estrus day. The spleen and the ovaries were removed to obtain MOs for culture and ovarian incubations, respectively.

MO culture

The culture of MO was performed as described previously (Figuroa *et al.* 2012). Briefly, the spleens from PCO and control rats were washed in saline solution and pressed through a sterile nylon screen (200 μ m mesh) to obtain the total cell populations. After centrifugation, the cells were resuspended in serum-free RPMI 1640 medium and treated with NH_4Cl . Cell number and viability were assessed microscopically using trypan blue exclusion, and 3×10^6 viable cells/ml of medium were incubated in culture medium supplemented with 10% (v/v) heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum (FBS) and antibiotics (50 $\mu\text{g/ml}$ streptomycin and 50 units/ml penicillin), defined as basal medium, in culture plates. After incubation for 2 h at 37 °C in 95% air/5% CO_2 , the non-adhered cells were removed. The adhered MO monolayer showed 90% purity according to the morphologic analysis performed by Giemsa staining (Supplementary Figure 1, see section on supplementary data given at the end of this article) and nonspecific esterase staining. The MO from PCO rats (PCO MO), as well as the MO from control rats (control MO), were plated at a density of 1×10^6 cells/well in a final volume of 1 ml in culture plates, preincubated in basal medium for 24 h and subsequently cultured for 24 h. The respective culture media were collected and used to stimulate ovaries and isolated ovarian cells from PCO rats (PCO ovaries), as well as from control rats (control ovaries).

Ovary incubation

After sacrificing the rats, the PCO and control ovaries were halved and preincubated in 1 ml of basal medium at 37 °C, in a 95% O_2 /5% CO_2 mixture. After 15 min, the incubation media were discarded and either 1 ml of basal medium or 1 ml of MO secretions (PCO MO or control MO culture medium respectively) was added (Forneris *et al.* 2008). Incubation was continued for 3 h, and then the medium was removed and stored at -20 °C until PGE_2 and nitrites release contents were measured.

Obtaining and incubation of ovarian cells

The procedures for harvesting and culturing the granulosa cells have been described previously (Erickson & Hsueh 1978, Aguado & Ojeda 1984). Briefly, granulosa cells from PCO and control ovaries were harvested in RPMI 1640 medium, supplemented with 0.2% BSA fraction V, N-2-hydroxyethylpiperazine-N'-2-ethanesulfonic acid (HEPES) (10 mM) and EGTA (6.8 mM) by needle puncturing of the follicles. The suspension was centrifuged at 100 *g* for 10 min, and the cell pellet was washed in RPMI medium containing penicillin (50 U/ml) and streptomycin (50 $\mu\text{g/ml}$). After viability determination by a trypan blue exclusion test, the cells were plated at 3×10^5 viable cells/tube containing 1 ml of RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with androstenedione (10^{-7} M), L-glutamine (2 mM), penicillin (50 U/ml), streptomycin (50 $\mu\text{g/ml}$) and

ovine FSH (10 ng/ml). Androstenedione was included in all cultures and served as an aromatase substrate (Erickson & Hsueh 1978). The cells were cultured in a humidified 95% v/v air and 5% v/v CO_2 incubator at 37 °C for 24 h. At the end of this period, the medium was discarded and replaced by fresh medium with antibiotics or MO secretions. The incubation was continued for 24 h and then the medium was stored at -20 °C until assayed for estradiol release. After harvesting granulosa cells by needle puncturing of the follicles, the corpora lutea were removed, and the residual ovarian tissue, which is considered to be enriched in interstitial cells, was dissociated in 2 ml of RPMI medium containing 0.4% w/v collagenase type XI (Sigma-Aldrich Co.) and 0.1% BSA fraction V (Sigma-Aldrich Co.) by stirring at 37 °C for 30 min in a metabolic shaking water bath and assisted by repeatedly drawing tissue fragments into a siliconized pipette. Five minutes before finishing the procedure, 0.001% of deoxyribonuclease type I (DNase I) (Sigma) was added. Subsequently, the digest was filtered through a nylon mesh and the suspension was centrifuged at 100 *g* for 10 min. The cell pellet was washed twice in RPMI medium containing penicillin (50 U/ml) and streptomycin (50 $\mu\text{g/ml}$), centrifuged as described above, and finally resuspended in the same medium. 5×10^5 cells were cultured in a humidified 95% v/v air and 5% v/v CO_2 incubator at 37 °C for 24 h. At the end of this period, the medium was removed and replaced by fresh medium with antibiotics or MO secretions, and the cells were cultured for an additional 24 h. Afterwards, the culture medium was stored at -20 °C until assayed for androstenedione release.

Steroid assays

Estradiol and androstenedione released in the media from the culture of granulosa and interstitial cells, respectively, were determined by RIA using specific antisera as described previously (Forneris & Aguado 2002). The assays sensitivities were <12 fmole/tube for estradiol and 0.02 ng/ml for androstenedione. For all steroids, the inter- and intra-assay coefficients of variation (CV) were $<10\%$.

Nitrite assay

Liquid incubations of ovaries from control and PCO rats were removed and analysed for NO by assaying nitrites, which is a stable product of NO oxidation, using the Griess reagent; the absorbance was read at 540 nm (Egami & Taniguchi 1974). The intra-assay CV were $<10\%$. The results were expressed as micromoles of nitrite per millilitre ($\mu\text{mol/ml}$).

Histological studies

After incubation with basal medium or MO secretions, the ovaries were fixed in Bouin's solution. The samples were dehydrated in a graded series of ethanol and embedded in paraffin. Sections 5 μm in thickness were obtained using a Microm HM 325 rotation microtome and stained with hematoxylin-eosin. Histological analysis was carried out using a computer-assisted image analysis system consisting of an Olympus BX-40 binocular microscope. The images were

captured by a Sony SSC-DC50A camera and processed with Image Pro Plus 5.0 Software (Media Cybernetics Inc., Silver Spring, MD, USA) under control of a Pentium IV computer.

Identification of apoptotic nuclei by TUNEL assay

Apoptotic nuclei were identified in ovarian tissue using the DeadEnd Colorimetric TUNEL System (Promega) according to the manufacturer's protocol. Briefly, nuclear DNA fragmentation was assessed in 5 µm thick sections of ovarian tissue mounted on silane-coated slides, deparaffinized with xylene and then treated with a graded series of ethanol (100, 95, 85, 70, and 50% (v/v)) and rehydrated in PBS (pH 7.5). Tissues were then treated with proteinase K solution for permeabilization and then refixed with 4% paraformaldehyde solution. Slides were then treated with recombinant terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase (TdT) reaction mix and incubated in a humidified chamber at 37 °C for 1 h. The reaction was terminated by immersing the slides in 2× saline-sodium citrate (SSC) solution for 15 min at room temperature. After blocking the endogenous peroxidases activity (by 0.3% hydrogen peroxide), slides were washed with PBS and then incubated with streptavidin horseradish peroxidase solution for 30 min at room temperature. Afterwards, the slides were incubated for 10 min with 3,3'-diaminobenzidine (DAB) as chromogen substrate. The sections were counterstained with hematoxylin, dehydrated, mounted and coverslipped. For negative control, incubation with TdT was omitted and the positive control was prepared by treating cells on a separate slide with DNase I. Cells showing dark brown staining from the colorimetric reaction were considered as positive for DNA fragmentation.

The results of the TUNEL assay were evaluated according to the signal intensity as negative (−) and positive (+). TUNEL positive staining was examined in ten consecutive areas from five independent ovarian sections. A total of 50 fields, from control and treated groups, were analysed. The number of TUNEL-positive follicles with apoptotic cells was counted in independent ovarian cross-sections from three different rats under microscope at 100× objective.

Western blot analysis for iNOS

Ovaries were homogenized in Tris-HCL 50 mM (pH 7.8) containing protease inhibitors. Protein was measured by the method of Lowry *et al.* (1951). 40 mg of proteins were mixed with 10 ml of sample buffer (125 mM Tris-HCL, pH 6.8, 4% SDS, 0.5 mM DTT, 0.02% bromophenol blue and 20% glycerol), boiled for 2–3 min and loaded into 8% SDS-PAGE gel. Protein molecular mass markers were always loaded on each gel. The separated proteins were transferred to PVDF membranes (Polyscreen NEF 1000, NEN Life Science Products, Boston, MA, USA) using a blot transfer system (Bio-Rad). After being blocked overnight with 5% BSA-TBS solution (20 mM Tris, 500 mM NaCl, pH 7.5) at 48 °C, membranes were incubated with a primary rabbit anti-iNOS polyclonal antibody solution (Santa Cruz Biotechnologies) (1:1000 dilution) for 1 h at room temperature. β-actin expression was measured as a control for protein loading using a rabbit polyclonal antibody.

After washing three times with TBS (0.1% Tween 20, 100 mM Tris-HCL, pH 7.5, 150 mM NaCl), the membranes were incubated with an anti-rabbit IgG secondary antibody linked to peroxidase for 1 h at room temperature. The membranes were washed and the colour was developed using a Vectastain ABC detection system (Vector Laboratories, Burlingame, CA, USA).

prostaglandin E₂ RIA

PGE₂ was determined by RIA as it has been previously reported (Motta *et al.* 1999). PGE₂ was quantified in incubation medium from ovary, and in ovary homogenate from PCO and control rats. To extract PGE₂, the samples were first acidified to pH 3.0 with 1 M HCL and then extracted three times with 1 ml of ethyl acetate. The ethyl acetate extracts were dried under an atmosphere of N₂ and stored at −20 °C until prostaglandin RIA was performed. PGE₂ was quantified by using rabbit antiserum from Sigma. The sensitivity was 10 pg/tube and the cross-reactivity was 100% PGE₂ and <0.1% with other prostaglandins. Results are expressed as picogram per milligram of tissue or millilitre of medium.

RNA extraction and semiquantitative RT-PCR

Total RNA was extracted from MO culture using TRIzol reagent. The semi-quantitative analysis of mRNA was performed using a one-step RT-PCR method (Access RT-PCR System, Promega). All components for RT and PCR were assembled in 50 µl reactions containing 5× reaction buffer (10 mM Tris-HCL, pH 8.3, 50 mM KCl), 3 mM MgCl₂, 10 mM dNTP mixture, 1 µM of each gene specific primers, 2 µg template RNA, 5 units of avian myoblastic virus (AMV) reverse transcriptase and 5 units of Tfl DNA polymerase. The amplification of cDNA was performed under the following conditions: denaturation at 94 °C for 2 min followed by 35 cycles of denaturation at 94 °C for 30 s, annealing at 60 °C for Bcl2, NFκB and GAPDH and at 61 °C for Bax, during 1 min and extension at 72 °C for 2 min. The reaction was completed with a final extension at 72 °C for 7 min (thermal cycler). The following primers were used: Bax: (5'-GCCAATTGGAGAT-GAAGTGG-3' sense and 5'-GTGAGCGAGGCGGTGAGGAC-3' anti-sense), Bcl2(5'-GCAACCGAACGCCCCGCTGTG-3' sense and 5'-GTGATGCAGGCCCCCACC-AG-3' antisense), NFκB: (5'-AGCCCAGAAATATGGACCGT-3' sense and 5'-TCGAAATCTGAAGCCTCGCTGT-3' antisense), GAPDH: (5'-GGGCTGCCTTCTCTTGTGAC-3' sense and 5'-CGCCA-GTAGACTCCACGACA-3' antisense). The predicted sizes of the PCR-amplified products were 366, 474, 180 and 325 bp for Bax, Bcl2, NFκB and GAPDH respectively. The PCR products were resolved on 2% agarose gel electrophoresis containing 0.5 mg/ml GelRed and photographed with a Polaroid camera. Band intensities of RT-PCR products were quantified using NIH Image software. The relative abundance of each band was normalized according to the housekeeping GAPDH gene, calculated as the ratio of the intensity values of each product to that of GAPDH. Thus, results are expressed as mRNA/GAPDH in arbitrary units.

