Minimally Invasive Ear Reshaping With a 1450-nm Diode Laser Using Cryogen Spray Cooling in New Zealand White Rabbits

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Background: Otoplasty is the current standard of care for treating prominent ears, a psychologically and sometimes functionally disabling disorder. The technically demanding procedure carries many risks such as poor aesthetic outcome, need for revision surgery, and need for general anesthesia. This study investigates the use of laser irradiation combined with cryogen skin cooling and stenting to reshape cartilage in the ears of New Zealand white rabbits.

Methods: In this prospective, randomized, internally controlled animal study, the right ears of 9 rabbits were mechanically deformed with a jig and then irradiated with a 1450-nm diode laser combined with cryogen skin cooling (14 J/pulse with cryogen spray for 33 milliseconds per cycle and a 6-mm spot size). The left ear served as the control. The ears were splinted for 1, 3, or 4 weeks. The rabbits were then given a lethal dose of intravenous pentobarbital, and the splints were removed and ears examined and photographed. Light and confocal microscopy were performed on the specimens.

Results: Shape change was observed in all 9 treated rabbit ears, while none of the control ears (stenting alone) showed significant change. Qualitatively, reshaped ears were stiffer after 4 weeks of splinting than after 1 or 3 weeks. None of the rabbits showed evidence of skin injury nor did they show signs of postprocedural pain. Findings from histologic analysis in the treated areas showed evidence of an expanded chondrocyte population in the region of laser irradiation, along with some perichondrial thickening and some fibrosis of the deep dermis. Confocal microscopy revealed minimal cellular death at 1 week and none thereafter.

Conclusions: Cartilage reshaping using laser energy can be performed safely transcutaneously using cryogen spray cooling in rabbits. This animal model has similarity to human ears with regard to skin and cartilage thickness and is a stepping stone toward developing minimally invasive laser auricle reshaping in humans.

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LASER CARTILAGE RESHAPING (LCR) has been an area of interest since it was first reported by Helidonis et al1 in 1993. Since that time, numerous studies have demonstrated successful cartilage shape change with various lasers in the rabbit and porcine models.2-5 However, developing this technology for use in humans remains a challenge because optimal dosimetry is difficult to ascertain, and the efficacy of the procedures relies on spatially selective heating of the tissue.

Clinical applications of LCR have focused on correcting septal deformities6 and protuberant ears.7 Septal reshaping relies on the surgeon to first deform the deviation using a modified speculum and then target regions of increased internal stress with a laser. No attempt is made to spare the mucoperichondrium from thermal injury because the laser irradiation spots are small, heal well, and are not visible. Reshaping the auricle using LCR presents a significant challenge because laser energy must be delivered either transcutaneously (with risk of skin injury) or via a series of incisions (negating the advantages of LCR over classic otoplasty operations). Fortunately, protecting the epidermis from injury during laser irradiation is well established in dermatology and generally involves the use of cooling devices, mechanisms, and/or agents that are applied to the tissue surface milliseconds before laser irradiation. Early investigations by our group demonstrated the efficacy of using cryogen spray cooling in particular to protect the epidermis dur-
We demonstrated that the prudent selection of laser and cryogen dosimetry could lead to the establishment of a significant subsurface temperature elevation at the level of the cartilage in the rabbit ear. Later, Mordon et al.9 demonstrated effective shape change in rabbit ears using an erbium:glass laser with a chilled sapphire window contact cooling system. Shortly thereafter, Treles and Mordon10 reported the successful use of this same laser system in correcting protruberant ears in 8 patients and demonstrated stability of results for up to 6 months of follow-up. Whereas Mordon’s group used contact cooling as a means to protect the skin, we have focused our efforts on the use of cryogen spray cooling (CSC) and, in the present study, demonstrate the efficacy of a 1450-nm diode laser with CSC to heat auricular cartilage and thus reshape rabbit ears in vivo.

The protocol was approved and performed under the aegis of the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) at the University of California, Irvine. We maintained strict adherence to IACUC rules and guidelines throughout the duration of this study.

Nine New Zealand white rabbits (Western Oregon Rabbit Company, Philomath, Oregon) weighing approximately 5 kg were anesthetized with ketamine hydrochloride (4-5 mg/kg) and xylazine (0.2 mg/kg) given intramuscularly. The ears were then shaved closely to remove as much hair as possible. The right ear was placed over a hollow cylindrical jig with an 8-mm-diameter perforations. A light source was placed in the jig, and when the ear was wrapped around it, the perforations transilluminated the ear, providing a guide to target laser administration.2 A clinical 1450-nm diode laser with CSC (Candela Smooth-Beam with 6-mm-spot diameter; Candela Corp, Wyland, Massachusetts) was used to irradiate the specimen. The initial dosimetry parameters were based on pilot investigations that used ex vivo auricles obtained from the crania of rabbits killed for other protocols. This work tested the upper limits of the laser without causing significant skin injury on the ex vivo ears. To minimize the risk of injury, the laser dosimetry was set at 14 J/pulse with cryogen spray for 33 ms/cycle. Laser spots were separated from one another by 2 mm, and a total of 4 rows of 5 to 6 spots (depending on ear size) were placed on the midportion of each ear (Figure 1). A reference suture corresponding to a notch on the jig was placed on each treated ear to allow identification of each laser spot at a later date and to maintain registry with histologic sectioning. Six cycles (at a rate of 1 Hz) were administered on the more medial (thicker) aspect of the ear, while 4 cycles were used on the thinner more lateral portions.

