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Published in:
Acta Anaesthesiologica Scandinavica

DOI:
10.1034/j.1399-6576.2002.460909.x

2002

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

Total number of authors:
5

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Bactericidal/permeability-increasing protein inhibits endotoxin-induced vascular nitric oxide synthesis

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**Background:** Endotoxin (lipopolysaccharide, LPS) up-regulates inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS) in blood vessels during septic shock. This promotes the production of nitric oxide (NO), leading to dilatation of the vessels. The aim of the study was to investigate the effects of the LPS-binding endogenous antibiotic bactericidal/permeability-increasing protein (BPI) on the action of LPS on the blood vessels wall and to identify possible influence on underlying NO-related mechanisms.

**Methods:** Isolated segments of rat thoracic aorta and cultured primary smooth muscle cells were incubated for 5–48 h in the presence of the following combinations of compounds: (a) LPS; (b) interleukin-1β (IL-1β); (c) BPI; (d) BPI + LPS; (e) BPI + IL-1β or (f) neither BPI, LPS nor IL-1β (control). After incubation of intact segments, we measured smooth muscle contraction in response to phenylephrine and accumulation of the NO end products nitrate and nitrite in surrounding medium. Western blot was used to assess the levels of inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS) in cultured cells.

**Results:** Both LPS and IL-1β decreased contractility and increased NO production, as well as iNOS. Co-incubation with BPI attenuated all the effects of LPS but only the effects of prolonged exposure to IL-1β in cultured cells.

**Conclusion:** We conclude that BPI attenuates the LPS-induced changes in vascular reactivity by inhibiting the expression of iNOS resulting in decreased NO formation and restored responsiveness to vasoconstrictors. The data suggest that BPI can prevent circulatory disturbances during Gram-negative sepsis.

**Key words:** antibiotics; endotoxins; granulocytes; interleukin-1; muscle, smooth; vascular; nitric oxide.

the infection with antibiotics (18). Thus, intact BPI or a recombinant N-terminal fragment attenuates LPS-induced neutrophil and endothelial cell activation in vitro (20, 21), as well as secretion of inflammatory mediators, neutrophil activation and circulatory changes in vivo (18, 22, 23). BPI, or BPI analogs, may therefore be beneficial as adjunctive treatment of severe infections (24, 25).

The aim of the present study was to investigate if BPI could modulate the effect of LPS on the reactivity of the smooth muscle in the blood vessel wall and to identify underlying NO-related mechanisms. The results may have bearing on the treatment of circulatory failure during Gram-negative sepsis.

Materials and methods

Material
The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for the care of animal subjects and the care and handling of the animals were in accordance with National Institutes of Health guidelines. Male Sprague-Dawley rats (250 gram body weight) were anaesthetized with halothane (Astra, Södertälje, Sweden) and bled to death. The thoracic aorta was removed, cleaned of adherent fat and cut into 3 mm long cylindrical segments.

Cell culture
Rat vascular smooth muscle cells were isolated from thoracic aorta by the explant method (26). In short, aorta segments were aseptically removed, trimmed and longitudinally cut open. The endothelium was removed by gently rubbing the intimal surface with a sterile cotton pad. Approximately 3 × 3-mm sections were placed with the intimal side down into 6-cm² Petri dishes. Dulbecco’s Modified Eagle’s Medium (DMEM) containing fetal bovine serum (10%), penicillin (100 U ml⁻¹) and streptomycin (100 µg ml⁻¹) and amphotericin-B (250 ng ml⁻¹, all from Life Technologies, St. Louis, MO), rinsed in Hanks’ Balance Salt Solution (Life Technologies) and transferred to 25-cm² flasks (first passage). The cells were cultured to confluence in DMEM with 5% fetal bovine serum and antibiotics as above. At subsequent passages the cells were seeded at a ratio of 1:4. Subcultured cells were found to have a mean doubling time of approximately 30 h. The cells were identified as smooth muscle cells by their characteristic hill and valley appearance in culture and by their expression of an approximately 40-kDa protein with immunoreactivity corresponding to smooth muscle α-actin as determined by Western blot (see below) using a monoclonal anti-smooth muscle α-actin antibody (Cat No. A-2547, Sigma-Aldrich).

