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Untersuchungen zur biologischen Antwort humaner Chondrozyten auf kapazitiv gekoppelte elektrische Wechselfelder

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

		0						1
1.1	-		•					1
1.2		· ·		_				3
1.3								4 -
								5
3 i								6 ungskapazität
3.1					_			
			•				•	gekoppelten
								6
	3.1.1			_		•		7
	3.1.2		_		-	_	-	1atriDerm®) 7
	3.1.3		n kapazitiv ge					
			· ·	-				8
	3.1.4	• •						tels Polyimid-
		beschichte	eten Kupfer-E	lektrode	n (12-Wells	system)		8
	3.1.5	Analyse de	er zellulären <i>i</i>	Aktivität .				10
	3.1.6	Genexpres	ssionsanalyse	n chondi	ogener Ma	ırker		10
	3.1.7	Analyse ex	trazellulärer	Matrixpr	oteine			10
	3.1.8	Statistik						11
3.2	Unt	ersuchung	der Zellver	eilung r	nach Stimu	lation mi	it kapazitiv	gekoppeltem
	We	chselfeld m	ittels Synchr	otron-Str	ahlung			11
	3.2.1	Kultivierun	ng humaner (hondroz	yten			11
	3.2.2							iller ^{liquid}) 11
	3.2.3							tels Polyimid-
		• •						12
	3.2.4		ung der Zellv					
	0.2.		•		•	_	•	12
⊿ F	roehni	•						13
4.1	_							ozyten nach
		_			-			13
								Vitalität und
	7.1.1							13
	112		er elektrische		•		•	13
	4.1.2							\r_
			erungskapazi			_		
4.3	Α -	-						
4.2		_						ung humaner
_		-						18
								19
5.1							-	gekoppelte
	we	unsemelaer.						19

5.2 Induktion der Zellmigration durch kapazitiv gekoppelte W	echselfelder 23
5.3 Translation und Ausblick	24
6 Zusammenfassung	25
7 Literaturverzeichnis	
8 Liste der Publikationen zur kumulativen Dissertation	36
9 Anhang	
Abkürzungsverzeichnis	II
Tabellenverzeichnis	IV
Abbildungsverzeichnis	
Lebenslauf	VI
Liste wissenschaftlicher Publikationen	VIII
Danksagung	
Selbstständigkeitserklärung	X
Erklärung	XI

1 Einleitung

Die Hauptaufgaben des Gelenkknorpels sind die Aufnahme von mechanischen Belastungen und die Reduktion von Reibung während der Gelenkbewegungen. Dadurch wird der darunterliegende Knochen vor Druck- und Stoßbelastungen geschützt und die freie Beweglichkeit des Gelenkes sichergestellt. [1,2]

Die Funktionalität des hyalinen Gelenkknorpels kann jedoch durch Traumata [3], mechanische Überbelastungen [4] sowie durch altersbedingte, metabolische oder entzündliche Veränderungen [5] gestört werden, wodurch eine eingeschränkte Beweglichkeit und Schmerzen im Gelenk resultieren können. Da der adulte hyaline Knorpel durch seinen einzigartigen Aufbau kaum über ein intrinsisches Regenerationspotential verfügt, können Schädigungen des Knorpelgewebes zu degenerativen Prozessen führen und das Gewebe irreparabel verändern [6].

Bei sehr großen Defekten mit voranschreitenden degenerativen Veränderungen bleibt oft nur der Ersatz des Gelenkes durch eine Endoprothese, um die Mobilität und Schmerzfreiheit des Patienten wiederherzustellen. Im Frühstadium kleinerer Läsionen ist eine rekonstruktive Behandlung erstrebenswert [7]. Hierfür stehen verschiedene zellbasierte regenerative Therapiestrategien zur Verfügung [8–10]. Jedoch ist es bisher nicht möglich, mit den etablierten Behandlungsmethoden den physiologischen Grundzustand des geschädigten Knorpelgewebes wiederherzustellen [11]. Daher haben sich verschiedene Forschungsfelder etabliert, aus denen verbesserte Behandlungsmethoden abgeleitet werden sollen. Neben der Entwicklung innovativer Biomaterialien für die Knorpelreparatur [12–16] und dem Einsatz verschiedener Zelltypen [13,17,18], stellt die biophysikalische Stimulation im Rahmen des Tissue Engineering eine interessante Alternative dar [19–21]. Dennoch besteht hier nach wie vor ein großer Forschungsbedarf.

1.1 Hyaliner Gelenkknorpel

Um eine optimale Behandlung von Knorpelläsionen zu ermöglichen, ist es essentiell, physiologische Umgebungsbedingungen zu schaffen bzw. für die Wiederherstellung des geschädigten Knorpels auszunutzen.

Die zelluläre und molekulare Struktur des hyalinen Gelenkknorpels ergibt sich aus seiner Funktion, den subchondralen Knochen zu schützen. Eine Besonderheit des adulten, hyalinen Knorpelgewebes ist seine Avaskularität, die zu einem reduzierten Sauerstoffgehalt führt [22]. Die Nährstoff- und Sauerstoffversorgung des Gewebes erfolgt vorwiegend durch Diffusion aus dem Gelenkraum und der darin enthaltenen Synovia sowie aus der subchondralen Region [1,2,23,24].

Zusammengesetzt ist der hyaline artikuläre Knorpel hauptsächlich aus einer wässrigen Phase (65 - 80 %) mit darin gelösten anorganischen Ionen und einer festen Phase (20 - 35 %). Innerhalb der festen Phase ergibt sich aufgrund physiologischer Belastungen eine dreidimensionale, zonale Anordnung. Die vier ineinander übergehenden Zonen des Knorpelgewebes gliedern sich in die Tangentialzone, die Übergangszone, die Radialzone und

Einleitung

die kalzifizierte Zone. Zwischen der tiefen Radialzone und der kalzifizierten Zone befindet sich zudem eine Grenzschicht, die sogenannte Tidemark. [2,24,25]

Innerhalb der Zonen unterscheiden sich die Ausrichtung, Morphologie sowie die metabolische Aktivität der in die Matrix eingebetteten Chondrozyten. In der Tangentialzone sind die Chondrozyten dicht verteilt, bilden einzellige Chondrone und sind morphologisch klein, elliptisch und flach. In der Übergangszone haben diese eine rundliche Morphologie, während sich in den tieferen Schichten mehrzellige Chondrone bilden, die säulenartig der Ausrichtung der Matrixfasern folgen. [2,24]

Die Zusammensetzung der von den Chondrozyten gebildeten extrazellulären Matrix (EZM) unterscheidet sich ebenfalls innerhalb der verschiedenen Zonen. Die EZM des hyalinen Knorpels besteht hauptsächlich aus Kollagen Typ II, Proteoglykanen wie Aggrecan sowie Glykoproteinen und verleiht dem Knorpelgewebe dessen strukturelle und mechanische Eigenschaften. [2,6,25,26]

Der Wasser- und Kollagengehalt innerhalb des Gewebes sowie die Zelldichte nehmen von der Gelenkoberfläche zur subchondralen Zone hin ab. Zudem erhöht sich die Zelldichte von mechanisch belasteten zu unbelasteten Bereichen. Die Konzentration an Glykosaminoglykanen (GAG), den Seitenketten der Proteoglykane, steigt hingehen zum subchondralen Knochen hin an und folgt zusätzlich einem proximal-distalem Gradienten. Innerhalb der GAG-Ketten im Proteoglykan-Netzwerk befinden sich negativ geladene funktionelle Gruppen wie Carboxyl- und Sulfatreste. Diese sind umgeben von im interstitiellen Wasser gelösten, positiv geladenen Ionen wie Calcium- und Natriumionen sowie ebenfalls negativ geladenen Ionen wie Chloridionen. [27–31]

Aufgrund mechanischer Belastungen und der daraus resultierenden Deformation des Knorpelgewebes kommt es zur Verschiebung der genannten Ladungsträger, wodurch sich ein endogenes elektrisches Feld ausbildet [28–30]. Durch die Gelenkbewegung wird innerhalb des Knorpels ein Flüssigkeitsstrom provoziert. Dieser führt dazu, dass sich die positiv und negativ geladenen Ionen im interstitiellen Wasser durch die fixierten, negativen Ladungen der Makromoleküle hindurchbewegen, was wiederrum zu strömungs- und diffusionsbedingten elektrischen Potentialen führt. [28,29,32–34]

Die resultierenden elektrischen Signale werden durch Makromoleküle der perizellulären Matrix wie Proteoglykane oder das oligomere Knorpelmatrixprotein auf die Chondrozyten übertragen. Die Zellen registrieren über in die Zellmembran eingebettete Rezeptoren und lonenkanäle sowohl die elektrischen als auch chemische und mechanische Signale aus ihrer Umgebung. [29] Diese mechano-elektrischen Transduktionsphänomene regulieren eine Vielzahl zellulärer Funktionen und Signalwege, wie Zellmigration, Proliferation, Genexpression sowie die Freisetzung von Proteinen und die damit einhergehende Differenzierung [35]. Für die Homöostase des Knorpelgewebes ist diese Signaltransduktion entscheidend. Durch Veränderungen des Mikromilieus kommt es zu einer Verringerung bis hin zum Verlust des endogen erzeugten elektrischen Feldes, was degenerative Prozesse und irreversible Schädigungen zur Folge haben kann. [29,34]

1.2 Knorpelläsionen und Therapiemöglichkeiten

Aufgrund seiner avaskulären und bradytrophen Gewebeeigenschaften besitzt das reife hyaline Knorpelgewebe ein sehr geringes intrinsisches Regenerationspotential [1,2,24]. Wird das Gewebe beschädigt, sollte daher zeitnah eine geeignete Diagnostik und Behandlung eingeleitet werden [7]. Die International Cartilage Repair Society (ICRS) hat 2003 Richtlinien herausgegeben, um Knorpelläsionen zu klassifizieren [36]. Die Einteilung erfolgt dabei nach Größe und vor allem Tiefe der Gewebeschädigung. Laut ICRS werden dem Grad 0 keine erkennbaren Defekte zugeordnet. Grad 1 umfasst oberflächliche Veränderungen des Knorpelgewebes. ICRS Grad 2 sind Läsionen mit einer Tiefe von < 50 % und ICRS Grad 3 Läsionstiefen > 50 % der Knorpeldicke. Ab Grad 4 ist zusätzlich der subchondrale Knochen von der Läsion betroffen. [36,37]

Die Art des einzuleitenden Therapieverfahrens richtet sich nach der Symptomatik sowie der Defektgröße, aber auch das Patientenalter und dessen Aktivitätsgrad werden berücksichtigt. Chirurgische Verfahren zur zellbasierten Rekonstruktion einer Läsion sind laut Niemeyer et al. erst bei einem symptomatischen Knorpelschaden des ICRS Grades 3 bis 4 indiziert [37,38]. Des Weiteren empfehlen diese die Knochenmarksstimulation zum Beispiel durch Mikrofrakturierung für Defekte < 2,5 cm² und einem eher niedrigen bis mittleren Aktivitätsgrad des betroffenen Patienten. Bei größeren Defekten und hohem Aktivitätsgrad sowie bei jungen Patienten findet die autologe Chondrozytentransplantation (ACT) Anwendung. Ist der subchondrale Knochen involviert, wird bei großem Defektdurchmesser eine Kombination aus ACT und Knochenaugmentation oder bei kleinem Durchmesser die osteochondrale Transplantation angewendet. [37]

Bei der ACT wird in einem ersten, meist endoskopischen Eingriff Knorpelgewebe aus einer unbelasteten Region des Gelenkes entnommen. Die daraus isolierten Chondrozyten werden unter standardisierten Bedingungen in vitro expandiert. Während eines weiteren Eingriffes werden diese Zellen in den geschädigten Knorpelbereich eingebracht. Bei der ACT kann die betroffene Region mittels eines Patches abgedeckt werden, um die Zellen ortständig in der Läsion zu halten. Bei der weiterentwickelten Matrix-assoziierten ACT (MACT) werden die Zellen vor der Reimplantation auf einem Biomaterial (Matrix) kultiviert und dieses in den Defekt eingebracht. Die Verwendung von Matrices bietet den Zellen eine angenäherte physiologische Umgebung, wodurch die Zellintegration verbessert wird. [10] Nachteilig bei der Ex-vivo-Expansion von Chondrozyten zeigt sich deren Neigung zur De-Differenzierung in Monolayer-Zellkulturen [18,39,40]. Dabei verlieren die Zellen ihren chondrogenen Phänotyp und erhalten einen prä-chondrogenen [41,42], fibroblastären [39,43,44] Charakter. Werden diese Zellen in den Knorpeldefekt eingebracht, bildet sich vornehmlich Faserknorpel [11,37]. Dieser besteht überwiegend aus Kollagen Typ I-Fasern und besitzt im Vergleich zum hyalinen Gelenkknorpel eingeschränkte mechanische Eigenschaften [11]. Dies kann in der Konsequenz zur erneuten Schädigung des umliegenden Gewebes und zum wiederholten Auftreten von Beschwerden beim Patienten führen. Nach wie vor ist dies ein Problem bei der Behandlung von Knorpelläsionen, sodass ein großer Bedarf an verbesserten Regenerationsstrategien besteht.

1.3 Knorpelregeneration mittels biophysikalischer Stimulation

Methoden zur Unterstützung der Knorpelregeneration im Rahmen der ACT oder MACT sollten zum einen die Anpassung an die physiologischen Bedingungen des Knorpelgewebes und zum anderen die Umkehrung des De-Differenzierungsprozesses während der Ex-vivo-Chondrozytenexpansion adressieren.

Neben der biochemischen Stimulation mittels chondrogener Wachstumsfaktoren [45,46] stellt die biophysikalische Stimulation eine vielversprechende Möglichkeit dar, um die Qualität des neugebildeten Knorpelgewebes zu verbessern [20,21,47]. Zu ihnen zählt neben der mechanischen Stimulation auch die Stimulation mittels elektrischer Felder, wobei die genannten exogenen Stimuli auf die Imitierung endogener mechano-elektrischer Mechanismen abzielen [19–21,48]

Schon 1974 untersuchten Baker et al. den Effekt der elektrischen Stimulation auf Knorpelgewebe in einem Tiermodell. Ihnen gelang es, mittels elektrischer Stimulation die Proliferation und die EZM-Synthese zu steigern und damit den Heilungsprozess im Vergleich zu unstimulierten Vergleichstieren zu verbessern. [49] Deren Erkenntnisse legten den Grundstein für das Tissue Engineering von Knorpelgewebe mit Hilfe der biophysikalischen Stimulation.

Um die zugrundeliegenden Mechanismen der elektrischen Stimulation zu untersuchen und Parameter zu optimieren, werden in vitro Studien durchgeführt. Für die Einbringung elektrischer Felder in vitro stehen verschiedene Möglichkeiten zur Verfügung. Diese unterteilen sich in direkte, induktive, kapazitive und semikapazitive Kopplungsmechanismen, wobei hauptsächlich die direkte und die kapazitive Einkopplung eingesetzt werden [50]. Der Vorteil der kapazitiv gekoppelten Stimulation gegenüber der direkten besteht darin, dass die Elektroden vom Zellkulturmedium räumlich getrennt sind, wodurch zellschädigende, elektrochemische Reaktionen wie die Bildung von Wasserstoffperoxid oder reaktiven Sauerstoffspezies sowie pH-Wertveränderungen unterbunden werden [50,51]. Mittels kapazitiv gekoppelter Versuchssysteme konnte eine Steigerung der Proliferation [52,53] sowie die erhöhte Expression chondrogener EZM-assoziierter Gene und Proteine aufgezeigt werden [52,54,55].

In der klinischen Anwendung werden derzeit Systeme genutzt, die auf gepulsten elektromagnetischen Feldern (PEMF) basieren. Diese sind in ihrem Aufbau sehr komplex und die postoperative Behandlung langwierig. Zudem wird mit PEMF hauptsächlich eine Schmerzreduzierung erreicht. [56] Die Ergebnisse aus Untersuchungen mit kapazitiv gekoppelten Systemen deuten darauf hin, dass eine präoperative elektrische Stimulation zellbesiedelter Biomaterialien zu einer verbesserten Regeneration und somit zur Wiederherstellung des physiologischen Knorpelgewebes beitragen kann. Ebenso ist die Anwendung solcher Felder für einen Therapieansatz in situ mittels elektrisch aktiver Implantate denkbar. Daher sollten weiterführende Behandlungsstrategien durch exogene elektrische Felder entwickelt sowie optimierte Therapieprotokolle für die verbesserte Knorpelregeneration etabliert werden.

2 Motivation und Zielstellung der kumulativen Dissertation

Die Funktionalität des reifen hyalinen Gelenkknorpels wird durch seinen zonalen Aufbau sowie durch biochemische und biophysikalische Stimuli bestimmt. Das intrinsische Regenerationspotential des Knorpelgewebes ist stark limitiert und bisher stehen kaum Therapien zur Verfügung, die zu einer vollständigen Wiederherstellung des physiologischen Zustandes führen.

Die exogene elektrische Stimulation mittels kapazitiv gekoppelter Wechselfelder stellt eine vielversprechende Möglichkeit dar, die Regeneration des Knorpelgewebes zu unterstützen. Dafür müssen dessen Wirkung verstanden und vor allem geeignete Systeme sowie Stimulationsprotokolle entwickelt werden. Die Expression wichtiger chondrogener Marker könnte mittels optimaler Stimulationsparameter gesteigert und somit die Gewebequalität im Rahmen zellbasierter Therapien optimiert werden.

Ziel der vorliegenden kumulativen Dissertation war daher die Charakterisierung des Einflusses verschiedener kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder auf humane, expandierte Chondrozyten im Hinblick auf deren Differenzierungskapazität und Migration. Die zugrundeliegenden Daten der In-vitro-Studien sind im Rahmen des Sonderforschungsbereiches 1270 – ELAINE entstanden und in den Publikationen [I] bis [III] (siehe Liste der Publikationen zur kumulativen Dissertation) gemündet.

Um die physiologischen Bedingungen des Knorpelgewebes in diesen Untersuchungen nachzubilden, wurden diese unter hypoxischer Atmosphäre auf dreidimensionalen (3D) Biomaterialien [57,58] durchgeführt. Zudem wurden die Chondrozyten mit chondrogenen Wachstumsfaktoren vorinkubiert, um ihre intrinsische Synthese zu induzieren [45,46]. Während der elektrischen Stimulation wurden die Zellen ohne eine Applikation von Wachstumsfaktoren inkubiert, um sich überlagernde Effekte auszuschließen.

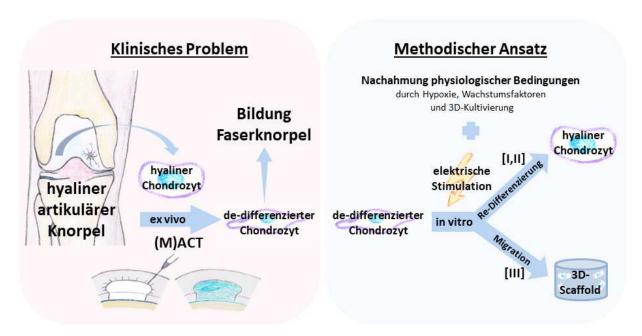


Abb. 1: Graphische Zusammenfassung der klinischen Problematik und des methodischen Lösungsansatzes.

Die Dimensionen der elektrischen Felder ergeben sich aus der Kombination von Wechselspannung und Frequenz und sind abhängig vom Aufbau des verwendeten Systems. In einer Voruntersuchung unserer Arbeitsgruppe wurde in Anlehnung an Brighton et al. [54,55,59] und Hiemer et al. 2018 [57] zunächst der Einfluss der Frequenz (1 kHz vs. 60 kHz) auf die chondrogene Differenzierung osteoarthrotischer (OA) Knorpelzellen untersucht [60]. Die Ergebnisse zeigten auf, dass Chondrozyten aus OA Gewebe auf die Stimulation mit 1 kHz mit einer gesteigerten Freisetzung des EZMassoziierten, C-terminalen Propeptides vom Kollagen Typ II (CIICP) reagieren [60].

Auf Grundlage dieser Erkenntnisse sollte in Studie [I] weiterführend in einem kapazitiv gekoppelten 6-Well-Stimulationssystem untersucht werden, ob sich bei der Nutzung von 1 kHz ein spannungsabhängiger und/oder zelltypabhängiger Effekt auf die chondrogene Differenzierung zeigt. Zu diesem Zweck wurden Chondrozyten aus OA und nicht-degenerativ verändertem (gesundem) Gewebe auf Kollagen Typ I-basierenden Scaffolds ausgesät und sieben Tage lang unterschiedlichen elektrischen Feldern (100 mV_{RMS} vs. 1 V_{RMS}) ausgesetzt. Um Parameterstudien gezielter durchführen zu können, wurde im Rahmen der Arbeit ein neues Stimulationssystem entwickelt [II]. Dieses ermöglichte die simultane Stimulation in vitro von 12 Wells mit unterschiedlichen Parameterkombinationen. Zudem ermöglicht die Anordnung der Elektroden die zukünftige Kombination mit mechanischen Stimuli. Innerhalb der Studie sollten für die neue Elektrodenanordnung der frequenz- und der spannungsabhängige Effekt auf die chondrogene Differenzierung für Chondrozyten aus

Da neben dem Differenzierungsstatus die zonale Verteilung der Chondrozyten essentiell für die Funktionalität des nativen Knorpels ist, sollte diese in Studie [III] mit Hilfe röntgenstrahlbasierter mikrotomographischer Untersuchungen in 3D-Hydrogelen aufgeklärt werden. Dabei wurde in der Studie die Etablierung eines geeigneten Messprotokolls für die Untersuchungen in wässriger Umgebung fokussiert. Zudem wurde der Effekt der kapazitiv gekoppelten elektrischen Stimulation auf die Migration der Zellen untersucht.

3 Material und Methoden

gesundem Gewebe herausgearbeitet werden.

Die Herstellerangaben der verwendeten Reagenzien, Kits, Verbrauchsmaterialien sowie Geräte und Zellspezifikationen sind in den Publikationen [I] bis [III] aufgezeigt.

3.1 Methodische Ansätze zur Untersuchung der Re-Differenzierungskapazität humaner Chondrozyten nach Stimulation mit kapazitiv gekoppelten Wechselfeldern

Nachfolgend wird die methodische Herangehensweise der vorgelegten kumulativen Dissertation erläutert. Für alle Versuche wurden Chondrozyten aus humanem artikulärem Knorpel verwendet.

3.1.1 Isolation und Kultivierung humaner Chondrozyten

Für die in [I] dargestellten Versuche wurden Zellen aus OA und nicht-degenerativ verändertem Knorpelgewebe nach dem Protokoll von Jonitz et al. 2011 [61] isoliert. Das OA Gewebe wurde von Spendern gewonnen, welche in der Orthopädischen Klinik und Poliklinik der Universitätsmedizin Rostock eine Knieendoprothese erhielten und ihre Zustimmung dafür erteilten (Ethikkommissionsnummer: A2009-0017). Die daraus isolierten Zellen werden nachfolgend als OA Chondrozyten bezeichnet. Am Institut für Rechtsmedizin der Universitätsmedizin Rostock wurde post mortem Gewebe von Patienten entnommen (Ethikkommissionsnummer: wobei A2011-0138), auf einen nicht-degenerativen Gewebestatus geachtet wurde. Die aus diesem Gewebe gewonnenen Zellen werden im Rahmen der Arbeit als gesunde Chondrozyten benannt. Die isolierten Chondrozyten wurden unter Standardkulturbedingungen bei 37 °C, 5 % CO₂ und 21 % O₂ Standardzellkulturmedium bestehend aus Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) versetzt mit 10 % fetalem Kälberserum (FKS), 1 % Penicillin-Streptomycin (Pen/Strep), 1 % Amphotericin B und 50 μg/ml Ascorbinsäure expandiert und in Zellpassage 2 kryokonserviert.

Für die in [II] dargestellten Versuche wurden kommerziell erhältliche humane, nichtdegenerativ veränderte (gesunde) Chondrozyten genutzt. Diese wurden nach Erhalt unter hypoxischen Bedingungen (5 % O₂) bei 37 °C und 5 % CO₂ in Standardzellkulturmedium expandiert und in Zellpassage 3 ebenfalls kryokonserviert.

Nach dem Auftauen der kryokonservierten Chondrozyten erfolgte deren Expansion unter hypoxischen Bedingungen in Standardzellkulturmedium in geeigneten Zellkulturflaschen.

3.1.2 Kultivierung humaner Chondrozyten auf Kollagen-Elastin-Vlies (MatriDerm®)

Als Trägermaterial für die humanen Chondrozyten wurden in den Studien [I] und [II] ein Kollagen-Elastin-Vlies (MatriDerm®) verwendet. Dabei handelt es sich um ein Kollagen Typ I-basiertes Biomaterial. Aus dem Matriderm®-Vlies konnten mittels geeigneter Stanzen Scaffolds mit einem Durchmessser von 10 mm bzw. 16 mm generiert werden. Diese 3D-Scaffolds wurden mittels biokompatibler Silikonpaste in Petrischalen fixiert und anschließend mit den Chondrozyten besiedelt.

Für die unter [I] beschriebenen Untersuchungen wurden OA sowie gesunde Chondrozyten verwendet und mit einer Zelldichte von 200.000 Zellen auf Matriderm®-Vliese mit einem Durchmesser von 16 mm gesiedelt.

