

AWARD NUMBER: W81XWH-19-1-0736

TITLE: Novel Combinatorial Approaches to Repair Visual System After Optic Nerve Damage

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REPORT DATE: October 2021

TYPE OF REPORT: Annual Progress Report

PREPARED FOR: U.S. Army Medical Research and Development Command
Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT: Approved for Public Release;
Distribution Unlimited

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE: Oct 2021	2. REPORT TYPE Annual Progress Report	3. DATES COVERED 1SEPT2020 - 31AUG2021
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Novel Combinatorial Approaches to Repair Visual System After Optic Nerve Damage		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER W81XWH-19-1-0736
		5b. GRANT NUMBER VR180110
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S) Kevin Park E-Mail: kpark@miami.edu		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) University of Miami Miller School of Medicine Miami Project to Cure Paralysis 1095 NW 14th Ter. LPLC 4-20 Miami, FL 33136		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Medical Research and Development Command Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		

14. ABSTRACT

Background: The neurons in the eye called retinal ganglion cells (RGCs) send visual information through nerve fibers that travel into the optic nerve to reach the brain. Damage to the optic nerve resulting from traumatic brain injury (TBI) and traumatic optic neuropathy (TON) can result in the death of these neurons, and subsequent visual impairment. There is no treatment available to restore vision once the damage is done. We have previously discovered specific genes that induce robust optic nerve regeneration in mice. Additionally, we have demonstrated that genetic modification of cell death-related genes render RGCs highly resistant to injury.

Objective/Hypothesis: The objective of this proposal is to determine the ability of combinatorial strategies to rescue RGCs and improve optic nerve regeneration in clinically-relevant models of optic nerve injury. The hypotheses of our study are: i) using a combinatorial treatment strategy comprised of hypothermia exposure and neuroprotective gene therapy will further improve RGC survival after TBI, and ii) regenerative gene therapy will promote optic nerve regeneration and restoration of lost vision after clinically-relevant optic nerve injury generated close to the brain. The specific aims are:

Aim 1. Systematically characterize the site, type, and time course of damage in the visual pathway, and long term subtype-specific RGC loss following TBI. Currently, there are gaps in the knowledge of the type and extent of axonal damage that occurs in the optic pathway after TBI. Therefore, more comprehensive animal studies are needed to better understand the pathophysiology of optic nerve damage and visual impairment after TBI.

Aim 2. Assess the individual and combined effects of hypothermia and gene therapy in preventing RGC death after TBI. We reason that hypothermia will reduce the rate of cell death in the acute stages after injury, while gene therapy will provide long-term neuroprotection of RGCs, and we expect a synergistic effect with combinatorial treatment versus single treatments alone.

Aim 3. Assess RGC axon regeneration and functional recovery after optic nerve crush adjacent to the brain. Nearly all the previous animal studies aimed at examining optic nerve regeneration have used a model in which the injury is generated in optic nerve regions close to the eye. This is simply because these regions are easy to access during animal surgery. However, optic nerve damage, particularly that resulting from TBI, occurs most frequently in optic nerve regions near the brain. Thus, we will test the exciting possibility that gene therapy will be effective in restoring vision in a clinically-relevant crush model in which optic nerve injury is performed near the brain.

Study Design:

Aim 1: To characterize visual system damage following TBI, we will subject adult mice to TBI and perform cutting-edge whole tissue imaging. We will systematically analyze signs of axon severance over several time points after TBI. Since there are different types of RGCs present, we will use immunostaining to examine which types of RGC die or survive after TBI.

Aim 2: We will assess for the first time the combinatorial effects of hypothermia and gene therapy in protecting RGCs after TBI. Animals will undergo hypothermia for several hours and gene therapy that targets cell death-associated genes will be administered into the eye. Using tissue staining, we will determine whether these treatment paradigms administered within hours or days after TBI improves RGC survival.

Aim 3: Animals will receive optic nerve crush immediately before the chiasm. Gene therapy that targets several different regeneration-associated genes will be given to the injured animals. Optic nerve regeneration will be assessed in tissue sections. Restoration of visual functions in animals will be assessed by monitoring various visually-guided behaviors.

Impact: There is currently no treatment that can prevent RGC death and restore vision after TBI and TON. Hypothermia and gene therapy are viable therapeutic options and have already been tested in other pathological conditions in the CNS. The combined effects of these strategies have not been tested before. The potential RGC protection and regeneration conferred by these strategies will be significantly impactful in the field of neuroscience and for the treatment of TON patients.