Incubations
Intact aorta segments intended for contraction experiments were incubated at 37°C for 5 h in Krebs-Ringer solution with penicillin (2000 U ml⁻¹) and streptomycin (0.2 mg ml⁻¹) continuously gassed with 5% CO₂ in O₂. The Krebs-Ringer solution contained (mmol. l⁻¹): Na⁺ 143, K⁺ 5.9, Cl⁻ 128, Ca²⁺ 2.5, HCO₃⁻ 25.0, Mg²⁺ 1.2, SO₄²⁻ 1.2, H₂PO₄⁻ 1.2, Glucose 5.5 and EDTA 0.024 in LPS-free distilled water (Sigma-Aldrich). Intact aorta segments intended for measurement of nitrate/nitrite accumulation were incubated 24 h in DMEM without phenol red (ICN, Costa Mesa, CA) containing L-arginine (1 mM, substrate for nitric oxide synthesis) and penicillin (2000 U ml⁻¹) and streptomycin (0.2 mg ml⁻¹, all from Sigma-Aldrich) in an atmosphere of 8% CO₂ in air. Cells cultured to confluence on 6-cm² Petri dishes (for Western blot) or 2-cm² wells in a 24 well plate (for DNA fragmentation and cytotoxicity experiments) were incubated for 16 or 48 h in DMEM with penicillin (100 U ml⁻¹), streptomycin (100 µg ml⁻¹) and amphotericin-B (250 ng ml⁻¹, all from Life Technologies) but without fetal bovine serum in an atmosphere of 5% CO₂ in air.

The segments and cells were incubated in the presence of the following combinations of compounds: (a) LPS (from E. coli, strain 0111:B4, Difco, Detroit, MI); (b) interleukin-1β (IL-1β, Alexis, San Diego, CA); (c) BPI (prepared from human neutrophils, Wieslab, Lund, Sweden); (d) BPI + LPS; (e) BPI + IL-1β or (f) neither BPI, LPS nor IL-1β (control). The concentrations of LPS and IL-1β used were determined from initial pilot experiments and chosen as they were found to be the lowest concentrations giving a clear response compared to control.

Measurement of smooth muscle contraction
The first set of experiments aimed to investigate the effects of incubation with LPS (100 ng ml⁻¹), IL-1β (0.2 ng ml⁻¹) and/or BPI (1 µg ml⁻¹) on circular smooth muscle contraction. After incubation, the segments
were placed on two L-shaped hooks in 2-ml tissue baths. The baths contained Krebs-Ringer solution gassed with 11.5% CO₂ in O₂ at a rate giving PCO₂ 5.0 kPa, PO₂ approximately 40 kPa and pH 7.4. The temperature was thermostatically maintained at 37°C. One of the hooks was connected to a Grass FTO3C force-displacement transducer (Grass Medical Instruments, Quincy, MA) for isometric measurement of tension. The vessel tension was recorded on a Grass polygraph model 7b. The segments were stretched to a pretension of 20 mN and allowed to equilibrate for 1 h. Thereafter, potassium chloride (90 mmol l⁻¹) was added and the resulting smooth muscle contraction was used to check the viability of the segments. After wash out, the α₁-adrenoceptor agonist, phenylephrine (10⁻⁹-10⁻⁴ mol⁻¹, Sigma-Aldrich), was added cumulatively in 10⁻⁶ log units (10⁻¹²-10⁻⁶ gm l⁻¹). The resulting contraction was registered and concentration-response curves drawn. The experiments were performed first in the absence and then, after wash out, during which the vessel tension returned to base-line, in the presence of the iNOS inhibitor L-nitro arginine monomethyl ester (L-NAME, 0.3 mmol l⁻¹, added 10 min prior to phenylephrine, Sigma-Aldrich).

A second set of experiments was performed in order to assess any direct effect of BPI on smooth muscle. Segments of rat aorta were mounted in organ baths, allowed to equilibrate and tested with potassium chloride as above. To some segments, BPI was added and the resulting smooth muscle contraction was measured. Other segments were first precontracted with endothelin-1 (0.1, 1 or 3 ng ml⁻¹) and then, after wash out, during which the vessel tension returned to base-line, in the presence of the iNOS inhibitor L-NAME, 0.3 mmol l⁻¹, added 10 min prior to phenylephrine, Sigma-Aldrich).

