Fuctionalized Magnetoliposomes for visualization of Hepatocytes in vitro and in vivo
Ashwini A. Ketkar-Atre1, Tom Struys2, Tineke Notelaers3, Michel Hodenius4, Philip Roelandt1, Tom Dresselaers3, Marcel De Cuyper4, Catherine Verfaillie1, and Uwe Himmelreich1
1Biomedical NMR unit, KU Leuven, Leuven, Vlaams Brabant, Belgium, 2Biomedical NMR unit, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium, 3Interdepartmental Stem Cell Institute, Leuven, Belgium, 4Lab Of BioNano Colloids, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

INTRODUCTION:
End stage liver disease is the final stage of acute or chronic liver damage and is associated with irreversible liver failure. Orthotopic liver or hepatocyte transplantations are hindered due to paucity of healthy liver donors, only 20-30% cell survival post transplantation and limitation in culturing hepatocytes for longer durations etc. (1). Thus, differentiation of stem cells into hepatocyte like cells could be a potential therapeutic approach. Stem cell differentiation results in mixed cell populations containing undifferentiated stem cells, cells from meso- and endoderm and hepatocytes (2). Labeling of hepatocytes with targeted MR contrast agents will allow following their location in vivo. It is the aim of this study to evaluate the specificity of functionalized magnetoliposomes (MLs i.e. iron oxide particles coated with a phospholipid bilayer) to target hepatocytes in vitro and in vivo from mixed culture. We have used galactose-terminal entities which are specifically recognized by asialglycoprotein receptors (ASGPR) abundantly present on hepatocytes. In addition, systemic administration of Lactose-MLs will allow non-invasive evaluation of liver function.

METHODS:
ML synthesis: Caticionic (DSTAP), anionic (DMPG) in a dimyristoylphosphatidylcholine (DMPC) matrix were synthesized as described before. Lactosyl-bearing MLs were produced similarly to the anionic MLs using 95% DMPC and 1% 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine-N-lactosyl (DOPE-lac) (3, 4).
in vitro experiments: Differentiation of mESCs was performed according to (1). Differentiated cells were labeled with all 3 types of MLs (100µg Fe/ml). Labeled cell samples were collected for RT-PCR, electron microscopy, immunostaining, MRI and magnetic cell separation to confirm the specificity and uptake quantification in hepatocyte like cells.
in vivo experiments: Initial experiments were performed by injecting MLs (200µg Fe/ml) in C57bl6 mice intravenously. Animals were scanned and livers were isolated for immunostaining and TEM at 4 hrs, day 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 post injections. Tissue sections were stained for Prussian blue stain to check the uptake specificity and wash out at different time points.
MRI: MR images were acquired using a Bruker Biospec 9.4 T small animal scanner. 3D-T2* weighted MRI FLASH (TE=12ms, TR=150ms) and T2-maps (MSME, with 8 echoes, TE increments of 10ms) were acquired with respiration gating.

RESULTS:
Differentiated mESCs did not show any toxic effects on total cell count and marker expression post labeling. Uptake specificity was confirmed by TEM (presence of iron oxide particles in endosomes of binucleated hepatocytes). Positive fractions post magnetic separation showed 25-30% of the total cell count which coincides with the percentage of ASGPR+ cells detected by FACS. These positive fraction cells were also detectable in MRI. In vivo dynamic contrast enhancement studies showed particles clearance through blood was very fast and all particle types ended up in the liver almost immediately after injection. There was no significant difference observed in the signal intensities of FLASH scans from anionic and lactose injected livers, indicating retention of particles in the liver cells for longer duration. However, histology confirmed that anionic MLs were mainly taken by Kupffer and stellate cells (only very small fraction in hepatocytes) and also confirmed by TEM. Lac MLs were mainly taken up by hepatocytes and kuffer, stellate immediately after injection but by later time points (week 1) particles were present only in hepatocytes (this observation correlated well with TEM images). Further, marker specific immunostaining experiments will be done to determine uptake specificity.

CONCLUSIONS:
Initial in vitro experiments revealed high specificity in uptake of lactose-functionalized MLs by hepatocyte like cells. This can be used for magnetic cell separation and subsequent MR imaging post engraftment of those cells. The potential of Lac MLs as a contrast agent for the evaluation of liver function was also confirmed by initial in vivo experiments.

References: