



PROSPECTS OF USING TITANIUM IMPLANTS WITH PREDETERMINED OSTEOGENIC PROPERTIES

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The paper discusses the benefits and drawbacks of using titanium implants in spine surgery. Improved fixation of titanium implants in bone tissue is achieved by applying a variety of textured and nano-based coatings on their surfaces. Coatings made of osteotropic hydroxyapatite (HA)- and tricalciumphosphate (TCP)-based materials prevail over allogenic materials in many features. This permits to achieve positive results in bone defect osteoplasty. However, HA and TCP do not completely meet the needs of clinicians due to the lack of apparent osteoinductive properties. The guided bone regeneration requires creation of initial conditions for the ordered proliferation of osteogenic cells and capillaries in a predetermined space. A prerequisite for this is the presence of biologically active substances providing osteoinduction of osteoplastic material to form a matrix on which the bone tissue will develop. Candidate substances are various fractions of bone morphogenetic protein (BMP) which induce bone regeneration. The advantages of various physicochemical treatments of titanium implants (plasma, ion, sandblasting, ablative, etc.) are still debated, but their clinical use requires further research. **Key Words:** titanium, implants, osseointegration, textured coating, nano-based coating.

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A surgeon dealing with surgical treatment of diseases and injuries of the spine has an arsenal of different plastic materials for reconstruction phase of the surgery. In addition to auto- and xenografts, the list also includes biodegradable and non-biodegradable non-biological implants [67]. While biodegradable implants are used primarily for replacement of bone cavities, the non-biodegradable ones, made from titanium and its alloys, bioceramics, composite carbon and other biocomposite materials are used for stabilizing and radical reconstructive surgery on the spine.

Autobone is still regarded as the gold standard of implants in vertebrology, since it combines osteoinductive (bone morphogenetic proteins and other growth factors), osteogenic (osteogenic cells) and osteoconductive (building matrix for bone formation) properties. However, traditional isolated use of bone grafts for anterior fusion in radical reconstructive surgeries for patients with diseases and injuries of the spine is subjected to critical re-evaluation due to high incidence of fractures or resorption

[4, 17]. Given great durability of titanium and its alloys, combination implants (metal in combination with a bone) are used in vertebrology, bringing together strength and osteotropic characteristics in one implant [4, 48, 56].

Titanium implants are most common in traumatology and orthopedics, since, in addition to low cost, they have almost all the features of an ideal implant: sufficient mechanical strength (6 times stronger than aluminum and 2 times lighter than iron), bioinert, wear-resistant, with low coefficient of thermal expansion. However, titanium and its alloy also have certain drawbacks common for metallic implants: they are susceptible to corrosion, have low reactivity and weak adhesive capacity. These factors contribute to bone resorption around implants [70] and force researchers to look for new ways of neutralizing these negative properties.

The biocompatibility of titanium implants is due to the formation of thin oxide film on their surface. Titanium dioxide film has a thickness of 4 nm. When the oxide film, rather than the

metal itself, is brought into contact with a tissue, tissue reaction occurs immediately after the implantation. Thanks to negatively charged oxygen, the titanium oxide compounds on the surface promote fixation of morphogenetic proteins, blood proteins and free calcium (TiO possess ion-exchange properties and may bind calcium ions in tissue fluid), which are involved in the building and rebuilding of bone tissue. However, self-organizing “bone-implant” interface may not be fully represented by organ-specific tissue and this fact may result in osteolysis and loosening of the implant in case of spinal instability [36, 62, 71].

Therefore, the key factor in integration of a vertebral implant is a number and functional activity of a patient’s stem cells, which depend on numerous factors, both general somatic ones (heredity, internal diseases, osteoporosis, age, immunity) and local ones (scope of intervention, biomechanical characteristics of “implant – bone” system, infections, etc.) conditions. Thus, one of the most urgent tasks is to create optimal conditions for osseointegration of the implant, which

in some cases can be achieved by special treatment of the implant surface or application of osteoproduktive materials.