Measurement of nitrate/nitrite accumulation
Nitric oxide is rapidly oxidized to nitrite and nitrate (27). The NO release from the segments is therefore reflected in the accumulation of nitrate and nitrite in the incubation medium. The segments were incubated with LPS (1 ng ml⁻¹) or IL-1β (0.2 ng ml⁻¹) for 24 h. BPI (0.1, 1 or 3 μg ml⁻¹) was added at the beginning of the incubation (‘Pre-incubation’) or immediately before analysis of the nitrate/nitrite content (‘Post-incubation’). This protocol was used in order to exclude any interaction of BPI with the nitrate/nitrite assay.

After incubation, the incubation medium was removed from the vessel segments and centrifuged at 11 000 x g for 5 min at room temperature. All nitrate was reduced to nitrite with nitrate reductase, which was subsequently detected by Griess reagent and measured in a spectrophotometer at 550 nm (Total Nitrate/Nitrite Assay Kit, Assay Designs Inc., Ann Arbor, MI). The detection limit of this assay was 0.75 μmol l⁻¹. Standard curves were constructed by analysing DMEM with different concentrations of sodium nitrate (Assay Designs).

**Western blot**
After incubation with LPS (0, 0.1, 1 or 10 ng ml⁻¹), IL-1β (0, 0.01, 0.1 or 1 ng ml⁻¹) and/or BPI (0, 1 or 3 μg ml⁻¹), the incubation medium was replaced by a lysis buffer containing phosphate buffered saline (PBS) with Triton X-100 (1%), a protease inhibitor cocktail (20 μg ml⁻¹) and benzamidine hydrochloride (10 mmol l⁻¹, all from Sigma-Aldrich). The cells were removed from the Petri dishes with a cell scraper. The cell suspension was frozen and thawed two times to enhance cytolyis and was then centrifuged for 5 min at 11 000 x g at room temperature.

Total protein concentration was determined on the basis of the Biuret reaction combined with colorimetric detection of the cuprous cation using a reagent containing bicinchoninic acid (Pierce, Rockford, IL). Twenty μg protein was electrophoretically separated in a 7.5% SDS polyacrylamide gel, stacking 4% (28), together with protein size standards (Kaleidoscope, Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA).

The separated proteins were transferred to a PVDF membrane (Hybey ECL, Amersham Pharmacia, Freiburg, Germany) using a Bio-Rad Mini protein tank blot equipment. The membranes were blocked with 5%-non-fat milk (ICN) in 2 mol l⁻¹ Tris buffered saline (TBS) with 0.1% Tween-20 (ICN) for 1 h at room temperature and subsequently exposed to a polyclonal rabbit anti-iNOS antibody 1/1000 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology Inc., Santa Cruz, CA) at room temperature for 1 h in blocking solution. After repetitive washings, membranes were incubated with a biotinylated goat antirabbit antibody 1/5000 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology Inc., Santa Cruz, CA) and then, after wash out, during which the vessel tension returned to base-line, in the presence of the iNOS inhibitor L-nitro arginine monomethyl ester (L-NAME, 0.3 mmol l⁻¹, added 10 min prior to phenylephrine, Sigma-Aldrich).

Measurement of nitrate/nitrite accumulation
Nitric oxide is rapidly oxidized to nitrite and nitrate (27). The NO release from the segments is therefore reflected in the accumulation of nitrate and nitrite in the incubation medium. The segments were incubated with LPS (1 ng ml⁻¹) or IL-1β (0.2 ng ml⁻¹) for 24 h. BPI (0.1, 1 or 3 μg ml⁻¹) was added at the beginning of the incubation (‘Pre-incubation’) or immediately before analysis of the nitrate/nitrite content (‘Post-incubation’). This protocol was used in order to exclude any interaction of BPI with the nitrate/nitrite assay.

After incubation, the incubation medium was removed from the vessel segments and centrifuged at 11 000 x g for 5 min at room temperature. All nitrate was reduced to nitrite with nitrate reductase, which was subsequently detected by Griess reagent and measured in a spectrophotometer at 550 nm (Total Nitrate/Nitrite Assay Kit, Assay Designs Inc., Ann Arbor, MI). The detection limit of this assay was 0.75 μmol l⁻¹. Standard curves were constructed by analysing DMEM with different concentrations of sodium nitrate (Assay Designs).

