Non-invasive Quantification of Atherosclerotic Plaque Inflammation and Neovascularity in a Rabbit Model using Bright-Blood Dynamic Contrast-Enhanced MRI

J. A. Ronald1, Y. Chen2, K. A. Rogers2, W. S. Kerwin3, and B. K. Rutt4

1Radiology, Stanford University, Stanford, California, United States, 2Anatomy and Cell Biology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada, 3Radiology, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, United States

Introduction - Neovascularization and inflammation are two common features of rupture-prone atherosclerotic plaques, the precursor plaques responsible for heart attacks and stroke (1,2). Development of non-invasive, quantitative imaging techniques to assess these features is of utmost importance to fully understand the natural progression of atherosclerosis, to properly stratify patients in terms of risk of thrombogenic events, and to effectively evaluate new treatments targeting these risk biomarkers. Here we have explored the use of bright-blood dynamic contrast-enhanced magnetic resonance imaging (DCE-MRI) for evaluating these features in hypercholesterolemic rabbit aortic plaques that resemble mid-stage plaques in humans. Our study was motivated by three main reasons: 1) relatively few studies have been done with DCE-MRI, particularly bright-blood DCE-MRI, in animal models and therefore further validation is required; 2) novel treatments targeting inflammation and angiogenesis will be evaluated in both humans and animal models and imaging methods that can be applied at both the pre-clinical and clinical stage are advantageous; and 3) to date the DCE-MRI technique has been necessarily validated in very advanced carotid plaques in humans (3,4,5), whereas to allow earlier identification of at-risk patients and improved treatment guidance it is important to show that the method can be used for characterizing earlier plaques such as those found in our rabbit model.

Methods and Results – Atherosclerotic plaques were induced in rabbits by combination of balloon endothelial denudation and 11 months on a hypercholesterolemic diet. In each rabbit, axial images were acquired on a 1.5T scanner using a customized two-channel phased array RF coil between the iliac and left renal bifurcations (4 plaque sections imaged per rabbit). DCE-MRI images were collected prior to and immediately following a 0.1 mmol/kg injection of DTPA-Gd using a fSPGR sequence (TE/TR 3.5/60 ms; FA 40°; BW 10.87 kHz; 40 mm saturation bands placed 5 mm superiorly and inferiorly to the block of images slices; resolution 0.195 x 0.195 x 5 mm³; scan time per 4 slices = 16 seconds; total scan time = 272 seconds) (Figure 1). Lumenal and adventitial boundaries were traced in each DCE-MRI series and kinetic modeling was performed (5). Briefly, the transfer constant of contrast agent into the extracellular space (Ktrans) and plasma volume (vp) were determined, maps of each measure were generated, and a fused colour-coded map of both metrics was generated. Importantly, positive correlations of the transfer constant (Ktrans) within plaques and histopathological plaque measures of both macrophage percentage and neovessel density were found (r=0.4438, p=0.011 for Ktrans versus macrophage %; and r=0.4186, p=0.027 for Ktrans vs. neovessel density) (Figure 2).