Following laser treatment, both ears were then splinted over a gauze roll (approximate diameter of 1 cm) and sutured into place using two 3-0 nylon sutures in horizontal mattress fashion (Figure 2). The contralateral ear was not treated with the laser but was, however, shaved, prepped, and splinted in an identical fashion. The procedure lasted approximately 10 to 15 minutes per rabbit, and no rabbits required intubation or additional doses of anesthetic agents. An Elizabethan collar was placed, and each animal was allowed to recover in the operating room while connected to cardiopulmonary monitors. The 9 rabbits were then randomly assigned to 3 groups that were splinted for either 1, 3, or 4 weeks.

Postoperatively, the rabbits were observed on a daily basis to ensure the splints were in place. No signs of thermal injury to the skin or superficial infection were observed. All rabbits demonstrated appropriate levels of activity without signs of pain or agitation, and the splints remained intact for the designated treatment times (Figure 3). At the end of each designated splinting period, the splints were removed and the ears photographed. Each animal was given a lethal dose of intravenous pentobarbital, and the auricles were harvested from the treated and untreated ears for further photography, measurement, and histologic analysis.

Analysis of the degree of deformation of each ear was measured using photo analysis software (Photoshop CS3, version 10.0; Adobe Systems Inc, San Jose, California). For conventional light microscopy, a segment of specimen incorporating a laser irradiation site was fixed in formalin for 24 hours, dehydrated via serial ethanol immersions, and then embedded in paraffin. Blocks were then sectioned with a microtome and stained with hematoxylin-eosin. Slides were examined for evidence of (1) thermal injury to skin and cartilage; (2) chondrocyte proliferation, and (3) overall thickness of the matrix.

For chondrocyte viability analysis, the skin and perichondrium were carefully dissected off the fresh cartilage specimens, which was then analyzed using the LIVE/DEAD assay system and confocal microscopy as previously described.10,11 The LIVE/DEAD assay (Molecular Probes Inc, Eugene, Or-
of the dermis (and accompanied by adjacent fibrosis in the deep layers) laser irradiation. The perichondrium was also thickened with increased thickness of the cartilage at the sites of 4-week splinted specimens showed that treated ears had already after splint removal.

The 3- and 4-week groups showed significant shape change as well, averaging 106° and 75°, respectively (Figure 4B and C). There was not a statistically significant difference between these groups; however, qualitatively, the ears splinted for 4 weeks were obviously stiffer in response to simple flexure than the specimens splinted for shorter intervals. The mean bend angle across all treatment groups was 89° (99.5% confidence interval, 63°-115°). This represented approximately 30% to 50% unfurling of the ear from its splinted shape. None of the control ears demonstrated shape change as well, averaging 106° and 75°, respectively (Figure 4B and C). There was not a statistically significant difference between these groups; however, qualitatively, the ears splinted for 4 weeks were obviously stiffer in response to simple flexure than the specimens splinted for shorter intervals. The mean bend angle across all treatment groups was 89° (99.5% confidence interval, 63°-115°). This represented approximately 30% to 50% unfurling of the ear from its splinted shape. None of the control ears demonstrated shape change, and all returned to their native shape immediately after splint removal.

Findings from a histologic analysis of the 3- and 4-week splinted specimens showed that treated ears had a substantially expanded chondrocyte population along with increased thickness of the cartilage at the sites of laser irradiation. The perichondrium was also thickened and accompanied by adjacent fibrosis in the deep layers of the dermis (Figure 5A). The specimens splinted for only 1 week did not show significant histologic findings other than shape change. The control ears showed no significant abnormalities or changes from native tissue (Figure 5B).

Confocal microscopy was performed on all groups. The specimens splinted for 1 week showed viable chondrocytes with a weak background signal, indicating the possibility of very few dead or dying cells in the central irradiated portion (Figure 6). The weeks 3 and 4 treatment groups showed only viable cells and no evidence of dying chondrocytes.

Each rabbit tolerated the surgery and recovery without mishap or incident. The treated ears splinted for 1 week demonstrated a bend averaging 86° (Figure 4A). The 3- and 4-week groups showed significant shape change as well, averaging 106° and 75°, respectively (Figure 4B and C). There was not a statistically significant difference between these groups; however, qualitatively, the ears splinted for 4 weeks were obviously stiffer in response to simple flexure than the specimens splinted for shorter intervals. The mean bend angle across all treatment groups was 89° (99.5% confidence interval, 63°-115°). This represented approximately 30% to 50% unfurling of the ear from its splinted shape. None of the control ears demonstrated shape change, and all returned to their native shape immediately after splint removal.