Statistical analysis

All data shown are expressed as mean $\pm$ S.E.M., and analysed using GraphPad Prism 5 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA). Significant differences among means were considered at a level of $P < 0.05$ and identified by one-way ANOVA and Tukey's test.

Results

MO secretions action on the ovarian Bax, Bcl2 and NFkB mRNA expressions

Presented in Fig. 1A are the results of the densitometric analysis of Bax mRNA (an apoptosis promoter) corrected for GAPDH expression (relative densitometric units) in PCO and control ovaries incubated with basal medium (basal conditions), control MO secretions and PCO MO secretions. It is observed that in basal conditions, the Bax mRNA expression of the PCO ovary was not significantly different to that of the control ovary. Incubating control ovaries with either control or PCO MO secretions resulted in a similar Bax mRNA expression in relation to the control ovary in basal conditions. Furthermore, incubation of the PCO ovary with control MO secretions did not show significant variations in the Bax mRNA expression with respect to the PCO ovary in basal conditions. However, incubation of the PCO ovary with PCO MO secretions presented a significant increase of Bax mRNA expression with respect to the PCO ovary incubated in basal conditions ($P < 0.01$) and therefore also showed a significant increase compared to the respective control ovary ($P < 0.001$).

As shown in Fig. 1B, no differences in the Bcl2 (an apoptosis inhibitor) mRNA expression were observed between PCO and control ovaries incubated with either basal medium, PCO

MO secretions or control MO secretions. From the data shown in Fig. 1A and B, it can be concluded that incubation of PCO ovaries with PCO MO secretions leads to an increase of the Bax to Bcl2 ratio with respect to PCO ovaries incubated in basal conditions (1.49 ± 0.06 vs 1.16 ± 0.03 ; $P < 0.05$) and also to the control ovaries incubated with PCO MO secretions (1.49 ± 0.06 vs 0.97 ± 0.03 ; $P < 0.05$).

Incubation of PCO ovaries in basal medium shows no significant differences in the NFkB mRNA expression compared to the corresponding control ovaries. Furthermore, after incubating with both control and PCO MO secretions, no variations were observed in the NFkB mRNA expression of the control ovaries compared to the control ovary in basal conditions. However, PCO ovaries incubated with both control and PCO MO secretions presented an increase of the NFkB gene expression compared to PCO ovaries incubated in basal conditions ($P < 0.05$ and $P < 0.01$ respectively). Likewise, there was also an increase of the gene expression with respect to the corresponding control ovaries incubated with both

control and PCO MO secretions, this increase being greater when PCO ovaries were incubated with PCO MO secretions ($P < 0.05$ for control and $P < 0.01$ for PCO MO secretions) (Fig. 1C).

Figure 1 Macrophage secretions on the ovarian (A) Bax mRNA expression, (B) Bcl2 mRNA expression and (C) NFkB mRNA expression. Ovaries from control (C) and polycystic (PCO) rats were stimulated with either basal medium (basal) or culture medium of C and PCO macrophages (macrophage secretions) for 3 h. Target mRNA was normalized by the level of GAPDH mRNA. Values are mean $\pm$ S.E.M. of three independent experiments, each experiment performed with three C and three PCO rats. * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$ compared with respective control.

MO secretions on the ovarian PGE₂ content and release

The results of the PGE₂ content in the ovaries are presented in Fig. 2A. It is observed that under basal conditions, the PGE₂ content was significantly increased in the PCO ovary with respect to the control ovary ($P<0.001$). It is also observed that incubating the control ovaries with both control and PCO MO secretions does not show an appreciable variation of prostaglandin content with respect to ovaries incubated in basal conditions. However, incubation of the PCO ovary with both control and PCO MO secretions showed a significant decrease of PGE₂ content with respect to the PCO ovary in basal conditions and also compared to their respective control ovaries ($P<0.001$), this decrease being more pronounced in the case of the PCO ovary incubated with PCO MO secretions.

