Loss of Thrombomodulin in Placental Dysfunction in Preeclampsia

Rosanne J. Turner, Kitty W.M. Bloemenkamp, Jan A. Bruijn, Hans J. Baelde

Objective—Preeclampsia is a pregnancy-specific syndrome characterized by placental dysfunction and an angiogenic imbalance. Systemically, levels of thrombomodulin, an endothelium- and syncytiotrophoblast-bound protein that regulates coagulation, inflammation, apoptosis, and tissue remodeling, are increased. We aimed to investigate placental thrombomodulin dysregulation and consequent downstream effects in the pathogenesis of preeclampsia.

Approach and Results—Placentas from 28 preeclampsia pregnancies, 30 uncomplicated pregnancies, and 21 pregnancies complicated by growth restriction as extra controls were included. Immunohistochemical staining of thrombomodulin, caspase-3, and fibrin was performed. Placental mRNA expression of thrombomodulin, inflammatory markers, matrix metalloproteinases 2 and 9, and soluble Flt-1 were measured with quantitative polymerase chain reaction. Thrombomodulin mRNA expression was determined in vascular endothelial growth factor–transfected trophoblast cell lines. Thrombomodulin protein and mRNA expression were decreased in preeclampsia as compared with both control groups (P<0.001). Thrombomodulin mRNA expression correlated with maternal body mass index (P<0.01) and diastolic blood pressure (P<0.05) in preeclampsia. An increase in placental apoptotic cells was associated with preeclampsia (P<0.001). Thrombomodulin expression correlated positively with matrix metalloproteinase expression (P<0.01) in preeclampsia, but not with fibrin deposits or inflammatory markers. Placental soluble Flt-1 expression correlated with decreased thrombomodulin expression. Vascular endothelial growth factor induced upregulation of thrombomodulin expression in trophoblast cells.

Conclusions—Decreased thrombomodulin expression in preeclampsia may play a role in placental dysfunction in preeclampsia and is possibly caused by an angiogenic imbalance. Hypertension and obesity are associated with thrombomodulin downregulation. These results set the stage for further basic and clinical research on thrombomodulin in the pathogenesis of preeclampsia and other syndromes characterized by endothelial dysfunction. (Arterioscler Thromb Vasc Biol. 2016;36:728-735. DOI: 10.1161/ATVBAHA.115.306780.)

Key Words: angiogenesis ▪ coagulation ▪ hypertension ▪ preeclampsia/pregnancy ▪ thrombomodulin

Preeclampsia complicates 2% to 8% of all pregnancies and is a leading cause of maternal and fetal morbidity and mortality. The exact pathogenesis of the syndrome is unknown, but impaired placenta plays a key role in its pathogenesis. In preeclampsia, placental production of antiangiogenic factors such as soluble Flt-1 (sFlt-1) and soluble endoglin is increased, which results in deprivation of essential survival factors in the endothelium and syncytiotrophoblast. This contributes to the development of endothelial dysfunction, causing increased systemic vascular resistance, high blood pressure, and hypercoagulability. Further, a hyper-inflammatory state develops, characterized, for example, by complement deposits in the kidneys and in the placenta.

Thrombomodulin is essential for the maintenance of endothelium; it is a transmembrane glycoprotein found on the endothelium of arteries, venules, and capillaries and on the syncytiotrophoblast in the placenta. Inflammation results in the release of thrombomodulin from endothelial cells into the circulation, leading to decreased expression of thrombomodulin on the endothelial surface. Whether this cleaved form of thrombomodulin is functional remains unclear, but soluble thrombomodulin concentrations can be used to monitor inflammatory conditions. In women with preeclampsia, maternal serum levels of cleaved soluble thrombomodulin in serum are elevated. The placenta is a possible source of this soluble thrombomodulin, which could result in decreased available thrombomodulin on the syncytiotrophoblast. Vascular endothelial growth factor stimulates thrombomodulin expression, so the angiogenic imbalance in the placenta in preeclampsia could lead to a decrease in placental thrombomodulin expression.
One of the pathways through which thrombomodulin exerts its protective effects on endothelium is by activating protein C. In mice, loss of thrombomodulin from the endothelium results in disruption of the activated protein C (APC) pathway, which leads to lethal massive thrombosis.13 APC has an anticoagulant function by cleaving activated cofactors FV and FVIII. In addition to its anticoagulant effects, APC has an important cytoprotective function for endothelium through the endothelial protein C receptor: namely, direct anti-inflammatory and antiapoptotic effects on endothelial cells.14 In an experimental mouse model, this antiapoptotic effect protected against diabetic nephropathy by inhibiting endothelial apoptosis.15 Furthermore, APC plays a role in tissue remodeling by activating matrix metalloproteinase (MMP) 2 and 9, which are involved in placental development and are dysregulated in preeclampsia.16–18