Es folgte eine dreitägige Vorinkubation unter hypoxischen Bedingungen in Zellkulturmedium, welches aus serumfreien DMEM mit den oben genannten Zusätzen bestand und 1 % Insulin-Transferrin-Selensäure (ITS+ TM Premix), 50 ng/ml transforming growth factor (TGF)- β 1, 50 ng/ml insulin-like growth factor (IGF)-1 sowie 100 nM Dexamethason zugesetzt war. Die detaillierten Mediumzusammensetzungen sind in [I] und [II] aufgeführt.

Für die Parameterstudie [II] wurden MatriDerm®-Scaffolds mit humanen Chondrozyten mit einer Zelldichte von 50.000 Zellen pro 10 mm-Scaffold besiedelt. Auch hier erfolgte eine

dreitägige Vorinkubation mit den Wachstumsfaktoren TGF-β und IGF-1 unter hypoxischen Bedingungen.

3.1.3 Applikation kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder mittels Titan-Elektroden (6-Wellsystem)

Für die Applikation der kapazitiv gekoppelten elektrischen Wechselfelder wurde in Studie [I] ein auf einer kommerziell erhältlichen 6-Well-Zellkulturplatte basierendes System genutzt. An der Zellkulturplatte wurden formangepasst zwei gegenüberliegende Titan-Aluminium-Vanadium (Ti6Al4V)-Elektroden (Stärke: 0,5 mm, eloxiert mit DOTIZE®) ohne Kontakt zum Zellkulturmedium von außen an die Außenwände der Plattenvertiefungen angebracht [I] und mittels Funktionsgenerator das elektrische Wechselfeld generiert.

Das System ermöglichte die Stimulation mit gleichen Parameterkombinationen für besiedelte MatriDerm®-Scaffolds (Ø 16 mm; Kapitel 3.1.2) in 3 nebeneinanderliegenden Wells.

Die elektrische Stimulation mit verschiedenen Parameterkombinationen (1 kHz + 100 m V_{RMS} vs. 1 V_{RMS}) wurde dreimal täglich für 45 min über einen Zeitraum von sieben Tagen [57] ohne weitere Verwendung von Wachstumsfaktoren durchgeführt.

Für die verwendeten Parameter wurden von der Arbeitsgruppe Theoretische Elektrotechnik der Universität Rostock Feldsimulationen mittels COMSOL Multiphysics® v5.3a durchgeführt [I]. Für die Frequenz von 1 kHz kombiniert mit 100 mV_{RMS} wurden elektrische Feldstärken im Bereich von 5.2×10^{-5} mV/cm und für 1 V_{RMS} 5.2×10^{-4} mV/cm ermittelt. Als unstimulierte Kontrollen wurden gleich behandelte Proben in Petrischalen ohne appliziertes elektrisches Feld mitgeführt.

Die Auswirkungen der applizierten Wechselfelder hinsichtlich der chondrogenen Differenzierungskapazität wurden nach der Stimulation mittels zell- und molekularbiologischen Methoden untersucht.

3.1.4 Applikation kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder mittels Polyimidbeschichteten Kupfer-Elektroden (12-Wellsystem)

Im Rahmen der Studie [II] wurde in Kooperation mit dem Lehrstuhl für Mikrofluidik der Universität Rostock ein neues 12-Well-Stimulationssystem entwickelt. Bei den Elektroden handelt es sich um zwei kreisringsegmentförmig angeordnete Kupfer-Elektroden (Abb. 2, links), mit einem Außendurchmesser von 20 mm und einem inneren Abstand von 10 mm. Die Elektroden waren beidseitig mit 25 µm dicken Polyimid-Schichten umgeben, wodurch die Abschirmung der Kupfer-Elektroden gegenüber dem Zellkulturmedium gegeben war. Zwölf dieser Elektrodenpaare wurden in drei Reihen mit jeweils 4 Wells angeordnet.

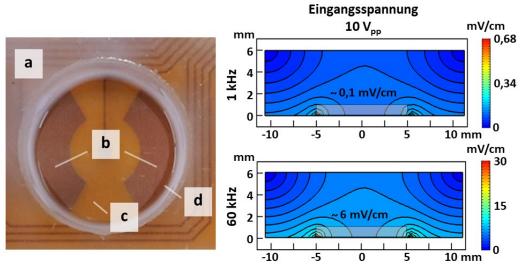


Abb. 2: Elektrodendesign und numerische Feldsimulation des neu entwickelten kapazitiv gekoppelten Stimulationssystems. Detaillierte Draufsicht eines Wells des Systems (Realbild, links) mit a) Polycarbonatbegrenzung, b) Elektroden, c) Polyimid-Beschichtung (25 µm) und d) Silikon-Kautschuk-Versiegelung. Beispielhafte Abbildung der numerischen Feldsimulation (Querschnitt) für 10 Vpp kombiniert mit 1 kHz bzw. 60 kHz (rechts) modifiziert nach [II].

Ein Vorteil des komplexen Systems war die Möglichkeit der computergestützten, unabhängigen Stimulation der einzelnen Wells unter Nutzung nur eines Netzteiles. Dadurch wurde ermöglicht, dass simultan verschiedene Parameterkombinationen untersucht werden konnten. Die mit Zellen besiedelten MatriDerm®-Scaffolds (Ø 10 mm; Kapitel 3.1.2) wurden für die Stimulation zwischen den beiden Elektroden platziert. Die anschließende Stimulation erfolgte ebenfalls für sieben Tage (dreimal täglich über 45 min) [57] ohne den Zusatz von Wachstumsfaktoren. Analog behandelte Proben in einem baugleichen System ohne appliziertes elektrisches Feld wurden als unstimulierte Kontrollen mitgeführt.

Die Feldsimulationen der untersuchten Parameterkombinationen wurden unter Federführung des Lehrstuhls für Mikrofluidik der Universität Rostock mittels COMSOL Multiphysics® 5.4 durchgeführt [II] und sind beispielhaft für die Simulation der Kombination von 10 V_{pp} mit 1 kHz bzw. 60 kHz in Abb.2, links dargestellt. Die untersuchten Parameterkombinationen sowie die laut numerischer Simulation resultierenden Felder sind in Tab. 1 aufgezeigt.

Tab. 1: Übersicht der Stimulationsparameter für die Parameterstudie [II].

Applizierte Frequenz [kHz]	Applizierte Spannung [V _{pp}]	Auf Zellen wirkendes Feld (laut Simulation) [mV/cm]
1	5	0,04 - 0,06
1	10	0,10 - 0,12
1	20	0,22 - 0,26
1	30	0,32 - 0,40
60	5	3 – 4
60	10	6 – 8
60	20	13 – 16
60	30	20 – 25

Nach der Stimulation wurden die Auswirkungen der applizierten Wechselfelder hinsichtlich der chondrogenen Differenzierungskapazität der verwendeten humanen Chondrozyten mittels der nachfolgend beschriebenen zell- und molekularbiologischen Methoden untersucht.

3.1.5 Analyse der zellulären Aktivität

Der Einfluss der kapazitiv gekoppelten Wechselfelder auf die metabolische Aktivität der untersuchten Chondrozyten wurde mittels wasserlöslichem Tetrazoliumsalz (WST-1) Assay bestimmt. Dabei wurde nach Herstellerempfehlung mit einer 10 %-igen Verdünnung gearbeitet und das Assay an die entsprechende Zellzahl und Wellgröße angepasst (siehe [I] und [II]).

Die Absorption des umgesetzten Formazansalz wurde als Triplikat mittels eines Mikroplattenreaders bei einer Wellenlänge von 450 nm sowie 630 nm als Referenz-Wellenlänge gemessen.

In [I] wurde zusätzlich zur metabolischen Aktivität der DNA-Gehalt der Proben mittels peqGOLD Tissue DNA Mini Kit und anschließender photometrischer Konzentrationsbestimmung bei einer Wellenlänge von 260 nm ermittelt.

3.1.6 Genexpressionsanalysen chondrogener Marker

Die Genexpressionsraten spezifischer Gene, die die De-Differenzierung, die Re-Differenzierung oder die Hypertrophie in stimulierten und unstimulierten Zellen modulieren, wurden durch die Quantifizierung der mRNA-Level bestimmt. Dafür wurden die genutzten Scaffolds mittels Kollagenase A verdaut und die Gesamt-RNA der darauf bzw. darin enthaltenen Zellen mittels pegGOLD Total RNA Kit isoliert und die RNA-Konzentration photometrisch bestimmt. Anschließend folgte die reverse Transkription in cDNA. Diese wurde in der semi-quantitativen Real-Time Polymerase Kettenreaktion (qRT-PCR) eingesetzt, wobei β-Aktin als Housekeeping-Gen verwendet wurde. Die genutzten Protokolle und Primersequenzen sind in [I] und [II] aufgeführt.

3.1.7 Analyse extrazellulärer Matrixproteine

Neben der Genexpression wurde die Synthese von spezifischen Matrixkomponenten wie Kollagen Typ I und Typ II [I] und [II] sowie Glycosaminoglykane [I] untersucht. Der Nachweis der Kollagen-Synthese erfolgte indirekt über die Konzentrationsbestimmung des jeweiligen C-terminalen Propeptides durch spezifische Enzyme-linked Immunosorbent Assays (ELISA). Das auf der Bindung von 1,9-Dimethylmethylenblau basierende Blyscan Sulfated Glycosaminoglycan AssayTM wurde genutzt, um die Menge der durch die Zellen gebildeten Glycosaminoglykane zu bestimmen. Die Konzentrationsbestimmungen der ELISAs und des Blyscan Assays erfolgte nach Herstellerangaben mittels Absorptionsmessung am Mikroplattenreader. Alle Proteindaten wurden auf den Gesamtproteingehalt bezogen, welcher mit dem Qubit® Protein Assay ermittelt wurde.

3.1.8 Statistik

Für die statistische Analyse und graphische Darstellung der Ergebnisse wurde GraphPad Prism v.7.05 genutzt. Als Ausreißertest wurde der integrierte ROUT ausgeführt. Die Auswahl des statistischen Tests erfolgte dabei in Abhängigkeit des Studiendesigns.

Die Darstellung der Ergebnisse zur zellulären Aktivität nach elektrischer Stimulation erfolgt tabellarisch als Mittelwert mit Standardabweichung. Die Daten der Genexpressionsanalysen wurden mit der ΔΔCt-Methode ausgewertet, wobei als Ct-Grenze (Cycle of Threshold) 28 verwendet wurde. Für die statistische Auswertung der Proteindaten wurden die spezifischen Proteingehalte auf die Gesamtproteinmenge normalisiert und die Ergebnisse als Boxplot dargestellt. Der waagerechte Strich eines Boxplots zeigt den Median an. Des Weiteren sind das 25 %-Quartil und 75 %-Quartil sowie das Minimum und Maximum als Whisker enthalten. Für die in [I] dargestellten Experimente wurden humane Chondrozyten von mindestens vier unabhängigen Spendern verwendet. Da die Experimente parallel für den gleichen Chondrozytenspender durchgeführt wurden, wurde für den Vergleich der Stimulationsparameter (unstimuliert, 100 mV_{RMS} und 1 V_{RMS}) innerhalb der gleichen Stimulationsgruppe (OA Chondrozyten oder gesunde Chondrozyten) der Friedman-Test herangezogen. Die gepaarte Analyse erlaubte es, die interindividuelle Variation der Spender zu berücksichtigen. Für den Vergleich der beiden Stichproben desselben Stimulationsparameters zwischen OA Chondrozyten und gesunde Chondrozyten wurde der Mann-Whitney-U-Test durchgeführt.

Für die Parameterstudie [II] wurden Zellen eines Spenders genutzt. Die Experimente wurden pro untersuchter Frequenz als Duplikat durchgeführt, sodass pro Parameterkombination sechs Proben sowie 16 Kontrollen für die Untersuchungen zur Verfügung standen. Der Vergleich der normalverteilten Daten (Shapiro-Wilk-Test) erfolgte mittels one-way ANOVA. Als Post-hoc-Test wurde die Bonferroni-Methode gewählt. Für alle Analysen wurde ein Signifikanzniveau von p < 0,05 gesetzt.

3.2 Untersuchung der Zellverteilung nach Stimulation mit kapazitiv gekoppeltem Wechselfeld mittels Synchrotron-Strahlung

3.2.1 Kultivierung humaner Chondrozyten

Für die in [III] detailliert dargestellten Untersuchungen wurden die in 3.1.1 beschriebenen humanen Chondrozyten genutzt und unter hypoxischen Bedingungen expandiert.

3.2.2 Kultivierung auf Kollagen Typ I-basiertem 3D-Hydrogel (Chondrofiller liquid)

Für die in [III] näher beschriebenen Untersuchungen wurde ein als Knorpelimplantat angewendetes Hydrogel-Scaffold (Chondrofiller^{liquid}) genutzt, welches vorwiegend aus Rattenschwanz-Kollagen Typ I (90 %) besteht. Das gelierte Hydrogel besitzt eine Kollagen-Konzentration von etwa 8 mg/ml. Durch Nutzung der Applikationsspritze des Herstellers und Neutralisationsreaktion in planparallelen Formen (Durchmesser 10 mm und Höhe 5 mm) konnten geeignete 3D-Hydrogele angefertigt werden. Diese wurden mit einer Zelldichte von

 $1,05 ext{ x } 10^3$ Zellen pro mm² besiedelt. Auch hier erfolgte eine Vorinkubation mit Wachstumsfaktoren sowie Dexamethason wie in 3.1.2 dargestellt.

3.2.3 Applikation kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder mittels Polyimidbeschichteten Kupfer-Elektroden

Bei dem genutzten Stimulationssystem handelte es sich um eine Vorstufe des unter 3.1.4 beschriebenen 12-Wellsystems. Die Systeme unterscheiden sich lediglich in der Spannungsversorgung, der Elektrodengröße (Außendurchmesser 13 mm, Abstand 5 mm) sowie in der Ausrichtung der Elektrodenoberfläche zu den besiedelten Biomaterialien. Die 3D-Hydrogele waren in dieser Versuchsanordnung unterhalb der Elektroden in einem Abstand von etwa einem Millimeter platziert. Um eine Verteilung der Zellen im 3D-Hydrogel zu erreichen, wurden die Arbeiten von Brighton et al. [54,55,59] zugrunde gelegt und die größtmögliche Feldstärke von 10 mV/cm (60 kHz + 20 V_{pp}) für sieben Tage ebenfalls dreimal täglich über 45 min analog zu [57] appliziert. Zudem wurde eine numerische Simulation der elektrischen Feldverteilung durchgeführt.

Nach der elektrischen Stimulation wurden die Proben in einem Gemisch aus 2 % Glutaraldehyd und 4 % Paraformaldehyd fixiert und für die Untersuchungen am Deutschen Elektronen-Synchrotron (DESY) in Hamburg präpariert. Dies beinhaltete die Markierung der im Scaffolds befindlichen Zellen mittels 1 % Osmiumtetroxid-Lösung, welche im Elektronenmikroskopischen Zentrum der Universitätsmedizin Rostock erfolgte. Die Markierung mittels Osmium-Ionen diente der Kontrastverstärkung für die anschließenden Synchrotron-Untersuchungen.

3.2.4 Untersuchung der Zellverteilung im 3D-Hydrogel mittels Synchrotron-Strahlung

Die Zellverteilung innerhalb der besiedelten 3D-Hydrogele (Scaffolds) wurde mittels mikrotomographischer Messungen am Messplatz P05 der Röntgenstrahlungsquelle PETRA III am DESY in Kooperation mit dem Institut für Materialforschung des Helmholz-Zentrum hereon untersucht [III]. Diese Methode ist besonders geeignet für die Analyse von 3D-Konstrukten. Aufgrund der ähnlichen Eigenschaften zwischen den eingebetteten Zellen und der Umgebung war für eine optimale Abbildung der Chondrozyten ausreichend Kontrast erforderlich, sodass die Phasenkontrast-Methode gewählt wurde [62].

Zum Schutz der zu untersuchenden 3D-Hydrogele vor Austrocknung und damit einhergehenden Veränderungen wurden diese in einer wässrigen Umgebung gehalten. Um ein geeignetes Messprotokoll für diese Proben zu etablieren, wurden neben der Energie der monochromatischen Röntgenstrahlen ebenfalls die Propagationsdistanz und die Anzahl der Projektionen optimiert.

Die generierten mikrotomographischen Aufnahmen wurden anschließend am Helmholtz Zentrum hereon computergestützt zu 3D-Darstellungen rekonstruiert [III], segmentiert und für die Auswertung mittels MATLAB herangezogen. Da es sich bei den Untersuchungen um eine Pilotstudie handelte, wurden hinsichtlich der Migration nur ein zellbesiedeltes Scaffold nach elektrischer Stimulation und ein unstimuliertes als Kontrolle verglichen. Aus diesem Grund erfolgte keine statistische Betrachtung der Daten.

4 Ergebnisse

4.1 Untersuchung der Differenzierungskapazität humaner Chondrozyten nach Stimulation mit kapazitiv gekoppelten Wechselfeldern

Um den Einfluss kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder auf die Differenzierungs-kapazität humaner Knorpelzellen zu untersuchen, wurden zwei verschiedene Stimulationssysteme verwendet. Für die Untersuchungen wurden die Zellen auf Kollagen-Elastin-Scaffolds ausgesät. Neben Vitalitätsuntersuchungen erfolgte die Bestimmung chondrogener Re- und De-Differenzierungsmediatoren auf Genexpressionsebene und im Zellkulturüberstand. Die vollständigen Ergebnisse dieser Untersuchungen sind in den Publikationen [I] und [II] dargestellt.

4.1.1 Einfluss kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder auf die Vitalität und Differenzierung osteoarthrotischer und gesunder Chondrozyten

Für die Untersuchungen eines spannungsabhängigen Effektes wurde in Studie [I] im 6-Well-System die Frequenz von 1 kHz mit den Spannungen 100 mV_{RMS} (5,2 x 10^{-5} mV/cm) und 1 V_{RMS} (5,2 x 10^{-4} mV/cm) kombiniert. Diese Felder wurden für sieben Tage sowohl OA als auch gesunde Chondrozyten appliziert, um eine Zelltypabhängigkeit zu überprüfen.

4.1.1.1 Zelluläre Vitalität

In Tab. 2 sind die Ergebnisse zur Zellvitalität nach der elektrischen Stimulation zusammengefasst.

Tab. 2: Vitalität humaner Chondrozyten nach elektrischer Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} und 1 V_{RMS} bei jeweils 1 kHz im Vergleich zur unstimulierten Kontrolle. Nach sieben Tagen Stimulation wurde die metabolische Aktivität mittels WST-1-Assay sowie der DNA-Gehalt von den humanen Chondrozyten bestimmt. Die Daten sind als Mittelwert mit Standardabweichung ($n \ge 4$) angegeben. Signifikante Unterschiede innerhalb einer Stimulationsgruppe wurden mit dem Friedman-Test ($^{\#}p < 0,05$; 100 mV vs. 1 V) berechnet. Zum Vergleich zwischen osteoarthrotischen (OA) und gesunden Chondrozyten wurde der Mann-Whitney-U-Test genutzt ($^{*}p < 0,05$; $^{*}p < 0,001$).

	Metabolische Aktivität [OD]		DNA-Gehalt [ng]		
	OA Chondrozyten	Gesunde Chondrozyten	OA Chondrozyten	Gesunde Chondrozyten	
Kontrolle	0,71 ± 0,12	0,55 ± 0,26	350,4 ± 103,4	421,8 ± 151,1	
100 mV _{RMS}	0,58 ± 0,12 ^{#,*}	0,40 ± 0,09	238,8 ± 78,8**	685,4 ± 248,3 [#]	
1 V _{RMS}	0,64 ± 0,09**	0,47 ± 0,09	303,5 ± 39,0**	517,2 ± 140,6	

Im Vergleich zur unstimulierten Kontrolle zeigte sich eine spannungsabhängige Absenkung der metabolischen Aktivität in beiden Zelltypen, wobei lediglich in den OA Chondrozyten eine signifikante Abnahme nach der Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} (p = 0,0281) detektierbar war. Zusätzlich wurden signifikante Unterschiede zwischen den beiden Zelltypen nach der Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} (p = 0,0303) sowie mit 1 V_{RMS} (p = 0,0087) ermittelt, wobei gesunde Chondrozyten eine geringere Stoffwechselaktivität aufwiesen.

Beim DNA-Gehalt zeigte sich nach der elektrischen Stimulation ein zelltypabhängiger Unterschied. So war der DNA-Gehalt verglichen mit den jeweiligen unstimulierten Zellen nach der Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} in den gesunden Zellen signifikant erhöht (p = 0,0133), während in den OA Zellen eine geringfügige Reduktion festgestellt wurde. Für beide Spannungen zeigten sich signifikante, zelltypabhängige Unterschiede (beide: p = 0,043). Jedoch waren die DNA-Gehalte der stimulierten gesunden Chondrozyten gegenüber denen in den stimulierten OA Chondrozyten erhöht.

4.1.1.2 Induktion der chondrogenen Re-Differenzierung

Neben der Vitalitätstestung wurden nach der elektrischen Stimulation die chondrogenen Re-Differenzierungsmarker Kollagen Typ II (*Col2A1*), Aggrecan (*ACAN*), SRY-Box (*Sox*) 9 sowie Kollagen Typ IX (*Col9A1*) mittels qRT-PCR untersucht. Dabei konnten aufgrund intraindividueller Zellvariabilitäten keine statistisch signifikanten Unterschiede zwischen den unstimulierten und stimulierten Zellen festgestellt werden. Jedoch zeigte sich nach der Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} in beiden Zelltypen eine leichte Steigerung der *Col2A1*-Transkription. Zudem konnte eine signifikante, spannungsabhängige Steigerung für *ACAN* in gesunden Chondrozyten detektiert werden (p = 0,0281, 100 mV_{RMS} vs. 1 V_{RMS}). Für die Expression von *Sox9* zeigte sich kein Einfluss durch die elektrische Stimulation und *Col9A1* konnte nicht nachgewiesen werden [I].

Der spannungs- und zelltypabhängige chondrogene Effekt wurde ebenfalls für akkumulierte EZM-assoziierte Proteine in den Mediumüberständen mittels spezifischer biochemischer Assays bestimmt. Als Re-Differenzierungsmediatoren wurden das CIICP sowie GAG analysiert. Die Ergebnisse für dessen Freisetzung sind in Abb. 3 dargestellt.

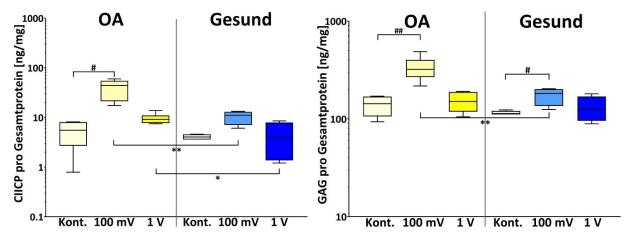


Abb. 3: Sekretion vom C-terminalen Propeptid von Kollagen Typ II (CIICP) und Glucosaminoglykane (GAG) pro Gesamtprotein nach elektrischer Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} und 1 V_{RMS} jeweils bei 1 kHz im Vergleich zur unstimulierten Kontrolle (Kont.). Nach sieben Tagen Stimulation wurden die Mediumüberstände entnommen und anschließend die akkumulierten EZM-Komponenten mittels Prokollagen Typ II C-Propeptid (CIICP) ELISA und Blyscan Sulfated Glycosaminoglycan (GAG) AssayTM untersucht. Die Daten sind als Boxplots ($n \ge 4$) dargestellt. Signifikante Unterschiede innerhalb einer Stimulationsgruppe wurden mit dem Friedman-Test ($^{\#}p < 0.05$; $^{\#\#}p < 0.001$; unstimulierte Kontrolle vs. 100 mV) berechnet. Zum Vergleich zwischen osteoarthrotischen (OA) und gesunden Chondrozyten wurde der Mann-Whitney-U-Test genutzt ($^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.001$).

Während sich in den OA Chondrozyten ein signifikanter Anstieg von CIICP nach der Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} (p = 0,0117) in Bezug zur mitgeführten Kontrolle zeigte, war nach Stimulation mit 1 V_{RMS} kein Unterschied zur Kontrolle nachweisbar (Abb. 3, links). Ein ähnlicher Trend konnte auch für die gesunden Chondrozyten detektiert werden. Der Vergleich beider Zelltypen belegte eine signifikante Steigerung in den OA Chondrozyten (100 mV_{RMS}: p = 0,0095; 1 V_{RMS} : p = 0,0381).

Ein ähnliches Ergebnis konnte für die Freisetzung von GAG festgestellt werden (Abb. 3, rechts). Auch hier zeigte sich im Vergleich zur Kontrolle eine signifikante Hochregulation von GAG nach Stimulation mit 100 m V_{RMS} sowohl für die OA Chondrozyten (p = 0,0045) als auch für die gesunden Chondrozyten (p = 0,0400). Zudem war bei dieser Spannung der GAG-Gehalt bei den OA Chondrozyten signifikant höher (p = 0,0095). Die Stimulation mit 1 V_{RMS} zeigte keinen Einfluss auf die Sekretion von GAG.

4.1.1.3 Chondrogene De-Differenzierung

Eine Wiederherstellung des hyalinen Charakters der Knorpelzellen durch elektrische Stimulation bzw. die Umkehr des De-Differenzierungsprozesses ist für das Gelingen einer verbesserten Behandlungsstrategie angestrebt. Daher wurde ebenfalls der De-Differenzierungsmarker Kollagen Typ I (Col1A1) sowie das C-terminale Propeptid von Kollagen Typ I (CICP) adressiert.