Military Relevance: Military service members are at a greater risk of incurring optic nerve damage. This proposal will investigate combinatorial therapeutic interventions to rescue dying neurons, promote regeneration, and restore vision, with the added potential to be administered in the clinic and on the battlefield

15. SUBJECT TERMS

TBI, axon regeneration, hypothermia, optic neuropathy, PTEN, apoptosis, axon injury, retinal ganglion cells

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:

a. REPORT

b. ABSTRACT

c. THIS PAGE

Unclassified

Unclassified

Unclassified

17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT

Unclassified

18. NUMBER OF PAGES

10

19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
USAMRMC**19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER** (include area code)

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1. Introduction

Vision, the ability to see, is perhaps one of the most important senses in our lives, as it is critical for navigation and survival. Military service members are more likely than non-military civilians to encounter traumatic events that can result in brain injury. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a debilitating, multifaceted trauma that frequently occurs in the military patient population. One of the facets of TBI is damage to the optic nerve, which can result in significant visual impairment. About 75% of active military personnel subjected to trauma suffer from progressive glaucoma or optic nerve injury (also known as optic neuropathy). The optic nerve works like a “highway”, connecting the eye to the brain. When it is damaged, such as what often occurs in TBI, the eye no longer can send visual information to the brain, resulting in irreversible blindness. Currently, there is no treatment available to patients that can regenerate the damaged optic nerve needed to reverse blindness. There has been some progress in animal research aimed at finding a cure for repairing the damaged optic nerve. One promising and relatively safe method is hypothermia exposure (cooling of the body) with beneficial effects observed in preclinical animal models to reduce the rate of nerve damage. Another therapeutic approach is the use of gene therapy to provide nerve protection and permit regeneration. However, these approaches, when given individually, have limited therapeutic effects. An optimized approach would be to combine the individual treatments together, ultimately leading to additive and synergistic effects. Such combinatorial approaches have never been tested in animal models of TBI-induced optic nerve injury. Our proposed study will explore this exciting possibility. The main objective of this study is to determine whether our unique combinatorial strategies rescue cells and promote optic nerve regeneration with a greater efficacy in clinically-relevant models of optic nerve injury. To this end, we will use cutting-edge tissue imaging techniques, genetically-modified mice, and innovative gene therapy approaches.

2. Keywords TBI, axon regeneration, hypothermia, optic neuropathy, PTEN, apoptosis, axon injury, retinal ganglion cells (RGCs).

3. Accomplishments

Below is the list of important activities and timeline approved SOW.

Specific Aim 1: Systematically characterize the site, type and time course of damage in the visual pathway, and long term subtype-specific RGC loss following TBI.	Proposed Timeline	Progress
Major Task 1: Systematically document axonal damage in Thy1-YFP mice with CTB injection.	Months	
Local IBC/IACUC Approval	1-2 months	Completed.
Milestone Achieved: Local IBC/IACUC/ACURO Approval	1-4 months	Completed.
Subtask 1: Breed Thy1-YFP mice (up to 4 breeding pairs 4 males and 4 females= 8 mice total)	2-6 months	Completed.
Subtask 2: Intravitreal injection of CTB. TBI, image whole tissues and document site, type and time course of axonal damage (5 mice x 3 time points 2, 14 and 56 days = 15 mice total)	2-6 months	Analysis underway. Using immunohistochemistry, we assessed RGC survival and cell stress markers in the retina, and signs of inflammation in the retina as well as in the optic nerves. Labeling of axons with CTB was performed, and the tissue sections were analyzed for signs of axonal transport disruption.
Subtask 3: No CTB injection animals. TBI, image whole tissues and document site, type, and time course of axonal damage (5 mice x 3 time points 2, 14 and 56 days = 15 mice total)	2-12 months	Analysis underway.
Subtask 4: TBI, assessment of RGC types' differences in survival (10 mice x 4 groups = 40 mice total)	2-12 months	Completed. Different RGC markers were used to

		assess survival different RGC types after injury.
Milestone(s): Have the 3D imaging Have the analysis on axonal damage profiles	12 months	Analysis underway.
Milestone(s): Have the RGC types' survival rates determined	12 months	Analysis underway.