**DNA fragmentation and cytotoxicity experiments**
Confluent cells were incubated in serum free DMEM for 16 h with IL-1β (1 ng ml⁻¹), IL-1β + BPI (1 or 3 μg ml⁻¹) or H₂O₂ (10 μmol l⁻¹). H₂O₂ has previously been found to induce apoptosis in cultured smooth muscle cells and was used as a positive control in these experiments (29). After incubation, the cells were lysed and DNA-fragmentation was assessed using an ELISA kit according to the manufacturer’s instructions (Cell Death Detection ELISA, Roche Molecular Bio-
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Fig. 1. Phenylephrine-induced smooth muscle contraction in rat aorta. Phenylephrine induced a concentration-dependent smooth muscle contraction. (a) The contraction was significantly weaker after 5 hours’ incubation with LPS (100 ng ml$^{-1}$, open square) compared to control (filled circle, $n = 13$, two-way repeated measurements ANOVA, $P = 0.016$). (b) The contraction induced by phenylephrine was significantly stronger in segments incubated for 5 h in the presence of both BPI (1 mg ml$^{-1}$) and LPS (100 ng ml$^{-1}$, open triangle) compared to segments incubated in the presence of LPS alone (open square, $n = 6$, two-way repeated measurements ANOVA, $P = 0.029$). This indicates that BPI can neutralize the effects of LPS on the aorta segments. Values are means $\pm$ SEM.

Fig. 2. Phenylephrine-induced smooth muscle contraction in rat aorta. (a) The contraction was significantly weaker after 5 hours’ incubation with IL-1$\beta$ (0.2 ng ml$^{-1}$, open square) compared to control (filled circle, $n = 6$, two-way repeated measurements ANOVA, $P = 0.034$). (b) The contraction induced by phenylephrine was not significantly different in segments incubated for 5 h in the presence of both BPI (1 mg ml$^{-1}$) and IL-1$\beta$ (0.2 ng ml$^{-1}$, open triangle) compared to segments incubated in the presence of IL-1$\beta$ alone (open square, $n = 6$). This suggests that the neutralizing effect of BPI can be specific for LPS. Values are means $\pm$ SEM.

smooth muscle contraction
Phenylephrine induced a concentration-dependent smooth muscle contraction that was significantly weaker after incubation with LPS compared to control (Fig. 1a, $P = 0.016$). In the presence of the nitric oxide synthase inhibitor, L-NAME, the contraction did not

Statistics
Concentration-response curves were compared using two-way repeated measurement ANOVA on logarithmically transformed data in order to eliminate inequality of the variances. Student’s paired $t$-test was used to compare the levels of nitrate/nitrite. Significance was accepted at $P < 0.05$. Values are means $\pm$ SEM and ‘n’ equals number of rats.

Results
Phenylephrine-induced smooth muscle contraction
Phenylephrine induced a concentration-dependent smooth muscle contraction that was significantly weaker after incubation with LPS compared to control (Fig. 1a, $P = 0.016$). In the presence of the nitric oxide synthase inhibitor, L-NAME, the contraction did not

chemicals, Germany). Cell viability after 48 h was determined using trypan blue (Sigma–Aldrich) on trypsinized cells by counting in a hemocytometer. Only dead cells are permeable to trypan blue.

Statistics
Concentration-response curves were compared using two-way repeated measurement ANOVA on logarithmically transformed data in order to eliminate inequality of the variances. Student’s paired $t$-test was used to compare the levels of nitrate/nitrite. Significance was accepted at $P < 0.05$. Values are means $\pm$ SEM and ‘n’ equals number of rats.
differ from control, indicating that the reducing effect of LPS incubation on the contraction is dependent on NO synthesis (not shown, n = 13). Incubation with BPI alone did not affect the contraction induced by phenylephrine (not shown, n = 6). However, the contraction was significantly stronger in segments incubated with both LPS and BPI compared to segments incubated with LPS alone (Fig. 1b, P = 0.029). The effect of BPI was not seen in the presence of L-NAME (not shown, n = 6). This indicates that BPI can neutralize the NO-mediated effects of LPS on the aorta segments.

Similar to after incubation with LPS, the phenylephrine-induced contraction was significantly weaker after incubation with IL-1β compared to control (Fig. 2a, P = 0.034). In the presence of L-NAME, the contraction after IL-1β incubation did not differ from control indicating that the effect of IL-1β is NO mediated (not shown, n = 6). Co-incubation with BPI did not affect the contraction after IL-1β incubation either in the presence or in the absence of L-NAME (Fig. 2b). This suggests that the action of BPI is LPS specific.

