Oxygen delivery to the tissues and mitochondrial respiration

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1. ABSTRACT

In mammals, the O₂ transport from the inspired air to the tissues is made by convective and diffusive mechanisms. The convective mechanisms are provided by the cardio-respiratory system and comprised by the basic variables of cardiac output and blood O₂ content. Microcirculation in arterioles and capillaries is adjusted to match the O₂ demand of local tissues. Endothelium-generated NO diffuses to the smooth muscle of microvessels and produces vasodilation that increases circulatory time in the capillaries and allows a more effective O₂ extraction in the tissues. Once within the tissue, O₂ diffuses to mitochondria where it is reduced in an exergonic process coupled to ATP synthesis. Both, O₂ and ATP are the two most homeostatic intracellular species. In heart and muscle, both species show unchanged levels with 25-100 times increases in work load and ATP turnover rate. The linear rates of O₂ uptake shown by tissue slices and perfused organs are interpreted as a fast switching of mitochondria between metabolic state 3 (with a fast rate of O₂ uptake and ATP synthesis) and state 4 (with a slow rate of O₂ uptake and no ADP phosphorylation). Endogenous mitochondrial NO, produced by mtNOS, sustains the concept of a physiological functional activity of this enzyme in regulating mitochondrial and cellular O₂ uptake.

2. INTRODUCTION

During evolution, first bacteria and then eukaryotic cells and pluricellular organisms utilized molecular oxygen (O₂) in a process that was first catalyzed by enzymes of prokaryote plasma membrane and that evolved to be located into mitochondrial cristae. Mitochondria are intracellular organelles characterized by a high degree of genetic, metabolic and regulatory autonomy due to intracellular compartmentalization. The mitochondrial reduction of O₂ to water is coupled to the provision of a useful form of energy for cell works, through a highly efficient process that converts the chemical energy of the redox reactions into a H⁺ electrochemical potential or proton-motive force that is then used to drive the endergonic synthesis of ATP. In the highly evolved mammals, the cellular steady state O₂ concentration is sustained by a convective mechanism powered by the cardio-respiratory system and by a diffusive mechanism that carries O₂ from the arteriolar and capillary bed to the cells. Diffusion is an entropy-driven process that dissipates O₂ gradients and that is effective only over short distances. Oxygen transport from lung alveoli to the red blood cells (RBC) in the capillaries surrounding the alveolar wall and from the RBC in the microvasculature to the tissues are diffusion-driven processes. The first model to describe O₂ exchange in a single capillary surrounded by a cylinder of
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Figure 1. Scheme of the PO\textsubscript{2} according to the Krogh cylinder model. The blue surface indicates the PO\textsubscript{2} in a distance of up to 30 microns from the center of the O\textsubscript{2} carrying vessel. The mean PO\textsubscript{2} under normal conditions falls from 90 mmHg (12.0 kPa) at the arterial end of a capillary to 28 mmHg (3.7 kPa) at the venous end. Within a cross section of the cylinder-shaped tissue irrigated by the capillary, the mean PO\textsubscript{2} falls by 26 mmHg (3.5 kPa) from the capillary to the edge of the cylinder. Blood flow is 800 microl/g x min and O\textsubscript{2} consumption is 90 microl/g x min at 37°C. Redrawn from (2).

O\textsubscript{2}-consuming tissue was formulated by Krogh (1) (Figure 1). The cylinder model has been since then the basis for most single-vessel models. Nowadays, systems containing multiple capillaries and vascular interactions allow large-scale simulations of complex microvascular networks (3). On the basis of capillarity, cell shape and size, the intracellular pO\textsubscript{2} may differ considerably from one to another tissue and, considering different energy demands, for the same tissue under different physiological conditions (4).

3. METHODOLOGICAL DEFINITION OF VARIABLES

In the human body, O\textsubscript{2} transport from the heart to the tissues through the blood vessels is defined as O\textsubscript{2} delivery (DO\textsubscript{2}, ml O\textsubscript{2}/min), which is the product of cardiac output (C, l blood /min) and blood O\textsubscript{2} content, defined as the sum of the O\textsubscript{2} bound to Hb (HbO\textsubscript{2}, ml O\textsubscript{2}/l blood) and of the physically dissolved O\textsubscript{2} (S, ml O\textsubscript{2}/l blood): DO\textsubscript{2} = C x (HbO\textsubscript{2} + S). The normal cardiac output (heart rate x stroke volume) in adult humans is about 5 l blood/min, a value that can be markedly increased by exercise and sympathetic regulation, yielding a normal DO\textsubscript{2} of about 1000 ml O\textsubscript{2}/min.

