Safety and efficacy of sperm washing in HIV-1-serodiscordant couples where the male is infected: results from the European CREAThE network

Louis Bujan, Lital Hollander, Mathieu Coudert, Carole Gilling-Smith, Alexandra Vucetich, Juliette Guibert, Pietro Vernazza, Jeanine Ohl, Michael Weigel, Yvon Englert and Augusto E. Semprini, for the CREAThE network

Objective: To examine the safety and effectiveness of assisted reproduction using sperm washing for HIV-1-serodiscordant couples wishing to procreate where the male partner is infected.

Design and methods: A retrospective multicentre study at eight centres adhering on the European network CREAThE and involving 1036 serodiscordant couples wishing to procreate. Sperm washing was used to obtain motile spermatozoa for 3390 assisted reproduction cycles (2840 intrauterine inseminations, 107 in-vitro fertilizations, 394 intra-cytoplasmic sperm injections and 49 frozen embryo transfers). An HIV test was performed in female partners at least 6 months after assisted reproduction attempt. The outcome measures recorded were number of assisted reproduction cycles, pregnancy outcome and HIV test on women post-treatment.

Results: A total of 580 pregnancies were obtained from 3315 cycles. Pregnancy outcome was unknown in 47 cases. The 533 pregnancies resulted in 410 deliveries and 463 live births. The result of female HIV testing after assisted reproduction was known in 967 out of 1036 woman (7.1% lost to follow-up). All tests recorded were negative. The calculated probability of contamination was equal to zero (95% confidence interval, 0–0.09%).

Conclusion: This first multicentre retrospective study of assisted reproduction following sperm washing demonstrates the method to be effective and to significantly reduce HIV-1 transmission risk to the uninfected female partner. These results support the view that assisted reproduction with sperm washing could not be denied to serodiscordant couples in developed countries and, where possible, could perhaps be integrated into a global public health initiative against HIV in developing countries.

From the *University Toulouse III Paul Sabatier, EA 3694, Research Group on Human Fertility and CECOS Midi-Pyrénées, Toulouse, France, the †ESMAN Medical Consulting, Milan, Italy, the ‡Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, London, UK, the §APHP, Hôpital Cochin – Université Paris Descartes, Unité de Médecine de la Reproduction Service de Gynécologie-obstétrique, Paris, France, the †Infectious Diseases, Department of Medicine, Kantonsspital, St Gallen, Switzerland, the ‡Centre d’AMP de Strasbourg, Service de Gynécologie-Obstétrique, CMCO-SHCU, Schiltigheim, France, the §Department Obstetric and Gynaecology, University Hospital of Mannheim, Leopoldina-Krankenhaus, Schweinfurt, Germany, and the †Fertility Clinic, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Erasme Hospital and Laboratory for Research in Human Reproduction, Medicine Faculty, Free University Brussels, Belgium.

Correspondence to Louis Bujan, MD, University Toulouse III Paul Sabatier, EA 3694, Research Group on Human Fertility and CECOS Midi-Pyrénées, Hôpital Paule de Viguier, 330 avenue de Grande-Bretagne, TSA 70034, 31059 Toulouse Cedex 9, France. E-mail: bujan.l@chu-toulouse.fr

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Introduction

According to the latest UNAIDS/World Health Organization (WHO) update (December 2006), the total number of people living with HIV had reached 39.5 million. As the AIDS epidemic continues to take a massive and global toll on human lives, the call for comprehensive strategies to prevent HIV transmission has never been higher. A fundamental policy in halting the spread of HIV has been the encouragement and facilitation of condom use in vaginal and anal sexual contacts. This approach however raises a major dilemma for serodiscordant couples, where the male partner is infected, who wish to conceive. These couples form an increasing part of the HIV population in developed countries, where most individuals infected with HIV are of reproductive age and able to access effective antiretroviral treatment. Improved life expectancy and quality has enabled these individuals to reanalyse their future and consider parenting as a socially and ethically acceptable option and many now express the desire for parenthood [1–3] as a fundamental part of healthy family life and return to normality. Recently published guidelines from the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) and ethics recommendations concerning assisted reproduction on people infected by virus have been modified to allow assisted reproduction in HIV-serodiscordant couples [4].

The desire to conceive could counteract preventive barrier methods such as condom use if couples do not receive sufficient information on reproductive options to reduce viral transmission risk. Adoption and assisted reproduction from donor sperm are two reproductive options available to couples which totally eliminate the risk of HIV transmission. However, both methods are not equally available throughout Europe and both deny the infected person a genetic link to his child and could reinforce feelings of stigma and discrimination. Unprotected intercourse restricted to the time of ovulation may limit the risk of HIV transmission but from the limited data available, transmission has been shown to occur under these conditions [5]. One way of allowing HIV-serodiscordant couples, where the male is infected, to conceive their biological children while limiting the risk of HIV transmission is the use of assisted reproduction after semen processing using the sperm washing method. Sperm washing, as a means of preventing female infection in HIV-1-serodiscordant couples where the male partner is infected, was first proposed 17 years ago at a time when no methods were available to detect HIV-1 nucleic acids in sperm and before the introduction of highly active antiretroviral treatment (HAART) [6]. Since then, several publications have reported the results of different sperm washing programmes in such couples [7–18].