Bactericidal/permeability-increasing protein added to the organ baths neither induced contraction of resting aorta segments nor relaxed aorta segments precontracted by endothelin-1 (not shown, n = 2).

**Nitrate/nitrite production**

Incubation with LPS significantly increased the production of nitrate/nitrite in the incubation medium compared to control (Fig. 3). Co-incubation with BPI concentration-dependently diminished the nitrate/nitrite production induced by LPS to control values. The production of nitrate/nitrite during incubation with BPI alone did not differ from the control values (not shown, n = 6). Co-incubation with BPI did not affect the contraction after IL-1β incubation either in the presence or in the absence of L-NAME (Fig. 2b). This suggests that the action of BPI is LPS specific.

![Graph showing nitrate/nitrite production](image)

Fig. 3. Production of the nitric oxide end products nitrate and nitrite from segments of rat aorta during 24 hours’ incubation as measured with Griess reagent. Compared to control (open bar), the production of nitrate/nitrite was higher after incubation with LPS (1 ng ml⁻¹) followed by addition of BPI (0.1, 1 or 3 µg ml⁻¹) immediately before the analysis (‘Post-incubation’). When BPI (0.1, 1 or 3 µg ml⁻¹) was added at the start of the incubation together with LPS (‘Pre-incubation’, hatched bars) the nitrate/nitrite production was lower compared to when BPI was added at the end of the incubation (‘Post-incubation’, filled bars, Student’s paired t-test, P < 0.05, *). This effect of BPI was concentration-dependent. It confirms that BPI can inhibit the LPS-induced nitric oxide production in rat aorta. The addition of BPI at the end of the incubation was used to exclude any interaction of BPI with the nitrate/nitrite assay. Values are means ± SEM. (n = 6).
shown, n = 6). This confirms that BPI can inhibit the LPS-induced NO production in rat aorta.

Incubation with IL-1β also significantly increased the accumulation of nitrate/nitrite (4.7 ± 0.68 nmol mg⁻¹ tissue 24h⁻¹, n = 5) compared to control (1.4 ± 0.31 nmol mg⁻¹ tissue 24h⁻¹, n = 5, P = 0.003, not shown). Co-incubation with BPI (0.1–3 μg ml⁻¹) did not affect the accumulation induced by IL-1β (not shown, n = 5). This confirms that the action of BPI on vascular NO synthesis is LPS specific.

Western blot
The anti-iNOS antibodies detected a band on the Western blot corresponding to the molecular weight of iNOS (approximately 135 kDa). The band was visible after incubation with LPS at 10 ng ml⁻¹ but not at lower concentrations indicating up-regulation of iNOS (Fig. 4). BPI at both 1 and 3 μg ml⁻¹ inhibited the LPS-induced up-regulation of iNOS. BPI also concentration-dependently inhibited the IL-1β-induced up-regulation. These results support the view that BPI inhibits the LPS-induced NO production in rat aorta via inhibition of iNOS expression. However, during our experimental conditions, BPI also seems to be able to inhibit the expression induced by IL-1β.

Cytotoxicity and DNA fragmentation
H₂O₂ caused DNA fragmentation in the cultured smooth muscle cells after 16h of exposure (504 ± 85% of control) and reduced the number of attached trypan blue impermeable cells after 48h (51 ± 4.7% of control) indicating cytotoxicity via an apoptosis pathway. Neither IL-1β nor IL-1β + BPI induced DNA fragmentation or affected the number of attached trypan blue impermeable cells (three independent experiments). This indicates that IL-1β and BPI do not induce apoptosis and are not cytotoxic in our model.

Discussion
These results show that BPI specifically attenuates the LPS-induced changes in vascular reactivity. This seems to be due to inhibition of the LPS-induced expression of iNOS, resulting in decreased NO formation and restored responsiveness to vasoconstrictors. This could be explained by binding of BPI to LPS (18), inhibiting the LPS interaction with cell surface receptors in the blood vessel wall. It suggests that BPI may prevent circulatory disturbances during Gram-negative sepsis.

It has previously been shown that IL-1β up-regulates NO synthesis in vascular tissue (30). Incubation with IL-1β or with both IL-1β and BPI reduced the contraction in response to phenylephrine and increased NO production to the same extent. This demonstrates that BPI, in a concentration sufficient to neutralize the effect of LPS, does not affect IL-1β-induced NO stimulation. It indicates that the NO-reducing BPI effect is LPS-specific and therefore supports the hypothesis of LPS binding to BPI.