Während nach der elektrischen Stimulation zwischen den Stimulationsgruppen keine Unterschiede bei der *Col1A1*-Genexpression detektiert werden konnten, zeigte sich für das CICP eine zelltypabhängige Sekretion des De-Differenzierungsproteins (Abb. 4).

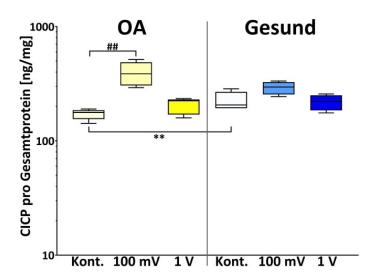


Abb. 4: C-terminales Propeptid des Kollagen Typ I (CICP) pro Gesamtprotein nach elektrischer Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} und 1 V_{RMS} jeweils bei 1 kHz im Vergleich zur unstimulierten Kontrolle (Kont.). Nach sieben Tagen Stimulation wurden die Mediumüberstände entnommen, um anschließend das CICP mittels ELISA zu bestimmen. Die Daten sind als Boxplots ($n \ge 4$) dargestellt. Signifikante Unterschiede innerhalb einer Stimulationsgruppe wurden mit dem Friedman-Test ($^{\#}p < 0.001$; unstimulierte Kontrolle vs. 100 mV) berechnet. Zum Vergleich zwischen osteoarthrotischen (OA) und gesunden Chondrozyten wurde der Mann-Whitney-U-Test genutzt (**p < 0.001).

Obwohl in unstimulierten OA Chondrozyten signifikant geringere Proteinmengen als in unstimulierten gesunden Chondrozyten (p = 0,0095) nachgewiesen wurden, führte die Stimulation mit 100 mV_{RMS} in den OA Chondrozyten zu einer deutlich höheren Freisetzung von CICP (p = 0,0016) im Vergleich zur Kontrolle. In gesunden Chondrozyten wurde kein signifikanter Unterschied zur mitgeführten Kontrolle detektiert. Die Stimulation mit 1 V_{RMS} führte zu keiner Änderung des CICP-Gehaltes in beiden Zelltypen.

4.1.2 Einfluss der elektrischen Feldstärke auf die Vitalität und Differenzierungskapazität humaner nicht-degenerativ veränderter Knorpelzellen

Um weiterführend geeignete Stimulationsprotokolle für die Entgegenwirkung der De-Differenzierung von Chondrozyten zu erarbeiten, wurde in einer weiterführenden Studie [II] der Einfluss verschiedener Parameterkombinationen in dem im Rahmen der Dissertation entwickelten 12-Well-System untersucht. Als Parameter wurden die Frequenzen 1 kHz und 60 kHz mit den Spannungen 5 V_{pp}, 10 V_{pp}, 20 V_{pp} und 30 V_{pp} kombiniert und die Chondrozyten für sieben Tage simultan mit den verschiedenen Feldstärken stimuliert. Dabei wurde die Auswirkung dieser Felder auf die Stoffwechselaktivität, die Genexpression chondrogener Marker sowie die Freisetzung von CICP und CIICP humaner, nicht-degenerativ veränderter Knorpelzellen untersucht.

4.1.2.1 Metabolische Aktivität und chondrogene Re-Differenzierung

Hinsichtlich der Stoffwechselaktivität konnten unabhängig von der Parameterkombination keine signifikanten Unterschiede festgestellt werden (Tab. 3).

Tab. 3: Metabolische Aktivität sowie die Freisetzung vom C-terminalen Propeptid des Kollagen Typ II (CIICP) nach elektrischer Stimulation mit verschiedenen Spannungen kombiniert mit 1 kHz vs. 60 kHz. Nach sieben Tagen Stimulation wurde die metabolische Aktivität von den humanen Chondrozyten mittels WST-1-Assay analysiert und die CIICP-Freisetzung in Mediumüberständen mittels ELISA bestimmt. Die Daten sind als Mittelwert mit Standardabweichung (n ≥ 5) angegeben. Signifikante Unterschiede zwischen den Gruppen wurden mit one-way ANOVA (Post-hoc-Test Bonferroni) berechnet.

		Metabolische Aktivität [OD]	CIICP [ng/mg]	
Kontrolle		0.46 ± 0.12	105.1 ± 29.7	
E V	1 kHz	0.42 ± 0.12	86.5 ± 36.2	
5 V _{pp}	60 kHz	0.43 ± 0.04	79.2 ± 21.7	
10 V	1 kHz	0.34 ± 0.10	91.3 ± 25.1	
10 V _{pp}	60 kHz	0.40 ± 0.05	107.8 ± 28.6	
20.1/	1 kHz	0.32 ± 0.12	82.0 ± 29.3	
20 V _{pp}	60 kHz	0.38 ± 0.04	78.9 ± 32.5	
20.1/	1 kHz	0.36 ± 0.11	96.7 ± 17.5	
30 V _{pp}	60 kHz	0.45 ± 0.06	93.3 ± 17.9	

Im Vergleich zur mitgeführten Kontrolle zeigte sich jedoch eine zunehmende Absenkung der metabolischen Aktivität für die Stimulationen mit den Spannungen 5 bis 20 V_{pp} . Zudem war eine frequenzabhängige Verringerung der mitochondralen Dehydrogenasen-Aktivität für die mit 1 kHz stimulierten Knorpelzellen erkennbar.

Bei der Analyse der Genexpressionsdaten zeigten sich keine signifikanten Unterschiede für *Sox9* nach der elektrischen Stimulation. Allerdings zeigte sich ein frequenzabhängiger Trend, bei dem die mRNA-Transkription bei 60 kHz leicht erhöht war, ausgenommen der Kombination mit 30 V_{pp}. *Col2A1* war in den eingesetzten Zellen nicht nachweisbar [II].

Für die Freisetzung von CIICP konnte ebenfalls kein signifikanter stimulationsabhängiger Einfluss detektiert werden (Tab. 3). Jedoch wies die Parameterkombination von 60 kHz mit $10 \, V_{pp}$ eine mit der Kontrolle ähnliche CIICP-Sekretion auf, während diese bei den anderen Kombinationen leicht sank. Zudem war bei der Kombination $10 \, V_{pp}$ und $60 \, \text{kHz}$ die Freisetzung von CIICP gegenüber der gleichen Spannung kombiniert mit $1 \, \text{kHz}$ im Mittel leicht erhöht.

4.1.2.2 Chondrogene De-Differenzierung

Der Prozess der De-Differenzierung wurde durch die Bestimmung von *Col1A1* und CICP adressiert. Obwohl auf Transkriptomebene keine signifikanten Unterschiede detektiert wurden, zeigte sich eine frequenzabhängige Reduktion in mit 1 kHz stimulierten Zellen. Für die Kombination mit 10 Vpp wurde der niedrigste Wert ermittelt [II].

Ebenfalls konnte für das De-Differenzierungsprotein CICP eine frequenzabhängige Absenkung bestimmt werden (Abb. 5).

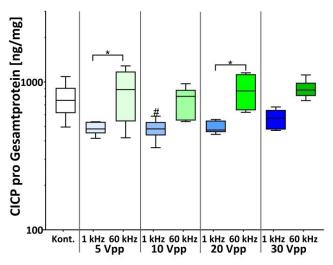


Abb. 5: Proteinfreisetzung von C-terminalem Propeptid des Kollagen Typ I (CICP) nach elektrischer Stimulation. Nach sieben Tagen Stimulation wurden die Medienüberstände gesammelt und für den CICP-ELISA verwendet. Die Daten sind als Boxplot ($n \ge 5$) dargestellt. Signifikante Unterschiede zwischen den Gruppen wurden mit one-way ANOVA (Post-hoc-Test Bonferroni) berechnet (*p < 0,05; Stimulation vs. unstimulierte Kontrolle (Kont.); *p < 0,05; 1 kHz vs. 60 kHz).

Im Vergleich zur Kombination von 60 kHz mit den Spannungen 5 V_{pp} und 20 V_{pp} zeigte sich bei den gleichen Spannungen kombiniert mit 1 kHz eine signifikante Reduktion der CICP-

Freisetzung (5 V_{pp} : p = 0,0149, 20 V_{pp} : p = 0,0119). Generell hatte die Stimulation mit 60 kHz unabhängig von der genutzten Spannung kaum Auswirkung auf die CICP-Sekretion.

In Bezug auf die unstimulierte Kontrolle konnte eine signifikante Absenkung nach der Stimulation mit 10 V_{pp} bei 1 kHz (p = 0,0473) detektiert werden.

4.2 Auswirkung kapazitiv gekoppelter Wechselfelder auf die Zellverteilung humaner Chondrozyten in 3D-Hydrogelen

Neben dem Differenzierungsstatus der in die EZM eingebetteten Chondrozyten ist die zonale Verteilung der Zellen essentiell für die Funktionalität des reifen hyalinen Gelenkknorpels. Um die Lage von Zellen innerhalb von 3D-Scaffolds zu untersuchen, bietet die röntgenstrahlbasierte mikrotomographische Analyse die Möglichkeit, volumenbasierte Aussagen zu treffen, ohne die Proben zu beschädigen. Um die Proben vor Veränderungen durch Trocknungsprozesse zu schützen und damit die Lokalisation von Zellen innerhalb der Matrix zu gewährleisten, wurde eine wässrige Probenumgebung gewählt. Primär wurde in Studie [III] die Etablierung eines geeigneten Untersuchungsprotokolls für die Zellverteilung in 3D-Hydrogelen (Scaffolds) in wässriger Umgebung fokussiert. Ebenfalls wurde die Zellmigration nach elektrischer Stimulation untersucht. Für die Messungen wurden ein unstimuliertes und ein elektrisch stimuliertes (10 mV/cm) 3D-Hydrogel herangezogen. Anschließend wurden die Hydrogele chemisch fixiert und eine Kontrastverstärkung der Zellen durch die Färbung mit Osmium-Ionen realisiert.

Die Nutzung von monochromatischer Röntgenstrahlung mit einer Energie von 30 keV war für die tomographischen Untersuchungen der besiedelten 3D-Hydrogele in wässriger Umgebung am besten geeignet. Damit konnte ohne Erzeugung von Strahlenschäden und Hydrolyse-Prozessen ausreichend Transmission trotz wässriger Umgebung erreicht werden. Um trotz der hohen Photonenenergie einen ausreichenden Kontrast zwischen dem Hydrogel und den eingebetteten Zellen sicherzustellen, wurde der Phasenkontrast genutzt [62]. Die Propagationsdistanz zwischen Röntgenquelle und Probe wurde auf 234 mm festgesetzt. Für eine optimale Aussage über die Zellverteilung wurden von jeder Probe 2400 Projektionen für eine Umdrehung von 0° bis 360° aufgenommen.

Nach der computergestützten, tomographischen Rekonstruktion der aufgenommenen Daten konnte sowohl ein Tiefenprofil der Chondrozyten in stimulierten und unstimulierten 3D-Hydrogelen als auch eine Korrelation zwischen der Größenverteilung und der Entfernung zur Oberfläche erstellt werden.

Beim Tiefenprofil ist die Anzahl der Chondrozyten in Korrelation zur Entfernung zur Oberfläche des 3D-Hydrogels aufgezeigt [III]. Es scheint, dass die elektrische Stimulation mit 10 mV/cm zu einer gesteigerten Migration der Chondrozyten in tiefere Bereiche des Hydrogels führt. Dies wird ebenfalls im 2D-Diagramm (Abb. 6) verdeutlicht, welches die Korrelation zwischen der Größenverteilung der Zellen und der Entfernung zur Oberfläche des Hydrogels darstellt. Zusätzlich zur gesteigerten Migration scheinen die Chondrozyten mit einer Veränderung der Zellmorphologie und/oder Zunahme der Zellzahl auf die Stimulation mit kapazitiv gekoppelten elektrischen Wechselfeldern zu reagieren. Dies wird im 2D-

Diagramm vor allem durch die Veränderung der Färbung hin zum gelben Bereich deutlich, wobei die Farbskala die Häufigkeit des Auftretens der Chondrozyten darstellt. Aufgrund der geringen Probenanzahl müssen die erzielten Ergebnisse in weiteren Untersuchungen bestätigt werden. Dafür kann das im Rahmen dieser Arbeit etablierte Messprotokoll herangezogen werden.

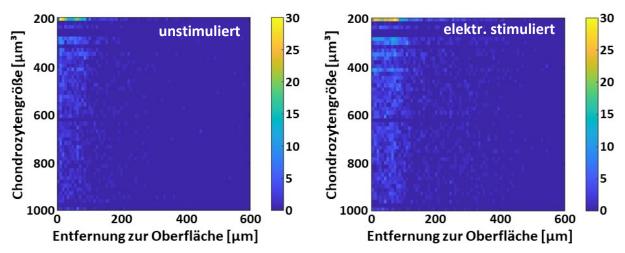


Abb. 6: 2D-Diagramme der Korrelation zwischen der Größenverteilung der Chondrozyten und der Entfernung zur Hydrogel-Oberfläche. Unstimuliert Probe links und elektrisch stimuliert Probe rechts. Die Farbskala repräsentiert die Anzahl der Chondrozyten, modifiziert nach [III].

5 Diskussion

Im Bereich der Orthopädischen Chirurgie ist die Behandlung von Läsionen des hyalinen Gelenkknorpels nach wie vor eine große Herausforderung. Eine vielversprechende Versorgungsstrategie stellt die Nutzung zellbasierter Therapien wie die (M)ACT dar [37,38]. Dafür werden Chondrozyten aus Patientengewebe isoliert und ex vivo expandiert [18]. Jedoch kommt es bei der Ex-vivo-Expansion in Monolayerzellkulturen zum Prozess der zellulären De-Differenzierung [18,39,40,63]. Dabei verlieren Chondrozyten ihre typischen chondrogenen Eigenschaften und nehmen einen prä-chondrogenen [41,42], fibroblastären [39,43,44] Phänotyp an. Werden diese Zellen in das geschädigte Knorpelareal implantiert, führt dies häufig zur Bildung von Faserknorpel [37,38], dessen Hauptbestandteil Kollagen Typ I ist [11]. Aufgrund der reduzierten mechanischer Eigenschaften des Faserknorpels kann es zu einem erneuten Auftreten von Beschwerden im Gelenk kommen [18]. Um nach Re-Implantation der Zellen eine suffiziente Qualität des Ersatzgewebes zu erreichen, ist die Re-Differenzierung der Chondrozyten bzw. das Entgegenwirken des De-Differenzierungsprozesses erstrebenswert.

5.1 Induktion des Re-Differenzierungsprozesses durch kapazitiv gekoppelte Wechselfelder

Hierfür scheint die exogene elektrische Stimulation ein effektiver Ansatz zu sein [19,21,47,57,59]. Es wird auf die Abbildung des hyalinen endogenen elektrischen Feldes abgezielt, welches sich aus der Verschiebung freier positiver und negativer Ladungsträger

Diskussion

(hauptsächlich Ca^{2+} , Na^{2+} und Cl^-) im interstitiellen Wasser durch die gebundenen negativen Ladungen (z.B. SO_4^{2-} und COO^-) der Proteoglykane bei physiologischen Gelenkbewegungen ergibt. Die resultierenden Strömungs- und Diffusionspotentiale sowie ladungsabhängige osmotische Veränderungen lösen Signaltransduktionsmechanismen in den Chondrozyten aus. [28–30,34,64,65] Diese wiederrum beeinflussen unter anderem die Proliferation und die Bildung von EZM-Komponenten [35,66]. Die Angaben zu den endogenen Feldstärken variieren in der Literatur. Allerdings werden die Werte üblicherweise in der Einheit elektrischer Potentiale angegeben. Diese reichen von μV [64,67] bis hin zu wenigen mV [33,68] und sind abhängig vom Messaufbau, der Platzierung der Messelektroden sowie der verwendeten Messeinstellungen [33,64,67,68]. Zudem variiert das elektrische Potential auch in Abhängigkeit des Degradationsgrades des artikulären Knorpels [65].

In der vorliegenden Dissertation wurde der Einfluss kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder auf humane Chondrozyten hinsichtlich deren Re-Differenzierungskapazität und Migration in vitro untersucht. Der reduzierte Sauerstoffgehalt des hyalinen Knorpelgewebes wurde beim Versuchskonzept durch die Nutzung einer hypoxischen Atmosphäre berücksichtigt [57,58]. Zur zusätzlichen Imitierung physiologischer Bedingungen wurden 3D-Strukturen in Form von Biomaterialien [42,45,61,69,70] verwendet. Ein limitierender Faktor bei den verwendeten Biomaterialien wie auch bei klinisch angewendeten Materialien ist, dass diese auf Kollagen Typ I basieren und damit nicht die natürliche Umgebung chondrogener Zellen in einer Kollagen Typ II-Matrix abbilden [11]. Ein weiterer Aspekt bei der chondrogenen Differenzierung sind Wachstumsfaktoren [71], weshalb eine Vorinkubation der expandierten Chondrozyten mit chondrogenen Wachstumsfaktoren [45] erfolgte. Die verwendete Stimulationszeit wurde auf Grundlage früherer Untersuchungen gewählt [57,72]. Für die aufgezeigten Experimente wurden OA und gesunde Chondrozyten auf Kollagen Typ I-basierenden Scaffolds ausgesät und verschiedene kapazitiv gekoppelte elektrische Wechselfelder für sieben Tage appliziert, wobei keine Wachstumsfaktoren den Zellkulturen zugeführt wurden. Anschließend wurde neben der zellulären Aktivität die Genexpression sowie Freisetzung wichtiger EZM-Komponenten bestimmt.

Es gibt wenige Studien, die mit kapazitiv gekoppelten Systemen zur Stimulation von Chondrozyten arbeiten, jedoch bieten diese den Vorteil, dass keine ungewollten elektrochemischen Reaktionen stattfinden [50,51]. Innerhalb von In-vitro-Untersuchungen fanden Brighton et al. heraus, dass der Stoffwechsel von bovinen Chondrozyten [73] und Knorpelgewebe bovinen [54] sowie humanen [59] Ursprungs durch exogene kapazitiv gekoppelte Felder positiv beeinflusst wird. Diese und weitere Studien belegen, dass artikuläre Chondrozyten auf exogene Felder mit einer Steigerung der Proliferation [52,53] und der Hochregulation der Expression von EZM-Komponenten reagieren [54,55,59]. Mit dem in der vorgelegten Arbeit genutzten kapazitiv gekoppelten 6-Wellsystem [I] konnte eine spannungsabhängige Steigerung des DNA-Gehaltes in humanen, gesunden Chondrozyten nach der Stimulation mit einer applizierten Spannung von 100 mV (5,2 × 10⁻⁵ mV/cm) bestimmt werden. Dies weist ebenfalls auf eine gesteigerte Zellproliferation hin. Zudem

Diskussion

wurde analog zu Brighton et al. [54,55,59] eine Hochregulierung der Biosynthese der EZM-Bestandteile CIICP und GAG nachgewiesen. Dabei ist zu beachten, dass Brighton et al. [54,55,59] für ihre Experimente eine Frequenz von 60 kHz verwendet haben, während im verwendeten System [I] die optimale Steigerung der Biosynthese bei 1 kHz beobachtet wurde. Dies könnte mit der unterschiedlichen Verteilung sowie Ausrichtung der elektrischen Felder im Zusammenhang stehen. Im kapazitiv gekoppelten System von Brighton et al. verläuft das elektrische Feld homogen und senkrecht [54,55,59], im vorgestellten System [I] jedoch heterogen und waagerecht zu den Zellen. Übereinstimmend mit Brighton et al. [54,55,59] und anderen Arbeiten [52,57] wurde die sinusförmige Signalform verwendet. Aufgrund der Unterschiede zwischen den Versuchsaufbauten ist ein direkter Vergleich der Messdaten erschwert [74].

In Studie [I] wurden signifikante Unterschiede zwischen gesunden und OA Chondrozyten gefunden, sodass der Zellstatus von hoher Relevanz zu sein scheint. Interessanterweise war die biologische Antwort der OA Chondrozyten bei 100 mV ausgeprägter bezüglich der Syntheserate von CIICP und GAG, aber auch für das CICP. Gesunde Chondrozyten reagierten ebenfalls mit erhöhten Werten der genannten EZM-Marker, allerdings war der Anstieg deutlich geringer als bei den OA Zellen. Dies könnte auf einen ausgeglichenen EZM-Umsatz im Vergleich zu Chondrozyten aus degenerativ verändertem Knorpel hinweisen, in denen es zu einer Dysregulation der EZM-Expression kommt und somit u.a. zu einer erhöhten Expression von *Col1A1* [75].

Das 6-Well-System wies für umfangreiche Parameteroptimierungsstudien eine Limitierung auf, da keine parallele Applizierung verschiedener Feldstärken möglich war. Zudem war aufgrund des großen Elektrodenabstandes nur die Generierung geringer Feldstärken möglich, die nicht mit Literaturdaten vergleichbar waren.

Das im Rahmen dieser Arbeit neu entwickelte 12-Well-Stimulationssystem [II] bietet gegenüber dem 6-Wellsystem und anderen Systemen [76–78] den Vorteil, dass simultan verschiedene Parameterkombinationen untersucht werden können. Darüber hinaus ist bei diesem wiederverwendbaren System nur eine Spannungsversorgung notwendig. Durch die kreissegmentförmige Anordnung der Elektroden unterhalb der besiedelten Biomaterialien wird zusätzlich ein inhomogenes elektrisches Feld generiert, welches den heterogenen endogen auftretenden Feldern ähnelt [29].

Mit dem 12-Wellsystem [II] konnten mit der Eingangsspannung von 30 V_{pp} kombiniert mit 60 kHz ähnliche elektrische Feldstärken (20 bis 25 mV/cm) wie beim Aufbau von Brighton et al. [54,55,59,79] erreicht werden. Dennoch war die Steigerung chondrogener Re-Differenzierungsmarker limitiert, was auf die kurze Stimulationsdauer von einer Woche, die gewählten Parameter sowie die verwendeten Chondrozyten zurückzuführen sein könnte. Brighton et al. nutzten für ihre Untersuchungen eine Stimulationszeit von 14 Tagen [59] und auch Kwon et al. beschreiben eine zeitabhängige Chondrogenese elektrisch stimulierter mesenchymaler Stammzellen [80]. In zukünftigen Studien sollte daher untersucht werden, ob eine längere Stimulationsdauer zusätzlich zu einer Anreicherung von hyalinen Matrixbestandteilen führt. Dabei könnte die Kombination verschiedener Frequenzen und

Spannungen zielführend sein. Eigene Vorarbeiten [60] und andere Studien [52,55,59] zeigen eine chondrogene Differenzierung überwiegend bei 60 kHz. Die Studie im 12-Wellsystem unterstreicht dies, da eine Steigerung der Sox9-Genexpression bei der Verwendung von 60 kHz detektierbar war. Es wurde beschrieben, dass verschiedene elektrische Felder unterschiedliche Einflüsse auf den Zellstoffwechsel haben. So führte die Anwendung von 4 mV/cm zu einer erhöhten Proliferation, während ein Feld von 8 mV/cm eine erhöhte GAG-Synthese zur Folge hatte. [52] Zudem deutet die Studie von Vaca-González et al. auf einen frequenzabhängigen Stimulationseffekt hin, der entweder intra- oder extrazelluläre Signalwege anregt [81]. Daher sollten in zukünftigen Untersuchungen neben der weiteren Parameteroptimierung ebenfalls die zugrundliegenden Stimulationsmechanismen adressiert werden. Die Transduktion elektrischer Signale durch Calcium-Kanäle stellt einen interessanten Ansatz dar [79,82]. In diesem Kontext zeigten eigene Voruntersuchungen die Expression des Low-voltage-activated ("T-type") Calcium-Kanals 3.1 (Ca_V3.1) in den verwendeten humanen Chondrozyten (Abb. 7). Bei zukünftigen Analysen der zugrundeliegenden Mechanismen könnte durch die Inhibierung mit beispielsweise ProTx I [83] eine Beteiligung dieses Calcium-Kanales an der Signalkaskade identifiziert werden.

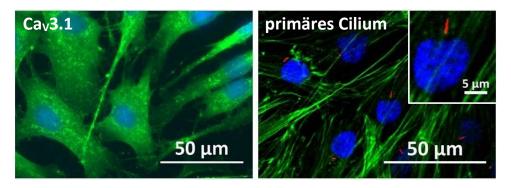


Abb. 7: Fluoreszenz-mikroskopische Aufnahmen: Low-voltage-activated ("T-type") Calcium-Kanal 3.1 (Cav3.1) (grün, links) und primäres Cilium (rot, rechts) sowie vergrößerter Bildausschnitt (rechts, oben). Die Färbung des hCav3.1 erfolgte mit primärem Antikörper Anti Cav3.1 (Alomone labs, Jerusalem, Israel) und Alexa Fluor® 488 Goat Anti-Rabbit IgG (Invitrogen by Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) als sekundärer Antikörper. Die Aufnahme erfolgte am Nikon Eclipse Ts2R mit 20x-Objektiv. Für die Darstellung des primären Ciliums wurde das acetylierte α-Tubulin gekoppelt mit Alexa Fluor® 647 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Dallas, TX, USA) genutzt. Die Aufnahme erfolgte am Zeiss LSM 780, AxioObserver. Maßstabsbalken entspricht 50 μm bzw. 5 μm.