The maximal O\textsubscript{2}-binding capacity of 1 g Hb (1.57 ml O\textsubscript{2}) can be calculated (4 x 25.4/64,484) considering that 4 moles of O\textsubscript{2} (25.4 l O\textsubscript{2}/mol at 37°C) bind reversibly to 1 mol of Hb (64,484 g). The contents of methemoglobin, the product of Hb oxidation that is unable to combine with O\textsubscript{2}, and of carboxyhemoglobin account for 1-3 % of total Hb. The content of these species and other factors decrease the theoretical value to the maximal accepted physiological O\textsubscript{2}-binding capacity of Hb: 1.34 ml O\textsubscript{2}/g Hb at a pO\textsubscript{2} of 100 torr (1 torr = 1 mmHg) or 13.6 kPa at 37°C with 100% of Hb saturation (SatO\textsubscript{2}). This value corresponds to 18.9 ml O\textsubscript{2}/dl blood being transported by 14.5 g Hb/dl at 97.5% SatO\textsubscript{2}, as it is the case in the lung.

The amount of physically dissolved O\textsubscript{2} (S) is pO\textsubscript{2}- and temperature-dependent, with solubility being higher at lower temperatures and higher pO\textsubscript{2}. The Henry O\textsubscript{2} solubility coefficient at 37°C is 0.0030 ml/dl x mmHg. At 21.3 kPa (the pO\textsubscript{2} of air at sea level) and 37°C, the solubility yields 185 microM O\textsubscript{2} in water (5) and the same value is taken for both plasma and blood. In the lung alveoli (13.6 kPa O\textsubscript{2} and 37°C), O\textsubscript{2} equilibrates with blood and yields an S value of 0.30 ml O\textsubscript{2}/dl blood. Therefore, RBC and Hb that carry 18.9 ml O\textsubscript{2}/dl blood afford most (98.4%) of the O\textsubscript{2} transported to the tissues. The round value of 20 ml O\textsubscript{2}/dl arterial blood is frequently used, recognizing that Hb content is variable. In the microcirculation, the low O\textsubscript{2} carrying capacity of the plasma and the discrete flow of the RBC in capillaries account for fluctuations in capillary pO\textsubscript{2}, that are named “erythrocyte-associated transients” of pO\textsubscript{2} (6). In cells and tissues, [O\textsubscript{2}] is in the range of 10-30 µM, that corresponds to a pO\textsubscript{2} of 8.6-25.8 torr or 1.15-3.45 kPa.

The whole O\textsubscript{2} consumption in the human body (VO\textsubscript{2}) is calculated from the difference in O\textsubscript{2} content (HbO\textsubscript{2} + S) between the blood in the left atrium (arterial blood) and in the right atrium (venous blood). The normal O\textsubscript{2} content of venous blood is about 14.6 ml O\textsubscript{2}/dl as HbO\textsubscript{2} and 0.12 ml O\textsubscript{2}/100 ml as S. The difference between arterial and venous blood, about 5.0 ml O\textsubscript{2}/dl, accounts for the O\textsubscript{2} extraction in the tissues and corresponds to about 25% of the O\textsubscript{2} content of arterial blood. The concept of tissue O\textsubscript{2} extraction or O\textsubscript{2} extraction ratio (O\textsubscript{2}-ER), defined as the ratio between O\textsubscript{2} consumption (VO\textsubscript{2}) and O\textsubscript{2} delivery (DO\textsubscript{2}) as: O\textsubscript{2}-ER = VO\textsubscript{2}/DO\textsubscript{2}, is useful for organ considerations and for physiological and pathophysiological conditions as this value becomes independent of Hb content, SatO\textsubscript{2}% and cardiac output.

If Hb were inexistent, the DO\textsubscript{2} (15 ml O\textsubscript{2}/min) given by S (3 ml O\textsubscript{2}/l blood) would only account for 6% of the basal VO\textsubscript{2} (about 250 ml O\textsubscript{2}/min). If the pO\textsubscript{2} is elevated up to 3.0 atm in a hyperbaric chamber (303.9 kPa) while breathing pure O\textsubscript{2}, S will be considerably increased to 45 ml O\textsubscript{2}/l blood, thereby approaching DO\textsubscript{2} (225 ml O\textsubscript{2}/min) to VO\textsubscript{2}. Oxygen toxicity appears with hyperbaric O\textsubscript{2} after...
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Figure 2. Hb/HbO2 association/dissociation curves. The corresponding P50 values are: Mb/MbO2=2.9 mmHg; Hb/HbO2, 23 mmHg; Hb/HbO2 and CO2 or NO, 27 mmHg; Hb/HbO2 and low pH, 30mmHg; Hb/HbO2 and increased temperature, 36 mmHg.

hours of exposure, limiting its application to episodes of CO poisoning, gangrene and decompression sickness. Breathing the usual carbogen mixture (95% O2 and 5% CO2) at normal pressure provides a fully saturated Hb (1.34 ml O2/g Hb) in the lung and 13.6 ml O2/l blood as S.