We set out to investigate whether placental thrombomodulin dysregulation plays a role in the pathogenesis of preeclampsia. Therefore, we measured thrombomodulin expression in placentas from women with preeclampsia and compared this with thrombomodulin expression in placentas from control subjects with uncomplicated pregnancies and in placentas from control subjects with pregnancies complicated by intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR) to confirm that our findings were preeclampsia-specific rather than a consequence of lower gestational age or birth weight in our case group. Further, we investigated whether thrombomodulin expression in the placenta is correlated with its downstream effects: fibrin depositions, cell survival, inflammation, and MMP expression in the placenta, and whether the angiogenic imbalance of preeclampsia is associated with a decrease in thrombomodulin expression.

Materials and Methods
Materials and Methods are available in the online-only Data Supplement.

Results
Patient Characteristics
Diastolic blood pressure and proteinuria were significantly higher in the preeclampsia group as compared with both control groups. The mean gestational age in healthy control subjects was 39 weeks and 4 days; in IUGR control subjects and in preeclampsia patients, the mean gestational ages were 33 weeks and 2 days and 30 weeks and 4 days, respectively, which were both significantly lower than as compared with healthy control subjects. The mean birth weight in the healthy control group was 3609 g. Mean birth weights in the IUGR control group and in the preeclampsia group were 1521 g and 1167 g, respectively, which were both significantly lower compared with the mean birth weight in the healthy control group. The mean placenta weight was significantly lower in preeclampsia patients and in growth-restricted control subjects as compared with healthy control subjects. Patient characteristics are illustrated in the Table.

Immunohistochemical Staining for Thrombomodulin
In 29 of 30 placentas from healthy controls, thrombomodulin was observed in an overall staining pattern, with thrombomodulin present on the syncytiotrophoblast of >50% of villi, and in 1 control placenta, a focal staining pattern was observed, with thrombomodulin being present on the syncytiotrophoblast of <50% of villi. In the IUGR group, thrombomodulin was present on the syncytiotrophoblast of >50% of villi in all 11 cases. In 12 of 28 placentas from patients with preeclampsia, thrombomodulin protein expression was found to be decreased. In 10 cases, we found a focal staining pattern, with thrombomodulin present on the syncytiotrophoblast of <50% of villi, and in 2 cases, thrombomodulin was nearly absent (present on the syncytiotrophoblast of <10% of villi). In the remaining 16 placentas from the preeclampsia group, thrombomodulin staining was present in an overall staining pattern. These findings are illustrated in Figure 1. Chi-square analysis indicated a strong association between decreased thrombomodulin expression and preeclampsia (P=0.001). Thrombomodulin staining on fetal vessel endothelium was present in a similar pattern in preeclampsia and control groups. Figure I in the online-only Data Supplement shows thrombomodulin staining on fetal vessel endothelium in placentas from preeclampsia and control cases with most reduced thrombomodulin staining on the syncytiotrophoblast; fetal vessel thrombomodulin staining was present in these samples and consequently serves as an internal control for the adequacy of the staining procedure.

Placental mRNA Expression of Thrombomodulin
Placental mRNA levels of thrombomodulin were on average 3-fold lower in preeclamptic women compared with control subjects (P=0.001), whereas in women with IUGR, the relative mRNA expression of thrombomodulin was not significantly different compared with healthy control placentas. These results are illustrated in Figure 2. In placenta samples where thrombomodulin protein expression was absent, thrombomodulin mRNA levels were 4-fold lower than those in placentas with a focal or overall staining pattern for thrombomodulin at the syncytiotrophoblast in the preeclampsia group (Figure II in the online-only Data Supplement).

Placental mRNA Expression of Thrombomodulin and Clinical Parameters in Preeclampsia
Placental thrombomodulin mRNA levels were significantly lower in patients with mild preeclampsia and in patients with severe preeclampsia compared with healthy control subjects; levels were not significantly different between patients with mild and severe preeclampsia. Placental thrombomodulin mRNA levels were negatively correlated with maternal diastolic blood pressure and maternal body mass index in patients with preeclampsia. In controls, this correlation was not present. There were no correlations between gestational age or placental weight and thrombomodulin mRNA levels. These correlations are illustrated in Figure 2.
mRNA levels were not associated with parity \((P>0.05)\). When exclusively primiparous cases were analyzed, thrombomodulin mRNA levels were still significantly lower in preeclampsia cases compared with placentas from control cases.