Das primäre Cilium wird in der Literatur ebenfalls als signaltransduzierendes Zellorganell aufgeführt. Bislang wurde aufgezeigt, dass dieses bei der elektrisch-induzierten Osteogenese adipogener Stammzellen [84] sowie bei der osteoblastären Mineralisierung [85] beteiligt ist. Generell ist dieses Zellorganell in die skelettale Entwicklung [86,87] und auch bei der Chondrogenese [88,89] involviert, wodurch es ebenfalls als Sensor für elektrische Felder in humanen Chondrozyten interessant ist. Da vor allem die Ciliumlänge für dessen Signaltransduktionskapazität entscheidend ist [90], wurde in Kooperation mit dem Lehrstuhl für Modellierung und Simulation der Universität Rostock eine automatisierte Längenmessung entwickelt. Diese ermöglicht eine verbesserte qualitative Aussage und damit die Möglichkeit,

eine Beteiligung des primären Ciliums als elektro-sensitiver Sensor in humanen Chondrozyten nachzuweisen.

Des Weiteren führte im 12-Wellsystem [II] die Kombination von $10\,V_{pp}$ mit $1\,kHz$ $(0,1-0,12\,mV/cm)$ zu einer Absenkung der CICP-Freisetzung. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass in erster Linie die angelegte Frequenz zu der Abnahme des De-Differenzierungsprozesses führt. Dies ist ein erster wichtiger Schritt zur Beeinflussung der chondrogenen Differenzierungsfähigkeit der Zellen. Interessanterweise konnte die Verringerung der De-Differenzierung trotz Nutzung nicht physiologischer Kollagen Typ I-basierter Scaffolds induziert werden. Um dieser Limitierung entgegenzuwirken, wäre die Verwendung von nicht-Kollagen Typ I-Materialien [12,91,92] zielführend und könnte zu verbesserten physiologischen Eigenschaften führen [93,94]. Bislang gibt es nur wenig verfügbare Materialen auf Kollagen Typ II-Basis [94,95]. Die Nutzung von devitalisierter Knorpelmatrix könnte ebenfalls zur verbesserten Re-Differenzierung führen, da diese Matrix chondro-induktiv wirkt und die physiologische Umgebung der Chondrozyten abbildet [96,97].

Die de-differenzierten Chondrozyten nehmen einen fibroblastären Phänotyp an. In diesem Kontext gelang es Lee et al. humane dermale Fibroblasten mittels elektrischer Stimulation (5000 mV/cm und 5,0 Hz) direkt in hyaline chondrogene Zellen zu differenzieren. Für den Differenzierungsprozess waren weder exogene Wachstumsfaktoren noch eine chondroinduktive Gentransduktion notwendig. [98] Auch in mesenchymalen Stammzellen konnte die Chondrogenese mittels elektrischer Felder angeregt werden [80,99,100]. Dies verdeutlicht das große Potential der elektrischen Stimulation für das Tissue-Engineering und die Behandlung von Knorpelläsionen.

5.2 Induktion der Zellmigration durch kapazitiv gekoppelte Wechselfelder

Ein weiter Aspekt für das Tissue-Engineering ist die Zellmigration, wobei diese auf die Zellinfiltration in das Biomaterial abzielt. Nach aktuellem Wissensstand liegen bisher keine vergleichbaren Arbeiten zur Untersuchung der Migration von humanen Chondrozyten in kapazitiv gekoppelten Wechselfeldern vor. Vorwiegend wurde der Einfluss von elektrischen Feldern auf die Beweglichkeit von Zellen mittels direkter elektrischer Stimulation untersucht [101]. Dabei variieren die erzielten Erkenntnisse je nach untersuchtem Zelltyp. Fibrochondrozyten des Meniskus [102] und Osteoblasten [103] migrieren in Abhängigkeit der Feldstärke in Richtung Kathode. Für Chondrozyten konnte ebenfalls eine kathodische Migration nachgewiesen werden [104]. Wobei die Migrationsrichtung von der Passagen-Anzahl abhängig zu sein scheint, da für Chondrozyten höherer Passagen (> P3) eine anodische Migration nachgewiesen wurde. In der gleichen Studie wurde gezeigt, dass die Elektrotaxis-Reaktion Einfluss auf den chondrogenen Phänotyp hat. [105] Sun et al. beschreiben in verschiedenen Studien die Auswirkung elektrischer Felder in 3D-Kollagen-Konstrukten auf die Migration von humanen Fibroblasten [106-108] und mesenchymalen Stammzellen [106]. Sie konnten zeigen, dass es eine Zelltyp-abhängige Orientierung im elektrischen Feld gibt [106]. Zudem weisen die Studien auf eine Beteiligung der Zelloberflächenrezeptor-gekoppelten Phospholipase C, der Integrine, der intrazellulären

Calcium-Ionen [107] und auf eine Abhängigkeit von der Kollagen-Konzentration hin [108]. Generell wird die Zellmigration in elektrischen Feldern durch die dielektrischen Eigenschaften der verwendeten Materialien beeinflusst [109]. Diese Aspekte sowie der Einfluss der Feldstärke auf die Migrationsgeschwindigkeit sollten in weiterführenden Studien untersucht werden, um die Migration durch kapazitiv gekoppelte elektrische Feldstimulation gezielt beeinflussen zu können. Zudem könnten die Korrelationen mit numerischen Simulationen und die Verwendung von spezifischen Inhibitoren der aufgezeigten Signaltransduktoren zur Aufklärung der zugrundeliegenden Mechanismen beitragen. Dafür ist das in Studie [III] vorgestellte Messprotokoll für die röntgenstrahlbasierte mikrotomographische Untersuchung geeignet. Eine Limitation des Protokolls besteht im Nachweis spezifischer EZM-Marker wie Kollagen Typ II. In histologischen Untersuchungen werden diese durch spezifische (immuno)histochemische Färbungen [110–112] realisiert. Für weiterführende Studien könnte eine zusätzliche, spezifische Immunfärbung die Untersuchung von EZM-Markern ermöglichen. Ein Verfahren dafür wurde von Metscher und Müller in einer μCT-Studie aufgezeigt [113], welches die Aufklärung Matrix-bildender Mechanismen ermöglicht.

5.3 Translation und Ausblick

Für eine zukünftige klinische Anwendung ist es denkbar, die etablierte MACT mit der exogenen, kapazitiv gekoppelten elektrischen Stimulation der Zellen zu kombinieren. Die stimulierten Chondrozyten sollten dadurch im Vergleich zu unbehandelten Zellen einen verbesserten Re-Differenzierungsstatus aufweisen. Dies könnte bei der Re-Implantation der Zellen das Risiko der Bildung von Faserknopel verringern. Jedoch muss diese Annahme mittels weiterführender In-vitro-Langzeit- und tierexperimenteller Studien untermauert werden. Zudem sollten weiterführend die optimalen Protokolle für die elektrische unterschiedlicher Zelltypen identifiziert werden. Eine verschiedener Stimulationsdauern, Frequenzen und Spannungen könnte ein geeignetes Mittel sein, um die chondrogene Differenzierung der Zellen zu fördern. Des Weiteren könnte eine Kombination aus elektrischer und mechanischer Stimulation auf einem geeigneten 3D-Scaffold mit knorpelähnlicheren Materialeigenschaften eine optimale Grundlage für die chondrogene Antwort von expandierten Chondrozyten bilden. Aufgrund der physiologischen elektro-mechanischen Wechselwirkungen im nativen Knorpel könnte eine Kombination der Stimulationsformen die chondrogenen Effekte gegenseitig verstärken. Dafür spricht, dass die mechanische Stimulation selbst in osteoarthrotischen Gewebe pro-chondrogene Effekte hervorruft [114,115]. Weiterführend wäre für eine Translation in die klinische Anwendung eine exakte Bestimmung der applizierten elektrischen Felder notwendig, was allerdings komplexere Aufbauten erfordert. Bisher basiert die Simulation der genutzten Felder auf der Annahme, dass durch die verwendeten Biomaterialien kein Einfluss auf die Feldverteilung ausgeübt wird, da aus der Absorption des umgebenden Zellkulturmediums gleiche Leitfähigkeitseigenschaften resultieren. Die Leitfähigkeit der verwendeten Materialien sowie der Einfluss benachbarter Wells sind jedoch wichtige Einflussgrößen und sollten in

Zusammenfassung

zukünftigen Studien mit geeigneten Messinstrumenten erfasst und in numerischen Feldsimulationen berücksichtigt werden. Mittels experimentell validierter Simulationen könnte eine verbesserte Vorhersage über die Verteilung der Felder getroffen werden und in den Aufbau eines in situ-anwendbaren, elektrisch aktiven Implantats einfließen. Mit derartigen Implantaten könnten Läsionen im Knorpelgewebe direkt in situ ohne Entnahme und Re-Implantation ex vivo-kultivierter Knorpelzellen erfolgen.

6 Zusammenfassung

In der Versorgung von Läsionen des hyalinen Gelenkknorpels besteht bis heute ein großer Bedarf an der Optimierung zellbasierter Behandlungsstrategien. Dies ist darin begründet, dass das intrinsische Regenerationspotential des Knorpelgewebes stark limitiert ist. verlieren Knorpelzellen während Zusätzlich der Ex-vivo-Expansion durch De-Differenzierungsprozesse ihren chondrogenen Phänotyp. Nach Implantation der dedifferenzierten Zellen kann es im reparierten Gewebe zur Ausbildung von faserigem anstatt hyalinem Knorpel kommen. Dieses Ersatzgewebe besitzt im Vergleich zum physiologischen Gelenkknorpel andere mechanische Eigenschaften, welche wiederum zur erneuten Schädigung bis hin zu degenerativen Prozessen des umliegenden Gewebes führen können. Die exogene biophysikalische Stimulation mittels kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder stellt einen vielversprechenden Ansatz zur Unterstützung reparativer Zelltherapien, wie der Matrix-assoziierten autologen Chondrozytentransplantation (MACT), dar. Mit ihrer Hilfe könnte die Ausbildung von Faserknorpel reduziert werden, wodurch bessere Eigenschaften des Ersatzgewebes erzielt werden können. Die Nutzung von Hypoxie, 3D-Biomaterialien und Wachstumsfaktoren während der Ex-vivo-Kultivierung imitieren zusätzlich die physiologische Umgebung der Zellen im Knorpelgewebe und wurden im Rahmen der Arbeit berücksichtigt.

Das Ziel der vorliegenden kumulativen Dissertation war, den Einfluss kapazitiv gekoppelter elektrischer Wechselfelder auf humane Chondrozyten hinsichtlich deren Differenzierungskapazität und Migration experimentell zu charakterisierten.

Mit Hilfe eigens entwickelter Stimulationssysteme wurden dafür humane Chondrozyten mit unterschiedlichen elektrischen Wechselfeldern exponiert. Neben der Auswirkung der elektrischen Felder auf die metabolische Aktivität sowie die Genexpression chondrogener Marker wurde die Synthese wichtiger Proteine der Extrazellulärmatrix (EZM) untersucht, um Rückschlüsse auf eine Frequenz- und/oder Spannungsabhängigkeit schließen zu können. Zusätzlich wurde der zelluläre Degenerationsstatus berücksichtigt. Da für die Funktionalität des nativen Knorpelgewebes neben dem Zellstatus ebenfalls die zonale Zellverteilung wichtig ist, wurde die Verteilung elektrisch stimulierter Chondrozyten in einem 3D-Hydrogel-Scaffold in wässriger Umgebung mittels Synchrotron-Strahlung untersucht.

In den durchgeführten Untersuchungen [I] und [II] konnte gezeigt werden, dass kapazitiv gekoppelte elektrische Wechselfelder die chondrogene Re-Differenzierung von expandierten, de-differenzierten Chondrozyten anregt.

Zusammenfassung

Im eingesetzten 6-Well-System [I] zeigte sich eine Spannungsabhängigkeit, sodass bei einer elektrischen Feldstärke von 5,2 × 10⁻⁵ mV/cm die chondrogene Re-Differenzierung stimuliert werden konnte. Zudem wurde eine Abhängigkeit zwischen dem elektrischen Feld und dem Degenerationsstadium der verwendeten Knorpelzellen beobachtet. Im Rahmen der Arbeit wurde weiterführend ein 12-Well-Stimulationssystem [II] entwickelt, mit dessen Hilfe simultan verschiedene Kombinationen aus Frequenz (1 kHz vs. 60 kHz) und Spannung (5 V_{pp}, 10 V_{pp}, 20 V_{pp} sowie 30 V_{pp}) untersucht werden konnten. In der Parameterstudie zeigte sich eine frequenzabhängige Reduzierung des De-Differenzierungsprozesses der humanen Chondrozyten. Mit dem 12-Well-Stimulationssystem ist zudem eine simultane mechanische Stimulation der Zellen durchführbar, sodass mögliche synergistische Effekte der beiden Stimulationsformen verifiziert werden können. In zukünftigen Studien sollen die Stimulationsparameter zur Unterstützung der Ausbildung hyaliner Zelleigenschaften weiter optimiert und die zugrundeliegenden zellulären Mechanismen untersucht werden. Des Weiteren sollte eine experimentelle Validierung der verwendeten Systeme erfolgen.

Neben der Untersuchung des Zellstatus wurde ein Messprotokoll [III] für die röntgenstrahlbasierte mikrotomographische Analyse der Zellverteilung in 3D-Hydrogelen in wässriger Umgebung etabliert. In einer Pilotstudie konnte gezeigt werden, dass ein kapazitiv gekoppeltes elektrisches Wechselfeld mit 10 mV/cm zu einer Migration von humanen Knorpelzellen in einen Hydrogel-Scaffold führt. In weiterführenden Studien sollten die Wirkung weiterer Parameterkombinationen auf die Migrationsrichtung und -geschwindigkeit untersucht werden. Zudem wird eine gezielte Inhibierung spezifischer Zellstrukturen zur Aufklärung der beteiligten Mechanismen beitragen.

Für eine zukünftige therapeutische Anwendung stellen kapazitiv gekoppelte elektrische Wechselfelder ein großes Potential für zellbasierte Therapien dar, um den De-Differenzierungsprozessen im Rahmen der Ex-vivo-Expansion der humanen Knorpelzellen entgegenzuwirken. Dafür ist eine weitergehende Optimierung der eingesetzten Stimulationssysteme und -parameter notwendig, welche in Langzeit- sowie In-vivo-Studien charakterisiert werden sollten.

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8 Liste der Publikationen zur kumulativen Dissertation

Für die kumulative Dissertation wurden folgende Publikationen herangezogen:

- [I] Krueger, S.; Achilles, S.; Zimmermann, J.; Tischer, T.; Bader, R.; Jonitz-Heincke, A.: Re-Differentiation Capacity of Human Chondrocytes in Vitro Following Electrical Stimulation with Capacitively Coupled Fields. *J. Clin. Med.* **2019**, 8, doi:10.3390/jcm8111771 Impact Factor: 3.303 (2020)
- [II] Krueger, S.; Riess, A.; Jonitz-Heincke, A.; Weizel, A.; Seyfarth, A.; Seitz, H.; Bader, R.: Establishment of a New Device for Electrical Stimulation of Non-Degenerative Cartilage Cells In Vitro. *Int. J. Mol. Sci.* 2021, 22, doi:10.3390/ijms22010394 Impact Factor: 4.556 (2020)
- [III] Wieland, D.C.F.; Krueger, S.; Moosmann, J.; Distler, T.; Weizel, A.; Boccaccini, A.R.; Seitz, H.; Jonitz-Heincke, A.; Bader, R.: Propagation-based Phase Contrast Computed Tomography as a Suitable Tool for the Characterization of Spatial 3D Cell Distribution in Biomaterials. Adv. Eng. Mater. 2021, doi:10.1002/adem.202001188 Impact Factor: 3.217 (2020)





Article

Re-Differentiation Capacity of Human Chondrocytes in Vitro Following Electrical Stimulation with Capacitively Coupled Fields

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Abstract: Treatment of cartilage lesions remains a clinical challenge. Therefore, biophysical stimuli like electric fields seem to be a promising tool for chondrocytic differentiation and treatment of cartilage lesions. In this in vitro study, we evaluated the effects of low intensity capacitively coupled electric fields with an alternating voltage of 100 mV_{RMS} (corresponds to $5.2 \times 10^{-5} \text{ mV/cm}$) or 1 V_{RMS} (corresponds to $5.2 \times 10^{-4} \text{ mV/cm}$) with 1 kHz, on human chondrocytes derived from osteoarthritic (OA) and non-degenerative hyaline cartilage. A reduction of metabolic activity after electrical stimulation was more pronounced in non-degenerative cells. In contrast, DNA contents in OA cells were significantly decreased after electrical stimulation. A difference between 100 mV_{RMS} and 1 V_{RMS} was not detected. However, a voltage-dependent influence on gene and protein expression was observed. Both cell types showed increased synthesis rates of collagen (Col) II, glycosaminoglycans (GAG), and Col I protein following stimulation with 100 mV_{RMS} , whereas this increase was clearly higher in OA cells. Our results demonstrated the sensitization of chondrocytes by alternating electric fields, especially at 100 mV_{RMS} , which has an impact on chondrocytic differentiation capacity. However, analysis of further electrical stimulation parameters should be done to induce optimal hyaline characteristics of ex vivo expanded human chondrocytes.

Keywords: cartilage lesion; electrical stimulation; capacitively coupled electric field; regenerative medicine; chondrocytes

1. Introduction

Hyaline cartilage is of high importance for the functionality of joints, it ensures a smooth and lubricated friction surface as well as the transfer of loads to the subchondral bone [1–3]. For these properties, the viscoelastic characteristic of cartilage, which is mainly mediated by the extracellular matrix (ECM), is essential. Further characteristics of hyaline cartilage are the limited potential for self-repair and that nutrient and oxygen supply is ensured only through fluid movement by diffusion and mechanical loading [1,4].

In contrast to bone, mature hyaline cartilage cannot regenerate itself after traumatic lesions or tissue degeneration due to various reasons like lack of vascular supply and low cell turnover [5]. For this reason, the cartilage tissue is often irreversibly damaged by trauma and by subsequent degenerative processes [6]. Multiple surgical techniques for the treatment of cartilage defects are used depending mainly on the defect size: osteochondral autograft and allograft transplantation, microfracturing,

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 2 of 16

matrix augmented bone marrow stimulation and autologous chondrocyte implantation (ACI) as well as matrix-assisted ACI (MACI). For ACI, autologous chondrocytes are isolated from hyaline cartilage tissue derived from non-weight-bearing joint regions and expanded during ex vivo cultivation. After expansion, the cartilaginous cells are re-implanted in damaged regions of the articular cartilage. In MACI treatment, the expanded chondrocytes are seeded onto a three-dimensional (3D) scaffold before re-implantation to provide a more physiological environment, thus resulting in improved cell integration in the defect and regeneration of cartilage tissue [7].

However, the main problem of ex vivo expansion and cultivation remains the de-differentiation of chondrocytes in monolayer cell cultures, which makes them lose their chondrogenic phenotype [8–10]. Using these de-differentiated cells, reconstruction of cartilage lesions is often accompanied by the formation of fibrocartilage tissue [11]. This tissue, in turn, has a lower ability to withstand mechanical stresses during joint loading [12]. Therefore, the treatment of cartilage lesions still remains a major clinical challenge. The current therapy options lack initiation of a healing process or ensurance of the necessary re-differentiation of de-differentiated chondrocytes and therefore do not offer an optimum quality of regenerated tissue [7,13].

In order to develop new and improved treatment options, a large field of research has been established. Among others, several scaffold materials for cartilage repair were introduced [14] and the use of mesenchymal stem cells were investigated [15]. Additionally, biophysical stimulation has been suggested for the improvement of tissue engineering approaches for repairing cartilage lesions [16–19]. Recently, effects of electrical stimulation on cartilage tissue and chondrocytes have been studied and an increased proliferation and matrix synthesis, as well as a reduced matrix degradation, was revealed [17,20]. These effects can probably be attributed to the unique structure as well as biomechanical and electromechanical properties of hyaline cartilage [16,21]. Therefore, electrical stimulation appeared to be a useful biophysical approach to support the re-differentiation of de-differentiated chondrocytes toward the chondrogenic phenotype, thus counteracting the degeneration of hyaline cartilage [17].

In the literature, different approaches have been described for applying electric fields to cells in vitro. These approaches can be divided into direct stimulation, inductive coupling, capacitive coupling, and semi-capacitive coupling. Of these, direct and capacitive applications are mainly used in vitro [22]. To apply direct current, electrodes are placed directly in the cell culture medium, which serves as conductors. The disadvantage of direct coupling is the interaction of the electrode material with the cell culture environment and the possible resulting electrochemical reactions such as Ph change, formation of hydrogen peroxide or reactive oxygen species, which can damage exposed cells. At capacitive coupling opposing electrodes were placed without contact to the conductive medium. The capacitive coupling of the cell culture medium then takes place via the frequency adaptation of the generator in order to generate an electric field. The separation of charges leads to the creation of an electric field between the capacitor plates or electrodes [22]. Since direct currents do not flow through these systems and the electrode, the materials do not react directly with the surrounding environment. Hence, the use of capacitive systems offers advantages with regard to future applications in ex vivo cultivation systems. In previous studies of our working group, we used direct coupling to stimulate bone and cartilage cells resulting in enhanced regenerative capacity [19,23–25]. Although direct coupling of electric fields is used for bone regeneration in situ, this approach is not feasible for cartilage tissue formation ex vivo. Therefore, the aim of this study was to establish an experimental setup for testing capacitively coupled alternating electric fields in order to characterize the influence of capacitively coupled alternating electric fields on the re-differentiation of human chondrocytes in vitro.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Test Setup for Capacitively Coupled Electric Field Stimulation

The experimental system is based on a commercially available six well cell culture plate (Corning Inc., New York, USA). To generate capacitively coupled electric fields, two titanium electrodes (anodized

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 3 of 16

with DOTIZE® by DOT GmbH, Rostock, Germany) were placed opposite to each other on the outside of the well (Figure 1). The three electrodes on each side were connected by the same conductive material as the electrodes. The electrodes were fitted as closely as possible to the polystyrene wells. A notch at the end of the electrodes ensured power supply via attaching a cable with a crocodile clip. A petri dish with fixed cell seeded scaffolds was placed in this system (explained in more detail in Section 2.3).

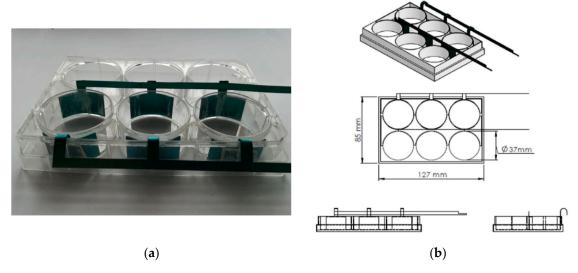


Figure 1. Experimental test setup. (a) The processed 6 well tissue culture plate with titanium electrodes. (b) Technical drawing of the system for capacitively coupled electric field stimulation.

To apply different sinusoidal alternating voltages with a frequency of 1 kHz, a function generator (GX 310, Metrix, Annecy-le-Vieux, France) was used. A custom-made timer allowed automated stimulation for 45 min three times per day following the protocol of Hiemer et al. [19]. The stimulation system itself was placed in an incubator to provide a stable and hypoxic environment (37 $^{\circ}$ C, 5% CO₂ and 5% O₂) for the cells.

2.2. Numerical Simulation of the Capacitively Coupled Electric Field

The finite element simulation package COMSOL Multiphysics®, v5.3a (COMSOL AB, Stockholm, Sweden) was used to build a geometric model of the electric fields corresponding to a single well with a pair of electrodes. The double wall resulting from the insertion of the petri dish into the cell culture plate is considered in the simulation. The electric field was computed using the "electric currents" interface at a frequency of 1 kHz. The solution was obtained for a total number of degrees of freedom of 2,713,555. One electrode was set to a potential of 0 V and the other to 1 V, corresponding to a voltage difference of 1 V. Since the system to be solved is linear, the solution and its derived quantities can be computed for any voltage difference by simply multiplying the solution with the ratio of the voltage difference and 1 V. Note that the voltage that is used in COMSOL refers to the amplitude of the signal, whereas lab equipment such as multimeter or function generator often use the RMS voltage. This must be accounted for when calculating the electric field. For example, 100 mV_{RMS} represents an amplitude of 141.4 mV.

The solution for the electric field at the bottom of the cell culture well and the electric field 1 mm above the bottom (corresponding to the location of the cells) is shown in Figure 2. Applying a voltage of 100 mV_{RMS} and a frequency of 1 kHz to our test system resulted in field strength of about 5.2×10^{-5} mV/cm, which acted on the cells. Using a voltage 10 times higher, the resulting amplitude on cells was also 10 times higher (5.2×10^{-4} mV/cm). The voltage inside the medium was almost constantly equal to 0.5 V, which potentially paved the way for validating the simulation by measuring this voltage.

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 4 of 16

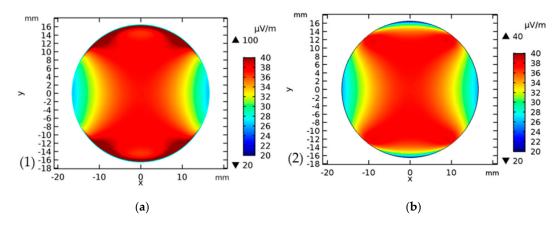


Figure 2. Numerical simulation of electric fields within the experimental test setup. (a) The electric field distribution simulated with COMSOL Multiphysics[®], v5.3a at the bottom of the Petri dish and (b) at 1 mm above the bottom for a potential difference of 1 V. At an amplitude of 141.4 mV, the result has to be scaled by a factor of 0.1414, yielding e.g., a maximum field of about 5.7 μ V/m instead of 40 μ V/m at 1 V amplitude.

