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# Chapter

Introduction

1

## INTRODUCTION

### *Brachial plexus injury*

A brachial plexus injury (BPI) is caused by traction on the brachial plexus during delivery or due to a high-energy road traffic accident in young adults<sup>1,2</sup>. Multiple synonyms are used for an obstetric brachial plexus injury (OBPI), including neonatal, congenital and perinatal brachial plexus palsy. However OBPI is the most preferred terminology in Europe and is therefore used in this thesis<sup>3</sup>. The incidence of an OBPI during delivery varies between 0.4 and 2.9 per 1000 live births<sup>4-6</sup>. The upper part of the brachial plexus (C5,C6) is most often affected, resulting in variable weakness of active shoulder and elbow flexion movements<sup>7</sup>. Elbow extension, wrist and hand function are additionally impaired when the C7, C8, T1, medial trunk and inferior trunk are involved. An isolated injury of the lower brachial plexus (C8-T1) is rare.

The first focus for therapy is on the type of injury of the peripheral nerve, for that matter, to the severity of the traction injury which may extend from minimal (axonotmesis) to severe (neurotmesis and avulsion) traction, as addressed in previous theses<sup>8,9</sup>. However, little attention has been paid to the effects on the end organ of the nerve: the muscle and its sequelae on functionality for the patient. A large variety of outcome measures have been used to evaluate the natural history and the effect of treatment, however there is no consensus on which outcome measures are the most appropriate<sup>10,11</sup>. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) is a worldwide accepted model providing a universal language for the description of functioning and includes the domains Body Structures, Body Functions, Activities and Participation as well as Personal and Environmental Factors<sup>12</sup>. ICF Core Sets are generally used to describe the typical spectrum of problems of functioning and health patients with a specific condition (e.g. brachial plexus injury). An important base for the optimal management of OBPI is an in-depth understanding, systematic consideration and sound measurement of the impact of OBPI on health and health-related domains of these patients. To date however, no universally accepted overall framework is available to assess the outcome of patients with (obstetric) BPI.

### *Muscle degeneration*

Long-term denervation results in muscle degeneration including muscle atrophy, fatty degeneration and interstitial fibrosis in the muscle. Current literature on muscle degeneration in the upper extremity of BPI only focuses on total muscle cross sectional area (CSA) and on a qualitative assessment of muscle fatty degeneration including the Goutallier score as a surrogate for contractile CSA, which is the true functional part of the muscle<sup>13-20</sup>. The inter-observer

reliability of the Goutallier score is moderate even in experienced hands <sup>21, 22</sup>. Furthermore, qualitative assessment of fatty degeneration is less sensitive in detecting small differences <sup>23, 24, 25</sup>. Quantitative measurements which assess the decrease in contractile CSA compared to the sound extremity could improve insight in the extent of muscle degeneration and would thus facilitate a better treatment strategy.

Muscle denervation and subsequent muscle degeneration results in functional limitations, contractures and osseous deformities. With respect to the elbow, the main complication occurring during follow-up is a flexion contracture, with a prevalence of 50 to 90% <sup>26, 27</sup>. Flexion contractures limited to 10° to 30° can be treated by range of motion exercises and nighttime splinting. In a minority of cases, however, if the contracture exceeds 30°, additional treatment is needed such as serial casting <sup>26, 27</sup>. Although serial casting is frequently applied and globally considered to be the preferred therapy, literature is limited on the effect of stretching by serial casting for elbow contractures. Other clinical consequences of muscle degeneration around the elbow include supination contractures and limited active elbow flexion for which surgical procedures are being performed including forearm osteotomies, biceps rerouting and Steindler elbow flexorplasty <sup>28-33</sup>.

Around the shoulder, muscle degeneration often results in internal rotation contractures, with a subsequent posterior humeral subluxation in the growing child, glenoid retroversion and glenoid and humeral head malformation <sup>16, 17, 34</sup>. The prevalence of internal rotation contractures can be as high as 39% depending on the extent and severity of the BPI <sup>35, 36</sup>. Muscle degeneration is most prominent in the subscapular muscle <sup>16, 17</sup>. Treatments of internal rotation contractures include surgical subscapular release combined with transfer of the latissimus dorsi and/or teres major tendon to the rotator cuff to create active external rotation <sup>37-39</sup>. Disadvantages of subscapular release and/or tendon transfer include weaker adduction and potential partial power loss of internal rotation with a subsequent risk for an external rotation contracture of the shoulder. Therefore, coracohumeral ligament releases have been advocated by our group. An even less invasive method to address this internal rotation contracture of the shoulder is the injection of botulinum toxin A (BTX-A) <sup>40, 41</sup>. There have been some reports on BTX-A injections but no clear conclusions could be drawn from these studies since heterogeneity of included patients as well as technique were large (i.e. number and units of BTX-A injections, variety of muscles, combination with tendon transfer surgery etc.) <sup>42-47</sup>. Other surgical procedures to improve shoulder functionality of BPI patients include arthodesis of the shoulder, glenoid anteversion osteotomies and humeral rotation osteotomies <sup>48-51</sup>.