As shown in Fig. 2B, under basal conditions, the amount of PGE₂ released from the PCO ovary was

Figure 2 Macrophage secretions on the ovarian (A) prostaglandin E₂ (PGE₂) content (A) and release (B). Ovaries from control (C) and polycystic (PCO) rats were stimulated with either basal medium (basal) or culture medium of C and PCO macrophages (macrophage secretions) for 3 h. Values are mean $\pm$ S.E.M. of three independent experiments, each experiment performed with three C and three PCO rats. * $P<0.05$, *** $P<0.001$ compared with respective control.

significantly increased compared to the control ovary ($P<0.001$). Incubating the control ovaries with both control and PCO MO secretions resulted in no significant variation in the amount of PGE₂ released with respect to control ovaries incubated with basal medium. However, incubation of the PCO ovary with both control and PCO MO secretions showed a significant decrease of PGE₂ release with respect to the PCO ovary in basal conditions ($P<0.001$), this decrease being more pronounced in the case of the PCO ovary incubated with PCO MO secretions. Therefore, incubating the PCO ovary with PCO MO secretions showed a decrease of PGE₂ release compared to the corresponding control ovary ($P<0.05$).

MO secretions on the ovarian nitrite release and iNOS protein expression

The results of nitrite released from the ovaries are presented in Fig. 3A. The release of nitrites from the PCO ovary incubated in basal conditions showed an increase with respect to the nitrites released by the corresponding control ovary ($P<0.01$). Stimulating control ovaries with both control and PCO MO secretions resulted in a similar increase of nitrite release compared to the control ovaries in basal condition ($P<0.001$). Furthermore, incubation of the PCO ovaries with control MO secretions showed an increase of nitrites released ($P<0.01$) with respect to basal conditions, while no change was observed when incubating with PCO MO secretions. Thus, incubation of PCO ovaries with PCO MO secretions showed a significant decrease of the nitrite released from the PCO ovaries in relation to the respective control ovary ($P<0.001$).

The results of iNOS protein expression in the ovaries are shown in Fig. 3B. Immunoblot analysis with an anti-iNOS monoclonal antibody demonstrated enhanced levels of iNOS protein expressions in PCO ovaries incubated in basal conditions relative to the corresponding control ovary ($P<0.05$). Stimulation of the control ovaries with both control and PCO MO secretions did not show changes of the iNOS expression with respect to that in basal conditions, whereas stimulating the PCO ovaries with both secretions resulted in a decrease of the iNOS expression relative to the PCO ovary in basal conditions ($P<0.001$), this decrease being more important with PCO MO secretions. Therefore, incubating the PCO ovary with PCO MO secretions showed a decrease of iNOS protein compared to the corresponding control ovary ($P<0.001$).

Effect of MO secretions on the steroids release from ovarian cells

Incubating with MO secretions from PCO as well as from control rats had a stimulatory effect on the androstenedione release from interstitial cells of both control and

Figure 3 Macrophage secretions on the ovarian (A) nitrite release and (B) iNOS protein expression. Ovaries from control (C) and polycystic (PCO) rats were stimulated with either basal medium (basal) or culture medium of C and PCO macrophages (macrophage secretions) for 3 h. Values are mean $\pm$ S.E.M. of three independent experiments, each experiment performed with three C and three PCO rats. The corresponding graph shows integrated optical density of the bands. * P <0.05, ** P <0.01, *** P <0.001 compared with respective control.

PCO ovaries compared to their respective basal values (P <0.001). In all cases, including basal conditions, PCO ovaries released more androstenedione than control ovaries (Fig. 4A), this difference being greater when stimulated with PCO MO secretions. Figure 4B shows that after stimulation with both control and PCO MO secretions, estradiol release from control granulosa cells showed no significant differences compared to basal conditions. However, incubating the PCO granulosa cells with both secretions resulted in a decrease of the estradiol release relative to the cells in basal conditions, and this decrease was more pronounced when PCO MO secretions were used (P <0.05 for control and P <0.01 for PCO MO secretions).

Effect of MO secretions on the ovarian TUNEL staining

In situ TUNEL analysis was used to detect the presence of apoptotic activity in ovarian sections (Fig. 5).