2.3. Cell Culture and Stimulation

Human chondrocytes were isolated either from osteoarthritic or non-degenerative hyaline cartilage. The tissue originates from articular cartilage of the knee joint, which was donated by patients undergoing primary total knee replacement (n = 6, 3 female donors: 67 ± 12 years, 3 male donors: 70 ± 7 years) or was post-mortally derived within 72 h after the death of the donors (n = 4, 1 female donor 29 years, 3 male donors 43 ± 11 years). The study was approved by the local Ethical Committee of the University of Rostock (registration numbers: A 2009–0017 and A 2011–0138).

Chondrocytes were isolated as described previously [26]. Cells were expanded at 37 °C, 5% CO₂, and 21% O₂ and cryopreserved at passage 2. After thawing, the chondrocytes were cultivated in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM, Gibco[®], Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) with 10% fetal bovine serum (Pan Biotech, Aidenbach, Germany), 1% penicillin/streptomycin (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA), 1% Amphotericin B (Biochrom GmbH, Berlin, Germany) and 50 μ g/mL ascorbic acid (Sigma-Aldrich, Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany) in a 75 cm² cell culture flask at 37 °C, 5% CO₂, and 5% O₂ to reach a confluency of nearly 90%.

At passage three, cells were seeded on a three-dimensional collagen elastin scaffold (Matriderm, MedSkin Solutions Dr. Suwelack AG, Billerbeck, Germany), mainly consisting of bovine collagen type I. The collagen scaffold was punched into round scaffolds with 16 mm in diameter. Using biocompatible silicone adhesive (Korasilon paste, Kurt Obermeier GmbH & Co. KG, Bad Berleburg, Germany), two scaffolds were fixed on the ground of one petri dish (35 mm diameter) (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA).

On each scaffold, 200,000 cells in 250 μ L of medium were seeded. After an initial adherence time of 30 min, each 6-well was filled up with 3 mL DMEM containing 1% Pen/Strep, 1% Amphotericin B, 1% Insulin-Transferrin-Selen (ITS+TM Premix, BD Biosciences, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA), 50 μ g/mL ascorbic acid, 100 nM dexamethasone (Sigma-Aldrich, Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany), 50 ng/mL transforming growth factor (TGF)-ß1 (Peprotec, Hamburg, Germany) and 50 ng/mL insulin-like growth factor (IGF)-1 (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA). Cells were cultivated for three days at 37 °C, 5% CO₂, and 5% O₂ without medium change. Afterwards, medium was replaced with DMEM containing 1% Pen/Strep, 1% Amphotericin B, 1% ITS+TM, 50 μ g/mL ascorbic acid, and 100 nM dexamethasone. Subsequently, petri dishes containing cell-seeded scaffolds were placed in the wells of the electrical stimulation device (Figure 3). The stimulation device was placed into the incubator at 37 °C, 5% CO₂, and 5% O₂ and connected to the function generator via a timer. The voltage was adapted by measuring the RMS voltage at the electrodes with a voltmeter (Voltcraft plus VC-960, Hirschau, Germany). In the following, we always report the RMS value. The cell seeded scaffolds were stimulated three times each

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 5 of 16

day for 45 min within eight hours over a period of seven days without media exchange. Unstimulated cells served as controls.

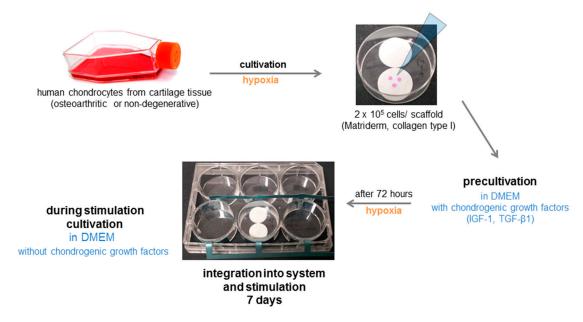


Figure 3. Scheme of the experimental procedure.

2.4. Cellular Activity

For the detection of metabolic active cells, the water-soluble tetrazolium salt (WST-1) assay (Roche GmbH, Grenzach-Wyhlen, Germany) was implemented. The tetrazolium salt WST-1 was reduced by mitochondrial dehydrogenases to formazan producing a color change from red-orange to yellow. For this assay, one scaffold of each petri dish was transferred into a 12-well plate. 500 μ L of a 10% dilution of WST-1 reagent with DMEM was added to the scaffolds. After one hour of incubation at 37 °C and hypoxic conditions, 100 μ L of each well was transferred into a 96-well-plate as triplicates. Absorption at a wavelength of 450 nm and at a reference wavelength of 630 nm was measured compared to a blank with the multimode plate reader Infinite 200 pro (Tecan Group Ltd., Maennedorf, Switzerland).

The scaffolds that were used for WST-1 were washed with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS, Biochrom AG, Berlin, Germany) and utilized to determine the DNA content per scaffold. Therefore, scaffolds were digested for 45 min at 37 °C in an incubation shaker (KS 4000 I control, IKA®-Werke GmbH & Co. KG, Staufen, Germany) in 1.5 mL reaction tubes (Sarstedt AG & Co. KG, Nuembrecht, Germany) filled up with 500 μ L Collagenase A (Roche GmbH, Grenzach-Wyhlen, Germany). For quantifying DNA from these isolated cells, the peqGOLD Tissue DNA Mini Kit (VWR International GmbH, Darmstadt, Germany) was used. This kit is based on the principle of selective binding characteristics of silica membranes. After cell lysis, DNA was bound to a silica matrix in a spin column due to polar interaction. Washing steps to remove proteins, RNA and other impurities were performed according to the manufacturer's instructions. Finally, DNA was eluted in 30 μ L of elution buffer. DNA concentrations were quantified via absorption by a photometer (Tecan Group Ltd., Maennedorf, Switzerland) at a wavelength of 260 nm.

2.5. Gene Expression

Gene expression rates of specific genes modulating de-differentiation, chondrogenic differentiation and hypertrophy in stimulated and unstimulated cells were determined by quantifying mRNA levels. For this purpose, scaffolds were digested in 500 μ L collagenase A to further isolate total RNA with the peqGOLD Total RNA Kit (VWR International GmbH, Darmstadt, Germany) according to the manufacturer's recommendations. RNA was eluted in 30 μ L of RNAse free water (Carl Roth GmbH &

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 6 of 16

Co. KG, Karlsruhe, Germany) and RNA concentrations were measured via NanoQuant™ plate and TECAN Reader (both: Tecan Group Ltd.).

By reverse transcription PCR (RT-PCR), RNA samples were transcribed to cDNA. RT-PCR was performed in a thermocycler (Biometra GmbH, Goettingen, Germany). Using the High Capacity cDNA Reverse Transcription Kit (Thermofisher Scientific), 200 ng RNA of each sample was dissolved in 10 μ L water and 10 μ L of the master mix were added. After RT-PCR, 20 μ L of RNAse free water was added to the transcribed cDNA.

The semi-quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) is based on the principle of common PCR to amplify DNA double strands. Hereby, qPCR works with fluorescence dyes to quantify amplificated genes. For this study, the innuMIX qPCR MasterMix SyGreen (Analytik Jena, Jena, Germany) was used. The fluorescence dye Sybr Green intercalates specifically in double stranded DNA. According to instructions, 1 μ L of amplificated cDNA was mixed with 9 μ L of a master mix containing 2x innuMIX, forward primer (12 μ M), reverse primer (12 μ M) and DEPC-water. The used primer sequences are mentioned in Table 1. QPCR was done in a qTOWER 2.0 (Analytik Jena) using the following conditions: 95 °C for the initial 2 min and 39 cycles, of 5 sec at 95 °C and 25 s at 60–65 °C. A cycle of threshold (Ct) of 28 was set as the limit. Relative expression of each mRNA compared to the housekeeper β -Actin was calculated according to the equation Δ Ct = Ct_{target} – Ct $_{\beta$ -Actin. The relative amount of target mRNA in unstimulated cells and stimulated cells was expressed as $2^{(-\Delta\Delta Ct)}$, where $\Delta\Delta$ Ct_{stimulation} = Δ Ct_{stimulated} – Δ Ct_{unstimulated}.

Gene		Primer Sequence	Description/Function	
β-Actin	forward	5'-CTTCCTGGGCATGGAGTC-3'	Housekeeping gene	
(ACTB)	reverse	5'-AGCACTGTGTTGGCGTACAG-3'	Housekeeping gene	
Collagen II	forward	5'-AATGGTGGCTTCCATTCAG-3'	Main macromolecule of the ECM of cartilaginous	
(Col2A1)	reverse	5'-GTGATGTTCTGGGAGCCTTC-3'	tissue	
Aggrecan	forward	5'-ACAAGGTCTCACTGCCCAAC-3'	Proteoglycan of ECM	
(ACAN)	reverse	5'-AATGGAACACGATGCCTTTC-3'	r toteogrycan of ECIVI	
SRY-box 9	forward	5'-AGTACCCGCACCTGCACAAC-3'	Transcriptional factor mediating chondrocytes	
(Sox9)	reverse	5'-CGCTTCTCGCTCTCGTTCAG-3'	phenotype and cartilage homeostasis	
Collagen IX	forward	5'-AACAGTGAAGGGGTCGTGAG-3'	Important function for integrity and stability of the	
(Col9A1)	reverse	5'-TGGAATTGACAGGGAATCTGGG-3'	cartilage	
Collagen I	forward	5'-ACGAAGACATCCCACCAATC-3'	De-differentiation marker	
(Col1A1)	reverse	5'-AGATCACGTCATCGCACAAC-3'	De-differentiation marker	
Collagen X	forward	5'-GAACTCCCAGCACGCAGAATC-3'	Hypertrophic marker	
(Col10A1)	reverse	5'-AGTGGGCCTTTTATGCCTGT-3'	rrypertropriic marker	
Alkaline phosphatase	forward	5'-CATTGTGACCACCACGAGAG-3'	Transcriptional factor mediating hypertrophy	
(ALP)	reverse	5'-CCATGATCACGTCAATGTCC-3'		
Matrix metallopeptidase	forward	5'-CACGCATAGTCATATAGATACT-3'	Degradation enzyme for Collagen II	
(MMP)-13	reverse	5'-CTGGAGATATGATGATACTAAC-3'		

Table 1. Overview of used primers for qPCR.

2.6. Protein Expression

Protein expression was determined through the measurement of soluble proteins in the supernatant of stimulated and unstimulated cells.

Collagens mainly exist as collagen fibrils. To form these arrangements, collagens are released as procollagens. From these precursor molecules, the carboxy-terminal and the amino-terminal ends are cut off by procollagen peptidases for embedding the mature proteins into the fibrils. In this context, the release of the amino-terminal and carboxy-terminal ends can be used to measure the synthesis rate of collagen. For measuring the amount of type I C-terminal collagen propeptide (CICP), the MicroVue CICP ELISA (Quidel, San Diego, CA, USA) was used according to manufacturer's instructions. A standard curve was carried along to determine protein concentrations within samples. Absorption was measured at 405 nm using a Tecan microplate reader (Tecan Group Ltd.). The Collagen Type II Synthesis ELISA (IBEX, Montréal, QC, Canada) was used to measure the concentration of type II C-terminal propeptide (CIICP). The assay procedure was performed according to the manufacturer's instructions. Absorption was measured at 450 nm using a Tecan microplate reader (Tecan Group Ltd.).

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 7 of 16

For the detection of glycosaminoglycans (GAG), the Blyscan Sulfated Glycosaminoglycan Assay TM (biocolor, Carrickfergus, UK) was used. Based on the binding of 1,9-dimethylmethylene blue to protein-free sulfated glycosaminoglycan chains, the assay creates an environment that allows specific labelling. Samples were digested overnight at 65 °C by papain (20 units/mg in 0.2 mol/L sodium phosphate buffer with pH = 6.4, Sigma Aldrich, Merck KGaA). Subsequently, the assay was implemented as recommended by the manufacturer and absorption was measured at 656 nm using a Tecan microplate reader (Tecan Group Ltd.).

All protein data were normalized to total protein content. Total protein content was measured using the Qubit[®] Protein Assay (Thermo Fischer Scientific Inc.). Proteins are labelled via a fluorescent dye and the fluorescence level was quantified with the Qubit Fluorometer (Thermo Scientific Scientific Inc.). This device quantifies protein expression via a standard curve created by provided standards. The assay was carried out according to the manufacturer's instructions.

2.7. Data Illustration and Statistics

For all experiments, a minimum of four independent donors was used. All results were plotted as boxplots using GraphPad Prism 7 (Graphpad Software Inc., San Diego, CA, USA). Median, 25%-Quartile, 75%-Quartile and whiskers from minimum to maximum were shown. All statistical tests were performed by GraphPad Prism 7. The outlier test ROUT was performed to detect outliers for boxplots and statistical analysis. Gene expression data are depicted as the percentage of $2^{(-\Delta\Delta Ct)}$ for better visualization of the changes with the unstimulated control set as 100%. The underlying statistical analysis was performed with the $\Delta\Delta$ Ct-values. For the statistical analysis of protein data, the values of the specific protein amount normalized to total protein content were used. Comparison of the stimulation parameters (unstimulated, 100 mV and 1 V) within the same stimulation group (OA or non-degenerative chondrocytes) was performed with the Friedman test as these experiments were performed in parallel for the same chondrocyte donor. The paired analysis allows taking into account the inter-individual variation of the donors. For comparing the two samples of the same stimulation parameter between OA and non-degenerative chondrocytes, the Mann-Whitney-U-test was performed. The significance level was set to a level of p < 0.05.

3. Results

3.1. Cellular Activity

Compared to unstimulated cells, the metabolic activity (represented through WST-1 conversion) was reduced after electrical stimulation in OA and non-degenerative chondrocytes. For OA cells, this decrease was significant following stimulation with 100 mV (p = 0.0281) (Figure 4a). Comparing both cell types, a significant difference was detectable after stimulation with 100 mV (p = 0.0303) and 1 V (p = 0.0087). Here, the metabolic activity of chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative hyaline cartilage was reduced compared to OA chondrocytes.

DNA content of non-degenerative chondrocytes was significantly increased after stimulation with 100 mV (p = 0.0133) compared to unstimulated cells (Figure 4b). In contrast, the DNA content of chondrocytes isolated from osteoarthritic cartilage (OA chondrocytes) was slightly decreased after stimulation with 100 mV without statistical significance. Similar to metabolic activity, a significant difference between both cell types was detectable following electrical stimulation (both: p = 0.0043). In contrast to the metabolic activity, DNA contents of stimulated non-degenerative chondrocytes were higher compared to stimulated OA chondrocytes.

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 8 of 16

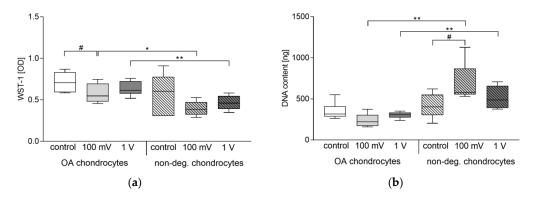


Figure 4. Cellular activity of human chondrocytes following electrical stimulation with 1 kHz and either 100 mV or 1 V. Chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative (n = 4) or osteoarthritic (OA) cartilage (n = 6) were seeded on collagen scaffolds and stimulated over a period of seven days. Afterwards, metabolic activity was determined via water-soluble tetrazolium salt (WST-1) assay (**a**) and DNA content was analyzed by peqGOLD Tissue DNA Mini Kit (**b**). Data are presented as boxplots. Statistical analysis within a stimulation group was performed with Friedman test ($^{\#}$ p < 0.05). To compare two samples between OA and non-degenerative chondrocytes, Mann-Whitney-U-test was performed ($^{\#}$ p < 0.05). **

3.2. Induction of Chondrocytic Differentiation

Regulation of chondrogenic differentiation markers following electrical stimulation was carried out for collagen II (Col2A1), aggrecan (ACAN), SRY-box (Sox) 9, and collagen IX (Col9A1). Due to the high intra-individual variability of cells, no statistically significant differences between the control groups and the electrically stimulated groups were detected. Electrical stimulation with 100 mV led to favorable results in non-degenerative chondrocytes compared to OA chondrocytes. Although Col2A1 transcripts did not reach statistical significance, an upregulation was shown following electrical stimulation with 100 mV. Additionally, an increase in gene expression rates of ACAN (p = 0.0281 compared to 1 V) in non-degenerative cells was observed (Figure 5). Electrical stimulation did not influence the mRNA of Sox9 or rather did not induce the expression of Col9A1.

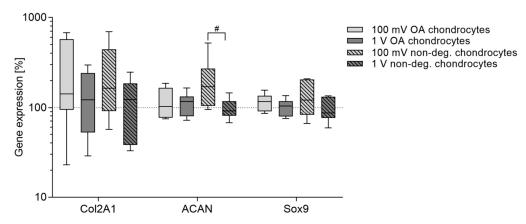


Figure 5. Relative gene expression of chondrogenic differentiation markers in human chondrocytes after electrical stimulation with 100 mV and 1 V at 1 kHz. Chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative (n = 4) or osteoarthritic (OA) cartilage (n = 6) were seeded on collagen scaffolds and electrical stimulation was performed over a period of seven days. Afterwards, RNA was isolated to determine the gene expression of chondrogenic differentiation markers via semi-quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR). Data are presented as boxplots of the percentage of $2^{(-\Delta\Delta Ct)}$ related to unstimulated cells (100%). Statistical analysis within a stimulation group was performed with Friedman test by using the $\Delta\Delta$ Ct-values ($^{\#}$ p < 0.05).

J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 9 of 16

The release of Col II protein was significantly increased in OA chondrocytes following electrical stimulation with 100 mV (p = 0.0117) compared to control (Figure 6). Moreover, stimulation with 1 V led to slightly decreased protein release in OA cells compared to 100 mV. However, protein amounts were significantly enhanced compared to non-degenerative chondrocytes (100 mV: p = 0.0095, 1 V: p = 0.0381).

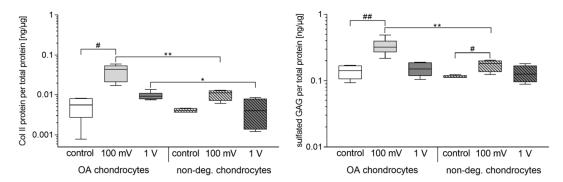


Figure 6. Release of collagen (Col) II and glycosaminoglycans (GAG) in human chondrocytes after electrical stimulation with 100 mV and 1 V at 1 kHz. Chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative (n=4) or osteoarthritic (OA) cartilage (n=6) were seeded on collagen scaffolds and stimulated over a period of 7 days. Afterwards, protein synthesis rates of Col II were determined using ELISA. Glycosaminoglycans (GAG) were analyzed by Blyscan Sulfated Glycosaminoglycan AssayTM. Data are presented as boxplots. Statistical analysis within a stimulation group was performed with Friedman test ($^{\#}p < 0.05$, $^{\#\#}p < 0.01$). To compare two samples between OA and non-degenerative chondrocytes Mann-Whitney-U-test was performed ($^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$).

Compared to unstimulated controls, the release of GAG was significantly upregulated in chondrocytes when stimulated with 100 mV (OA chondrocytes: p = 0.0045, non-degenerative chondrocytes: p = 0.0400). Moreover, GAG released from OA chondrocytes was significantly higher than for non-degenerative chondrocytes (p = 0.0095). Following stimulation with 1 V, GAG contents were similar to those of unstimulated controls.

3.3. De-Differentiation and Hypertrophy after Electrical Stimulation

To determine the influence of electrical stimulation on mRNA transcripts of important de-differentiation and hypertrophy markers, gene expression rates of collagen I (Col1A1), collagen X (Col10A1), alkaline phosphatase (ALP), and matrix metalloproteinase (MMP)-13 were analyzed (Figure 7). Col1A1 gene expression was not influenced in all stimulation groups. However, stimulation with 100 mV and 1 V led to slightly increased gene expression rates of Col10A1 in OA chondrocytes. ALP mRNA transcripts were significantly upregulated in non-degenerative chondrocytes following stimulation with 100 mV compared to unstimulated control (p = 0.0117). Although gene expression of MMP-13 did not reach significance in all stimulation groups, a tendency of increased expression rates could be shown after stimulation with 100 mV.

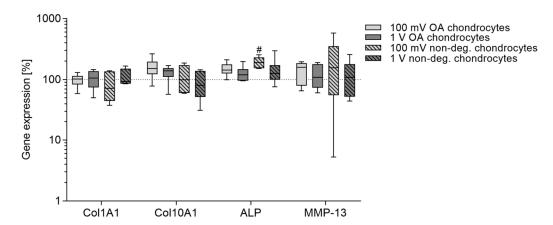


Figure 7. Relative gene expression rates of de-differentiation and hypertrophy markers in chondrocytes after electrical stimulation with 100 mV and 1 V at 1 kHz. Chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative (n=4) or osteoarthritic (OA) cartilage (n=6) were seeded on collagen scaffolds and stimulated over a period of seven days. Afterwards, the gene expression of chondrogenic de-differentiation and hypertrophy markers was determined via a semi-quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR). Data are presented as boxplots of the percentage of $2^{(-\Delta\Delta Ct)}$ related to unstimulated cells (100%). Statistical analysis within a stimulation group was performed with Friedman test by using the ΔΔCt-values ($^{\#}p < 0.05$).

In contrast to collagen I gene expression rates, significant changes could be determined for the release of Col I protein (Figure 8). A significant difference between unstimulated chondrocytes was observed (p = 0.0095). Here, non-degenerative chondrocytes released more Col I protein than OA chondrocytes. For OA chondrocytes, stimulation with 100 mV resulted in significantly enhanced protein levels (p = 0.0016). Additionally, an upregulated protein synthesis rate was also detectable in non-degenerative cartilage cells after stimulation with 100 mV but did not reach statistical significance. However, the release of Col I protein was slightly reduced compared to OA chondrocytes stimulated with 100 mV. Stimulation with 1 V led to similar protein levels as in unstimulated controls.

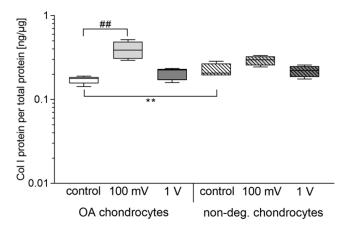


Figure 8. Collagen I release of human chondrocytes after electrical stimulation with 100 mV and 1 V at 1 kHz. Chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative (n = 4) or osteoarthritic (OA) cartilage (n = 6) were seeded on collagen scaffolds and stimulated over a period of seven days. Afterwards, protein biosynthesis of collagen I was detected in supernatants using the MicroVue CICP assay. Data are presented as boxplots. Statistical analysis within a stimulation group was performed with the Friedman test (** p < 0.01). To compare two samples between OA and non-degenerative chondrocytes Mann-Whitney-U-test was performed (** p < 0.01).

4. Discussion

The treatment of articular cartilage defects remains a major challenge in orthopedic surgery. The main problem in cell-based therapies like ACI or MACI is the de-differentiation of chondrocytes during ex vivo expansion [8–10] resulting in the formation of fibrocartilage tissue after re-implantation [11]. To counteract de-differentiation of cartilaginous cells, electrical stimulation seems to be an effective approach [16-20]. In 1974, Baker et al. [27] investigated the effect of electrical stimulation in a defect model of hyaline cartilage in an animal model showing an enhanced healing process with regard to cell proliferation and ECM synthesis compared to unstimulated control animals. In further in vitro analyses, Brighton et al. [28] found that metabolism of bovine chondrocytes and cartilage tissue is affected at specific field strengths of the applied electric field. In addition, this working group showed that articular chondrocytes reacted to appropriate electric fields with proliferation and upregulation of gene expression of ECM components [29]. Nevertheless, cellular reaction included the influx of Ca²⁺ into chondrocytes through voltage-gated calcium channels resulting in transduction by calmodulin, calcineurin, and nuclear factor of activated T-cells (NF-AT) [30]. All these phenomena can probably be traced back to the structure of cartilage tissue. The organization and resulting properties of hyaline cartilage are mainly determined by the main components of the ECM collagen and proteoglycans. Since hyaline cartilage is composed of different layers, these zones also contain different properties of the ECM and the matrix-forming chondrocytes [1]. This natural inhomogeneity seems to play an important role in the amplification of signal transduction mechanisms to chondrocytes. The resulting electrochemical characteristics of hyaline cartilage can be derived from the displacement of unbound cations (especially Na⁺, Ca²⁺, etc.) along the relatively fixed negative charges (e.g., SO₃⁻ and COO⁻) present in the proteoglycans. This results in phenomena such as streaming and diffusion potentials as well as charge-dependent osmotic swelling pressures. These and further properties cause external electric signals leading to intracellular signals [21] having an influence on cell proliferation and formation of ECM components. However, it remains unclear which electric field is the most suitable for stimulating chondrocytes. A consensus in the literature revealed the use of sinusoidal alternating current with a frequency of 60 kHz [28,31,32]. Nevertheless, stimulation with a frequency of 1 kHz showed promising results [19,33]. A great discrepancy might exist in the use of electric field strength, different studies varied in their statements about the best value. The most common value for the electric field strength is 20 mV/cm postulated by Brighton et al. [31]. This is in contrast to the study of Vaca-González et al. [32] who indicated an electric field between 4 mV/cm and 8 mV/cm depending on the type of application.

