Sphingomyelin appears to be a key molecule in the central nervous system. Its accumulation in the liver, spleen, and bone marrow is associated with Niemann-Pick disease [1]. The acid sphingomyelinase defect leads to sphingomyelin accumulation in the cells of the liver, spleen, bone marrow, lungs, and in some patients, brain [2-5].

Bone marrow transplantation has been used to treat Niemann-Pick disease, with varying success. For example, enzyme replacement therapy (ERT), miglustat, histone deacetylase, cyclophosphamide, and antithymocyte globulin (ATG) have been used with mixed results [9-13]. The best results were achieved with mesenchymal and amniotic stem cells [17]. Amniotic membranes cells share many features with mesenchymal cells in the CD phenotype and in their biological activity [18-20].

Seven years ago we put forward a child with Niemann Pick type A for a bone marrow transplant, who had failed to improve lysosomal storage in his organs and to slow down the worsening of the CNS symptoms. Later we infused I.V. and intrathecally the mesenchymal cells isolated from the marrow of the same donor.

Case Report

A patient suffering from Niemann Pick A Disease, underwent an haploidentical bone marrow transplantation, which was then followed by intrathecal and I.V injections of mesenchymal cells.

Results: While the outcome of the bone marrow transplantation was a complete failure, after one month after from the treatment with the mesenchymal cells the patient improved from the psychomotor and from the parenchymal storage perspective. Hypersplenism was solved and platelets rose quickly from 20,000 to 120,000/ microliter. After the discontinuation of the therapy the disease slowly relapsed; however the patient is alive at the age of 8 years, while the survival of this disease does not exceed 3 years.

Conclusions: A bone marrow transplantation resulted ineffective while cellular therapy should be considered as a possible choice for of treatment of for Niemann Pick disease.

Keywords: Bone marrow transplantation; Parenchymal; Sphingomyelin

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been performed in Trieste since 1986, for mismatched bone marrow transplantations [21].

The engraftment of the marrow was rather quick, with minor problems of Graft versus Host Disease (grade 1). The engraftment of the donor’s cells was confirmed by means of HLA control and DNA polymorphism. Unfortunately after three months the size of the liver and spleen was even larger. In the liver biopsy and in the marrow smear there were still foam cells. The number of platelets after a first growth not sustained by transfusions fell and never exceeded 20,000/ microl.

At that moment we, along with the parents, decided to proceed with a further attempt with mesenchymal cells.

**Cellular Therapy**

A large core (“carrot”) of bone marrow stroma cells was harvested from the iliac crest of the father. The spongy bone sample was fragmented with surgical forceps in phosphate buffered saline (PBS). The cell suspension was then centrifuged and the pellet resuspended in culture medium (D-MEM, 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), glutamine 2 serum, and antibiotic/antimycotic (Gibco®). The mixture was distributed in four 75 cm² Falcon flasks and incubated in a CO₂ incubator for 24 hours. Then the non-adherent cells and bone fragments were poured out and the adherent cells resuspended in culture medium which were cultivated for three weeks. The medium was changed twice a week. At the end the cells were detached from the plastic wall with trypsine, washed and cryopreserved in aliquots in a 10% DMSO solution.

This system of harvest and the culture allowed elimination of all the haemopoietic stem cells, and at the end of the culture the phenotype of the cells was CD90+, CD73+, CD 105-, CD44+, CD31-, CD34-, CD45-. We underline that CD105 is usually weak/negative in the first three weeks of culture, while it becomes positive in the fourth week.

On the day of the treatment one aliquot was washed twice with physiological saline and used for IV injection; two million cells were diluted in 50 ml of PBS and infused IV within 10 minutes.