The development of bone and tissue engineering, which allows studies of the use of bioactive materials with anti-inflammatory and regenerative properties, is the most promising direction. The materials that promote osseointegration of the implant are currently used in clinical practice [16]. A variety of organic and inorganic coatings are being developed to optimize the chemical composition of the implant's surface. Osteoproducing materials may be used at the interface of its contact with the bone to improve the integration of the implant [10, 12, 22, 26, 32, 42, 61, 64]. Materials which improve cellular proliferation, cell chemotaxis and angiogenesis can also be applied to structured metal surfaces. In addition to clinically used bone morphogenetic protein (BMP), osteotropic properties of platelet growth factor, transforming growth factor β , insulin-like growth factor-1, vascular endothelial growth factor and fibroblast growth factor are studied *in vitro* and *in vivo*. However, the results of the research are contradictory and require further study.

The purpose of this study is to classify the materials used in vertebrology for stimulation of osteogenic and osteoconductive properties of titanium implants.

Biocompatibility and osseointegration of titanium implants. Osseointegration was first reported in Sweden in 1950–60ies [5]. Ingrowth of titanium structures into living bone tissue was discovered during experiments in using implants. This phenomenon was called osseointegration. Successful integration of implants and grafts into the tissue environment is a basic requirement for reconstructive surgeries on the spine. Synthetic materials, cell and tissue technologies which are deemed appropriate for this purpose are used where biological integration and functioning of body's own tissues and foreign materials integrated with them occur. By now the prevailing opinion is that bone formation involves two types of bone forming processes on the implant surface: contact osteogenesis (on the implant surface)

and distant one (from the parental bone) [18]. These mechanisms have their own specific features, but they share common cellular processes, consisting of proliferation and osteogenic differentiation of body's own mesenchymal stem cells, formation of cells of osteoblastic line, which create the bone that undergoes subsequent restructuring. The healing of cancellous bone includes three overlapping phases: 1) osteoconduction; 2) formation of new bone; 3) remodeling [43].

Osteoconduction, attraction osteogenic stem cells to the implant surface, is the most important stage of intraosseous healing [59]. The surface of the implant adsorbs fibrinogen that acts as an adapter for platelet adhesion [35]. For its part, platelets on the implant surface are activated and produce various osteogenic growth factors. Fibrinogen is proteolytically cleaved to fibrin, which forms temporary three-dimensional networks around the implant. As a result of activation of factors expressed by platelets, the osteogenic stem cells travel through the fibrin frame to the implant surface. This migration causes a retraction of the temporary fibrin matrix [66].

The next phase of bone formation is characterized by progressive degradation of the organic bone matrix due to osteogenic cells, which appear on the implant surface and move toward the periphery. Then the matrix is mineralized as a result of the accumulation of calcium phosphate.

The biological connection between the implant and the bone tissue is fully formed after the first two phases of bone healing; osseointegration has occurred. The subsequent remodeling phase involves organization of periimplant bone tissue due to resorption processes [44].

The main prerequisite for adaptation of non-biodegradable implants in the bone is the formation of regenerate with organotypic beam structure at its periphery. Autobone chips, allogenic bone or synthetic ceramic materials are used for this purpose. Their biological properties are different, but overall they have weaker osteoinductive properties, since the donor material has been subjected

to additional processing (devitalization with irradiation, treatment with sonication or freezing). Modern biomedical technology involve the use of osteoinductors, such as recombinant proteins (rhBMP), fixed on various carriers (synthetic, biological, inorganic or biocomposite polymers) [9, 24].

The most promising way to increase osteoinductivity of bone implants and to enhance regeneration of connective tissue is to develop biocomposite materials, containing main components of tissues and active protein substances, various growth factors. In 1965, Urist [72] made a fundamental discovery, proving that the demineralised bone matrix is capable of inducing the formation of new bone as a result of biochemical activation of bone proteins.

The ideal biodegradable implant is expected to gradually dissolve in the body environment while fulfilling its supporting function and the new bone tissue should be formed in its place. Obviously, resorptive function of biological material, along with its support function, is crucial for successful integration of the material into the body. The rate of bone regeneration depends on several factors: porosity, chemical composition, solubility and presence of some of elements that are released during the resorption process of ceramic material, facilitating bone regeneration carried out by osteoblasts.