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This study demonstrates the feasibility of LCR of the ear in an animal model using a 1450-nm diode laser in combination with CSC. As a commercial clinical laser system was used to accomplish reshaping without any custom hardware or software modifications to the native operating system, it may be possible to rapidly translate and apply this technology to reshape protuberant ears in human subjects, albeit “sutured in place splints” would be replaced with either silicone rubber moulages or headbands as in traditional otoplasty operations. We currently are pursuing a clinical trial with this instrumentation. By transcutaneously heating the cartilage framework of the pinna with limited injury to the overlying skin, shape change can be achieved without incisions. The feasibility of this technology is further supported by findings from anatomical studies that show that the thickness of the skin, subcutaneous tissues, and auricular cartilage in the rabbit are similar to that of the human ear—especially in the pediatric population. Cryogen spray cooling allows protection of the skin from severe thermal injury while facilitating substantial subsurface temperature elevations, at least above threshold values required for cartilage shape change. Heating cartilage results in a change in the material properties of this tissue that facilitates shape change and is manifested by accelerated stress relaxation.

As in the study by Mordon et al, rabbit ears underwent shape change with LCR, albeit with 2 major differences. First, we opted to reshape the central region of the rabbit pinna, which is about halfway between the tip of the ear and its connection to the bony external auditory canal. The skin and cartilage of the rabbit ear in this area is substantially thicker than that at the tip of the ear where Mordon et al performed their reshaping study. The thicker skin requires a more robust application of both cryogen and laser energy because more light must penetrate deeper beneath the subsurface. Thicker cartilage also requires a larger region of tissue axially (ie, in the direction of laser light propagation) to be heated to the threshold temperatures needed for shape change.
ply put, this is a more challenging task, and the central region of the rabbit ear reshaped herein is more similar to the geometry of the human ear.

Using a CSC system to protect the skin from major thermal injury is the second major difference between our work and that of Mordon et al,9 who used a contact cooling system based on simple heat exchange devices. Anvari et al28,29 demonstrated that significant subsurface temperature elevations could be generated using infrared laser irradiation and CSC and coined the phrase “spatially selective heating,” which is an integral component of the mechanisms of LCR.30 Cryogen spray cooling removes massive amounts of heat from the tissue surface as the cryogen undergoes a phase change from liquid to gas at the tissue surface. When laser dosimetry and cryogen spray duration are selected appropriately, spatially selective heating can be achieved, and this is ideal for use in auricular LCR.

Finally, our previous work31 and that of others9 have observed that heating cartilage using laser dosimetry adequate for LCR may result in stimulation of chondrocyte regeneration with the formation of new cells and new cartilage tissue matrix. This phenomenon was observed in the present study as well, suggesting that in addition to acute changes in the tissue related to shape change, a later secondary effect is the formation of new cartilage. Histologic findings of clonal chondrocyte expansion and a thickened perichondrium (Figure 5B) are consistent with the observations that ears splinted 4 weeks prior to harvest are noticeably stiffer than those harvested at 1 or 3 weeks. The orthopedic literature is replete with studies and case reports of irreversible and undesirable thermal injury to articular cartilage generated by both laser and radiofrequency devices. In contrast to these collective observations, in facial cartilage enveloped by a dense layer of mesenchymal stem cells, such profound injury is not observed. In fact, we see just the opposite effect, ie, chondrocyte proliferation, in this animal model. This may, however, be a phenomenon that is unique to the elastic and hyaline cartilage tissues of the face.
In conclusion, laser cartilage reshaping in tandem with CSC can be used to reshape ears in a rabbit model. Because the axial dimensions of the midportion of the rabbit ear are similar to the dimensions of the human ear in certain regions, it should be possible to accomplish this task with this device in patients as well. Cryogen spray cooling protected the skin surface from significant thermal injury, while facilitating the creation of adequate subsurface temperature elevations to achieve shape change. New cartilage tissue formation was observed as well, suggesting that the process is not entirely destructive in nature.

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REFERENCES


Figure 6. Scanning confocal micrograph of a specimen from the treated ear of a rabbit in the 1-week group (original magnification ×40). The yellow emission among the LIVE green cells hints toward recent cellular death in the area (possibly at deeper layers). No obvious dead cells were visualized; however, they may have been present immediately after treatment and had undergone degradation by the 1-week interval.

Error in Text. In the Original Article titled “Margin Reflex Distance in Different Ethnic Groups” by Murchison et al, published in the September/October issue of the Archives (2009;10[5]:303-305), an error occurred in a table citation on page 303. In the “Results” section, the fifth sentence should have read, “White patients had the highest mean MRD (5.1 mm) and Asians had the lowest (3.8 mm) (Table 1).”