**Fibrin Depositions**

In placentas from healthy control subjects, villous fibrin deposits were present on 13% of the villi, and in IUGR control, placentas on 7%. In pregnancies complicated by preeclampsia, fibrin depositions were present on 17% of villi, on average. One-way analysis of variance analyses indicated an association between increased fibrin deposits and preeclampsia, but post hoc analyses did not reveal any significant differences between preeclampsia cases and healthy or growth-restricted control cases. These data are shown in Figure 3. There was no significant association between fibrin deposits and thrombomodulin mRNA or between fibrin deposits and the thrombomodulin protein staining pattern.

**Immunohistochemical Staining of Cleaved Caspase-3**

In placentas from healthy subjects and IUGR control subjects, there were 4 and 3 apoptotic cells per mm\(^2\), on average. In placentas from preeclamptic patients, there were on average 16 apoptotic cells per mm\(^2\), which was significantly different from both control groups. These data are shown in Figure 3. There was no significant association between thrombomodulin mRNA and the amount of apoptotic cells, and a focal or absent thrombomodulin staining pattern was not associated with an increase in apoptotic cells.

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**Table. Patient Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Healthy Controls, n=30</th>
<th>IUGR Controls, n=21</th>
<th>Preeclampsia, n=28</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean maternal age in years (SD)</td>
<td>33.9 (4.0)</td>
<td>31.4 (6.0)</td>
<td>31.6 (7.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean maternal BMI (SD)</td>
<td>25.3 (4.2)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>26.9 (7.2)</td>
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<td>Mean gravidity (SD)</td>
<td>2.9 (1.2)</td>
<td>1.9 (0.8)†</td>
<td>2.1 (1.9)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean parity (SD)</td>
<td>1.3 (1.0)</td>
<td>0.5 (0.7)†</td>
<td>0.8 (1.2)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest diastole, mm Hg (SD)</td>
<td>76.4 (5.1)</td>
<td>81.0 (8.3)†</td>
<td>107.5 (13.9)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proteinuria, g/24 h (SD)</td>
<td>0.0 (0.0)</td>
<td>0.0 (0.0)</td>
<td>5.2 (5.1)†</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe preeclampsia, %§</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>19 (67.9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birth weight, g (SD)</td>
<td>3608.5 (429.5)</td>
<td>1520.7 (854.0)†</td>
<td>1167.0 (320.0)†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placenta weight, g (SD)</td>
<td>645.7 (137.3)</td>
<td>302.4 (118.1)†</td>
<td>261.9 (90.2)†</td>
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<td>Mode of delivery§</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caesarean section, %</td>
<td>19 (63.3)</td>
<td>14 (66.7)</td>
<td>28 (100)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vaginal delivery, %</td>
<td>11 (36.7)</td>
<td>7 (33.3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gestational age at delivery (weeks+days; SD in days)</td>
<td>39+4 (9)</td>
<td>33+2 (35)†</td>
<td>30+4 (12)†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BMI indicates body mass index; IUGR, intrauterine growth restriction; and SD, standard deviation.

†\(P<0.05\) compared with healthy controls.

‡\(P<0.05\) compared with IUGR controls.

§\(P<0.05\) for overall comparison with Chi-square testing.

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**Figure 1.** Placental thrombomodulin protein expression. Results of immunohistochemical and histological staining of placentas from preeclamptic patients and control subjects. **A**, Abundance of thrombomodulin protein expression in placentas from 30 placentas from healthy controls, from 11 control pregnancies complicated by intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR), and from 28 preeclampsia patients. \(P=0.001\), controls (H), healthy control subjects; Controls (IUGR), control subjects with pregnancies complicated by intrauterine growth restriction. **B**, Example of an overall staining pattern of thrombomodulin on the syncytiotrophoblast in control placent. **C**, Example of a focal staining pattern of thrombomodulin in a placenta from the preeclampsia group.
Villitis was present in 14.8% of the control placentas and in 42.9% of the preeclampsia cases; this difference was significant ($P<0.05$). In all villitis cases, the infiltrate was multifocal and composed of mononuclear cells. Intervillositis occurred in 7.4% of control placentas and in 19% of preeclampsia placentas; the infiltrate consisted of histiocytes in the majority of cases. Neither villitis nor intervillositis was associated with a decreased thrombomodulin staining pattern or with decreased thrombomodulin mRNA expression. Placental mRNA levels of tumor necrosis factor-$\alpha$ and intercellular adhesion molecule 1 were lower in placentas from preeclampsia patients as compared with healthy controls ($P<0.001$ for both; Figure 3). There was no correlation between thrombomodulin mRNA expression and tumor necrosis factor-$\alpha$ or intercellular adhesion molecule expression.