The mean risk of sexual HIV-1 transmission for a single act of penile–vaginal intercourse appears to be on the order of 0.1% (see review by Bartin and Overbaugh [19]). Therefore, it is not easy to establish whether sperm washing and assisted reproduction actually reduces the risk of transmission in a significant way.

In Europe, centres involved in sperm washing programmes have created the CREAThE network (Centre for REproductive Assisted Techniques for HIV in Europe) whose primary objective is to pool knowledge, experience and results in order to improve the service offered to HIV-serodiscordant couples.

The present retrospective study analysed pooled data, from eight centres involved in the CREAThE network, to study the safety and efficacy of assisted reproduction with sperm washing in the largest series of sperm washing cases ever performed in serodiscordant couples where the male partner was HIV-1 positive.

Materials and methods

Eight centres from six European countries participated in retrospective data collection on assisted reproduction cycles performed between 1989 to 2003 (Table 1). Serodiscordant couples (n = 1036) in which the male...
partner was infected with HIV-1, attended the centres to follow a sperm washing programme. Variables concerning HIV-1 infection in the man, age of the woman at the time of treatment, and past gynaecological history were recorded from the patients’ data in each centre. A fertility screen was performed for both partners. Sperm washing was performed according to published methods [6,9] with minor adaptations in each centre. Briefly, sperm washing has been previously reported using three steps: step 1, a spermatozoa migration on density gradient; step 2, repeated washing of the migrated pellet, step 3, a spermatozoa swim up. Sperm washing was performed on one or more semen samples according to the protocol used in each centre. Briefly the sperm obtained after a recommended 3–7 days of abstinence was submitted to a separation following density gradient centrifugation. The 90% fraction was centrifuged and washed (method with two steps only) or submitted to a swim up method (method with three steps). The London, Strasbourg, Mannheim and Toulouse centres systematically performed the preparation with three steps and the Brussels and Milan centres also performed three steps except when there was a fertility issue where only the two-step method was performed. The St Gallen and Paris centres used only the two-step method and St Gallen used a specific double tube technique that has been reported [20]. The aim of all these sperm washing methods was to select only motile spermatozoa free of seminal plasma and semen cells such as leukocytes.

After its introduction into clinical use (1995–1997), HIV-1 genome detection was performed according to published methods [21] on the final fraction of spermatozoa obtained after sperm washing, except in the St Gallen centre where a more stringent separation was performed. Supernumerary embryos obtained after IVF or ICSI were frozen with the possibility of being transferred in a subsequent cycle (frozen embryo transfer; FET) if pregnancy did not occur after the first embryo transfer. Following each assisted reproduction cycle with washed sperm, HIV screening was performed on the female partners. The result of a HIV-test performed at least 6 months after the last assisted reproduction treatment was recorded in the database for this study.

All couples were required to systematically use condoms during intercourse throughout the period of treatment. They were informed about the assisted reproduction procedure and the fact that sperm washing may not totally eliminate transmission risk. All couples gave their informed consent to the assisted reproduction with sperm washing and the procedure was done in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki. In accordance with each country’s laws, an agreement by an institutional review board was obtained. A limited number of anonymized clinical data for each patient from each centre were recorded in a central database and statistical analysis was performed using STATA software version 8.0 (StataCorp LP, College Station, Texas, USA). The probability and the 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) of HIV-contamination risk in the female partners were calculated according to Clopper and Pearson.

Results

In the eight centres involved in this study, a total of 3390 assisted reproduction cycles were performed for 1036 couples. The number of cycles per couple varied from 1 to 19 (3.24 ± 2.58). Intra-uterine insemination was the most frequently used procedure (84%) (Table 2). The average age at the time of treatment was 32.3 years

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Table 2. Results of assisted reproduction attempts according to the different procedures used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedures</th>
<th>IUI</th>
<th>IVF</th>
<th>ICSI</th>
<th>FET</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>P*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couples</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1231*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycles</td>
<td>2840</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3390</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy per cycle (%)</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple pregnancy rate (%)</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery per cycle (%)</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy per couple (%)</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>&gt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery per couple (%)</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FET, frozen embryo transfer; ICSI, intra cytoplasmic sperm injection; IUI, intra-uterine insemination; IVF, in-vitro fertilization.

*The total was over 1036 couples as a couple could be have different assisted reproduction procedures (for example four IUI + two IVF).

*Missing information in 66 IUI and seven IVF cycles.

*Missing information in 91 IUI, 11 IVF and 40 ICSI cycles.

*P-value for comparison between procedure groups.
Numerous couples of reproductive age now seek medical assistance to have a child while minimizing the risk of infecting the HIV-negative partner.