As expected, in basal conditions, the control ovary showed low or no staining and the absence of cystic follicles. Only a negligible amount of apoptosis in granulosa cells of secondary and antral follicles was observed (Fig. 5A). On the other hand, the PCO ovary showed TUNEL-positive reaction in a few primary follicles and an increased reactivity in secondary and antral follicles, as well as an abundance of cystic follicles, compared to control (Fig. 5B). TUNEL staining was predominantly localized in granulosa cells and, in less extent, on theca cells. It was observed that when incubating with PCO MO secretions, the TUNEL reactivity in secondary and antral follicles of the control ovary increased (Fig. 5E) and even more in secondary and antral follicles of the PCO ovary (Fig. 5F) compared with the respective ovary in basal conditions. TUNEL staining was seen in both granulosa as well as theca cells

Figure 4 (A) Effect of macrophage secretions on the androstenedione release from ovarian cells. Interstitial cells (IC) from control (C) and polycystic (PCO) rats were stimulated with either basal medium (basal) or culture medium of C and PCO macrophages (macrophage secretions) for 24 h. (B) Effect of macrophage secretions on the estradiol release from ovarian cells. Granulosa cells (GC) from control (C) and polycystic (PCO) rats were stimulated with either basal medium (basal) or culture medium of C and PCO macrophages (macrophage secretions) for 24 h. Values are mean $\pm$ S.E.M. of three independent experiments, each experiment performed with three C and three PCO rats. ** P <0.01; * P <0.05 compared with respective control.

Figure 5 *In-situ* detection of apoptosis by TUNEL in ovarian sections of control and PCO rats. Representative photomicrographs of control (A, C and D) and estradiol valerate exposed (B, E and F) rat ovary sections are shown. Ovaries from control and PCO rats were incubated for 6 h in basal medium (Basal) or macrophage secretions from control (Control MO) and PCO (PCO MO) rats. Nuclear dark brown staining shows a positive reaction. Arrowheads indicate isolated apoptotic cells, and arrows indicate apoptotic follicles. In basal conditions, increased apoptosis on the PCO ovary is evident as compared to negligible apoptosis in the control ovary (A and B). PCO MO secretions increase TUNEL reactivity in the control ovary and even more in the PCO ovary (E and F). Control MO secretions do not modify TUNEL reactivity in the control or PCO ovary compared to respective basal (C and D). TUNEL staining was predominately localized in granulosa cells. Magnification 100X.

in PCO ovaries under stimulation with PCO MO secretions. The distribution of TUNEL positive reactions in granulosa cells in primary, secondary and antral follicles is illustrated in the Table 1.

Discussion

Cystic ovarian disease and/or PCOS are reproduction disorders that affect human beings and other species such as bovine, ovine, caprine and porcine (Garverick 1997, Jakimiuk *et al.* 2002, Silvia *et al.* 2002, Salvetti *et al.* 2004, Salvetti *et al.* 2007). The heterogeneity of the syndrome is reflected in many polycystic ovaries animal models (Mahajan 1988, Salvetti *et al.* 2004, Baravalle *et al.* 2006, Francou *et al.* 2008). Furthermore, EV is one of the most widely used steroids to induce PCO in rats (Brawer *et al.* 1986, Rosa-e-Silva *et al.* 2003). On this

basis, in the current work, the effect of MO secretions on the polycystic ovarian apoptosis has been studied to gain further knowledge on the mechanisms determining PCO. The results show that MO secretions induce apoptosis in the PCO ovary.