**Figure 2.** Placental mRNA expression of thrombomodulin. A, Relative normalized placental mRNA expression of thrombomodulin in preeclampsia cases and controls; *$P=0.001$; Mann–Whitney U test comparing preeclampsia and growth-restricted or healthy control placentas. B, Normalized placental thrombomodulin mRNA expression in healthy control subjects and patients with mild or severe preeclampsia. Expression was not significantly different between patients with mild and severe preeclampsia compared with healthy control placentas. Expression was not significantly different between patients with mild and severe preeclampsia ($P>0.05$, Mann–Whitney U test). *$P<0.05$; **$P<0.01$, calculated with Mann–Whitney U testing. C, Maternal BMI and normalized placental thrombomodulin mRNA levels in the preeclampsia group; Spearman’s rho $=-0.671$, $P<0.01$. D, Diastolic blood pressure and normalized placental thrombomodulin mRNA levels in the preeclampsia group; Spearman’s rho $=-0.431$, $P<0.05$. E, Gestational age and normalized placental thrombomodulin mRNA levels in the preeclampsia group; Spearman’s rho $=0.361$, $P>0.05$. F, Placenta weight and normalized placental thrombomodulin mRNA levels in the preeclampsia group; Spearman’s rho $=0.033$, $P>0.05$. Controls (H) indicates healthy controls; Controls (IUGR), control subjects with pregnancies complicated by intrauterine growth restriction; IUGR, intrauterine growth restriction; PE, preeclampsia; and TM, thrombomodulin.
Placental mRNA Expression of MMPs

On average, MMP-2 mRNA levels were 2-fold lower in placentas from preeclamptic women compared with placentas from both control groups ($P<0.01$). MMP-9 mRNA levels were 5-fold lower in placentas from preeclamptic women compared with control subjects ($P<0.01$). In IUGR control placentas, MMP-2 and MMP-9 mRNA levels were not significantly different compared with control placentas. In preeclamptic patients, MMP-2 expression was positively correlated with thrombomodulin mRNA expression. The correlation between MMP-9 and thrombomodulin did not reach statistical significance ($P=0.095$). These findings are illustrated in Figure 3.

Placental Expression of sFlt-1 and Thrombomodulin

An inverse correlation between thrombomodulin protein expression and sFlt-1 expression was observed; in placentas from preeclampsia patients with a focal syncytiotrophoblast thrombomodulin staining pattern, mRNA expression of sFlt-1 was 3-fold higher compared with the expression in placentas with...
an overall thrombomodulin staining pattern at the syncytiotrophoblast \((P<0.05\); Figure 4). This inverse correlation was not observed between thrombomodulin mRNA and sFlt-1 mRNA.

**In Vitro Experiments**

In BeWo cells, vascular endothelial growth factor transfection resulted in a 1.5-fold upregulation of thrombomodulin mRNA expression. This increase was significantly \((P<0.05)\) compared with untreated control cells and control cells that had received the transfection reagent without plasmid DNA. In Jeg-3 cells, vascular endothelial growth factor transfection was associated with a 1.3-fold upregulation of thrombomodulin mRNA expression, but this was not significantly different when compared with both control cell groups. These results are illustrated in Figure 5.

**Discussion**

Increasing evidence suggests that preeclampsia is caused by deprivation of factors essential for the placenta and endothelium, with consequent placental and endothelial dysfunction. This study demonstrates that thrombomodulin mRNA and protein expression are decreased in placentas of mildly and severely preeclamptic patients, and that this decrease correlates negatively with maternal body mass index and diastolic blood pressure. Additionally, thrombomodulin mRNA expression correlates directly with placental expression of MMPs, and the decrease in placental thrombomodulin is accompanied by impaired villous cell survival.