In the microcirculation, RBC flux (RBC/s) is the product of RBC velocity (V, micron/s) and RBC lineal density (RBC/micron) as: RBC flux = V x L.D. Oxygen flow in the capillaries (F02) is calculated with the RBC flux, the RBC-SatO2 and the O2 carrying capacity of a single RBC (B=0.0363 pl O2/RBC at 100% SatO2): F02 = RBC flux x SatO2% x B (7). Taking into account that most of the O2 is not taken up by the tissues, capillary O2 extraction ratio (O2,ERc) is calculated from capillary O2 flux rates at the capillary entrance (in) and exit (out) as: O2,ERc = [F02 (in) – F02 (out)] / F02 (in). Changes in capillary O2 extraction indicate localized mitochondrial or microvascular dysfunction.

4. CONVECTIVE TRANSPORT MECHANISMS

The Hb within erythrocytes is essential in the convective transport of O2 by blood. The equilibrium between Hb and HbO2 (Hb + O2 ⇌ HbO2) is not a simple chemical equilibrium characterized by an equilibrium constant. Instead, O2 binds cooperatively with Hb, altering its tetrameric conformation and switching the O2 binding properties. The process is adequately described by the HbO2 and MbO2 dissociation curves, in which the square hyperbola for MbO2 shows a stiff high O2 affinity (P50 = 2.9 mmHg) and the sigmoidal shape for HbO2 shows a lower O2 affinity (P50= 23 mmHg) (2). P50 is the O2 necessary to half-saturate these O2-binding proteins (Figure 2). The sigmoidal shape of the HbO2 saturation/dissociation curve has fascinated scientists for a long time and fostered the concepts of cooperativity and changes in biochemical properties by protein conformation. In the tissues, the HbO2 dissociation curve is shifted to the right, implying less affinity of Hb towards O2, by the Bohr effect which is caused by the reversible combination of CO2 to Hb protein amino groups after diffusion of CO2 from the tissues to the RBC. The Bohr effect in arterioles and capillaries effectively improves tissue oxygenation and is also favored by the simultaneous decrease in pH and by changes in RBC metabolites, as 2,3-diphosphoglycerate (2). Other factors such as temperature increase or NO (8) also shift the curve to the right. It is important to emphasize that this rightward shift only occurs at a pO2 below 60 torr (70 microM O2, 8 kPa) which indicates a more effective O2 supply to the tissues when metabolic stress, such as exercise or sepsis, takes place.

5. DIFFUSIVE TRANSPORT MECHANISMS

Oxygen diffusion is determined by Henry O2 solubility (k), O2 diffusivity (D), surface area through which exchange occurs (A), pO2 gradient (delta pO2) and length of the diffusion path (l) as established by Fick’s law of diffusion (O2 diffusion = -k x D x A x delta pO2 / l). The critical O2 diffusion distance, which is the maximum distance that mitochondria can be away from an O2 source without anoxia and impaired function, is located at the edge of the Krogh [O2] plot and ranges from 10 to hundreds of microns (9). This distance is determined by Fick O2 diffusion parameters, which are rather constant, and capillary pO2 and tissue O2 consumption which are the two physiological variables.

An important observation is that the capillary-tissue contact area is only a fraction of the surface area of the inner mitochondrial membranes and cristae. By definition, this means that the highest gradients and highest O2 fluxes are at the capillary-tissue cell interface and that these gradients are much shallower in the cytosol (10). Moreover, Mb further minimizes intracellular O2 gradients in heart and muscle. It can be inferred that mitochondrial function is better served with a homeostatic and homogeneous intracellular O2 steady-state concentration.

Once within the intracellular milieu, O2 faces three independent factors: viscosity, binding and interference from cell structures, that account for the O2 translational diffusion in the cytosol to be only 27% of the one in water (11). Viscosity in fibroblasts is 28% greater than in water, 19% of O2 is transiently bound to low-mobility intracellular components and O2 movement is hindered 2.5-fold by collisions with cell solids that comprise 13% of cell volume (11).