For HIV-1-serodiscordant couples with an infected male partner, unprotected intercourse on the day of ovulation has been proposed and studies have analysed its safety. In 1997, Mandelbrot et al. reported four seroconversions, not related to the unprotected intercourse during ovulation, but occurring 7 months later or postpartum in a series of 92 natural conceptions in 92 HIV-1-negative women with an HIV-1-infected partner [5]. A more recent study [22] reported pregnancy and HIV-1 incidence in 178 married couples with discordant HIV-1 status. Women who became pregnant had a mean number of 8.4 acts of penetrative sex/month with 43% protected intercourse in comparison with a mean of 2.5 acts with 95% protected in women who did not become pregnant. One out of 14 women (7%) who became pregnant seroconverted and five out of 78 women who did not become pregnant seroconverted. It should be noted, however, that these two studies were done before the introduction of HAART or in a country where the HAART was not universally available.

In 1992, assisted reproduction with sperm washing was proposed in order to reduce the risk of female HIV contamination in HIV-1-serodiscordant couples [6]. Eight European centres offering assisted reproduction with sperm washing to HIV-1-serodiscordant couples have combined their results in this study. A total of 1036 couples underwent 3390 assisted reproduction cycles resulting in 580 pregnancies. No transmission of HIV to the female partner was observed after 3272 cycles with complete follow-up information. The upper level of the 95% CI of the transmission risk was thus 0.09%.

Several serodiscordant-couples studies have estimated that the risk of sexual HIV-1 transmission for a single act of penile–vaginal intercourse in a stable sexual partnership appears to be on the order of 0.1% (see Baeten and Overbaugh [19]). According to the De Vencenzi study [23] the calculated probability of women seroconverting occurred following treatment in the 3272 cycles for which the results were known, allowing us to calculate the probability of contamination risk to be zero (95% CI, 0.0–0.09%).

Discussion

Prevention of HIV sexual transmission requires systematic use of condoms during intercourse. The consequence is to induce sterility in the couples. For this reason, numerous couples of reproductive age now seek medical assistance to have a child while minimizing the risk of infecting the HIV-negative partner.

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transmission risk during one act of sexual intercourse and the rate of female HIV-seroconversion reported for HIV-1-serodiscordant couples where the male partner is HIV-positive: four out of 92 couples (4.3%) in the Mandelbrot study [5], six out of 92 (6.5%) in the Ryder study [22]; and eight out of 74 (10.8%) in the De Vincenzi study [23] representing a total of 18 female seroconversions in a population of 268 (6.7%). In our study, we reported no seroconversions in the 967 women ($P < 0.01$) treated with washed sperm during assisted reproduction programmes.

Recently a case of seroconversion was reported in a woman preparing for assisted reproduction whose infected male partner was not under antiretroviral therapy [25].

It is noteworthy that the studies on transmission risk during unprotected intercourse were done either before HAART was available or in countries where it was unobtainable due to restricted resources. Blood viral load is known to increase the risk of seroconversion and HAART is known to reduce such risk [26]. It must, however, be remembered that several additional factors are associated with HIV-1 genome excretion in semen such as genital infection and inflammation and that HIV-1 genome has been found in a small proportion of men with undetectable blood viral load under HAART [27,28] while infectiousness in these cases was unknown. The debate over the real risk of timed intercourse when the infected male has an undetectable viral load therefore continues. No seroconversions were observed in a more retrospective study of 77 HIV-1-serodiscordant couples who attempted conception through timed unprotected intercourse and in which the HIV-positive male partner had an undetectable blood viral load (< 500 copies/ml) through HAART [29]. This study did not, however, look for seroconversions in those couples who failed to conceive and the population size was too small to allow conclusions on the safety of this approach. Vernazza et al. have recently proposed additional measures to improve the safety of timed unprotected intercourse [30].

One limitation of our retrospective study was the loss to follow-up in 7.1% of couples. This loss to follow-up was due to geographical issues in the early days of the assisted reproduction programmes in the Italian centre. As these assisted reproduction programmes were offered to reduce the contamination risk, it is reasonable to presume that any female seroconversion following treatment would have been reported to the centre concerned.

The present study is the first multicentre study of the use of sperm washing in HIV-1-serodiscordant couples, in which the male partner was infected, who wished to conceive. It is the largest series published to date and the first with sufficient case numbers to confirm the safety and efficacy of assisted reproduction, where sperm washing was used as the primary means of avoiding HIV infection in the female partner. We recommend that public health authorities sustain and promote networks in order to analyse the results of assisted reproduction programmes, tailored to the needs of HIV-serodiscordant couples, and ensure a comprehensive database for the outcome of treatment and follow-up of all female patients treated is maintained, thereby facilitating epidemiologic studies.

According to our present data and other studies that have demonstrated the feasibility of such approach (see review by Gilling-Smith et al. [31]) it is neither ethically nor legally justifiable to exclude individuals from infertility services on the basis of male HIV-infection. For many countries in the world the first priority of the policy against HIV is to improve education, to allow access to HIV screening, to encourage condom use and to offer antiretroviral therapy where appropriate. In countries where these approaches are now in place we recommended that assisted reproductive programmes, such as IUI with sperm washing, should be integrated into a global public health initiative against HIV.

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