Search for technologies to improve osseointegration of titanium implants. The long-term stability of the implant depends primarily on osseointegration processes prompting numerous studies of surface modification of titanium implants and the roughness (R) of their surface by a variety of methods. Sandblasting, ion, laser ablation and additive treatment of metal surfaces are the most studied among the physical and chemical technologies. Sa, the average depth of roughness, is the most important surface topographic parameter in implantology. According to Wennerberg and Albrektsson [75], the implant surfaces can be divided into four groups based on their degree of roughness: 1) smooth ($Sa < 0.5 \mu\text{m}$); 2) slightly rough ($Sa = 0.5-1$

µm); 3) moderately rough ($S_a = 1-2$ µm); 4) rough ($S_a > 2$ µm) surfaces.

The impact of the implant surface roughness on osseointegration and osteoconduction had been thoroughly investigated. Some authors suggest that metabolic activity of osteoblast-like cells on the titanium surface, which is controlled by the level of osteocalcin, prostaglandin E2, and transforming growth factor-β1 (TGF-β1), and alkaline phosphatase activity, significantly increases after sandblast treatment or plasma spraying [60]. The surface of the implant increases with the increase in the surface roughness, which leads to a further increase in the adsorption of fibrinogen and platelet activation rate. In addition, fibrin frame more firmly attaches to rough surfaces [65]. In experiments on rabbits Larsson et al. [57] have demonstrated that the surface roughness and thickness of the oxide layer affect the adhesion rate of bone in the early stages of implantation (1-7 weeks).

There is general agreement that the implants with smooth ($S_a < 0.5$ µm) and slightly rough ($S_a = 0.5-1$ µm) surfaces have worse osseointegrative properties than the implants with moderately rough ($S_a = 1-2$ µm) and rough ($S_a > 2$ µm) surfaces. In addition, experiments demonstrated better contact between the bone and the implant with moderately rough surface than with the rough one [75].

Improved fixation of implants in bone tissue is achieved by applying various textured (porous globulous, coral-like) coatings and nano-coatings (nanocrystalline hydroxyapatite, fluoride, metaphosphate or calcium octaphosphate) to their surfaces [1, 6, 10, 12, 28, 34, 55].

Bio-ceramic coating. Spraying bioactive materials based on synthetic calcium phosphates, hydroxyapatite (HA) and tricalcium phosphate (TCP), is one of the promising directions in surgery of the spinal column. HA is an inorganic matrix of mineralized tissues of human and animal body, accounting for 65 % of the weight of a cortical bone. It is characterized by biocompatibility with the human body and does not trigger rejection reaction, it increases proliferative activity of the osteoblasts and stimulates the repar-

ative osteogenesis at the injection site, however, this material is completely devoid of osteoinductive properties [15]. It has been shown that in a biological system the crystals of synthetic HA and TCP are susceptible to the influence of body cells metabolism and are degraded into calcium and phosphate ions, which are later incorporated into regenerating bone structure [31]. Implants coated with a thin layer of calcium phosphate were designed to increase bone mineralization in the bone formation phase [45]. The drug also delays the development of inflammatory response in the bone tissue. Currently, synthetic HA preparations have been successfully used in clinical practice in Russia and in the leading foreign countries.

Despite such a pronounced current interest in HA, the indications for its medical use are quite limited. The drug is used either as a porous (reserved) ceramics intended to serve as a support frame for tissue grafts, gradually dissolving during substitution with newly formed bone tissue, or as a solid (non-resorbing) ceramics intended for coating of metal or synthetic surfaces. Since HA cannot be used in surgery of the spine as a supporting frame, it is interesting to consider the currently available experimental and clinical results of the surface treatment of titanium implants.

An experiment studied the specific effect of the drug based on nanocrystalline "Hydroxyapatite gel" [15]. Several studies have investigated the effect of different surface treatments of titanium implants on the formation of mineralized osteoblastic culture [30, 63]. Cooper et al. [41] cultivated osteoblast culture on various titanium surfaces (after mechanical treatment, plasma spraying, and sandblasting of titanium oxide) and reported no significant differences in cell growth. Later D.A. Dimitrovich [8] has shown that the area of cell material attachment after ion-plasma etching was 50% larger and after shot-blasting was 35 % larger than after microplasma treatment.

One promising area is development of composite materials based on biphasic ceramics using different binders, biologically active substances, stem cells.