The diffusion of O2 from arterioles to tissue was evaluated with a data acquisition system capable of obtaining values of microvessel diameter, RBC velocity, [Hb] and SatO2% which allow O2 convective flow to be calculated (see ref. 3 for equations and references therein). The calculated values indicate that most of the O2 (about two-thirds) is released in the precapillary network and that the rate of diffusion is greater in small than in large arterioles, consistently with the lower velocity of blood in the smaller arterioles and their larger surface/volume ratio (12). Another interesting finding is that RBC gain O2 as they pass through the capillaries near arterioles (13).
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The half saturation of Mb with O2 in cardiac and skeletal muscle occurs at a pO2 of 2.9 mmHg or 3.3 microM O2, which lies well below the tissue pO2 of 10-25 mmHg or 12-30 microM O2. Thus, under normal conditions Mb is in a largely oxygenated state acting as an O2 reservoir and as a facilitator of O2 diffusion favored by its random distribution in the citosol (14). Myoglobin knockout mice exhibit a slight but significant increase in blood Hb content (13.3 to 14.4 g/dl) and an identical Hb/hematocrit ratio indicating normal Hb content per RBC (15). Other functional adaptations in these mice include a significant (33%) increase of coronary blood flow, a higher maximal coronary flow elicited by 20 sec of coronary occlusion or 1 microM adenosine (both responses being maximal coronary flow elicited by 20 sec of coronary occlusion or 1 microM adenosine (both responses being elevated by 22%), and a 33% augmented capillary density in the heart (15). All these facts indicate an important role of Mb in O2 delivery and in avoiding steep intracellular O2 gradients in order to sustain a constant O2 flow to the mitochondrial cristae.

Cold body temperatures, as experienced by many ectothermic animals either seasonally or chronically, produce physiological changes in O2 delivery to the tissues (16). Taking 25°C as reference point and at atmospheric pressure, a decrease in temperature to 5°C increases O2 solubility from 240 microM to 350 microM (5). The same temperature change produces a 70% increase in water viscosity affecting O2 diffusion and the O2 dissociation from MbO2. However, the Mb and MbO2 of Antarctic fishes exhibit convenient improvements of its association and dissociation constants (17). The mitochondrial compartment, *i.e.* the fraction of cytosol occupied by mitochondria, increases from 15% to 31% in the slow muscle fibers and from 2% to 6% in fast fibers in the acclimation of crucian carp from 28°C to 2°C, whereas the number of capillaries is augmented 2-fold (18). Results from striped bass muscle are similar: the cytosolic volume occupied by mitochondria increases from 29% to 45% in acclimation from 25°C to 5°C (19). Mitochondrial proliferation reduces the O2 diffusion distance from capillaries to cristae, enhancing mitochondrial O2 supply. Additionally, acclimation of striped bass from 25°C to 5°C increases intracellular neutral lipid droplets from 0.6% to 7.9% (19). An oil:water partition coefficient of 4.4 at 25°C indicates that lipid droplets act both as an O2 reservoir and as low-resistance structures providing an 85% improvement in O2 diffusion (20). Membranous conduits, a phenomenon seen in cold temperature fishes, improve O2 delivery and provide an explanation of how mitochondria can obtain O2 in the center of clusters (16). The epitome of cold adaptation is given by the Channichthydae, a family of hemoglobinless Antarctic fishes that also lack Mb in several genus (21).

6. REGULATION OF OXYGEN DELIVERY

Blood vessels controlling microcirculatory flow are understood as comprising flow-controlling vessels and distribution vessels. Most of the arterio-venous pressure gradient is dissipated in large flow-controlling vessels (medium-sized and large arterioles) that determine organ flow. On the other hand, the local tissue distribution of blood flow is determined downstream (small arterioles) by precapillary sphincters in tissues that have them or by similarly-sized precapillary arterioles in all tissues. Upstream, flow-controlling vessels are controlled by sympathetic tone and by regional neurohumoral systems. Conversely, distribution microvessels are under local control, responding to vasodilator metabolites (22). These metabolites produced by parenchymal cells under hypoxic conditions include adenosine (23), CO2, NO, prostaglandins, lactate, H+ and K+ (22). Endothelial cells and smooth muscle cells respond to these stimuli to match vascular tone and O2 delivery to increased local O2 demand. The phenomenon is generally known as reactive hyperemia.