Another aliquot was washed, resuspended in PBS and 10% patient’s serum, and incubated for 40 mins with 6 microl/ml of a solution of retinoic acid in ethanol (10 mg in 10 ml). This incubation started the initial differentiation of the stem cells into the neurological line, as demonstrated by means of the expression of neurological markers (assay at 2 hours) as III tubulin and neurofilaments M (NF-M) in real time experiments with reverse transcriptase. After incubation, the cells were centrifuged and resuspended in 2 ml of physiological solution, and immediately injected into the lumbar spine of the patient. The same treatment was repeated after 2 months.

**Outcome**

The patient had no untoward effects due to these injections. After 25 days the number of platelets rose to 100,000/microl. The size of the liver and spleen was reduced to one half. One week later the child was able to keep his head in an upright position unaided. His relationship with his parents improved and the achievements brought him up to a psychomotor level compatible with a 7-8 months old child. We did not consider it ethically acceptable to perform a further liver biopsy. After a second infusion we were not able to continue the treatment for 2 years. The psychomotor skills maintained a plateau. After 2 years the patient showed a clear worsening mainly from the neurological perspective. He became unable to swallow and was then fed by naso-gastric tube. An anesthesiologist refused to put him under anesthesia to insert a PEG, due to the high anesthesiological risk (Figure 1).

In 2012, in the Hospital of Brescia, he restarted another cycle with intratecal and I.V. mesenchymal cells. This time the mother was the donor. After one month from the first injection he was able to swallow normally, and was fed with a spoon. The liver and spleen remained within normal size. His psychomotor skills (movements, relationship with the parents) improved, but he remained a severely handicapped child.

Following 4 injections of the new cycle he had to stop the therapy due to burocratical reasons in the hospital of Brescia (spring 2013). The improvement lasted six months and then we witnessed a new worsening of the psychomotor symptoms, and the child was fed again by means of a naso-gastric tube.

**Noteworthy**

Today even with severe health problems (recently the platelets fell to 50,000/microl) this child is 8 years old; this survival is definitely unusual in Nieman Pick A disease. No untoward effect was seen after this treatment.

**Discussion**

We are aware that this patient was submitted to the treatment with mesenchymal cells too late. Maybe if we had chosen this treatment much earlier the outcome would have been different. The effect of mesenchymal cells lasted less than 2 years, after which the symptoms reappeared. The treatment was given again with a different donor, with significant - but not complete and short lasting- results.

Since the first time we used the father as a donor (his “twin” from the immunological point of view), this could be a particular situation from the immunological aspect, maybe more favorable than in cases when there could be an HLA mismatch.

However, since these cells have no HLA-DR on their surface and are immunosuppressive of their own, the choice of the donor may have been irrelevant.

The crucial point of our method seems to be the short incubation with retinoic acid, which starts a differentiation along the neurological line, without achieving the complete maturation expected to occur in vivo. As long as the cells maintain the features of stem cells, they are
able to move across the blood brain barrier and to “feel” the chemical messages of cellular damage. Mature neurons are unable to move more than one mm from the site of injection [22] (Figure 2).

Figure 2: First two injections of stem cells on August 15th and October 15th. Effect on the number of platelets

Our method seems much more efficient than treatments that use undifferentiated mesenchymal cells in neurodegenerative diseases. Our previous experience with untreated mesenchymal cells in Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA1) resulted in a very short lived activity [23].

This report deals with only one case; therefore the result must be confirmed in a larger cohort of patients. We must be aware that mesenchymal cells do not cure this disease, even if they produce significant improvements and stop the progression of the disease.

However at the moment cellular therapy with mesenchymal cells could be the right answer for the treatment of Niemann Pick diseases.

Legal and Ethical Issues

The treatment in the hospital of Brescia achieved the positive opinion ("nothing against this treatment") of the Italian Agency for Drugs (AIFA), according to a decree (DM 12/5/2006) that allowed even without authorization a cellular therapy in life-threatening cases.

The treatment was discontinued twice due to the different interpretation of the Italian laws that changed in the last years. Therefore the treatment was permitted, then prohibited, at last even imposed by a Civil Court.

The Hospital Ethical Committee granted permission for the procedure. The patient’s parents signed an informed consent.

References