In reconstructive surgery it is important to take into account the rate of biodegradation of the implant material. Very fast resorption may outstrip the processes of bone formation. In this case, there are extensive fibrous tissue sections in the area of the implant. Ceramics based on HA biodegrade slower than those based on TCP. The advantage of this type of material is a possibility to combine the hardness of HA and the formation of calcium depot (due to biodegradation of TCP). When choosing intraosseous implants with textured coatings it is better to give preference to those that are characterized by a porosity of 10-40 % and pore sizes of 0.1 to 10 µm and have additional hydroxyapatite or hydroxyapatite and calcium phosphate bioceramic layer. Durable dense nanoceramics allow production of new generation of endoprostheses and implants for use in orthopedics, dentistry, arthroplasty, especially in heavily loaded segments of the skeleton (spine, joints, etc.).

Titanium implants with hydroxyapatite coating have been used in vertebrology [2, 11]. Application of nanostructured hydroxyapatite coating on titanium allows creation of meshes with the necessary strength and improved osseointegration properties of the implants. A.B. Makarov et al. [20, 21] have shown that these implants promote formation of bone-metal block within 2-2.5 months, which is considerably faster than for conventional metallic implants.

"HumanTech Germany GmbH" company (Germany) manufactures bioceramic-based cages "TRISTAN®" for cervical spine and "ADONIS®" for lumbar spine which have elasticity modulus close to the bone material. Stability during the installation of the system is ensured by the presence of titanium plasma coating on the bearing surfaces of the cage. Ceramics based on zirconium oxide and aluminum are promising for applications in orthopedics and traumatology due to good strength (from 800 to 1800 MPa), better biocompatibility and chemical stability in the human body than any other material [13, 14, 19]. According to studies by the European Association of Osseointegration, the adaptation of an implant

can be expected to improve by covering its surfaces with peptides that stimulate osteoconduction [53]. Bioceramics may serve as a carrier system for osteogenic drugs based on transforming growth factor β (TGF- β) or BMP.

BMP and other cell growth factors. Out of the fifteen known mammal bone morphogenetic proteins of BMP family, rhBMP-2, 4, and 7 are the most often used in clinical practice [9, 40]. A number of experimental and clinical studies in the early XXI century demonstrated safety and effectiveness of using rhBMP-2 and rhBMP-7 as inducers for regeneration of bone graft substitutes. They induce mitogenesis of mesenchymal stem cells and their differentiation from osteoblasts [23]. Animal experiments have demonstrated that fusion begins a few weeks earlier in rhBMP-treated implants than in those without it [33, 58]. Experiments with rhBMP-2-coating of titanium surfaces have shown promising results [27]. Side effects of rhBMP are rare and occur in the form of local erythema and slight edema at the site of introduction of the osteoinductor.

Several BMP materials, particularly ACS "Infuse" (Medtronic, USA) and "OP-1, BMP-7" (Stryker Biotech, USA) are currently approved for use in medical practice. The use of rhBMP-2 in a collagen sponge resulted in higher frequency of bone fusion of the vertebral bodies in comparison with the use of autologous graft from the iliac crest [37, 49]. Some companies combine the osteoinductive properties of BMP with osteoconductive and osteogenic agents. For example, "Cerapedics, Inc." (USA) created an implant for bone tissue regeneration "i-FactorTM" which combines unique natural calcium phosphate matrix and short synthetic peptide P-15 which stimulates osteogenic cells to release growth factors and natural biologically active molecules.

The effectiveness of rhBMP-7 in achieving bone fusion in vertebral pathology was comparable or even superior to that of autologous bone material [52, 73, 74]. A randomized study included 36 patients who underwent surgical treatment for degenerative lumbar spondylolysis [54]. One group of the

patients received autograft from the iliac crest with "Ossigraft" paste containing rhBMP-7 (study group), while the other one received only the graft from the iliac crest (control group). After 1 year of observation the rate of coossification was 86 % in the study group, and 73 % in the control group, after 4 years, the rate was 69 % and 50 %, respectively. [54]. In another series of studies Kanayama et al. [54] compared the efficacy of "Ossigraft" paste containing rhBMP-7 mixed with ceramic pellets (9 patients of the main group) and grafts from the iliac crest (10 patients in the control group) in patients with degenerative spondylolysis in lumbar spine. Coossification was observed in 78 % (7 of 9) of patients in the study group and 90 % (9 of 10) patients in the control group. Histological examination revealed complete coossification in 57 % (4 of 7) patients of the study group and 78 % (7 of 9) patients in the control group. Viable bone formation was observed in 6 of the 7 cases of rhBMP-7 and in all cases of autografts.