In the preeclampsia group, parity, birth weight, placenta weight, and duration of pregnancy were significantly different compared with those of the term control group. Therefore, we added an extra control group to our study, consisting of placentas from pregnancies complicated by growth restriction and not by hypertensive disorders. In this group, parity, birth weight, placenta weight, and duration of pregnancy were comparable to those of the preeclampsia group. Thrombomodulin expression in the growth-restriction control group was not different from the expression in the term control group; therefore, we conclude that our findings on placental thrombomodulin loss in the preeclampsia group cannot be explained by, for example, the lower gestational age in the preeclampsia group. A significant correlation was present between placental thrombomodulin expression and diastolic blood pressure in preeclampsia cases. This indicates that thrombomodulin expression is connected to the degree of endothelial dysfunction in preeclampsia, which could be upstream, in the pathogenesis of endothelial dysfunction, or downstream, as a consequence of endothelial dysfunction. However, thrombomodulin expression was not significantly different between mild and severe preeclampsia cases, so placental loss of thrombomodulin alone does not seem to be a major contributor to the development of end-organ involvement in preeclampsia.

If thrombomodulin is involved in the pathogenesis of preeclampsia, one would expect mutations in the thrombomodulin gene to be associated with the syndrome. For example, hemolytic uremic syndrome, a disease also characterized by endothelial dysfunction and complement activation, is associated with mutations in the thrombomodulin gene.\(^9\) However, a recent meta-analysis of genetic variants in preeclampsia revealed that thrombomodulin mutations are not associated with preeclampsia.\(^{20}\) Our study shows that a decreased thrombomodulin protein expression pattern in the placenta is accompanied by an increase in placental expression of sFlt-1, and that vascular endothelial growth factor transfection is associated with thrombomodulin upregulation in trophoblast cells in vitro. These results strengthen the hypothesis that the angiogenic imbalance of preeclampsia could cause the decreased thrombomodulin expression in the placenta that we found in our cohort.

The decreased thrombomodulin expression in the placenta in preeclampsia could have unfavorable downstream effects on the placenta through at least 4 pathways, which are illustrated in a hypothetical scheme in Figure 6.

First, thrombomodulin inhibits coagulation through the APC pathway. Systemically, increased levels of the thrombin–antithrombin complex in the presence of increased thrombomodulin cleavage product have been reported in preeclampsia,\(^{21}\) but we did not find an increase in placental fibrin deposits in preeclampsia or a correlation between thrombomodulin expression and placental villous fibrin deposits in our study; apparently, the placental decrease in thrombomodulin we observed in our cohort did not lead to increased fibrin at the fetomaternal interface. Second, we found that decreased placental thrombomodulin expression was accompanied by impaired placental cell survival in preeclampsia; these changes could also contribute to the impaired placentation seen in preeclampsia. However, a direct correlation between the amount of apoptotic cells detected with immunohistochemical staining and thrombomodulin expression was not present, possibly caused by sampling error because of the heterogeneous nature of placental lesions. In vitro studies investigating the effects of thrombomodulin depletion on trophoblast cells would shed some light on this area. Third, although preeclampsia itself is associated with a hyper-inflammatory state,\(^{4,5}\) we found no increased mRNA expression of intercellular adhesion molecule-1 and tumor necrosis factor-\(\alpha\) in placentas from preeclamptic patients, and there was no correlation between thrombomodulin expression and these parameters. Further, thrombomodulin expression was not associated with villous- or intervillous infiltrates. Last, we

![Figure 4](http://atvb.ahajournals.org/)

**Figure 4.** Placental soluble Flt-1 (sFlt-1) expression in preeclampsia cases with and without decreased thrombomodulin expression. Relative mRNA expression levels of sFlt-1 in placenta samples from the preeclampsia group with decreased thrombomodulin protein expression (TM<50%) or without decreased thrombomodulin protein expression (TM>50%) are depicted.

\[P<0.05, \text{Mann–Whitney U test. TM indicates thrombomodulin.}\]
found a positive correlation between thrombomodulin expression and expression of MMP-2 and MMP-9. These results indicate that thrombomodulin expression could lead to decreased MMP-2 and MMP-9 activity in the placenta, which is associated with impaired trophoblast invasion and preeclampsia. Because our cohort contained exclusively third-trimester placentas obtained after delivery, early stages of placental development, and trophoblast invasion, were not studied. Further studies on thrombomodulin expression in the placenta at earlier stages of placental development are warranted.

In our cohort, we found a negative correlation between body mass index and placental thrombomodulin expression. Obesity is associated with endothelial dysfunction and increased levels of circulating thrombomodulin, suggestive for loss of endothelial thrombomodulin. Obese pregnant women show increased levels of circulating markers of endothelial dysfunction and have an increased risk of developing preeclampsia. Possibly, the highly inflammatory and hypoxic vascular environment of obesity leads to decreased expression of vasculoprotective factors, such as thrombomodulin, both on the fetomaternal interface and in the systemic vasculature and contributes to the development of systemic endothelial dysfunction and preeclampsia. However, obesity in healthy control pregnancies was not associated with thrombomodulin loss. Apparently, additional endothelial- or syncytiotrophoblast damaging factors are needed to cause placental thrombomodulin loss in preeclampsia.