In the ovary, the mechanisms underlying decisions of life and death involve cross-dialogue between pro-apoptotic and pro-survival molecules through fetal and adult life, which are carried out by several molecular pathways, out of which the Bcl2 family, TNF and caspases proteins appear to be important players. The Bax/Bcl2 ratio, which is thought to be a critical determinant of cell fate (a low ratio favours extended survival of cells, whereas a high ratio accelerates cell death) (Rueda *et al.* 1999, Tilly 2001, Skarzynski *et al.* 2005, Bas *et al.* 2011), was significantly higher in the PCO than in the control ovary incubated with PCO MO secretions, suggesting that these secretions may be involved in an imbalance among apoptotic and pro-apoptotic family members in the PCO ovary. In this sense, the NFkB mRNA expression was increased in the PCO ovary after incubation with the PCO MO secretions. It is known that the activation of this transcription factor, which induces the transcription of downstream target genes involved in the inflammatory and apoptotic process (Perkins 2007), is induced by TNF in rat granulosa cells through phosphorylation of IκB (Gonzalez-Navarrete *et al.* 2007). Considering the pro-apoptotic role for TNF in reproductive tissues (Kaipia *et al.* 1996, Hussein 2005, Haider & Knofler 2009) and having observed that secretions from spleen MO of PCO rats contain more TNF than secretions from control MO (Figueroa *et al.* 2012), the induction of NFkB mRNA expression in the PCO ovary after incubation with control MO secretions, which was even more accentuated with PCO MO secretions, could be associated, at least to some extent, to the TNF levels of the MO secretions. In addition, after incubation with PCO MO secretions, an increase of the apoptotic nuclei number in

Table 1 *In situ* detection of apoptosis by TUNEL in ovarian sections from control and PCO rats treated, or untreated, with macrophages secretions.

Group	Follicles			
	Primary	Secondary	Antral	Cystic
Control (Basal)	—	—	+ / —	Ab
PCO (Basal)	+	++	++	++
Control + MO PCO	—	+	++	Ab
PCO + MO PCO	++	+++	+++	+++

Adult cycling Holtzman control and PCO rats (injected with 2 mg of estradiol valerate) were sacrificed at estrus day. Ovaries from control and PCO rats were incubated for 6 h in basal medium (Basal) and macrophage secretions from PCO rats (MO PCO). Then, the ovaries were collected and processed for detection of apoptosis by TUNEL. Intensity of the positive TUNEL reaction: (—) negative; (+ / —) weak positive; (+) positive; (++) strong positive; (+++) strong positive including theca and stromal cells; Ab, absence of respective type of follicle.

the granulosa cells of the PCO ovary was detected by TUNEL staining. All of these findings suggest that PCO MO secretions induce apoptosis in the PCO ovary. Furthermore, immune cells play an important role in the pathology of PCOS, as suggested by the high concentration of white cells in the PCO ovary (Bukulmez & Arici 2000, Wu *et al.* 2004, Wu *et al.* 2007). Thus, resident MO populations could possibly modulate the cell death in the PCO ovary.

In the ovary, resident MO and other white cells, as well as follicular granulosa and theca cells, are known to produce prostaglandins (Takaya *et al.* 1997). In particular, PGE₂ has been shown to mediate the ovarian follicle growth in the rat *in vivo* (El-Nefiawy *et al.* 2005). In the present work, it was found that the content of PGE₂ in the PCO ovary incubated with basal medium was higher than in control ovary, as it was also observed with the PGE₂ release. This agrees with results from other authors who found an increased PGE₂ release from dehydroepiandrosterone- or letrozole- induced polycystic ovaries in rats and also from polycystic ovary granulosa cells collected from women (Navarra *et al.* 1996, Jabbour *et al.* 2009, Rezvanfar *et al.* 2011). Interestingly, both control and PCO MO secretions decreased the PGE₂ content of the PCO ovary, and this decrease was more pronounced with PCO than with control MO secretions. It is known that NO, which is produced by the resident and infiltrating ovarian MO, and also by ovarian cells (Bukulmez & Arici 2000, Wu *et al.* 2004, Wu *et al.* 2007), stimulates cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) activity, which is the rate-limiting step in prostaglandin synthesis (Chandrasekharan & Simmons 2004). Therefore, the fact that iNOS protein expression and nitrite levels follow a similar pattern than the PGE₂ content suggests that PGE₂ synthesis can be modified by PCO MO secretions.