Nevertheless, despite such impressive results, some researchers have expressed skepticism about the use of rhBMP-2 in vertebral pathology, believing that such coating causes a loss of bone mass, and even reduces the degree of osseointegration [53].

In addition to BMP, other growth factors involved in bone regeneration and cell proliferation are used in clinical trials, including platelet-derived growth factor, transforming growth factor β , insulin-like growth factor-1, vascular endothelial growth factor and fibroblast growth factor. Modern technologies allow to cover cages with cell growth factor ("LMP-1" technique, Sofamor Danek), rhBMP-2 (Medtronic, USA), or a combination of recombinant "MP52" bone protein and a bone growth factor ("HEALOS" method, jointly developed by "Orquest" and "Sulzer Spine-Tech" companies, Germany, DePuy Spine Inc, USA) [58].

Creating a nanostructured surface. A promising new way to improve the physical and mechanical properties of titanium and its alloys is the creation of nanostructural implant surface by laser irradiation or different types of treatment (sandblasting, severe plastic defor-

mation). Another interesting trend in implantology is treatment of titanium surface with various types of carbon: fullerenes, DLC (diamond-like carbon) and other materials.

The treatment of the surface with femtosecond laser pulses [7, 50] produce nanostructured surface, which has a well-defined one-dimensional lattice with a characteristic step of 70–600 nm. For example, a series of 500 pulses with the density of laser radiation of 17 mJ/s² produces a sequence of narrow grooves (thickness of about 100 nm) on the surface of a titanium target which are on average 400 nm apart.

Severe plastic deformation results in structured grains and depressions less than 0.1 mm in size on the titanium surface [29]. Carbon nanotube antennas, which can significantly speed up the process osteoreparation, are then grown in these cavities [3]. Bone tissue grew twice as fast as on the surface with carbon nanotubes than on the unmodified titanium surface [69]. Acceleration of bone regeneration process is particularly noticeable when carbon nanotubes are used together with rhBMP, commonly employed to improve bone growth [68]. However, in vivo application require studies of their biocompatibility and potential toxicity. Due to the uncertainty about biocompatibility and cytotoxicity of carbon nanotubes, the feasibility of their clinical use is unclear [25].

Creating diamond films on the surface of the titanium implants by pulsed cathodic arc deposition of carbon plasma is promising way to improve osseointegration [39]. Their use for the corrosion protection of the implants has been first proposed in the early 1990s [38, 51]. In certain cases the controlled interaction of the implant with the biological medium produce positive results, for example, in order to stimulate growth of bone cells on the implant. For example, Grill et al. [46, 47] used diamond-like coating for potentiation of osteoblastic activity on the implant surface. There are also literature data pointing to the antibacterial properties of diamond-like carbon [39]. However, these properties are not yet sufficiently understood.

Conclusion

Titanium and its alloys are the most widely used materials in vertebrology because of their high strength and biocompatibility. However, self-organizing “bone-implant” interface may not be fully represented by organ-specific tissue which leads to osteolysis and implant instability.

Coatings made of osteotropic HA and TCP prevail over allogenic materials in

many features. This permits to achieve positive results in bone defect osteoplasty. However, HA and TCP do not completely meet the needs of clinicians due to the lack of apparent osteoinductive properties. The guided bone regeneration requires creation of initial conditions for the ordered proliferation of osteogenic cells on the implant surface. A prerequisite for this is the presence of biologically active substances providing osteoinduction of osteoplastic material to form

a matrix on which the bone tissue will develop. BMPs, inducers of bone regeneration, are potential candidates for this role. For example, bioceramic coating of the titanium implants can serve as a carrier system for osteogenic drugs based on transforming growth factor- β or BMP. The advantages of various physicochemical treatments of titanium implants (plasma, ion, sandblasting, ablative, etc.) are still debated, but their clinical use requires further research.

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