The aim of our present study was to characterize the influence of capacitively coupled alternating electric fields on human chondrocytes with respect to the re-differentiation of expanded cells in vitro. For this purpose, OA and non-degenerative chondrocytes were seeded on collagen-based scaffolds and exposed to the electric field for seven days to determine cellular activity, gene expression rates of chondrogenic and hypertrophic markers as well as the release of important matrix proteins. The used stimulation parameters like sinusoidal signal form, stimulation time, frequency as well as hypoxic culture conditions and the use of collagen-based scaffolds have been selected on the basis of previous investigations in our working group [19,25,34]. In contrast to our previous works, we had now chosen a capacitive coupling of the electric fields. The great advantage of capacitively coupled systems is the prevention of electrochemical effects due to a missing direct contact of the electrodes and the electrolyte. Thus, in comparison to direct contact systems, negative effect on the cell network caused by a change in the electrochemical environment (pH, temperature, dissolved metal ions) may not arise [22,35]. However, compared to direct stimulation systems, the main disadvantage is the necessity of very high energy input to form comparable electric fields within the stimulation chamber.

Due to the avascular nature of hyaline cartilage, the hypoxic cell culture conditions create a more physiological environment [19,36]. The use of 3D structures such as scaffolds also contributes to this [26,37–39]. However, it should also be kept in mind that collagen type I-based scaffolds, which are commonly used to treat articular cartilage defects, do not represent the natural environment for

chondrogenic cells. The use of growth factors during precultivation in our study served to initially guide the expanded chondrocytes towards differentiation [37].

Although numerical simulation revealed very low electric fields within our experimental setup, results demonstrated that the application of 100 mV $_{RMS}$ (a field of about 5.2×10^{-5} mV/cm acts on the cells) had a significant impact on cellular metabolism and expression of chondrogenic markers. However, it should be noted that the used electric fields have been represented by simulation so far and have to be validated. Doing this, very sophisticated equipment is required, hence validation of the test setup will be the subject of ongoing research.

The comparison to other studies is still challenging because our electric fields differed clearly from other experimental setups [40]. Compared to the studies of Brighton et al. [20] and Vaca-González et al. [17], who also used a capacitively coupled alternating electric field, our applied electric fields were of low amplitude. Brighton and his team have conducted numerous studies in recent years to investigate the effect of capacitively coupled electric field stimulation on bovine and human cartilage explants as well as chondrocytes. Since their results showed a signal-specific increase in cell proliferation, but also a decrease in proteoglycan and collagen biosynthesis [31,41], they concluded a specific relationship between signal form and biological response. Furthermore, Vaca-González et al. [32] showed that different electric fields have different influences on cell metabolism. They pointed out that the application of 4 mV/cm led to increased proliferation, while a field of 8 mV/cm resulted in increased GAG synthesis. Although our input voltages produced very low electric fields compared to other works, we were able to demonstrate significant voltage-dependent differences in matrix synthesis. Since we have also found significant differences between non-degenerative and OA chondrocytes, the cell status might be of high relevance. Interestingly, the biological response of OA chondrocytes at 100 mV was more pronounced concerning the synthesis rate of Col II and GAG but also for Col I protein.

Chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative hyaline cartilage also reacted with enhanced levels of the mentioned ECM markers, however, the increase was clearly lower than for OA cells. This might indicate a more balanced ECM turnover compared to chondrocytes derived from degenerative-altered cartilage. This aspect might be also supported by our Col I protein results. A type I collagen synthesis for the formation of hyaline cartilage would not be desirable. However, it is important to analyze this marker as it is used as a de-differentiation marker for cartilage cells. Regarding this, it is preferable that a successful re-differentiation of the cells is accompanied by a significant decrease of Col I. Comparing the two cell types, significantly more Col I protein was released in unstimulated cells from non-degenerative cartilage. However, after electrical stimulation, these cells show no increase in protein, whereas OA cells have a significantly higher affinity for the formation and release of Col I. It is, therefore, important to adapt parameters of electrical stimulation to the cell source in order to prevent the formation of fibrous cartilage. Nevertheless, for clinical translation it must be noted that parameter optimization is essential, as cartilage defects are associated with OA progression. We have also stimulated both cell types with 100 mV_{RMS} and 1 V_{RMS} at a frequency of 60 kHz, resulting in an electric field of 0.003 mV/cm or rather 0.03 mV/cm. Here, it was shown that the effects on Col I and Col II protein biosynthesis, as well as release of GAG, were clearly reduced or no longer detectable compared to stimulation with 1 kHz (see Supplement 1). Therefore, it can be assumed that both a voltage- and frequency-dependent influence on the cells appeared to be present during electrical stimulation. Considering the electric fields which affect the cells, chondrocytes seemed to show a higher sensitization to the lower applied voltage of 100 mV_{RMS} (5.2×10^{-5} mV/cm) compared to the ten times higher used field at $1\,V_{RMS}$. In contrast to the literature and our own investigations with a frequency of 60 kHz and 1 V_{RMS} (leading to an electric field of 0.03 mV/cm), this very low electric field seemed to be more effective for chondrocytic differentiation. So far, we cannot explain this phenomenon, but we assume that different mechanisms influence cell behavior. Whether the low electric fields influence either voltage-dependent channels or other structures/mechanisms that lead to

downstream signaling needs to be clarified in further studies. It is possible that the stimulation in our approach leads to undesired overstimulation of the cells.

Another important aspect is the use of growth factors for chondrogenic differentiation. If cartilage implants are used [20], it can be assumed that essential growth factors are embedded in the matrix [42]. However, once the cells are removed from their 3D environment, the cells do not have access to these factors. This circumstance has to be considered in cell culture. For our experiments, we incubated the chondrocytes for 72 h with the chondrogenic growth factors IGF-1 and TGF-β1 in order to give an initial boost to intrinsic synthesis. During electrical stimulation, the cells were incubated without these factors. Due to the increased synthesis performance of the ECM components compared to the control, it can be assumed that the electric fields were sufficient to maintain the re-differentiation status. In this context, recent studies have shown that human dermal fibroblasts can also be directly reprogrammed into hyaline chondrogenic cells by electrical stimulation. Lee et al. were able to show that electrical stimulation with a frequency of 5.0 Hz and an electric field strength of 5 V/cm (applied with a commercial system) could enhance expression of chondrogenic markers, such as type II collagen, aggrecan, and Sox9 by a concomitant decrease of type I collagen without the addition of exogenous growth factors or gene transduction [43]. Considering this in further studies, it would be interesting to determine the release of specific growth factors following electrical stimulation to identify additional important pathways influenced by electric fields.

For future clinical application, further investigations are required to elucidate the signaling pathways in detail which occurred during stimulation. To increase the chondrogenic response of expanded, de-differentiated chondrocytes, combinations with other approaches could be beneficial. Here, mechanical stimulation of chondrocytes could be a promising approach since this stimulation form is well studied [17] and pro-chondrogenic effects were observed even in osteoarthritic tissue [44,45]. Due to the interaction of mechanical and electrical properties in native cartilage, a combination of electrical and mechanical stimulation might reinforce effects on each other.

5. Conclusions

Our results demonstrated that human chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative and OA hyaline cartilage were sensitized by low capacitively coupled electric fields (100 mV_{RMS} resulting in 5.2×10^{-5} mV/cm) resulting in altered cellular activity and the formation of extracellular matrix components. In addition to voltage-dependent differences, cell type-specific reactions in the synthesis rate of Col II, GAG, and Col I were observed. The underlying molecular mechanisms, which are responsible for downstream signaling at low electric fields, have to be identified in further investigations. Nevertheless, analysis of further electrical stimulation parameters should be done to induce optimal hyaline characteristics of ex vivo expanded human chondrocytes.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at http://www.mdpi.com/2077-0383/8/11/1771/s1, Figure S1: Release of collagen (Col) I (de-differentiation marker), Col II and glycosaminoglycans (GAG) (both differentiation marker) from human chondrocytes after electrical stimulation of 100 mV and 1 V at 60 kHz.

Author Contributions: R.B. and A.J.-H. admined the project and acquired the funding. R.B., A.J.-H., S.K., and S.A. designed the study and used the stimulation chamber. S.K. and S.A. performed cell experiments and analyzed the data. S.K., S.A., A.J.-H., T.T., and R.B. were involved in data interpretation. J.Z. performed the simulation of the capacitively coupled electric field. S.K., S.A., and J.Z. wrote the manuscript. All authors edited and reviewed the manuscript.

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J. Clin. Med. 2019, 8, 1771 15 of 16

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Article

Establishment of a New Device for Electrical Stimulation of Non-Degenerative Cartilage Cells In Vitro

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Abstract: In cell-based therapies for cartilage lesions, the main problem is still the formation of fibrous cartilage, caused by underlying de-differentiation processes ex vivo. Biophysical stimulation is a promising approach to optimize cell-based procedures and to adapt them more closely to physiological conditions. The occurrence of mechano-electrical transduction phenomena within cartilage tissue is physiological and based on streaming and diffusion potentials. The application of exogenous electric fields can be used to mimic endogenous fields and, thus, support the differentiation of chondrocytes in vitro. For this purpose, we have developed a new device for electrical stimulation of chondrocytes, which operates on the basis of capacitive coupling of alternating electric fields. The reusable and sterilizable stimulation device allows the simultaneous use of 12 cavities with independently applicable fields using only one main supply. The first parameter settings for the stimulation of human non-degenerative chondrocytes, seeded on collagen type I elastin-based scaffolds, were derived from numerical electric field simulations. Our first results suggest that applied alternating electric fields induce chondrogenic re-differentiation at the gene and especially at the protein level of human de-differentiated chondrocytes in a frequency-dependent manner. In future studies, further parameter optimizations will be performed to improve the differentiation capacity of human cartilage cells.

Keywords: capacitively coupled electrical stimulation; cartilage regeneration; differentiation; chondrocytes



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1. Introduction

One of the main tasks of articular cartilage is the absorption of mechanical loading and reduction of friction during joint movements. Cellular and molecular structure of cartilage tissue is adapted accordingly [1–3]. Articular cartilage is composed of two different phases: A fluid phase (65–80%), consisting mainly of water and dissolved inorganic ions, and a solid phase (20–35%), which is composed of different types of collagens, proteoglycans, and the embedded chondrocytes. It also contains a small amount of lipids, phospholipids, noncollagenous proteins and glycoproteins [2,4,5]. Embedded chondrocytes are responsible for the synthesis and degradation of extracellular matrix (ECM) macromolecules, like collagen type (Col) II and glycosaminoglycans (GAGs). These macromolecules provide the cartilage tissue with dimensionality, elasticity, and strength to withstand mechanical loading [5,6]. Since a direct exchange of substances through vessels cannot take place, the cells are supplied with nutrients and oxygen from the synovial fluid [2] or the subchondral

bone [7] by diffusion. During physical activity, the cellular supply is improved due to constant alternating phases of pressure loading and pressure relief [2]. Not only is nutrient and oxygen supply promoted by this process but also endogenous electric potentials are triggered by mechanical stress [8]. Mechano-electrical transduction phenomena within the tissue occur physiologically and are based on streaming and diffusion potentials caused by mechanical loading of the micro-structured cartilage tissue [5].

During weight-bearing and joint movement, the fluid flow provokes streaming- and diffusion-generated electric potentials by fixed ionized macromolecules within the cartilage tissue. In detail, the chains of GAGs within the proteoglycan network are carrying negative charges (carboxyl and sulfate groups), which are surrounded by dissolved counter-ions (e.g., calcium ions, sodium ions) and co-ions (e.g., chloride ions) in the interstitial water [5,9–12]. The resulting endogenous electric field is transferred to the embedded cells by macromolecules like proteoglycans, cartilage oligomeric matrix protein and others [10]. The cells can sense electrical, as well as chemical and mechanical signals from the environment via receptors and ion channels, which are located in the cell membrane [11,13]. This signal transmission works both from the cell outside to the inside and vice versa. Intracellular, a variety of cellular functions and pathways can be regulated by endogenous electric fields. This includes, among others, cell migration, proliferation, gene expression, and the release of proteins and, thus, also differentiation [13–20].

Age-related alteration, traumatic injuries or degeneration of the cartilage matrix results in a loss of the fixed micro-environment leading to disruption of the physiological electric field, which is important for tissue homeostasis [21]. To treat lesions of articular cartilage, several therapeutic approaches are used to relieve the pain within the joint and to repair the affected cartilage tissue. For this reason, treatment concepts have focused on the restoration of articular cartilage through invasive and non-invasive treatments [22-24]. Regenerative approaches like (matrix-associated) autologous chondrocyte implantation ((M)ACI) are widely used. Here, autologous chondrocytes which are isolated from an intact part of the patient's articular cartilage in an initial step, are cultivated ex vivo, and re-implanted in the cartilage defect to restore the extracellular matrix of hyaline cartilage [25,26]. However, cellbased methods can lead to fibrocartilage in situ, which shows altered mechanical properties compared to physiological hyaline cartilage [24,27-29]. To improve the restoration of cartilage tissue, it is therefore necessary to optimize cell-based procedures and to adapt them more closely to the physiological boundary conditions. In this context, electrical stimulation is described as a possible approach to improve regeneration of the cartilage tissue [13,16,30,31].

Although therapeutic devices for electrical stimulation are entering the clinical market [32], there are only few studies dealing with electrical stimulation of cartilaginous cells [11,13,16,31,33]. Most of the described in vivo and in vitro approaches are based on pulsed electromagnetic fields (PEMF). Here, data from clinical trials suggest that PEMF is able to improve clinical scores and function of osteoarthritic patients [34]. In vitro, it was found that PEMF increases the proteoglycan release of alginate-encapsulated chondrocytes [35] and in osteoarthritic cartilage tissue [36]. In addition to PEMF, other approaches for the application of electric fields in vitro, like direct and capacitive coupling, are described in the literature. Using capacitive coupling, many disadvantages can be excluded compared to direct coupling, such as the formation of cytotoxic compounds like hydrogen peroxide or electrochemical reactions that can lead to pH changes [32,37]. Brighton et al. developed an experimental setup for electrical stimulation in vitro based on capacitively coupled electric fields (2 V/m at 60 kHz). They found that applied alternating electrical fields showed an increased anabolic effect by a concomitant decrease in matrix catabolism [11,16,31]. In previous stimulation experiments we were able to demonstrate a pro-chondrogenic effect on the differentiation capacity of human chondrocytes using capacitively coupled electric fields [38]. However, the experimental setup which we used in previous studies did not allow extensive comparative analyses of different stimulation parameter. Therefore, we have conceptualized and developed a new stimulation device

for application of capacitively coupled electrical fields in vitro. In the present paper, we introduce the stimulation device, in particular the generated cell chamber, control and signal unit, as well as the user interface. In addition, initial stimulation parameter analyses were carried out with respect to the chondrogenic re-differentiation potential of human de-differentiated chondrocytes in dependency of different alternating electric fields and frequencies.

2. Results

2.1. Stimulation Device

The device has been designed to operate, once configured, as an automatized electrical stimulation system. Its core components are the software, the control and signaling unit, and the sample carrier (cell chamber) coupled to the electrodes (Figure 1). The stimulation device enables 12 independent configurable signals within 12 wells. The modular design allows a variable implementation of the stimulation system. While the sample carrier (cell chamber) must be placed exclusively inside the incubator and the power supply exclusively outside, the control unit can be positioned as required. For use of the control unit inside the incubator, the housing has been three-dimensionally (3D) printed for sealing against the humidified atmosphere. In this application, problems with the heat generated by the electronics can occur. For this case the external placement is provided. Here, only the signal lines of the stimulation are led into the incubator and connected to the sample carrier.

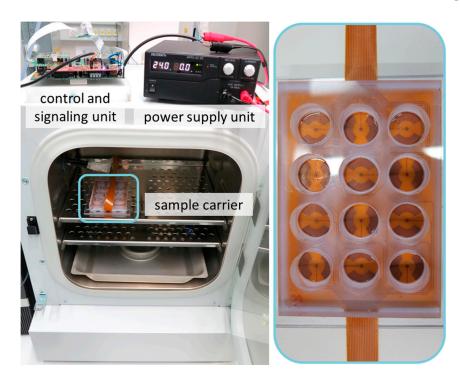


Figure 1. Overview of the stimulation device with control and signaling unit, sample carrier (detailed image; right) which is coupled to the electrodes and power supply unit.

2.1.1. Control Software and User Interface

The software solution includes a user interface and firmware for the microcontroller. The user interface is used to schedule the stimulation tasks. The type, start, and duration of each stimulation can be defined here. Alternatively, it is possible to import already defined stimulation cycles. After definition of the tasks, a timetable is generated and sorted chronologically. After triggering the start command, the instructions for the respective stimulation cycle are transmitted to the microcontroller via a serial interface (UART). The microcontroller converts the information into the corresponding electrical stimulation.

2.1.2. Control and Signal Unit

The control unit is based on the $C2000^{TM}$ LaunchpadXL (Texas Instruments, Dallas, TX, USA). It has been extended with self-developed circuit boards to connect the signal generators of the electrical stimulation. A socket board is implemented to accommodate the Launchpad. It provides the power supply for the components and relays the signals. The signal generator is an in-house developed circuit based on the AD9833 (Analog Devices, Inc., Norwood, MA, USA). The signal is transmitted to the electrodes via an operational amplifier with differential output. Voltages of up to 42 V peak-to-peak (Vpp) and a maximum frequency of 2 MHz can be realized. The system contains twelve independent signal generators of this type. For calibration, input voltage, control voltage, and output voltage were measured and the amplification factor as a function of the control voltage was determined. The values determined for all signal generators were averaged, resulting in a relative deviation of the output voltage from the setpoint of 3% (data not shown).

2.1.3. Sample Carrier

Figure 2 shows the cross-sectional view (a), a real picture (b) and the electric field distribution (c) of one well. The sample carrier (cell chamber) consists of a polycarbonate plate (1) into which 12 cavities have been inserted by drilling with subsequent reaming. On one side of the plate, the flexible printed circuit board with the electrode array consisting of 25 μm polyimide layer with enclosed copper electrodes (5–7) is fixed by means of siliconecaoutchouc-adhesive (Troll Factory Rainer Habekost e.K., Riede, Germany) (4). The scaffold (e.g., collagen-based matrix or hydrogel) (3) is directly attached to the flexible printed circuit board and surrounded by the cell culture medium (2). Depending on the scaffold material, it can be fixed with some adhesive to ensure that it remains in place during stimulation. The cavity has a diameter of 21 mm and a height of 16 mm. The maximum height of the scaffold is limited by the required overhang of the medium. To prevent the ingress of contaminants, the entire sample carrier is covered with a 3D-printed lid with small gaps at its edges to allow gas exchange with the environment. All components of the device can be sterilized by heat or ethanol and are, thus, reusable. The electric field distribution of one well was simulated for all stimulation parameters in the yz-plane view. In the center of the electrodes, where the scaffolds are placed, the electric field amplitude is heterogeneously distributed. The resulting field, which affects human chondrocytes in 1 mm height, is either approximately 2.0 to 2.5 V/m estimated for an input voltage of 30 V_{pp} and a frequency of 60 kHz or 0.032-0.040 V/m for 30 V_{pp} and a frequency of 1 kHz. Due to the linearity of the system, the electric fields for other input voltages can be easily deduced by scaling the result.

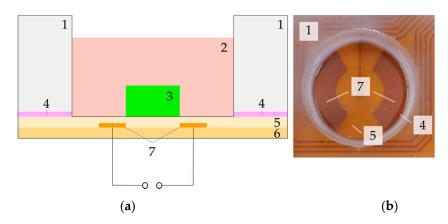


Figure 2. Cont.

Int. J. Mol. Sci. 2021, 22, 394 5 of 17

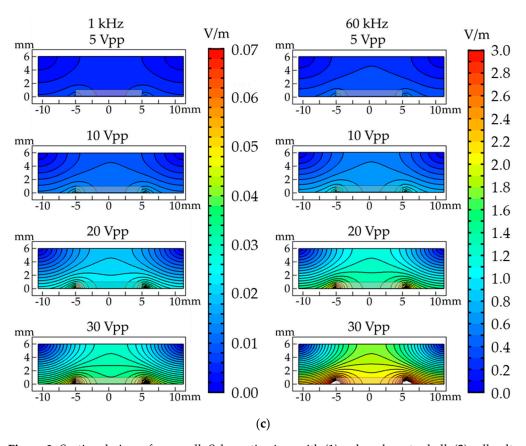


Figure 2. Sectional view of one well: Schematic view with (1) polycarbonate shell, (2) cell culture medium, (3) scaffold, (4) silicone-caoutchouc-adhesive, (5) 25 μ m polyimide insulation layer, (6) 25 μ m polyimide base layer, (7) electrodes (a). Real picture of one well without cell culture medium and scaffold (b). Electric field distributions in one well (yz-plane) for different parameter combinations (c).

2.2. Biocompatibility Testing of System Components

To ensure that no cytotoxic substances are released from components of the electrical stimulation system, an indirect cytotoxic test in conformity with the DIN EN ISO 10993-5 was performed. For this purpose, the sample carrier (cell chamber) was filled with cell culture medium and incubated under standard culture conditions for five days. The medium was removed and incubated on human chondrocytes over a period of one, two, and five days. Afterwards, cellular viability has been determined via measuring metabolic activity and live/dead staining.

A possible cytotoxicity of the stimulation device was not found. The metabolic activity of human chondrocytes does not deviate from the corresponding control (Figure 3a). In addition, metabolic activity increased in a time-dependent manner (p < 0.0001).

Live/dead staining revealed no difference between exposed and non-exposed cells after one and two days (Figure 3b). After five days, a confluent cell layer was detected for both cell cultures (data not shown).

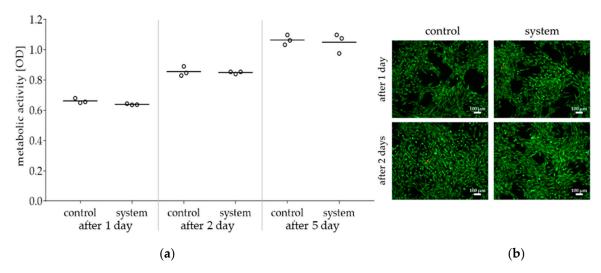


Figure 3. Viability of human chondrocytes following incubation for one, two or five days with conditioned medium (whole stimulation device): (a) Metabolic activity of chondrocytes treated with conditioned medium and corresponding control were determined via water-soluble tetrazolium salt (WST-1) assay. Data are illustrated as mean including mean values of measuring points (n = 3). Statistical analysis was performed with two-way ANOVA. (b) Live/dead-staining of chondrocytes after incubation with control medium or with conditioned medium; living cells (green), dead cells (red); the scale bar represents 100 μm.

2.3. Investigation of Stimulation Parameter

The influence of different stimulation parameters on cell activity and chondrogenic differentiation was investigated with human chondrocytes derived from non-degenerative cartilage tissue cultivated on collagen elastin scaffolds. Unstimulated cells served as controls. All cell culture experiments were done in humidified atmosphere at 5% CO₂ and 5% O₂. Based on literature data and our own previous research we have chosen the frequencies 1 kHz [38,39] and 60 kHz [11,16,31] for initial parameter analyses. These frequencies were combined with voltages of 5 V_{pp} , 10 V_{pp} , 20 V_{pp} , and 30 V_{pp} . In preliminary tests, maximum applicable voltage of 42 V_{pp} combined with 60 kHz showed no significant changes in cellular activity and chondrogenic differentiation and was, therefore, not integrated into the presented test series (data not shown). In addition to frequency and voltage, the stimulation duration also has an impact on cell response. Therefore, we used previously described stimulation duration of three times 45 min per day for a period of seven days [38,39]. Following electrical stimulation, we have determined metabolic activity by using WST-1 assay. Chondrogenic differentiation capacity was evaluated by gene expression analyses of the de-differentiation marker collagen type I (Col1A1) as well as the re-differentiation markers collagen type II (Col2A1) and SRY-box (Sox) 9. Additionally, the release of Col I and Col II propeptides was determined in supernatants of stimulated and unstimulated cells.

Table 1 contains an overview of all achieved results. Regarding metabolic activity, no significant differences were observed after electrical stimulation. Although no significant differences were detected in Col1A1 gene expression, a frequency-dependent trend for downregulation was noticed. This was in line with Col I propeptide data, where a frequency-dependent reduction of the release could be observed; significant for the combination of 1 kHz with 5 V_{pp} (p=0.0149) and 20 V_{pp} (p=0.0119) compared to 60 kHz and for 1 kHz with 10 V_{pp} (p=0.0473) compared to unstimulated controls. While we were not able to determine Col2A1 gene expression, release of Col II propeptide could be detected in both unstimulated and stimulated cells. However, no significant differences in protein contents were detectable. In addition, no significant differences were found regarding Sox9 gene expression. However, similar to Col1A1 gene expression, a frequency-dependent trend was observed at low voltages.

Table 1. Overview of metabolic activity, gene expression and protein release of de-differentiation and re-differentiation markers following electrical stimulation (three times 45 min per day). After seven days metabolic activity of human chondrocytes seeded on collagen elastin scaffolds was determined via WST-1 assay; accumulated supernatants were collected and cells were lysed. Afterwards, RNA was isolated and reverse transcribed. Gene expression analyses were performed by semiquantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR). Supernatants were used for type I C-terminal collagen propetide (CICP) and type II C-terminal collagen propeptide (CIICP) ELISA. Data are shown as mean and standard deviation ($n \ge 5$). Significant differences between groups were calculated with ordinary one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni 's multiple comparison test (* p < 0.05; stimulated vs. unstimulated control; * p < 0.05, 1 kHz vs. 60 kHz).