## ***Muscle regeneration***

The regenerative potential of skeletal muscle is determined by muscle stem cells, which are called satellite cells. These are quiescent mononucleated cells that are sequestered between the basal lamina and the plasma membrane of the myofibers and can be identified by the expression of the paired box transcription factor Pax7<sup>52,53</sup>. The number of satellite cells in adult human has been shown to range from 7% in young age (20 years old) to 1% of all skeletal muscle nuclei in old age (73 years old)<sup>54</sup>. In response to injury, they become activated, proliferate, differentiate and fuse to existing muscle fibers or fuse together to form new myofibers during regeneration of damaged skeletal muscle<sup>55</sup>. This regenerative potential is influenced by replicative and stress-induced premature senescence and apoptosis of these cells.

Replicative senescence is indicated by exhaustion of the pool of available satellite cells and their proliferative capacity which is limited by the mitotic clock<sup>56-58</sup>. Progressive erosion of telomeres after each cell division leads to critically short telomere length and the activation of replicative senescence through a p53 and p21 dependent pathway<sup>59</sup>. The erosion of telomeres can be prevented by the catalytic subunit of the human telomerase reversed transcriptase (hTERT) leading to extension of replicative life<sup>60</sup>. Furthermore, lack of differentiation may contribute to poor functional recovery of long-term denervated muscle<sup>61,62</sup>. Up-regulation of the p16 dependent pathway results in proliferative arrest before telomeres reach their critical length known as stress induced premature senescence<sup>63,64</sup>. The regenerative potential of satellite cells is also limited by the extent of apoptosis. Upon denervation, the susceptibility of satellite cells to apoptosis has been shown to increase<sup>65,66</sup>. Satellite cell activity can be modulated by a microenvironment inducing inflammatory cytokines, however underlying factors influencing the regenerative potential of satellite cells have not yet been identified<sup>58,67</sup>.

Cell therapy has the goal to repair damaged cells and to replenish the exhausted satellite cell pool by (systemic or local) injection of cells with myoregenerative properties. Transplantation of primary satellite cells has been shown to improve the properties of reinnervated skeletal muscles<sup>68</sup>. However, poor cellular survival and limited cell dissemination hampers successful satellite cell transplantation. Furthermore, only few transplanted cells fuse with host muscle cell fibers. This suggests that a subpopulation of myogenic cells (i.e. stem cells) may be optimally suited for transplantation<sup>69,70</sup>. Bone marrow (BM)-derived cells migrate to the site of muscle injury and contribute to the satellite cell pool<sup>71-73</sup>. The injection of autologous BM-derived mononuclear cells (MNCs) has been applied in clinical studies focusing on the muscles of the heart and leg<sup>74-77</sup>. Cell therapy could potentially regenerate partially denervated muscle in BPI by replenishment of the satellite cell pool and re-establishment of vascular and neural connections which are essential for muscle growth and function<sup>78,79</sup>.

## AIM OF THIS THESIS

The aim of this thesis is to evaluate determinants of outcome, which will have an effect on overall functionality of the patient with a BPI. Deterioration of functionality will either occur immediate after the injury, but will also occur years after the initial peripheral nerve injury. They are generally, but not exclusively, related to the primary target organ of the nerve: the muscle. Secondary to these impaired muscles with subsequent impaired movement of the extremities, joint development in the growing child will be affected. This will have effect at the functionality level of the patient. To this end, outcome measures of functionality using the ICF model are developed (chapter 2). At the clinical level, muscle and joint deformities and their treatment options are addressed (chapter 3, 4, 5). At the cellular level, a deteriorated muscle is characterized in both inflammatory as well as nerve injury patients (chapter 6, 7). Finally, a possible treatment option with cell therapy for this muscle in nerve injury patients is used (chapter 8). The results of this thesis are summarized and future perspectives of muscle degeneration and regeneration for patients with BPI are considered in the discussion (chapter 9).

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