Specific Aim 2: Assess the individual and combined effects of hypothermia and gene therapy in preventing retinal ganglion cell (RGC) death after TBI.		
Major Task 2: Determine RGC survival after combinatorial treatment		
Subtask 1: Generate AAV2-shRNA against CHOP and AAV2-XBP1	12-16 months	Completed. We have AAVs including AAVs targeting XBP1, CHOP as well as AAV-shRNAs against numerous genes for further examination.
Subtask 2: Generate animals subjected to TBI and intravitreal injection of AAV with or without hypothermia (8 mice x 7 groups x 2 survival time points = 112 mice total)	13-18 months	Animals are being generated and analysis is underway.
Subtask 3: Immunohistochemistry to examine RGC survival in various animal groups	13-20 months	Animals are being generated and analysis is underway.
Milestone(s) Achieved: Have the RGC quantification completed	20 months	Animals are being generated and analysis is underway.
Milestone(s) Achieved: Submit manuscript for publication on the results from 3D imaging in Specific Aim 1	20-28 months	One manuscript has been accepted for publication.
Specific Aim 3. Assess RGC axon regeneration and functional recovery after pre-chiasmatic nerve crush.		
Major Task 3: Assess the extent of RGC axon regeneration		
Subtask 1: Generate AAV2-shRNA against PTEN, AAV2-STATca and AAV2-MEKca	20-23 months	AAV generation is underway.
Subtask 2: Generate animals subjected to prechiasmatic crush and intravitreal injection of AAV (8 mice x 2 groups. 12 mice x 2 groups = 40 mice total)	21-24 months	Under planning.
Subtask 3: Tissue sections to examine RGC axon regeneration and reconnection in the chiasm and into the	22-30 months	Not yet commenced.

brain		
Milestone(s) Achieved: Document regeneration profiles, target innervation and potential synapse formation by the regenerated axons	30 months	Not yet commenced.
Major Task 4: Assess restoration of visual functions in mice		
Subtask 1: Behavioral assays including circadian rhythm, pupil reflex, visual cliff test (12 mice x 2 groups = 24 mice total)	22-32 months	Not yet commenced.
Subtask 2: Prepare and submit publications on RGC survival and axon regeneration	36 months	Not yet commenced.
Milestone(s) Achieved: Complete functional behavioral assays Milestone(s) Achieved: Submission of at least one research paper Milestone(s) Achieved: Review of potential IP, patent, and potential transition plan for next step in translation into clinics	36 months	Not yet commenced.

There has been a significant slowdown in initiating and completing some of the proposed animal experiment due to the restrictions resulting from the COVID19. Nonetheless, we have managed to carry out substantial experiments during the last two years of funding period. We have initiated and completed the listed subtasks above. Specifically, the main goals of this reporting period were to; i) test the TBI models in our hands and assess the degree of visual system damage using tissue sections, and in whole tissues (i.e., subtasks 1, 2 and 3). We have generated several animal groups that were subjected to either sham surgery or TBI. Several days and weeks after TBI, mice were humanely euthanized. Eyes, optic nerves, and brains were removed from these animals for analysis. Retinas were processed for immunostaining and stained with antibodies against RBPMs (RGC marker), reactive astrocytes (i.e., GFAP) and immune cells (IBA1). RGC numbers were counted, and signs of inflammation were assessed. Some animals received intravitreal injection of cholera toxin beta subunit (CTB) prior to TBI to label RGC axons. CTB labeling was used to assess the effects of TBI on axonal transport and examine for signs of axonal damage. Some animals with CTB injection were perfused, then processed for tissue clearing and whole tissue imaging. Using immunohistochemistry, we assessed RGC survival (i.e., using RBPMs antibody) and cell stress markers (ATF3 and c-Jun expression) in the retina, and signs of inflammation in the retina as well as in the optic nerves. Labeling of axons with CTB was performed, and the tissue sections were analyzed for signs of axonal transport disruption. We see some degree of visual system damage in these mice.

In addition to the genes that we proposed to examine (e.g., XBP1 and CHOP), we sought to examine other genes that might have even stronger neuroprotective effects on mouse RGCs. To this end, we have searched in our RNAseq data protein coding genes as well as non-coding RNAs (e.g., microRNAs and long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs)) that are differentially expressed in the injury-resilient RGC types (i.e., ipRGCs). Accordingly, we find dozens of transcription factors and lncRNAs that might be good candidates for further testing in vivo. These genes include Taf7l, Phf10 and Mef2b, and several lncRNAs whose functions are completely unknown. We have started to generate shRNAs and Crispr/Cas9 to silence these genes, generate AAVs and injected in adult mice to assess whether they promote RGC survival after optic nerve injury. Excitingly, our preliminary data show that one lncRNA (we call it "lncRNA 2021" for now) has strong neuroprotective effects of RGCs in vivo (Figure 1). A part of this initial finding was submitted to the journal *BMC Genomics* and was recently accepted for publication. To our knowledge, this is the first demonstration that silencing a single lncRNA protects adult RGCs after optic nerve damage.