A Copernican revolution in microcirculatory physiology was produced with the identification of the EDRF (endothelium-derived relaxing factor) as NO. The endothelium-dependent vascular smooth muscle relaxation process was well characterized by 1982 and subsequent investigations recognized the involvement of cGMP and of nitric oxide synthases (NOS) (24). The discovery of the role of NO as a messenger in the cardiovascular system led to the 1998 Nobel Award in Physiology and Medicine to R. Furchgott, L. Ignarro and F. Murad.

Endothelial cells react to autonomic nervous system mediators (*i.e.* acetylcholine), to vasoactive substances (*i.e.* bradikynin and others), to intracellular Ca++ signals and to vasodilator metabolites produced by parenchymal cells in hypoxic conditions with an activation of endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) (25). Nitric oxide diffuses from the endothelial cells to the adjacent smooth muscle cells, which respond to endothelium-derived NO with an stimulation of guanylate cyclase to produce cGMP, which in turn activates endoplasmic Ca++ pump, reduces intracellular Ca++ and dephosphorylates myosin light chains (26) (Figure 3). The described mechanism allows NO to play a crucial role in the regulation of whole body blood pressure. When L-NAME, a NOS blocker, is infused intravenously in rabbits or humans, it induces a raise in vascular resistance and blood pressure (27). This demonstrates that circulation resistance is in a constant state of vasodilatation due to the continuous release of NO by the endothelium. It is to remark that NO was found involved in the response to shear stress in the rabbit heart as N-nitro-L-arginine (a NOS blocker) abolished completely the flow-dependent dilation (28). Also, hypoxic dilation was seen to be completely dependent on endothelium-derived NO in rat coronary small arteries as it was blocked by L-NAME or endothelium removal (29).

The molecular mechanism underlying reactive hyperemia is still largely unknown. However, it is known that beta-adrenoceptor-mediated vasodilatation partially explains the exercise-induced hyperemia in the heart through its effect on large arteries and that alpha-adrenoceptor mediated vasoconstriction also protects subendocardial flow by increasing resistance in medium-sized intramyocardial vessels (30). An autonomic nervous system-mediated reactive hyperemia is a compelling
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Figure 3. Scheme of the NO-cGMP signaling cascade in the microvessels. The eNOS of the endothelial cells is activated by a rise in cellular [Ca^{2+}]. Nitric oxide diffuses to neighboring smooth muscle cells and activates guanylate cyclase that produces cGMP. The rise in intracellular cGMP levels in the target cell activates cGMP-dependent systems. The cGMP regulated ion channels include the Ca^{2+} pump of the sarcoplasmic reticulum. Redrawn from (24).

hypothesis because the same signal responsible for increasing VO_{2} would simultaneously increase DO_{2}.

The nature of the reactive hyperemia vasodilatory signal in the microcirculation is proving to be difficult to elucidate. A gap-junction blocker, 18-beta-glycyrrhetinic acid, failed to stop the propagation of the vasodilatory signal in capillaries, indicating that the electrotonic spread of membrane potential along the vessel wall is not involved. On the other hand, halothane and high osmolar sucrose did abolish the vasodilatory signal (31). Also, the transmitted signal is thought to be Ca^{2+}-independent as Fura-PE3, a Ca^{2+}-sensitive dye, failed to show intracellular Ca^{2+} changes in capillaries following increased muscle electrical stimulation (31). A fascinating answer, indeed complementary to the findings above, to the problem of the mediation of reactive hyperemia was given when an O_{2} sensor was reported to exist in the erythrocyte itself. The pathway involves vasodilating ATP being released from RBC when sensing a low pO_{2} and ATP acting on the endothelium to release NO (32).

A differential vascular reactivity should assure a rapid recruitment of vasodilatory mechanisms in the upstream direction. Whereas small arterioles (below 50 microns) show the greatest sensitivity to adenosine, myogenic mechanisms predominate in intermediate-sized arterioles (50-80 microns) and flow-dependent responses are mostly active in large arterioles (100 microns) (33). The myogenic response, defined as an intrinsic property of smooth muscle to respond to stretch or pressure, is effective in heart (34) and skeletal muscle (35) arterioles. It involves the endothelium-independent constriction of an arteriole following increases in intraluminal pressure and its dilation following decreases in intravascular pressure (36). In this manner, intermediate-sized vessels located upstream of the point of initial dilatation are able to respond to local pressure changes also dilating (because of a reduced intraluminal pressure) thus increasing the shear stress stimulus on large-sized arterioles and finally achieving their adaptation (vasodilatation) to a metabolism-induced elevation in flux. Intermediate-sized vessels, relying on this myogenic mechanism, are able to transmit the vasodilatory signal from small to large arterioles. The physiological relevance is evident when it is thought that large arterioles are the ones capable of maximal vasodilation (33,36).