Thrombomodulin has raised interest as a possible target in the treatment of preeclampsia; it could act beneficially by reducing both endothelial and placental dysfunction. Recently, administration of recombinant thrombomodulin was shown to rescue fetal tissue oxygenation and growth in a rat model of preeclampsia. However, in rats, thrombomodulin did not improve the maternal systemic symptoms of preeclampsia, such as hypertension. This could indicate that thrombomodulin administration rescues fetal growth by attenuating placental dysfunction. Our findings, which link decreased thrombomodulin expression to impaired placental

**Figure 5.** Thrombomodulin expression in VEGF-transfected trophoblast cells. A, Normalized relative thrombomodulin mRNA expression in BeWo control cells, cells treated with transfection reagent, and cells treated with VEGF plasmid DNA. Thrombomodulin expression was significantly higher in the VEGF-transfected cells compared with both control groups (P<0.05). B, Normalized relative thrombomodulin mRNA expression in Jeg-3 control cells, cells treated with transfection reagent, and cells treated with VEGF plasmid DNA. There were no significant differences between the 3 groups. n.s. indicates not significant; T-control, control cells treated with transfection reagent; and VEGF, vascular endothelial growth factor. *P<0.05.

**Figure 6.** Hypothetical scheme of thrombomodulin in the pathogenesis of preeclampsia. This figure shows the hypothetical role of thrombomodulin in the placenta in preeclampsia. Antiangiogenic and possibly other (genetic) factors lead to thrombomodulin downregulation in the placenta, both on mRNA and protein levels. Because thrombomodulin inhibits coagulation, this downregulation could lead to increased fibrin deposition. Further, downregulation could increase apoptosis and inflammatory processes in endothelial cells and/or syncytiotrophoblast. Finally, thrombomodulin plays a role in activating matrix metalloproteinases, so its downregulation could result in impaired trophoblast invasion.
cell function, support this hypothesis. Further research exploring the safety and efficacy of thrombomodulin as a target for the prevention and treatment of preeclampsia are of interest.

To conclude, preeclampsia is characterized by placental and endothelial dysfunction, but the exact pathogenesis is not completely understood. Our study shows that thrombomodulin is a new candidate role player in the pathogenesis of preeclampsia that is associated with both clinical parameters and disregulation of factors essential for placental function. These insights set the stage for further basic and clinical research on placental development, the development of placental pathology, and on thrombomodulin as a target for the prevention and treatment of preeclampsia.

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Disclosures

None.

References


Significance

The events leading to impaired placentation and systemic endothelial dysfunction in preeclampsia are unclear. This study sheds light on this area by demonstrating loss of placental thrombomodulin mRNA and protein expression in preeclampsia; this is accompanied by decreased placental expression of matrix metalloproteinases, which are required for trophoblast invasion, and impaired sycnctiotrophoblast survival. Loss of placental thrombomodulin is associated with placental soluble FIt-1 production, hinting to a link between the angiogenic imbalance of preeclampsia and loss of activated protein C signaling. Further, loss of thrombomodulin is associated with hypertension and obesity in preeclampsia. These findings give rise to the hypothesis that obesity creates a state in the microvasculature and on the placenta where vasculoprotective factors are lost, leading to a favorable environment to develop preeclampsia. These new findings reveal thrombomodulin as a new target of interest in preeclampsia and other syndromes characterized by endothelial dysfunction.
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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Loss of Thrombomodulin in Placental Dysfunction in Preeclampsia

Rosanne J. Turner*1, Kitty W.M. Bloemenkamp2,3, Jan A. Bruijn1, Hans J. Baelde1

1: Department of Pathology, Leiden University Medical Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands
2: Department of Obstetrics, Leiden University Medical Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands
3: Department of Obstetrics, Birth Centre, Wilhelmina Children Hospital, Division Woman and Baby, University Medical Centre Utrecht, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Running title: Thrombomodulin downregulation in preeclampsia

*Corresponding author:
Rosanne Turner
Address: Leiden University Medical Centre
Department of Pathology, L1 Q
PO Box 9600, P0-107
2300 RC Leiden, the Netherlands
Email: r.j.turner@lumc.nl
Telephone: +31-71-5265008
Fax: +31-71-5248158
**Supplemental Figures and Figure legends**