		Metabolic Activity (OD)	Col1A1 (%)	CICP Protein (ng/mg)	Sox9 (%)	CIICP Protein (ng/mg)
Coı	ntrol	0.457 ± 0.123	101.3 ± 15.9	766.1 ± 184.2	101.1 ± 16.2	105.1 ± 29.7
5 V _{pp}	1 kHz 60 kHz	0.416 ± 0.124 0.427 ± 0.044	90.7 ± 16.9 114.0 ± 17.8	485.7 ± 47.5 # 867.0 ± 340.3	88.8 ± 7.4 108.0 ± 18.6	86.5 ± 36.2 79.2 ± 21.7
10 V _{pp}	1 kHz 60 kHz	0.342 ± 0.097 0.401 ± 0.052	85.7 ± 3.3 99.0 ± 13.5	481.3 ± 75.1 * 752.7 ± 173.0	90.2 ± 25.1 98.8 ± 14.9	91.3 ± 25.1 107.8 ± 28.6
20 V _{pp}	1 kHz 60 kHz	0.324 ± 0.116 0.383 ± 0.038	92.7 ± 23.3 101.0 ± 16.6	492.4 ± 47.2 # 881.0 ± 243.4	98.2 ± 10.8 109.2 ± 24.9	82.0 ± 29.3 78.9 ± 32.5
30 V _{pp}	1 kHz 60 kHz	0.357 ± 0.107 0.450 ± 0.063	92.2 ± 21.9 89.2 ± 15.2	566.5 ± 83.9 899.1 ± 125.2	104.0 ± 11.5 93.2 ± 21.8	96.7 ± 17.5 93.3 ± 17.9

3. Discussion

Electrical stimulation is successfully used for bone regeneration both in vitro and in vivo [32]. Additionally, electrical stimulation also appears to be suitable for the treatment of cartilage lesions and is therefore a good alternative to conventional treatment approaches [13,30], because it can improve the quality of re-implanted chondrocytes [11,16,17,31].

According to Vaca-González et al., several stimulation devices were used for investigations of electrical stimulation of chondrocytes or cartilage tissue [13]. The devices differ mainly in their construction: e.g., in the arrangement of the electrodes, the distance between electrodes and the resulting electric fields [13]. Due to these differences, it is difficult to compare various studies [40]. Brighton and co-workers are one of the most cited studies in the field of electrical stimulation of chondrocytes and cartilage tissue [14,41–43]. Their in vitro stimulation systems consisted of different kinds of Petri dishes. Metallic electrodes were placed below and on top of the dishes, which leads to a capacitive coupling of electric field into the cell or tissue culture. By modification of the used Petri dishes, a reduction of the distance between the electrodes was realized, resulting in improved dielectric material properties. This, in turn, led to reduction of applied voltages at constant field strengths [14,41–43]. The homogenous distributed field strength of 20 mV/cm (2 V/m) with the use of a frequency of 60 kHz was found to be the most suitable for differentiation of chondrocytes and cartilage tissue in the used stimulation system [11,15,16,31]. In detail, in studies of Brighton et al. a significant upregulation of cartilage matrix components aggrecan and collagen type II after stimulation with an electric field of 2 V/m in bovine [15] and in human osteoarthritic cartilage tissue samples [16] could be shown.

The combination of alternating voltage and frequency influences resulting electric field strength. With the input voltage of 30 V_{pp} and a frequency of 60 kHz, it is possible to achieve similar electric field strengths (2.0 to 2.5 V/m; according to our simulation results) in our stimulation device as in the setup of Brighton et al. [11,16,31]. We achieve this despite the use of low voltages, which are beneficial when handling voltage-carrying equipment. Analogue to Brighton et al. and other groups, we use sinusoidal signals [14,15,31,33], but our configuration additionally allows triangular voltages. However, it must be noted that the field alignment in our device differs from the Brighton et al. system. This also leads to the effect that air does not play a role as a possible additional insulator.

Due to the design and arrangement of the electrodes, our new stimulation system generates a heterogeneous electric field. In detail, the electrodes are located semi-circular below the cell-seeded scaffold without being covered. Therefore, field strengths decrease from the electrodes to the well centre and from the electrode interface to medium surface. Hence, we expect to be able to mimic the physiological electric fields distribution in cartilage tissue with this electrode arrangement; as the occurrence of cartilage matrix components is also inhomogeneous. The proteoglycan concentration increases from the cartilage surface to the subchondral zone, while water content and Col II concentration behave oppositely. The density of cells decreases from the non-load- to the load-bearing region of the articular cartilage. Since proteoglycans are unequally distributed in the tissue, fixed charges in it are not uniformly distributed. This leads to assumption that resulting endogenous electric fields occur heterogeneously in cartilage tissue [5]. Additionally, capacitively-coupled stimulation systems offer several advantages for electrical stimulation of human cells or tissues. There is no direct cell- or electrolyte-electrode interaction, thus preventing electro-chemical reactions of the electrode material. Moreover, cell damage by formed noxious substances due to redox reactions at electrolyte-electrode interface can be avoided by using this kind of electric field stimulation [37]. Furthermore, the arrangement of the electrodes in our system enables the future combination with mechanical stimulation through compression and shear stress by using 3D scaffolds [44]. In addition, our system also allows the use of other electrode arrangements, which would result in a change of the field direction.

An important aspect for cell culture is that cultivation is performed in a defined environment. Therefore, our device is designed for use in an incubator with humidified atmosphere and a defined temperature. Additionally, a hypoxic atmosphere can be provided, which mimics physiological conditions in cartilage tissue [39,45]. In addition to the shown biocompatibility, our new stimulation device also addresses the aspect of sustainability, as all components can be sterilized by heat or ethanol and are, therefore, reusable.

For our initial parameter study we stimulated twelve cell-seeded Col I elastin-based scaffolds independently, by using only one main supply (Figure 4). In this context, our own previous studies were disadvantaged by systems as the number of necessary function generators was limited [38,39,46]. Other partially commercially available systems would be unfavorable for our approach. On the one hand, this is due to the use of direct electrical stimulation [47–50]. On the other hand, the use of additional, external generators is necessary, which limits parallel parameter optimization [49–51].

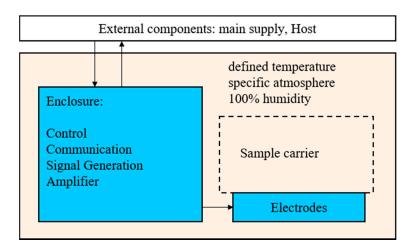


Figure 4. Interaction between the subsystems.

The results of our initial parameter study revealed a frequency-dependent impact on chondrogenic re-differentiation capacity of human chondrocytes. In contrast to Brighton et al. [15,16] and own previous study [38] we could not detect *Col2A1* gene

expression and there was no change neither in Sox9 gene expression nor in Col II propeptide release compared to unstimulated controls after electrical stimulation for seven days. At this point, however, it must be noted that the time period of seven days is relatively short to significantly induce the synthesis of pro-chondrogenic factors. However, trends are emerging, which will be clarified by extended stimulation duration in subsequent test series. Data from Brighton et al. also show that stimulation exceeding a period of seven days increased effect on proteoglycan concentration [15]. In cell-based therapies like (M)ACI the de-differentiation of chondrocytes during ex vivo expansion is still the main problem [52-54]. After re-implantation these altered cells begin to form fibrous cartilage [55], which main component is Col I [29]. With regard to de-differentiation processes, a reduced Col I protein release could be detected after stimulation with 1 kHz. This trend is also evident in *Col1A1* gene expression at low input voltages. Although we used Col I-based scaffolds in our study, our results may show that, primarily, the applied frequency leads to a decrease in de-differentiation processes. This would be a first important step to improve the chondrogenic differentiation capacity of the cells. Subsequently, it should be analyzed in long-term stimulation experiments if electrical stimulation leads further to an accumulation of hyaline matrix components.

In order to achieve significantly enhanced cartilage regeneration in situ, optimal parameters for electrical stimulation must be identified. A combination of different stimulation durations, frequencies and voltages could be a suitable tool to enhance chondrogenic differentiation. Corresponding results have already been demonstrated by Brighton et al. [14,42,56] and emphasize the importance of adjusted stimulation parameters. In a previous study with another stimulation chamber we have seen a voltageand frequency-dependent re-differentiation of stimulated human osteoarthritic and nondegenerative chondrocytes [38]. As our new stimulation device has an automatic stimulation control, a sequence of different combinations of stimulation parameters is possible and will be tested in subsequent experiments. We were able to identify slight differences with the first parameter analysis; further cultivation conditions have to be adapted in order to achieve significant changes in the chondrogenic differentiation capacity. In addition to the total stimulation time, the type of 3D matrix is a main challenge for reaching optimal stimulation results. Moreover, it is also conceivable that the additional use of non-Col I materials could lead to improved physiological properties. Although Col I materials are mainly used for cartilage repair, these matrices do not reflect the physiological condition and probably interfere with hyaline chondrogenic differentiation [2,4]. So far, there are only a few Col II-based materials that would correspond more to the natural surroundings of the chondrocytes [57,58]. Furthermore, materials influence the applied electric fields by conductivity properties, so that a material should be used that has similar conductivity properties to hyaline cartilage matrix. A limitation of our electric field simulation is based on the assumption that the used scaffold has same conductivity properties as the cell culture medium, caused by complete absorption of the medium. Therefore, no influence on field distribution is assumed. However, since these properties are an important influencing variable, these should be investigated with suitable instruments and included in numerical field simulations. Furthermore, we assume that the electric field of one well does not affect the electric field distribution in the scaffold of adjacent wells. Moreover, edge effects would be negligible due to the positioning of the scaffolds in the center of two circular ring segment-shaped electrodes at the bottom of the wells. Experimental validation of the electric field will have to be part of future investigations.

For cartilage repair expanded autologous chondrocytes are commonly used [26]. However, it must be notices that these cells have two disadvantageous characteristics. They are not stable in ex vivo monolayer culture and change their phenotype to a prechondrogenic mesenchymal-like one, and they are rarely present in donor tissue [26,59]. Therefore, the physiological quality of the cells must be regained before they can be re-implanted into weak cartilage tissue. Electrical stimulation with alternating fields seems to be a suitable tool to induce chondrogenic re-differentiation. [13,16,30,31]. For a prospective practical

application, it would be conceivable that donor-derived cells would be extracted as is already done for (M)ACI and expanded ex vivo in our stimulation device. Obtained chondrocytes for re-implantation would have an improved re-differentiation status compared to unstimulated chondrocytes, which may reduce the risk of fibrocartilage formation. This assumption has to be proven during long-term and in vitro studies. In the current version of our stimulation device, the applied parameter combinations are saved as log files. However, with regard to a clinical application, the measurement, automatic documentation and any necessary automatic adaption of the resulted electric fields would have to be enabled in the future. In addition, in the literature it is described that a co-cultivation of chondrocytes and mesenchymal stem cells could also lead to improved cartilage regeneration [60,61]. Since mesenchymal stem cells also react to electric fields with chondrogenesis [62,63], a combination of electrical stimulation with mechanical loading, a suitable 3D scaffold close to cartilage properties as well as the use of co-cultivated cells could lead to an optimal basis for re-implantation of cultivated autologous chondrocytes into the cartilage defect.

In conclusion, we could establish a new device for electrical stimulation of chondrocytes in vitro, which operates on the basis of capacitive coupling of alternating electric fields. Our initial results show that the applied electrical fields lead to reduction of Col I protein expression in human de-differentiated chondrocytes in a frequency-dependent manner. This, in turn, could lead to improved quality of regenerated cartilage tissue after re-implantation of stimulated cells into injured tissue. Nevertheless, electrical stimulation period and scaffold material have to be further optimized. In the future, a combination of electrical and mechanical stimulation within the in vitro device and use of more articular cartilage tissue-like scaffolds may further improve the outcome by mimicking the physiological environment of articular cartilage tissue.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Concept of Electrical Stimulation Device

The electrical stimulation device was planned for use within an incubator to ensure stable atmospheric and temperature conditions around the specimen (Figure 4). Therefore, all electronic components had to be enclosed and sealed to avoid any unwanted interchange of the atmosphere, especially humidity. This separation was achieved by an enclosure sealed with a silicone adhesive (Troll Factory Rainer Habekost e.K., Riede, Germany). All mechanical parts were 3D printed with a material based on polylactic acid (PLA) (PLA Plus, Filamentworld, Neu-Ulm, Germany). Within the enclosure a microcontroller board (LaunchPadXL, Texas Instruments) takes place as a low-cost control and communication solution.

It was extended by a printed circuit board for signal routing, power supplies and connectors for the stimulation stage. All voltage measurements for calibration were performed with a PicoScope 2205MSO oscilloscope (Picotech, Cambridgeshire, UK). Further, a sample carrier (cell chamber) with tight coupling to the electrodes as well as the electrodes themselves was needed. Programming of the microcontroller was done with CodeComposerStudio (TexasInstruments, TX, USA) using C/C++. The development of printed circuit boards and the electrodes has been performed using EAGLE 9.6.1 (Autodesk, Inc., San Rafael, CA, USA). Ease of use was guaranteed by the deployment of a software solution created in MATLAB® 2018a (The MathWorks, Inc., Natick, MA, USA) providing a graphical user interface. The software includes the definition of the stimulation tasks and a scheduler for their execution. All mechanical constructions were conducted with PTC Creo Parametric 5.0 (Parametric Technology GmbH, Unterschleissheim, Germany).

4.2. Numerical Simulations of Electric Fields Distribution

The electrical field distribution inside the new stimulation device was numerically modeled with COMSOL Multiphysics 5.4 (Comsol Multiphysics GmbH, Berlin, Germany). A schematic view of the setup is presented in Figure 2a and a schematic view of one well with labeled plane-direction for electric field simulation is mentioned in Figure 5.

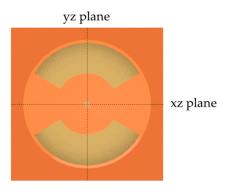


Figure 5. Schematic view of one well with labeled yz and xz plane-directions for electric field simulation.

The thin polyimide insulation layer over the electrodes was defined by the 'contact impedance' boundary condition with a thickness of 25 μm . The electrodes were assumed as ground and terminal with time-varying input voltages. The simulations were carried out in the frequency domain as an electro-quasi-static problem. All outer boundaries of the device were modeled as electrical insulators. The used material parameters in the model are summarized in Table 2. All simulations were performed with an Intel Xeon E5-2643 (3.3 GHz, two sockets with eight cores) workstation with 128 GB RAM under Windows 10 (64-bit).

Table 2. Material parameters in the simulation model.

Material	Conductivity [S/m] σ	Relative Permittivity ε
Air	10×10^{-15}	1
Cell medium	1.5	80
Electrodes (copper)	5.998×10^{7}	1
Insulation layer (polyimide)	1×10^{-10}	3.4

4.3. Biocompatibiltiy Testing of Stimulation Device Components

Biocompatibility tests of system components were carried out under consideration of all used materials in direct or medium contact. Therefore, commercially available human chondrocytes isolated from non-degenerative articular cartilage tissue of the knee joint (NHAC-kn; male donor: 30 years, CC-2550, LONZA Walkersville Inc., Walkersville, MD, USA) were expanded and cryopreserved at passage 3. For cell cultivation, chondrocytes were cultured in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM; Gibco[®]; Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS; Pan Biotech, Aidenbach, Germany), 1% penicillin/streptomycin (Pen/Strep; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA), 1% Amphotericin B (Biochrom GmbH, Berlin, Germany), and 50 μg/mL ascorbic acid (Sigma-Aldrich, Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany) in a 175 cm² cell culture flask (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) at 37 °C in a humidified atmosphere containing 5% CO₂ and 5% O₂ (hypoxia). When confluence reached 90% the cells were enzymatically detached and frozen in aliquots. For biocompatibility test of the stimulation device in its entirety, a medium conditioning experiment was carried out. In detail, 3 mL of DMEM with 10% FBS were added into each well of the stimulation device and incubated at hypoxic cell culture conditions for five days.

For subsequent analysis of the conditioned media, cells were thawed and cultured in 75 cm² cell culture flasks (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) at the same hypoxic cell culture conditions as previously described. Afterwards, cells were detached and seeded at passage 4 as triplicates in a 24-well plate (Corning, Inc., Corning, NY, USA) with a density of 100,000 cells per well (50,000 cells/cm²) allowing adherence in DMEM with 10% FBS containing 1% Pen/Strep, 1% Amphotericin B and ascorbic acid (50 µg/mL)

at cell culture conditions for 24 h. Afterwards, the medium was fully replaced by the conditioned medium to which ascorbic acid (50 μ g/mL) was added.

For the evaluation of a possible cytotoxicity effect of the used materials the metabolic activity of the cells was detected after one, two, and five days via water-soluble tetrazolium salt (WST-1)-assay (Takara Bio Inc., Kusatsu, Japan). This assay is based on the reduction of the tetrazolium salt by mitochondrial dehydrogenase to formazan, which produce a photometrically measurable color change. The optical density of this color change was detected and quantified at a wavelength of 450 nm and a reference wavelength of 630 nm. Therefore, cells were incubated with diluted WST-1-reagent (dilution 1:10 with DMEM with 10% FBS) for 30 min at hypoxic cell culture conditions. Afterwards, the absorbance was measured as triplicates of 100 μL in a 96-well plate (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) using Dynex Opsys MR TM Microplate Reader (Dynex Technologies Inc., Chantilly, VA, USA).

After washing once with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS; Biochrom AG, Berlin, Germany) cells were stained with Live/Dead-dye (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA). In detail, 4 μ M Ethidium homodimer 1 and 2 μ M Calcein AM were solved in PBS. The contained dye Calcein AM (Ex/Em 494/515 nm) is retained by living cells, therefore these cells fluorescent green after excitation. Ethidium homodimer 1 (binding to nucleic acids: Ex/Em 495/635 nm) accesses exclusively cells with damaged membrane. Dead cells are not able to exclude the dye and fluorescent red. The stained samples were imaged with the Nikon Eclipse 120 fluorescence microscope (Nikon Instruments, Tokyo, Japan) by using FITC- and G-2A-filter on matching positions, respectively. Afterwards, images of living and dead cells were overlaid by using the GNU Image Manipulation Program (GIMP, Version 2.8.4.).

4.4. Initial Parameter Analyses

An advantage of the newly constructed stimulation device is the possibility of stimulating 12 samples in parallel. This opportunity was used to study the effect of different parameter combinations (voltage and frequency) on the biological response of human chondrocytes.

For investigations of stimulation parameters, human chondrocytes (LONZA) were thawed and cultured in 25 cm² cell culture flasks at the hypoxic cell culture conditions. At subconfluence, cells were detached and 50,000 chondrocytes were seeded at passage 4 on three-dimensional collagen elastin scaffolds (Matriderm; MedSkin Solutions Dr. Suwelack AG, Billerbeck, Germany), which were 10 mm in diameter and attached in the middle of each electrode area with biocompatible silicone adhesive (Korasilon paste, Kurt Obermeier GmbH and Co. KG, Bad Berleburg, Germany). After an initial adherence time of 30 min, each well was filled up with 2 mL DMEM containing 1% Pen/Strep, 1% Amphotericin B, 1% Insulin-Transferrin-Selen (ITS+TM Premix, BD Biosciences, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA), 50 μg/mL ascorbic acid, 100 nM dexamethasone (Sigma-Aldrich, Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany), and 50 ng/mL insulin-like growth factor (IGF)-1 (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA), as well as 50 ng/mL transforming growth factor (TGF)-β1 (Peprotech, Hamburg, Germany). After three days of incubation under hypoxic cell culture conditions the medium was exchanged by medium without growth factors and the electrical stimulation was started by the MATLAB configuration and maintained three times for 45 min per day for seven days. Each parameter combination was examined in triplicate and the experiment was performed twice. Thus, six samples per parameter combination and 16 related controls were available for further cell biological investigations.

The following parameter combinations were examined (Table 3):

Applied Frequency (kHz)	Applied Voltage (V _{pp})	Electric Field Affecting Cells (Approximately) (V/m)
1	5	0.004-0.006
1	10	0.010-0.012
1	20	0.022-0.026
1	30	0.032-0.040
60	5	0.3-0.4
60	10	0.6-0.8
60	20	1.3–1.6
60	30	2.0-2.5

Table 3. Overview of used stimulation parameter combinations.

4.4.1. Cellular Activity

After electrical stimulation the metabolic activity was determined as described before (Section 2.1.3); with the exception that scaffolds were transferred to a 24-well plate and incubated for 45 min with diluted WST-1-reagent (dilution 1:10 with DMEM without FBS) under cell culture conditions.

4.4.2. Gene Expression Analyses

The gene expression of *Col1A1*, *Col2A1*, and *Sox9* was examined as described in [38]. Briefly, scaffolds were enzymatically digested with collagenase A for approximately 10 min. Afterwards total RNA was isolated using peqGOLD Total RNA Kit (VWR International GmbH, Darmstadt, Germany) according to manufacturer's recommendations. For subsequent transcription into cDNA with High Capacity cDNA Reverse Transcription Kit (Applied Biosystems, Forster City, CA, USA), 150 ng RNA was used. To determine the expression rates of de-differentiation and re-differentiation-associated genes, the cDNA of the stimulated and unstimulated cells was used for semi-quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR). Using the following conditions: 95 °C for the initial 2 min and 39 cycles of 5 sec at 95 °C and 25 sec at 60 °C, qPCR was performed in a qTOWER 2.0 (Analytik Jena, Jena, Germany). The used primer sequences are mentioned in Table 4.

Gene		Primer Sequence	Description/Function	
β-Actin (ACTB)	forward	5'-CTTCCTGGGCATGGAGTC-3'	Housekeeping gene	
	reverse	5'-AGCACTGTGTTGGCGTACAG-3'	Troubencepting gene	
Collagen I (Col1A1) _	forward	5'-ACGAAGACATCCCACCAATC-3'	– De-differentiation marker	
	reverse	5'-ACGAAGACATCCCACCAATC-3'		
Collagen II (Col2A1) _	forward	5'-AATGGTGGCTTCCATTCAG-3'	Main macromolecule of the ECM of	
	reverse	5'-GTGATGTTCTGGGAGCCTTC-3'	cartilaginous tissue	
SRY-box 9 (Sox9)	forward	5'-AGTACCCGCACCTGCACAAC-3'	Transcriptional factor mediating	
	reverse	5'-CGCTTCTCGCTCTCGTTCAG-3'	chondrocytes phenotype and cartilage homeostasis	

Table 4. Overview of used primers for qRT-PCR.

4.4.3. Protein Synthesis

The release of Col I and Col II was determined through the measurement of their propertides in supernatant of electrically stimulated and unstimulated cells as previously described in [38].

Briefly, for measuring the amount of type I C-terminal collagen propeptide (CICP), the MicroVue CICP ELISA (Quidel, San Diego, CA, USA) was used according to manufacturer's instructions. Collagen type II ELISA (IBEX, Montréal, QC, Canada) was used to measure the concentration of type II C-terminal propeptide (CIICP).

All protein data were normalized to total protein content, which was measured using a Qubit[®] Protein Assay (Thermo Fischer Scientific Inc., Waltham, MA, USA).

4.5. Statistics and Data Illustration

GraphPad Prism v.7.05 (GraphPad Software, Inc., San Diego, CA, USA) was used for data analysis and illustration. The results for biocompatibility testing are illustrated as the mean including measuring points (mean values) and for metabolic activity, gene, and protein expression as the mean and standard deviation. To detect outliers the ROUT outlier test was performed.

For biocompatibility tests, human chondrocytes were used in triplicates. The underlying statistics were performed with the mean values of the repeated measured optical density data. Samples, treated with conditioned medium, were compared to associated controls by a two-way ANOVA test to examine time- and treatment-dependent effects.

To investigate the effect of electrical stimulation six samples per parameter combination and 16 related controls were examined. The underlying statistics for metabolic activity were performed with the mean values of the repeated measured optical density data. The gene expression data are shown as $2^{(-\Delta\Delta Ct)}$ in percent. For data analysis a cycle of threshold (Ct) limit of 28 was used. The relative expression of each gene compared to the housekeeping gene β -Actin was calculated using the equation: $\Delta Ct = Ct$ (target gene) – Ct (β -Actin). The relative amount of target mRNA in unstimulated and stimulated cells was calculated using $2^{(-\Delta\Delta Ct)}$ with $\Delta\Delta Ct$ (treatment/control) = ΔCt (stimulated/control) – ΔCt (mean value of unstimulated controls related to experiment). To allow the statistical comparison to the unstimulated controls, the underlying statistical analysis was performed with the $\Delta\Delta Ct$ values. For the statistical analysis of protein data, values of investigated protein amounts normalized to total protein content were used.

Normal distribution of results after stimulation was tested with Shapiro–Wilk. All data passed the Shapiro–Wilk test and were compared by ordinary one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni's multiple comparison test. The significance level was set to a *p*-value less than 0.05. Further details of statistical tests are indicated in the results section and the figure/table legends.

Author Contributions: R.B. and H.S. acquired the project funding. R.B., H.S., A.J.-H. and A.R. designed, and A.R. built, the stimulation device. R.B., A.J.-H. and S.K. designed the parameter study. S.K. performed cell experiments in the stimulation device and analyzed the data. A.S. performed the gene expression analyses. S.K., A.J.-H. and R.B. were involved in data interpretation of the cell experiments. A.W. performed the simulation of the capacitively-coupled electric fields. S.K., A.R., A.J.-H. and A.W. wrote the manuscript. All authors edited and reviewed the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval was waived for this study because exclusively commercially available human cells were utilized.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding authors.