Porcine subepicardial coronary arterial microvessels show 21%, 32% and 52% increases in diameter to maximal shear-stress in small (40 microns), intermediate (60 microns) and large arterioles (100 microns), respectively, whereas small arteries (180 microns) display only a 22% maximal dilation (36). The same pattern of differential vascular sensitivity was found when dose-response curves showed small arterioles to be more sensitive than larger arterioles and small arteries in the response to vasodilating substances such as adenosine or substance P. On the other hand, sodium nitroprusside (a NO donor) dose-response curves were identical in all vascular beds. These results suggest that segmental heterogeneity helps to coordinate the overall microvascular response during physiological stress and to optimize O_{2} delivery to the tissues.

We will now focus on some VO_{2}/DO_{2} considerations. As normal whole body DO_{2} (1000 ml O_{2}/min) greatly surpasses basal VO_{2} (250 ml O_{2}/min) a large DO_{2} reserve enables the body to stay far from a DO_{2} that implies hypoxia or anoxia, with VO_{2} exhibiting a behavior largely independent of DO_{2}. Schlichtig et al. (37) have shown that when DO_{2} is reduced below the critical point of 5.0 ± 0.8 ml/100 g x min in the liver, the VO_{2} starts to decrease accordingly (Figure 4). Simultaneously, the beta-hydroxybutyrate/acetacate ratio (a measurement of the mitochondrial NADH/NAD ratio and by extension of mitochondrial redox state, was constant until a DO_{2} value of 3.0 ± 0.5 ml/100 g x min, being the difference statistically significant. At variance, kidney shows a 60% VO_{2} reduction from its baseline value when it reaches the critical DO_{2}, indicating the inexistence of a supply-independent phase of O_{2} consumption in this tissue (37). O_{2}ER was shown to be equally maximally elevated (0.86) when it reaches critical DO_{2} values in the kidney and in whole body (38). In experiments in which DO_{2} declines by progressive hemorrhage or by flow reduction, the VO_{2} is physiologically protected by an increase in the O_{2}ER, presumably by recruitment of capillaries and autonomic-mediated blood flow redistribution (Figure 4). Thus, failure to achieve this increase in O_{2}ER during progressive DO_{2} reductions is considered deleterious to the tissue, as it was observed after administration of deoxycholate or L-NAME and indomethacin that plundered endothelium vascular function (39). Adrenergic vasoconstriction, as indicated by the use of an alpha-adrenoreceptor antagonist (phenoxybenzamine), is also necessary to maintain efficiency in extracting O_{2} during hypovolemic stress (40).

7. CELLULAR OXYGEN STEADY-STATE LEVELS

Constant and homeostatic O_{2} levels in cells and tissues are the teleologic reason for the development and
Liver exhibits a supply-independent VO\(_2\), whereas dissolved O\(_2\), or 10-25 mmHg or 1.3-3.3 kPa expressing the contribution to eliminate O\(_2\) gradients in the cytosol and the range of usual [O\(_2\)] in tissues is 12-30 microM, considering evolution of cardio-respiratory systems. In mammals, the kidney does not. Pathological O\(_2\)ER is lower than physiological O\(_2\)ER due to mitochondrial dysfunction or because of an impairment in microvascular recruitment. Data from (36-38).

Intracellular [O\(_2\)] and [ATP] are the most homeostatic cellular species, showing stable concentrations over a 100-fold ATP turnover rate, even though O\(_2\) delivery correlates with the metabolic rate in a 1:1 fashion (41). In muscle and heart, where metabolic studies are thoughtful, O\(_2\) uptake and ATP turnover are linearly related to the work rate (42). In these tissues, a randomly distributed MbO\(_2\) contributes to eliminate O\(_2\) gradients in the cytosol and the creatine phosphokinase reaction has a subsidiary role in maintaining a stable [ATP]. Phosphocreatine (descending) and phosphate (rising) changes, because of the creatine phosphokinase reaction, are also linear functions of work, but these changes are smaller (3-fold) compared with a 40-fold increased ATP turnover rate (43). Other pathways that supply ATP, such as glycolysis, the tricarboxylic acid cycle, amino acid metabolism and the beta-oxidation of fatty acid catabolism exhibit a modest (0.5- to 3-fold) increase in rates in the working tissue (41). This condition was described as “relatively” homeostatic because the relative changes in intermediate concentrations are far less than the percentage of the changes in metabolic rates with which they correlate. When 80% of aerobic maximum work rate in muscle and heart was sustained (the high metaboliite rate was attainable because most of the cardiac output was available for muscle work), Mb oxygenation (70%) did not change with an ATP turnover rate of 80 micromol ATP/g tissue x min, 25 times increased over resting conditions (41).