**Supplemental Figure I** Thrombomodulin staining on fetal vessel endothelium

**A** shows a healthy control placenta with a focal thrombomodulin staining pattern on syncytiotrophoblast and thrombomodulin staining on fetal vessel endothelium. **B** shows an IUGR control placenta with overall thrombomodulin staining on syncytiotrophoblast and thrombomodulin staining on fetal vessel endothelium. **C** shows a placenta from the preeclampsia group with an absent thrombomodulin staining pattern on syncytiotrophoblast and thrombomodulin staining on fetal vessel endothelium. Arrowheads indicate examples of fetal vessel endothelium stained positively for thrombomodulin.
Supplemental Figure II Thrombomodulin mRNA levels and thrombomodulin staining patterns

Normalized placental thrombomodulin mRNA levels in the preeclampsia group in placenta samples with absent (<10%), focal (10-50%) or overall (>50%) syncytiotrophoblast thrombomodulin staining.
Supplemental Figure III Thrombomodulin mRNA expression and tumor necrosis factor alpha and intercellular adhesion molecule 1 mRNA expression

A Normalized thrombomodulin and intercellular adhesion molecule 1 mRNA expression in the preeclampsia group; R² = 0.035, P = 0.3718 (Pearson correlation test). B Normalized thrombomodulin and tumor necrosis factor alpha mRNA expression in the preeclampsia group; Spearman’s ρ = 0.008, P = 0.968. TM, thrombomodulin; TNFA, tumor necrosis factor alpha; ICAM1, intercellular adhesion molecule 1.
### Supplemental Table I Primers used for quantitative PCR

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<th>Gene</th>
<th>Primer sequences (F: forward, R: reverse)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: CGCAGATGCACTCGAAGGTA</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMP2</td>
<td>F: TGATGGCATCGCTCAGATCC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>R: GGCCTCGTATACCAGCATCAA</td>
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<td>MMP9</td>
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<td>sFlt-1</td>
<td>F: CATTCAAGCCGAGGGGGGCTG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: TGCAACCCCTGGGGCCCATTT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAPDH</td>
<td>F: TTCCAGGAGCGAGATCCCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: CACCCATGACGAAACATGGG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HPRT</td>
<td>F: TGACACTGGGAAAAACATGCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: GGTCCTTTTCACCAGCAAGCT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TM, thrombomodulin; MMP, matrix metalloproteinase; TNFA, tumor necrosis factor alpha, ICAM1, intercellular adhesion molecule 1; sFlt-1, soluble Flt-1; HPRT, hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase.
DATA SUPPLEMENT: MATERIALS AND METHODS

Loss of Thrombomodulin in Placental Dysfunction in Preeclampsia

Rosanne J. Turner*1, Kitty W.M. Bloemenkamp2,3, Jan A. Bruijn1, Hans J. Baelde1

1: Department of Pathology, Leiden University Medical Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands
2: Department of Obstetrics, Leiden University Medical Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands
3: Department of Obstetrics, Birth Centre, Wilhelmina Children Hospital, Division Woman
and Baby, University Medical Centre Utrecht, Utrecht, the Netherlands

Running title: Thrombomodulin downregulation in preeclampsia

*Corresponding author:
Rosanne Turner
Address: Leiden University Medical Centre
Department of Pathology, L1 Q
PO Box 9600, P0-107
2300 RC Leiden, the Netherlands
Email: r.j.turner@lumc.nl
Telephone: +31-71-5265008
Fax: +31-71-5248158
Samples

We studied 79 placentas obtained from women who delivered at the Leiden University Medical Center Department of Obstetrics between 2002 and 2011. After delivery all placentas were macroscopically examined and samples from pre-defined locations on the placenta and fetal membranes were taken according to a standard protocol. For this study, tissue samples from lateral sites of the basal plate of the placenta were selected to study mature and terminal villi. The placentas were divided between a case group of 28 placentas obtained from women with mild or severe preeclampsia and a healthy control group of 30 placentas obtained from women with uncomplicated pregnancies that resulted in term livebirths. Preeclampsia were diagnosed according to ISSHP guidelines, with severe preeclampsia being defined as the presence of diastolic blood pressure >110 mmHg, proteinuria > 3 g / 24H, or HELLP syndrome. Because the majority of women with preeclampsia delivers by caesarean section, we aimed to collect control placentas from women who delivered by caesarean section as well. A second control group consisting of 21 placentas from pregnancies complicated by IUGR (defined as birth weight below fifth percentile for gestational age), but not by preeclampsia or hypertension, was included to confirm that our findings on thrombomodulin expression were preeclampsia-specific rather than a consequence of lower gestational age or birth weight in our case group. Paraffin-embedded samples were available for immunohistochemical staining from 11 patients in this control group; from the remaining ten patients, frozen samples were available for RNA isolation and PCR. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the Leiden University Medical Centre (P13.084) and subjects gave informed consent.

