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Mapping the unseen to uncover the unknown: spatial analysis of neuromuscular disorders

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What we know is
a drop, what we
do not know is an
ocean.

- Isaac Newton



English summary

Dystrophinopathies are a group of muscular dystrophies caused by pathogenic variants, or mutations, on the dystrophin (*DMD*) gene. These defaults can be passed on from parent to child, or the genetic defect can happen spontaneously during pregnancy. The *DMD* gene encodes for the dystrophin protein, a protein that is essential for proper muscle functioning. Dystrophin is part of a bigger complex, the dystrophin-glycoprotein complex (DGC), where it serves as a stabilizer between the muscle cells and extracellular matrix. When dystrophin is lost, due to these mutations, muscles that undergo damage, which happens day in and out, struggle to function well and repair themselves properly. This leads to a loss of muscle, which results in a loss of muscle strength and function.

In this thesis, two types of dystrophinopathy will be discussed. Becker muscular dystrophy (BMD) and Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD) are both dystrophinopathies and have their differences as well as some overlap. BMD patients are thought to suffer from a 'milder, slower' variant, as the dystrophin protein is made, but not in the normal form or amount. It is a progressive neuromuscular disorder, affecting 7-29 in 100,000 males that will experience their muscles becoming weaker over time until it affects the whole body. Patients suffering from DMD, produce no or not-functioning dystrophin proteins. This leads to a very progressive loss of muscle and has a prevalence of 1 in 5,000 male births. While there is no cure available yet for these patients, life expectancy has improved to many DMD patients living into their early thirties. To improve the current therapies available, aid in basic knowledge on the pathology and find potential new therapeutic targets for dystrophinopathies, more research is needed. We decided to use a new technique, spatial transcriptomics, on (diseased) skeletal muscle tissue as our main research approach.

In **Chapter 1**, we introduce the basic pathology of dystrophinopathies, both muscular and cognitive. The cell types and genes that are known to be involved in the secondary pathology and muscle wasting are described. And lastly, the innovative and new techniques, such as spatial transcriptomics and single cell RNA-sequencing (scRNA-seq) used in this thesis are introduced.

The cell types and mapping of *Dmd* expression in the brain is studied in **Chapter 2**. By utilizing scRNA-seq, the different *Dmd* patterns are mapped across different brain areas, cell types and development stages. Moreover, the lack of specific *Dmd* isoforms and its consequences are explored further using DMD mouse models.

Chapter 3 is where the use of a noninvasive imaging technique (DT-MRI) is tested as a potential metric as an alternative for the invasive muscle biopsies to measure disease hallmarks of BMD. The DT-MRI metrics are aligned with histological measures of matching skeletal muscle biopsies from BMD patients and healthy controls.

Hereafter, in **Chapter 4**, the use of a new technology, spatial transcriptomics, is introduced. We applied this technique for the first time in order to reveal molecular markers of histopathological tissue changes in DMD mouse models. This study, with a small cohort, shows the potential of the technique for unbiased marker detection, while it is deepening our knowledge on the basic DMD pathology.

We then applied this same technique to a cohort of skeletal muscle biopsies derived from BMD and DMD patients in **Chapter 5**. We dive further into specific tissue alterations such as fibrofatty infiltration, as well as the interaction of cells in the diseased tissue microenvironment by using scRNA-seq data.

Chapter 6 provides the reader with an overall summary of the previous Chapters and discusses the results presented. The discussion will highlight new terrains to be discovered and challenges to overcome for neuromuscular research.

Taken together, this thesis introduces new ways to perform research in the neuromuscular field by pioneering in the use of spatial transcriptomics on skeletal muscle. We add to the knowledge on *Dmd* patterning in the central nervous system, discover genes that can be linked to observed pathology in the skeletal muscle and investigate whether there is a need for invasive biopsies in BMD research.

Dystrofinopathieën vormen een groep spierziekten die worden veroorzaakt door pathogene varianten, of mutaties, in het dystrofinegen (*DMD*). Deze afwijkingen kunnen erfelijk zijn en van ouder op kind worden doorgegeven, maar kunnen ook spontaan ontstaan tijdens de zwangerschap. Het *DMD*-gen codeert voor het dystrofine-eiwit, dat essentieel is voor een goede werking van de spieren. Dystrofine maakt deel uit van een groter eiwitcomplex, het dystrophin-glycoprotein complex (DGC), waarin het fungeert als stabilisator tussen spiercellen en de extracellulaire matrix. Wanneer dystrofine ontbreekt als gevolg van mutaties, zijn spieren minder goed in staat om dagelijkse schade te weerstaan en zichzelf te herstellen. Dit leidt tot spierafbraak, met als gevolg verlies van spierkracht en -functie.

In dit proefschrift worden twee typen dystrofinopathie besproken: Becker spierdystrofie (BMD) en Duchenne spierdystrofie (DMD). Beide aandoeningen vertonen zowel verschillen als overeenkomsten. BMD wordt beschouwd als een mildere en langzaam voortschrijdende variant, aangezien het dystrofine-eiwit wel wordt geproduceerd, maar in een afwijkende vorm of hoeveelheid. Het betreft een progressieve neuromusculaire aandoening die voorkomt bij 7–29 per 100.000 mannen en die leidt tot geleidelijke spierzwakte die uiteindelijk het gehele lichaam kan beïnvloeden. Patiënten met DMD produceren geen of een niet-functioneel dystrofine-eiwit, wat resulteert in een zeer snelle en ernstige spierafbraak. DMD heeft een prevalentie van ongeveer 1 op de 5.000 mannelijke geboorten. Hoewel er momenteel geen genezing beschikbaar is, is de levensverwachting de afgelopen decennia verbeterd, waarbij veel DMD-patiënten inmiddels de leeftijd van begin dertig bereiken.

Om bestaande therapieën te verbeteren, meer inzicht te verkrijgen in de pathologie en nieuwe therapeutische aangrijpingspunten te identificeren voor dystrofinopathieën, is aanvullend onderzoek noodzakelijk. In dit proefschrift is gekozen voor het gebruik van een relatief nieuwe techniek, spatial transcriptomics, die vervolgens is toegepast op (ziek) skeletspierweefsel als voornaamste onderzoeksbenadering.