The exact role of prostaglandins during apoptosis remains unclear. On the other hand, PGE₂ promotes survival of pathological cells by inhibiting apoptosis (heng *et al.* 1998, Rask *et al.* 2006), as well as death cells by pro-apoptotic effects (Bowolaksono *et al.* 2008). We have observed an inverse relationship between PGE₂ content and apoptosis of the PCO ovary after stimulation with PCO MO secretions, where a lower ovarian PGE₂ content and release and a higher apoptotic nuclei numbers were found compared with the effect induced by control MO secretions. It is also known that PGE₂ suppresses cell death induced by TNF in ovarian bovine luteal cells (Bowolaksono *et al.* 2008), and Kunisch *et al.* (2009) have shown that PGE₂ can act as a negative feedback molecule in the signalling pathway linking TNF to pro-destructive matrix metalloproteinase (MMP1) production in fibroblast cells. In addition, a high ovarian matrix metalloproteinase-2 (MMP2) has been found to be increased in PCO rats compared with healthy controls (Rezvanfar *et al.* 2014). Therefore, because our previous results show that the TNF α level of PCO MO secretions is higher than control MO secretions (Figuroa *et al.* 2012),

it is conceivable that the low PGE₂ content of the PCO ovary stimulated with those secretions can contribute to apoptosis promotion.

Moreover, an apoptotic role of androgen has been recognized in reproductive tissues. In this sense, global knockout of the androgen receptor in female mice leads to reduced fertility, with reduced numbers of antral follicles and increased granulosa cells apoptosis (Shiina *et al.* 2006, Walters *et al.* 2008, Tyndall *et al.* 2012). We have previously shown that PCO MO secretions decrease the conversion of androstenedione to estradiol in the PCO ovary, leading to an increase of androstenedione (Figuroa *et al.* 2012). This was also observed in the current study when PCO ovarian cells were incubated with PCO MO secretions, where an increase of androstenedione release from interstitial cells and a decrease of estradiol release from granulosa cells occurred. This effect can be attributed, at least in part, to the high TNF α content of PCO MO secretions. It has been reported that TNF α activates transcription of an inducible repressor form of 3',5'-cyclic adenosine 5'-monophosphate-responsive element binding modulator and represses P450 aromatase in ovarian rat granulosa cells (Morales *et al.* 2006). In addition, we have previously observed an increase of IL6 mRNA expression in PCO MO compared with control MO, which was even greater after treatment with testosterone (Figuroa *et al.* 2012), indicating that IL6 mRNA abundance seems to be modulated, as it was observed with TNF α , by testosterone environment. Because an enhanced IL6 production may attenuate estradiol production, partially by inhibiting the expression of aromatase mRNA in rat granulosa cells (Tamura *et al.* 2000), it is possible that the increased IL6 expression of PCO MO may contribute to the steroidogenic ability of the MO secretions to decrease the androstenedione conversion to estradiol in the PCO ovary.

Moreover, the low PGE₂ content and NO production found in the PCO ovaries stimulated with MO secretions could contribute to the androgen environment. PGE₂ stimulates Cyp19 expression, the key gene of estrogen biosynthesis, in rat granulosa cells (Cai *et al.* 2007). In relation to NO, it is known that the *in vitro* synthesis of estradiol is inversely regulated by NO in ovarian rat cells (Dave *et al.* 1997) and also in human granulosa-luteal cells cultures, the NO being capable of directly inhibiting the activity of aromatase or indirectly decreasing the levels of the mRNA of the enzyme (Snyder *et al.* 1996).

Considering the present results and knowing that testosterone stimulates the TNF α and IL6 production by MO, it is reasonable to suggest that the increase of androgens stimulated in ovarian cells by PCO MO secretions could in turn stimulate the cytokine production from MO, thus maintaining an apoptotic vicious cycle in the PCO ovary.

Despite the bidirectional relationship between pro-inflammatory cytokines and the androgen excess in PCOS is still unclear, our results suggest that the detrimental effect of up-regulation of proinflammatory cytokines of spleen MOs could contribute to explain the lack or loss of reproductive capacities observed in PCOS. Also, the possibility that MO secretions released into the general circulation can act on hypothalamic–pituitary sites, and subsequently produce changes in the ovary, cannot be discarded.

Supplementary data

This is linked to the online version of the paper at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1530/REP-15-0216>.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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