We were therefore surprised to find that BPI reduced not only the LPS-induced iNOS expression but also the iNOS expression induced by IL-1β as assessed by Western blot. In these experiments we had to use cultured smooth muscle cells and a prolonged incubation time in order to achieve detectable amounts of iNOS. This suggests that the mechanisms for iNOS induction by LPS might be different in cultured cells compared to intact vessel segments and/or that the Western blot method used has a high detection threshold. The inhibitory action of BPI on IL-1β-induced iNOS expression cannot be explained by BPI being solely a LPS scavenger. Van der Schaft and colleagues (31) have recently shown that BPI during 72 h of exposure induces apoptosis in endothelial cells in concentrations about one order of magnitude higher than the concentrations used in the present study. They were not able to demonstrate any effects on human fibroblasts or a human adenocarcinoma cell-line
and concluded that these effects of BPI are endothelial cell specific. Contrary to the conclusions by Van der Schaft and colleagues, the results from the Western blot experiments suggest that BPI could have a cytotoxic effect also on cultured smooth muscle cells and/or after prolonged exposure. However, we did not find any evidence for apoptosis or cytotoxicity induced by IL-1β or BPI in our model. Taken together, it cannot be excluded that BPI has anti-inflammatory properties acting directly on the cultured smooth muscle cells. This remains to be further tested. BPI did not alter the NO-mediated action of IL-1β on contractility and NO-production in intact aorta rings. Thus it seems unlikely that a cytotoxic or non-specific anti-inflammatory action was responsible for the inhibition by BPI on the LPS-effects in the intact blood vessel wall.

One should be careful to compare the potency of BPI found to reduce the effects of LPS in different models. We found a significant reduction by BPI at an in vitro concentration of 1 μg ml⁻¹. However, on a molar basis, this is similar to the potency of intact BPI to inhibit LPS-induced expression of the surface antigens CR1 and CR3 on human neutrophils (20). It is also similar to the potency of rBPI₂₃, a recombinant modified N-terminal fragment of human BPI with preserved LPS binding activity, to inhibit tumour necrosis factor secretion and nitrite production in mouse macrophages (32).

Earlier efforts to modulate the extreme inflammatory response during sepsis have focused on reducing the levels or effects of secondary inflammatory mediators such as proinflammatory cytokines. However, the results in the clinical setting have been disappointing (33). The present results suggest a way to interfere earlier in the cascade of events during Gram-negative sepsis by directly reducing the inflammatory action of the bacteria and their products.

Recently the results of a large scale prospective randomized multicentre study evaluating a recombinant BPI analog (rBPI₂₃) as adjunctive treatment for meningococcal sepsis in children was published (25). The study included 393 patients who received either rBPI₂₃ or placebo. The study could not demonstrate any significant reduction of mortality. This could be due to problems with the study design, which suffered from a time-consuming inclusion procedure. Thus, most deaths occurred in the interval between identification of the patients and study drug administration and, of those who finally got the drug, the majority would have survived anyway (34). However, among the surviving children, fewer had multiple severe amputations, suggesting that BPI protects the circulation.

The present results suggest that the protection could be, at least partly, mediated via effects on the vascular nitric oxide system.

The present study shows that BPI attenuates the LPS-induced changes in vascular reactivity by inhibiting the expression of iNOS, resulting in decreased NO formation and restored responsiveness to vasoconstrictors. They suggest that BPI can prevent circulatory disturbances during Gram-negative sepsis. Hopefully, the present results will stimulate further clinical studies with BPI and its analogs in septic patients since they emphasize the dual beneficial action of BPI: being both an antibiotic and an anti-inflammatory compound.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Tove Sandberg, for advice concerning cell culture, to our statistical consultant Anna Lindgren, and to Giorgia Menini for technical assistance. Financial support: The Medical Faculty of Lund University, the Lund University Hospital Research Funds, the Yngve and Margaretha Deibert Foundation, the Anna Lisa and Sven-Eric Lundgren Foundation, the Thelma Zoéga Foundation, the Stig and Ragna Gorthor Foundation, the Edith Roos Foundation, the Crafoord Foundation, the Golje Foundation, the Michaelsen Foundation and the Swedish Society of Medicine.

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