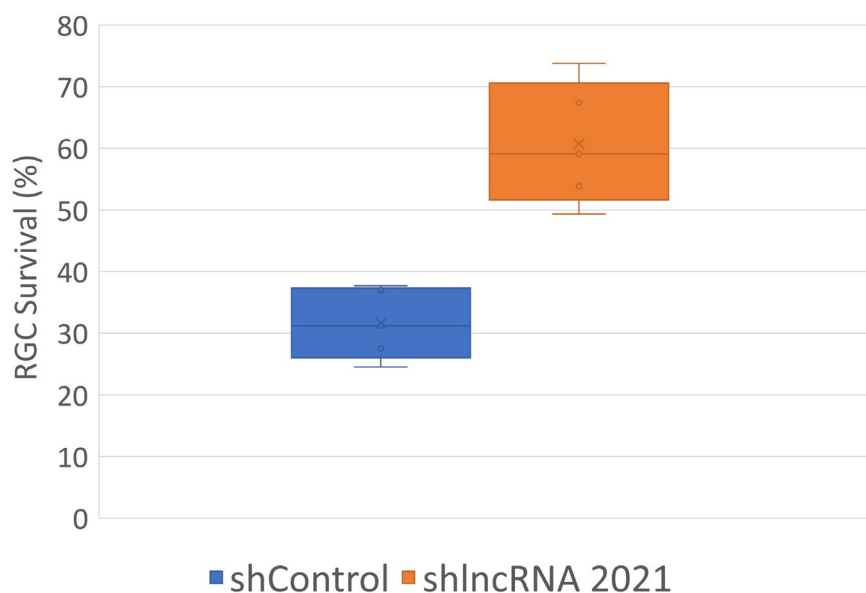


Figure 1. Novel neuroprotective lncRNA against optic nerve damage in adult mice. Animals were given intravitreal injection of AAV expressing shRNA against lncRNA 2021. Control animals received injection of AAV expressing scramble shRNA. Animals were given intraorbital optic nerve lesion, and perfused 2 weeks after injury. shlncRNA animals show about 2-fold increase in RGC survival compared to the control group. (n=5 mice/group).

4. Impact

There is currently no treatment that can prevent retinal ganglion cell (RGC) death and restore vision after traumatic brain injury (TBI) and traumatic optic neuropathy (TON). Hypothermia and gene therapy are viable therapeutic options and have already been tested in other pathological conditions in the central nervous system. The combined effects of these strategies have not been tested before. The potential RGC protection and regeneration conferred by these strategies will be significantly impactful in the field of neuroscience and for the treatment of TON patients. We are currently processing and analyzing the tissues and samples from animals generated for subtasks above. The results from these sets of animals will create strong foundation for our future experiment proposed in this study.

5. Changes/Problems

COVID 19 situation last year and early 2021 has significantly limited our ability to generate animals, and perform analyses on the processed tissues. Fortunately, most restrictions were lifted off in the last several months, allowing staff to return to work, and generate animals, perform experiments. We will continue to work with the guidelines provided by the School, and seek to remain as strategic and productive as possible to complete the proposed studies.

6. Products

We recently had one manuscript accepted for publication, partially supported by this grant.

Manuscript title: Identification of Long Noncoding RNAs in Injury-Resilient and Injury-Susceptible Mouse Retinal Ganglion Cells. **BMC Genomics** (Accepted).

7. Participants & Other Collaborating Organizations

Name:	Kevin Park
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Project Role:	PD/PI
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Nearest person month worked:	1
Contribution to Project:	Dr. Park has designed the experiment, and trained students and lab technicians.

Name:	Meghan Blaya
Project Role:	Investigator (Assistant Scientist)
Researcher Identifier (ORCID ID):	0000-0002-1722-7872
Nearest person month worked:	1
Contribution to Project:	Dr. Blaya has performed TBI, processed tissues and trained students.

Name:	Ana Ayupe
Project Role:	Investigator (Postdoctoral fellow)
Researcher Identifier (ORCID ID):	
Nearest person month worked:	4
Contribution to Project:	Dr. Ayupe processed tissues, analyzed the samples and trained students.

8. Special Reporting Requirements N/a

9. Appendices N/A