At the gene level, adaptation to hypoxia involves the binding of the hypoxia-inducible factor-1 (HIF-1) to the hypoxia-responsive element of the regulated genes in a process understood to increase the expression of the proteins that increase O\(_2\) delivery or that shallow cell and tissue O\(_2\) gradients, enabling cells to survive in O\(_2\) deficient conditions. About 40 hypoxia-inducible genes have been found to be regulated by HIF-1. Maduration of RBC, including iron transport and erythropoiesis, angiogenesis, vasomotor control, ATP metabolism and survival/death proteins are involved in this adaptation (44). It is worthy of note that in response to hypoxia the mitochondrial form of NOS, the mtNOS reacting with anti-iNOS antibodies (45), and the iNOS mRNA were found increased in cardiac myocytes (46). The mRNA corresponding to iNOS was found increased in pulmonary artery endothelial cells (47), and the ones corresponding to nNOS and eNOS were also increased in the lung (48). It has been reported that NO concentrations over 1 microM stabilize HIF-1alpha, whereas lower levels, below 400 nM, prevent its accumulation (49). Moreover, HIF-1alpha stabilization and HIF-1 DNA binding activity were correlated with accumulation of NO\(_2\) in the extracellular medium when iNOS expression was induced (49). It is then likely that hypoxia is associated with an increased NOS activity mediated by HIF-1alpha.

### 8. Regulation of Mitochondrial and Cell Respiration

Since the pioneering work by Chance & Williams (50,51) it has been known that ADP availability regulates mitochondrial and cellular O\(_2\) uptake, based on the concepts of respiratory control and metabolic states. The former concept elegantly describes the state 4 to state 3 transition in which ADP regulates the rate of mitochondrial electron transfer and respiration (Figure 5). State 4, with availability of respiratory substrates but not of ADP and showing slow rates of O\(_2\) uptake, was described as “controlled or resting respiration”; whereas state 3, with ample respiratory substrate and ADP availability was defined as the “active respiration”, i.e. the maximal physiological rate of ATP production and O\(_2\) consumption. In the transition from state 4 to state 3, after addition or availability of ADP, the rate of O\(_2\) uptake is increased 3-10 times (51).

The linear rates of O\(_2\) uptake observed in isolated tissues and perfused organs are interpreted as the result of a fast and random oscillation of mitochondria between states 3 and 4. This physiological condition, driven by local ATP demands, results in mitochondrial subpopulations exposed either to high ATP or ADP levels that decline or stimulate respiration (52,53).

The rates of O\(_2\) uptake by isolated mitochondria in metabolic states 4 and 3, as well as the amount of mitochondrial protein per gram of organ and the O\(_2\) uptake rates of the perfused organs for rat liver and heart are given in Table 1 (54). In the assumption that the whole tissue O\(_2\)
Table 1. Rates of the O₂ uptake in isolated mitochondria and in perfused rat liver and heart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oxygen uptake (nmol O₂/min x mg protein)²</th>
<th>Content of mitochondria (protein/g organ)</th>
<th>Oxygen uptake of perfused organ (micromol O₂/min x g organ)</th>
<th>Fraction of mitochondria (%)³</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State 4</td>
<td>State 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rat liver¹</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rat heart¹</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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</table>

¹ Temperature 30°C, ² The rates of state 4 and 3 oxygen uptake were estimated for a substrate supply under physiological conditions: (3 x the rate with 5 mM malate and 5 mM glutamate as substrates) + (rate with 5 mM succinate as substrate)/4, ³ Fractions of mitochondria in state 4 and in state 3 calculated as indicated in equation [1] in the text, ⁴ Isolated beating heart, 280 beats/min.