Histology

Specimens were stained with hematoxylin and eosin. 27 control samples and 21 preeclampsia samples were examined by a single pathologist blinded for cases and controls. The presence, extent, chronicity and composition of villous- and intervillous infiltrates were determined.

Immunohistochemistry

To investigate the placental protein expression of thrombomodulin and to investigate apoptosis and coagulation in the placentas, we performed immunohistochemical staining for thrombomodulin, caspase-3, and fibrin. Sections were deparaffinized, and antigen retrieval was performed. Sections were incubated with an anti-thrombomodulin mouse monoclonal antibody (1:200; Leica Biosystems, Danvers, MA, USA) or an anti-fibrin mouse monoclonal antibody (1:200, Immunotech, Prague, Czech Republic) for 1 hour, or with an anti–cleaved caspase-3 rabbit antibody (1:300; Cell Signaling, Danvers, MA, USA) overnight at room temperature. Binding of the primary antibody was visualized with labelled anti-mouse IgG polymer or with labelled anti-rabbit IgG polymer (DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) and diaminobenzidine as a chromogen.

Scoring of staining patterns

Slides were scored by two observers blinded with respect to cases and controls. The presence of thrombomodulin at the surface of viable syncytiotrophoblast was scored semiquantitatively as absent (present on <10% of viable syncytiotrophoblast), focal (present on 10–50% of viable syncytiotrophoblast), or overall (present on >50% of viable syncytiotrophoblast). Positivity for caspase-3 was scored quantitatively as the number of apoptotic cells per mm². Fibrin deposits were scored quantitatively as the number of villi with fibrin deposits divided by the total number of villi in ten 0.28 mm² sections per sample.
Quantitative PCR was performed to quantify placental mRNA expression of thrombomodulin, MMP 2 and 9, tumor necrosis factor alpha, intercellular adhesion molecule 1 and sFlt-1. RNA isolation was performed with TRIzol® (Lifetechologies, San Francisco, CA, USA). Synthesis of cDNA was performed with AMV reverse transcriptase (Roche, Basel, Switzerland), and SYBR Green quantitative PCR was performed according to the manufacturer’s protocol (Bio-Rad Laboratories Inc, Hercules, CA, USA). Primer sequences are described in Supplementary Table 1. Expression was measured by the comparative threshold cycle method and normalized to hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase and GAPDH expression. A melting curve analysis was performed to verify the specificity of amplification.

**In vitro experiments**

Trophoblast cell lines BeWo (CCL-98, ATCC, Manassas, VA, USA) and Jeg-3 (HTB-36, ATCC, Manassas, VA, USA) were grown on 6-Multiwell plates. After 24 h, cells were transfected with a VEGF plasmid (pHIPPY-PGL3-VEGF). For transfection, plasmid DNA was diluted into growth medium at a concentration of 1 g/L and X-tremeGene HP DNA Transfection Reagent (Roche, Basel, Switzerland) was added at a 3:1 ratio. 48 hours after transfection, RNA was isolated with TRIzol® (Lifetechologies, San Francisco, CA, USA). cDNA synthesis was performed and expression of thrombomodulin, hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase and GAPDH was determined with PCR as described above. The experiments were repeated three times.

**Statistical analysis**

Mean differences in normalized mRNA expression levels between two groups were analyzed with the unpaired t-test for normally distributed data or with the Mann–Whitney U test for skewed distributions. The distributions of staining patterns of thrombomodulin and histological scores in the preeclampsia and control groups were analyzed with the chi-square test or Fisher’s exact test. Correlations between thrombomodulin mRNA levels, clinical parameters or mRNA levels of other proteins were calculated with the Pearson test or Spearman test. A P value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Mean differences in fibrin deposits and in caspase-3 positive cells between more than two groups were analyzed with the one-way ANOVA. Posthoc tests, Bonferroni and LSD, were subsequently performed to investigate differences between the preeclampsia group and the control groups. Standard deviations depict variance in the figures. All analyses were performed with the IBM SPSS statistics software package (version 20; IBM, Armonk, NY, USA).

**References**