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Int. J. Mol. Sci. **2021**, 22, 394

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Propagation-Based Phase Contrast Computed Tomography as a Suitable Tool for the Characterization of Spatial 3D Cell Distribution in Biomaterials

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The 3D structural investigation of soft tissue samples under near physiological conditions is challenging as most established techniques require embedding, staining, or cutting samples. Such manipulations can induce artifacts or result in a tremendous workload by, e.g., the preparation of multiple 2D images to retrieve the volume information. A non-invasive technique allowing to image the soft tissue in a 3D fashion is propagation-based phase contrast computed tomography. We explore the methods' unique properties to assess the 3D distribution and size of human chondrocytes within collagen scaffolds in a liquid environment without embedding. To seek if the identification of differences in cell distribution is possible, we have seeded cartilage cells on collagen scaffolds that were unstimulated or stimulated by alternating electric fields for 7 days. Analysis of the 3D cell distributions reveals that the migration depth of the chondrocytes into the scaffold is nearly doubled along with the total number of cells due to the applied electric field. Further analysis shows no specific size distribution of the chondrogenic cells. Our results indicate that propagation-based phase contrast computed tomography is a suitable tool to determine the 3D distribution of cells within a biomaterial investigated under aqueous conditions.

1. Introduction

Cell-based therapeutic approaches to treat articular cartilage defects can regenerate into fibrous rather than hyaline tissue, which has a lower capacity to withstand mechanical stress. [1,2] Articular cartilage is a 3D structured tissue with a hierarchical ordering and limited self-regeneration capacity, rendering the treatment of complex lesions such as deep chondral or osteochondral defects a clinical challenge. In each zone, the chondrocytes exhibit a zone-specific different morphological shape, [3] which must also be realized in matrix-supported therapeutic approaches to ensure the same mechanical properties of regenerated tissue compared with native articular cartilage.[4] Several studies have shown the positive effects of electrical stimulation on bone regeneration and cartilage tissue.^[5-7] In this context, it is important to understand how the migration, shape, and also differentiation of the

chondrocytes in combination with a scaffold material can be altered by the application of electrical fields.

However, the investigation of cartilage tissue and cell migration happens via different techniques, each having specific

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advantages and shortcomings. In clinical diagnostics, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is used to visualize directly changes and defects in the cartilage tissue. [8] It is a noninvasive technique based on the coupling of the hydrogen spin to strong magnetic fields and radio waves. Quantitative MRI techniques can provide structural information in the submillimeter range to assess parameters such as the volume and thickness of the tissue.^[9,10] However, it is limited by the achievable spatial resolution; thus, cell distribution within 3D tissue volumes cannot be examined by MRI. Although histological examinations using light microscopy are considered the method of choice for cell distribution analysis, this approach does not provide a comprehensive overview of the total number and distribution of cartilage cells within a 3D biomaterial (matrix), as the provided information is only 2D.[11] Light-based techniques to visualize 3D cell distributions in tissues, such as multiphoton microscopy, require for either cartilage sectioning^[12] or additional clearance steps to achieve sufficient penetration depth to receive tissue image data in three dimensions.[13]

An established technique for the generation of 3D information with high spatial resolution is X-ray-based micro computed tomography (µCT), as this technique allows the imaging of volumes in a nondestructive fashion down to the micrometer and even nanometer scale. The imaging of soft tissue is challenging, as such samples exhibit low attenuation contrast at hard X-ray energies, as they are mainly made of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen. Furthermore, imaging under aqueous conditions requires the X-ray energies of about 30 keV to have sufficient transmission and minimized radiation damage. The application of X-ray computed tomography for soft matter samples has become possible with the development of X-ray phase contrast tomography, which utilizes the phase shift of the X-ray wave. [14] X-rays interact with matter not only by attenuation of their amplitude, but also by a shift of their phase. For coherent X-rays, this change in phase can be utilized as a contrast mechanism for weakly attenuating samples. Thus, phase contrast imaging at synchrotron radiation facilities with limited access opens the possibility to investigate cell distribution within an opaque soft matter matrix with micrometer resolution, which is hardly possible for other techniques such as optical or fluoresce microscopy.

Therefore, this technique is ideally suited to investigate the 3D distribution of chondrocytes in biomaterials without any embedding. The aim of this study was to assess the parameters and feasibility if the spatial distribution of chondrocytes within a

collagen scaffold can be determined under aqueous condition with high resolution. Two scaffolds with chondrocytes seeded on top were investigated, where one was exposed to an electrical field during in vitro cell culture. These experiments aimed to test if phase contrast tomography can fill the gap between MRI and histology to reveal micrometer-sized information on the cell distribution within the biomaterial.

2. Results: 3D Assessment of Chondrocyte Distribution

The samples were imaged by propagation-based phase contrast tomography, and the 3D volume was reconstructed. As the samples were larger than the field of view (FOV), a region of interest scan was performed concentrating on the center of the samples. **Figure 1**a shows a 3D rendering of the reconstructed volume. In the next step, the cells were segmented, which is needed for the visualization, see Figure 1b, and the following spatial distribution analysis (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2 shows the number of chondrocytes as a function of the distance from the surface of collagen scaffolds with and without electrical stimulation. Both depth profiles show the same behavior, i.e., a high number of chondrocytes within the first $60\,\mu m$ followed by a decrease in their number with increasing distance from the scaffold surface to a maximum depth of $580\,\mu m$. To understand the depth profile, we have plotted vertical cuts from the tomographic reconstruction in **Figure 3**. These images reveal a thick layer of chondrocytes, which corresponds to the observed high accumulation at the near surface. For the unstimulated sample, no chondrocytes were detected after $300\,\mu m$ sample depth, whereas chondrocytes can be visualized down to a migration depth of $580\,\mu m$ for samples stimulated with electric fields.

To show this more closely, the percentage increase of the chondrocytes as a function of the distance from the interface is plotted in Figure 2. We note that the data were cut at the *x*-axis, as counts for the chondrocytes with electrical stimulation were dropped to zero. This representation shows that the number of cells for the interface region is increased by 20% and constantly increases down to the bulk of the sample where it reaches 100%.

Figure 4 shows the volume distribution of the chondrocytes for samples without and with electrical stimulation. For the samples, no direct correlation with respect to the chondrocyte size can be drawn. We argue that the oscillations in the size

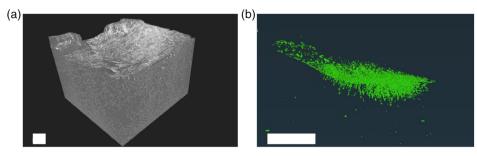


Figure 1. a) 3D reconstruction of the collagen scaffold investigated by a region of interest phase contrast tomography measurement. b) 3D distribution of segmented chondrocytes in the collagen scaffold. The scale bar in each image corresponds to 400 μm.

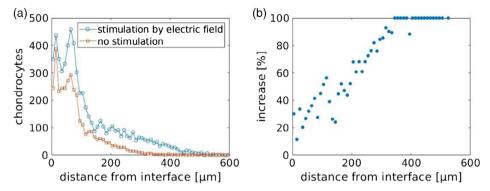


Figure 2. Depth profile of the chondrocytes evaluated from the tomographic reconstruction for collagen scaffold with and without electric stimulation. a) Total number of human chondrocytes as a function of the distance from the interface. b) Percentage increase as a function of the distance from the interface.

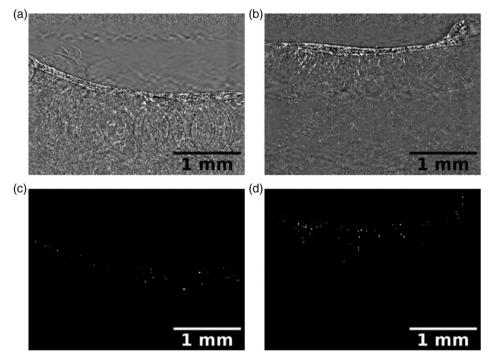


Figure 3. Slices through the 3D reconstruction of tomographic measurement of a cell-seeded collagen-based matrix a) without and b) with electrical stimulation. The bottom row shows the segmentation of the chondrocytes in the respective slice grown on the collagen-based scaffold c) without electrical stimulation and d) with electrical stimulation.

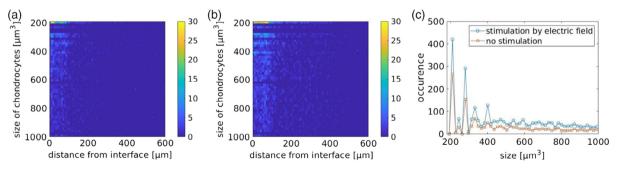


Figure 4. 2D maps correlating the size distribution of chondrocytes with the distances from the interface. The color code represents the number of chondrocytes. For samples a) without electric stimulation and b) with electric stimulation. c) Size distribution averaged along the distance from the interface.

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distribution occur due to the behavior of the chondrocytes forming columns composed of single cells. It seems that the overall number of cells is increased, whereas no preferential volume size can be deducted from the data. This is also shown in Figure 4c. Here, the volume size distribution is averaged along the depth.

3. Discussion

Due to the complexity of cartilage tissue and the fact that injured hyaline cartilage cannot regenerate itself, the treatment of cartilage lesions remains a major therapeutic challenge. Therefore, there is still a great need for research in this field. [2,4,15,16]

In addition to the approach of using endogenous chondrocytes or stem cells, methods have also been developed to anchor these cells in the lesion. [2,15] For this purpose, a variety of different biomaterials have been developed in recent years for potential application in the treatment of cartilage injuries.^[17] The aim is that the used biomaterials are transformed into physiological structures through the migration of cells into the materials and subsequent cellular processes. Biophysical stimuli such as electrical stimulation appear to be suitable for regulating the processes that lead to the formation of hyaline articular cartilage. [6,7,18]

In clinical routine, cartilage lesions are diagnosed by arthroscopy or MRI, as MRI is a noninvasive method. [8] MRI could be used to characterize the conversion of biomaterials with regard to changes in collagen and proteoglycan content in, e.g., ex vivo or in vivo experiments. [10,19] The advantage of MRI is that the biomaterials could remain in position, thus enabling continuous investigations. The disadvantage of MRI is that no statement can be made about the distribution of the cells with respect to their zonal position within the matrix. However, this information is important to assess whether the utilized biomaterial can resemble the cellular distribution as found in healthy hyaline cartilage in vivo.

Phase contrast tomography offers the possibility to investigate soft tissue samples under near physiological conditions with high spatial resolution allowing visualizing the cell distribution or even single cells with high accuracy. [20] Size, position, and shape of cells can be identified at differentiation stages.^[21] Furthermore, in more advanced approaches, specific immunostaining could additionally allow the detection of important structural markers, such as collagen II, as already shown in the µCT study of Metscher and Müller. [22] In addition, the high achievable resolution is only possible for samples having a size of a few millimeters or even smaller. Furthermore, due to the coherent X-ray beam needed, such investigations are restricted to advanced X-ray sources such as synchrotrons, and a high radiation dose is applied to the samples during measurements. However, a perspective to yield similar information at laboratorybased sources is using grating-based phase contrast tomography. [23] Different studies show the applicability and versatility, but further developments have to be done to reach a similar quality as with synchrotron measurements.

Histological examinations are the method of choice when it is necessary to characterize cells within different tissues or biomaterials. The main advantage of histological examination is the combination of staining cells specifically and either marking special cell components such as collagen II for cartilage tissue^[24] or in parallel use of different staining. Although histology provides valuable insight into the morphology and cell migration, there is a lack in 3D information.^[11] Figure 5 shows a histological image of a cell-seeded collagen scaffold with some typical artefacts caused by sample preparation, such as fold or cutting artefacts. Furthermore, a shrinking of the sample may happen due to the embedding procedure during histological preparations. For

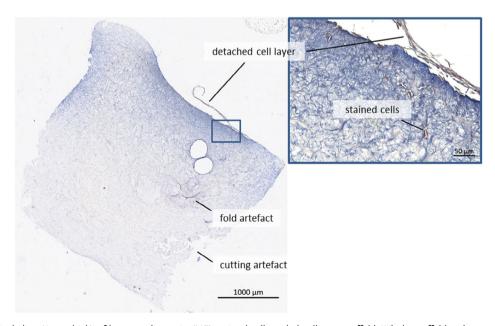


Figure 5. Histological slice (4 µm thick) of hematoxylin-eosin (HE) stained cell-seeded collagen scaffold. Whole scaffold with some typical artefacts of histological preparation (left). Detailed view of scaffold surface (right).

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histological investigations, the samples have to be sectioned before staining, and image acquisition has to be done by optical microscopy, thus yielding only 2D information. Volumetric information of samples can only be obtained using serial slices, imaging them and aligning these multiple sequential sections, thus generating a major effort of sample preparation and time.[11,25]

To be able to make an all-encompassing statement on the suitability of used biomaterials and stimuli, a multimodal approach combining the techniques mentioned earlier is recommended.

4. Conclusion and Outlook

In the present work, we could show the feasibility to investigate chondrocyte distribution by means of propagation-based phase contrast tomography, which allows assessing the cell distribution in 3D volumes with a resolution of 3.65 μm . The shown measurements allow observing an increased cell migration in the presence of an applied external electric field at 1 V m⁻¹ compared with unstimulated controls. The data indicate that an alternating electric field is fostering cell migration. These experiments allow for the assessment of cell size and the number of cells as a function of the distance to the interface in the full 3D volume. Based on this experience in terms of measurement properties and data evaluation approach, we are able to carry out a comprehensive study on the influence of electrical fields on cell migration.

In contrast to histology, which is the "gold standard" for the analysis of soft tissue samples, the collagen matrix can be investigated under aqueous conditions without any embedding or slicing, reducing preparation artefacts. However, only spatial information can be deduced from phase contrast tomography, requiring additional techniques to assess extracellular matrix composition, quality of collagen matrix, or hyaline cartilage component deposition, which is possible using histology or MRI. Thus, a comprehensive analysis of the cartilage microstructure that requires a multimodal investigation is needed, as each of the mentioned techniques has its advantages allowing to address specific questions. None of these methods alone can provide comprehensive characterization. Such combination of techniques enables to understand fully the connection of cartilage quality, as determined by MRI or histology, to the chondrocyte distribution, size and shape, as determined by inline phase contrast tomography.

5. Experimental Section

Cell Culture on 3D Scaffolds and Capacitively Coupled Electrical Stimulation: Human chondrocytes of a 30 year old man (NHAC-kn 31343, CC-2550; LONZA Walkersville Inc., Walkersville, MD, USA) were expanded at 37 °C, 5% CO₂, and 5% O₂ and cryopreserved at passage 3. After thawing, the chondrocytes were cultivated as described previously. [7] At passage 4, cells were seeded on a 3D collagen-based scaffold (Chondrofiller^{liquid}, Meidrix GmbH, Esslingen, Germany), mainly consisting (90%) of rat-tail tendons collagen type I. Chondrofiller is in the article referred to as collagen scaffold. Scaffolds with plane-parallel surfaces were 10 mm in diameter and 5 mm in height. After washing, scaffolds were placed in 24-well plate (Corning, Glendale, AZ, USA), and cells were seeded with a density of 1.05×10^3 cells mm⁻². Cell-seeded scaffolds were cultivated with the chondrogenic growth factors insulin-like growth factor (IGF)-1 (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA) and transforming growth factor (TGF)-β1 (Peprotec, Hamburg, Germany) each 50 ng mL hypoxic conditions as described in the previous study. [7] After 3 days, the medium was replaced by medium without added growth factors. Subsequently, cell-seeded scaffolds were placed in an electrical stimulation device (Patent DE 10 2018 114 019 A1). The cell-seeded scaffolds were stimulated with an alternating capacitively coupled electric field $(\approx 1 \text{ V m}^{-1} \text{ at } 60 \text{ kHz})$ three times each day for 45 min within 8 h over a period of 7 days with media changing every 2 days. Unstimulated cellseeded scaffolds served as controls. After stimulation, the scaffolds were washed with (0.1 mol L^{-1}) phosphate buffer and fixed with a mix of glutaraldehyde (2%) and paraformaldehyde (4%) in phosphate buffer and cut to a cylindrical sample of \approx 5 mm in diameter using a razor blade (Wilkinson Sword GmbH, Solingen, Germany) to achieve a suitable sample size for tomography measurements. However, the preparation of smaller sample size was not possible without inducing artifacts. To increase the attenuation contrast of the cells in the surrounding collagen matrix, the cells were stained with 1% osmium tetroxide solution (Science Service GmbH, Munich, Germany). The attenuation and phase contrast are both influenced by the staining, as it affects both, the real part decrement, Δ , and the imaginary part, β , of the refractive index. As the Δ to β ratio is \approx 36 of Osmium tetroxide, the impact of the staining on the phase contrast is stronger than on the attenuation contrast. By comparing the data from an unstained to a stained sample, an overall increase of the image contrast (electron density with respect to unstained areas) by 54% can be deduced. Due to the experimental setting, i.e., finite propagation distance, no estimation on the pure attenuation contrast can be made.

Tomography Measurements: The tomography measurements using propagation-based phase contrast were performed at microtomography end station of the imaging beamline P05 at PETRA III at DESY (Hamburg, Germany) operated by the Helmholtz-Zentrum Geesthacht. [26] Figure 6 shows an image of the experimental setup along with a sample holder with a collagen-based scaffold sample. A camera system based on a complementary metal-oxide semiconductor (CMOS) with a pixel size of $6.5\,\mu m$ and an array size of 5120×3840 pixel was used. The magnification was \approx 9.954 with an effective pixel size of 0.642 μm . The resolution was determined to be 3.56 µm by doing a knife edge scan and calculating the mutual transfer function (MTF). The energy of the incoming, monochromatic beam was 30 keV. The propagation distance was chosen to be 234 mm. For each sample, 2400 projects were taken in the angular range from 0° to 180°. As the samples were larger than the FOV, a region of interest scanning was performed. Along with the radiographs of the

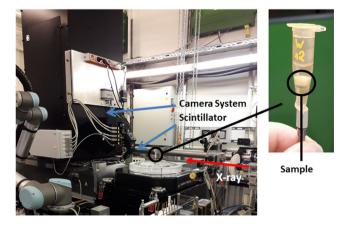


Figure 6. Image of the experimental setup at the beamline P05 at PETRA III, DESY. On the left-hand side, the camera system can be seen along with the position of the sample. On the right, the mounted sample can be seen. The samples were measured under aqueous conditions in an Eppendorf tube mounted on a sample holder.



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sample, reference images of the X-ray beam were taken to be able to perform a flat field correction.

The reconstruction was performed by a Matlab (MathWorks, Natick, USA) code using the ASRTA toolbox. [27] In the first step, radiographs of the sample and the images of the beam profiles were correlated to find the respective flat field for each image. Afterward, the flat field correction and the reconstruction were performed. In contrast to attenuation contrast tomography, phase retrieval had to be performed prior to tomographic reconstruction to yield (relative) phase shifts from the acquired intensity images. For this, the Paganin algorithm was used. [28] During the reconstruction, a binning was performed, resulting in images with a size of 2560×1920 with a pixel size of 1.29 $\mu m.$ The reconstructed volumes were segmented, making use of the software package Ilastik. [29] For the segmentation, the 3D option of Ilastik was used. Thus, the cells were marked in all 3D directions, and Ilastik was trained on the dataset. As feature, the intensity, the detected edge (Laplacian, gradient, difference), and the texture (tensor eigenvalues, hessian eigenvalues) were used. In the following, the segmented label sets were analyzed with the 3D particles analyzer of ImageJ to extract the distribution, number, and size of the human chondrocytes. [30] As the sample surface was bend, it was necessary to determine the distance of the chondrocytes from the interface to allow a quantification of the migration distance into the scaffold. This procedure was done in MATLAB yielding the following parameters: chondrocyte density and size distribution as the function of migration distance.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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biomaterials, histology, multimodal analysis, phase contrast tomography

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9	Anhang
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Abkürzungsverzeichnis

Abkürzungsverzeichnis

ACAN Aggrecan

bzw. beziehungsweise

Ca²⁺ Calcium-Ion

Ca_V3.1 Low-voltage-activated ("T-Type") Calcium-Kanal 3.1

cDNA komplementäre Desoxyribonukleinsäure
CICP C-terminales Propeptid vom Kollagen Typ I
CIICP C-terminales Propeptid vom Kollagen Typ II

Cl⁻ Chlorid-Ion cm Zentimeter

cm² Quadratzentimeter
CO₂ Kohlenstoffdioxid
Col1A1 Kollagen Typ I
Col2A1 Kollagen Typ II
Col9A1 Kollagen Typ IX
COO⁻ Carboxyl-Gruppe

DESY Deutsches Elektronen Synchrotron
DMEM Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium

DNA Desoxyribonukleinsäure

ELISA Enzyme-linked Immunosorbent Assays

et al. latein: et alii; und andere
EZM Extrazelluläre Matrix
FKS Fetales Kälberserum
GAG Glykosaminoglykan

Hz Hertz

ICRS International Cartilage Repair Society

IGF Insulin-like growth factor

ITS Insulin-Transferrin-Selensäure

keV Kiloelektronenvolt

kHz Kilohertz

LSM Laser Scanning Mikroskop

(M)ACT (Matrix-assoziierte) autologe Chondrozytentransplantation

mg Milligramm
min Minute
ml Milliliter
mm Millimeter

mm² Quadratmillimeter

mRNA messenger Ribonukleinsäure

mV_{RMS} Millivolt_{Root Mean Square}

Na²⁺ Natrium-Ion

Abkürzungsverzeichnis

ng Nanogramm nm Nanometer nM Nanomolar O₂ Sauerstoff

OA Osteoarthrotisch
OD Optische Dichte

PEMF Gepulste elektromagnetische Felder

Pen/Strep Penicillin-Streptomycin

qRT-PCR Semi-quantitiativ Real-Time Polymerase Kettenreaktion

RNA Ribonukleinsäure

SO₄²⁻ Sulfat-Ion Sox9 SRY-Box 9

TGF Transformig growth factor
Ti6Al4V Titan-Aluminium-Vanadium

V_{pp} Volt_{peak-to-peak}

WST-1 Wasserlösliches Tetrazoliumsalz

z.B. zum Beispiel

ΔΔCt delta-delta Cycle of Threshold

Ø Durchmesser°C Grad Celcius

% Prozent

μCT Mikrocomputertomographie

μm Mikrometer

μm³ Kubikmikrometer
 2D Zwei dimensional
 3D Drei dimensional

Tabellenverzeichnis

Tabellenverzeichnis

Tab. 1: Übersicht der Stimulationsparameter für die Parameterstudie [II]	9
Tab. 2: Vitalität humaner Chondrozyten nach elektrischer Stimulation	13
Tab. 3: Metabolische Aktivität sowie die Freisetzung vom C-terminalen Propeptid des	
Kollagen Typ II (CIICP) nach elektrischer Stimulation	16

Abbildungsverzeichnis

Abbildungsverzeichnis

Abb. 1: Graphische Zusammenfassung der klinischen Problematik und des methodische Lösungsansatzes	
Abb. 2: Elektrodendesign und numerische Feldsimulation des neu entwickelten kapaziti gekoppelten Stimulationssystems	
Abb. 3: Sekretion vom C-terminalen Propeptid von Kollagen Typ II (CIICP) und Glucosaminoglykane (GAG) pro Gesamtprotein nach elektrischer Stimulation	14
Abb. 4: C-terminales Propeptid des Kollagen Typ I (CICP) pro Gesamtprotein nach elektrischer Stimulation	15
Abb. 5: Proteinfreisetzung von C-terminalem Propeptid des Kollagen Typ I (CICP) nach elektrischer Stimulation	17
Abb. 6: 2D-Diagramme der Korrelation zwischen der Größenverteilung der Chondrozyte und der Entfernung zur Hydrogel-Oberfläche	

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- Wieland, D.C.F.; **Krueger, S.**; Moosmann, J.; Distler, T.; Weizel, A.; Boccaccini, A.R.; Seitz, H.; Jonitz-Heincke, A.; Bader, R.:
 - Propagation-based Phase Contrast Computed Tomography as a Suitable Tool for the Characterization of Spatial 3D Cell Distribution in Biomaterials. *Adv. Eng. Mater.* 2021
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- 2021 **Krueger, S.**; Riess, A.; Jonitz-Heincke, A.; Weizel, A.; Seyfarth, A.; Seitz, H.; Bader, R.:
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 - Electrical stimulation leads to chondrogenic differentiation in co-cultured human mesenchymal stem cells and chondrocytes.
 - ELAINE conference 2020 (virtuell)
- 2019 Krüger, S.; Achilles, S.; Jonitz-Heincke, A.; Bader, R.:
 - In vitro Charakterisierung humaner Chondrozyten unter Stimulation mit elektrischen Wechselfeldern verschiedener Frequenzen.
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Selbstständigkeitserklärung

Selbstständigkeitserklärung

Ich versichere hiermit, dass ich die vorliegende Dissertation mit dem Thema: "Untersuchungen zur biologischen Antwort humaner Chondrozyten auf kapazitiv gekoppelte elektrische Wechselfelder" selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen Hilfsmittel als die angegebenen benutzt habe. Die Stellen, die anderen Werken dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach entnommen sind, habe ich in jedem einzelnen Fall durch Angabe der Quelle kenntlich gemacht. Ich erkläre hiermit weiterhin, dass ich meine wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten nach den Prinzipien der guten wissenschaftlichen Praxis gemäß der gültigen "Regeln zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis und zur Vermeidung wissenschaftlichen Fehlverhaltens" an der Universität Rostock angefertigt habe.

Rostock, 20.07.2021	
Jnterschrift:	
Simone Krüger	

Erklärung

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Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich mich bisher keinem Promotionsverfahren unterzogen oder um dessen Zulassung beworben habe. Die eingereichte Dissertation wurde an keiner anderen Hochschule eingereicht.

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