The reaction of reduced cytochrome oxidase, the O₂ acceptor and terminal enzyme of the mitochondrial respiratory chain, with O₂ is very fast (k= 10⁸/M⁻¹ s⁻¹) and the rate of electron transfer to cytochrome oxidase by the electron transfer chain is the key factor to define Kₐ₀.₅, the operational O₂ concentration for half maximal rate of O₂ uptake, also named Kₐ₀.₅. Evidence obtained by high resolution respirometry indicates Kₐ₀.₅ values of 0.25-0.30 microM O₂ for state 4 mitochondria and 1.5-1.7 microM O₂ for state 3 mitochondria (55). The relative high value of Kₐ₀.₅ is close enough to the physiological O₂ concentration to assume a critical dependence of mitochondrial respiration on tissue pO₂, understanding as critical pO₂ the one that by strict application of Michaelis-Menten kinetics will limit mitochondrial O₂ uptake below 80% of the maximal rate.

Valdez et al. (56) have recently introduced the concept of “mtNOS functional activity” to describe the effects of the NO generated by mtNOS in the regulation of mitochondrial O₂ uptake. Conditions of maximal NO levels (achieved by supplementation with arginine and superoxide dismutase) show diminished state 3 respiration rates whereas conditions of minimal NO levels (achieved by supplementation with NOS-blockers and Hb) show increased state 3 respiration rates. The difference in state 3 respiration (in the range of 15-65%) is named the mtNOS functional activity in the regulation of mitochondrial respiration (57). The mtNOS functional activity results much higher in state 3 than in state 4, in agreement with the kinetic characteristics of the NO inhibition of cytochrome oxidase (57). Considering that the NO produced by mtNOS is able to inhibit cytochrome oxidase activity by 22-25% in isolated heart and liver mitochondria (56), it can be calculated (equation [1]) that heart and liver mitochondria oscillate, about equally distributed, between a NO-inhibited state 3 (47% in heart and 58% in liver) and state 4 (53% in heart and 42% in liver). The NO-inhibited respiration lowers the steepness of intracellular O₂ gradients and allows O₂ to diffuse further along its gradient at the edge of

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Figure 5. Scheme of the O₂ uptake by isolated mitochondria, as followed by a Clark-type O₂ electrode, that illustrates the respiratory control concept (50). State 4: mitochondrial metabolic state 4 in the presence of substrates, usually succinate or malate-glutamate. When the state 4 respiration after the expenditure of ADP (by phosphorylation to ATP) is faster than the initial state 4 respiration, it indicates mitochondrial uncoupling or excess Mg²⁺ in the reaction medium. State 3: mitochondrial metabolic state 3 after addition of ADP. The respiratory control is the ratio between the respiratory rates in state 4 and in state 3 (state 4/state 3; usually 3.0-7.0 with succinate and 4.0-10.0 with malate-glutamate). The amount of O atoms used to phosphorylate ADP under state 3 allows the estimation of oxidative phosphorylation energetic efficiency as the ADP:O ratio (usually 1.70 with succinate and 2.70 with malate-glutamate).
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Figure 6. Regulation of mitochondrial respiration. Three mitochondrial proteins located in the inner membrane regulate the rate of electron transfer in the respiratory chain and mitochondrial and cellular O₂ uptake. 1. F₁-ATPase: dissipates the H⁺ electrochemical gradient, or proton-motive force, coupled to ATP synthesis. The proton-motive force across the inner mitochondrial membrane is capable of decreasing electron transfer to the rate of state 4 respiration by matching the electrochemical potentials of the redox reactions and the proton-motive force. 2. mtNOS: the mitochondrial NOS isoenzyme produces NO that is a competitive inhibitor of cytochrome oxidase. 3. Cytochrome oxidase: the terminal oxidase of the mitochondrial respiratory chain whose activity is regulated by the ratio [O₂]/[NO] (57).

Krogh’s cylinder, extending the space of adequate tissue oxygenation away from the blood vessel (58, 59).

9. PERSPECTIVES

In summary, the rate of mitochondrial and cellular O₂ uptake and energy production in mammalian cells is regulated by energy demands (ADP level), O₂ supply and NO levels, this latter through the O₂/NO ratio. Three membrane-bound mitochondrial proteins, F₁-ATPase, mtNOS, and cytochrome oxidase are the regulable and operational effectors that regulate mitochondrial function based on the intramitochondrial ADP, NO and O₂ steady state concentrations (Figure 6).

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**Abbreviations:** Hb: hemoglobin; Mb: myoglobin; HbO2: oxyhemoglobin; MbO2: oxymyoglobin

**Key Words:** oxygen uptake, oxygen diffusion; mtNOS functional activity; NO-mediated vasodilation; hyperemia; homeostatic oxygen levels, Review

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