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Tissue Factor Activity in Women with Preeclampsia or SGA: A Potential Explanation for the Excessive Thrombin Generation in These Syndromes

Offer Erez, MD^{1,2}, Roberto Romero, MD, D.Med.Sci.^{1,3,4,5}, Edi Vaisbuch, MD^{1,2}, Nandor Gabor Than, MD, PhD^{1,2,6,7,8}, Juan Pedro Kusanovic, MD^{1,9,10}, Shali Mazaki-Tovi, MD^{1,2}, Francesca Gotsch, MD^{1,11}, Pooja Mittal, MD^{1,2}, Zhong Dong, PhD^{1,2}, Tinnakorn Chaiworapongsa, MD^{1,2}, Chong Jai Kim, MD, PhD^{1,12}, Chia-Ling Nhan-Chang, MD^{1,2,13}, Sun Kwon Kim, MD^{1,2}, Lami Yeo, MD^{1,2}, Moshe Mazor, MD¹⁴, and Sonia S. Hassan, MD^{1,2}

¹Perinatology Research Branch, NICHD/NIH/DHHS, Bethesda, MD, and Detroit, MI, USA

²Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Wayne State University School of Medicine, Detroit, MI, USA

³Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

⁴Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

⁵Center for Molecular Medicine and Genetics, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA

⁶Maternity Private Department, Kutvolgyi Clinical Block, Semmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary

⁷Systems Biology of Reproduction Lendulet Research Group, Institute of Enzymology, Research Centre for Natural Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

⁸First Department of Pathology and Experimental Cancer Research, Semmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary

⁹Center for Research and Innovation in Maternal-Fetal Medicine (CIMAF), Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Sótero del Río Hospital, Santiago, Chile

¹⁰Division of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Faculty of Medicine, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile

¹¹Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Azienda, Ospedaliera Universitaria Integrata, Verona, Italy

¹²Department of Pathology, University of Ulsan College of Medicine, Seoul, Republic of Korea

¹³Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA

¹⁴Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Ben-Gurion University, Beer-Sheva, Israel

Address correspondence to: Offer Erez M.D. and Roberto Romero, M.D., D.Med.Sci., Perinatology Research Branch, NICHD/NIH/DHHS, Wayne State University/Hutzel Women's Hospital, 3990 John R, Box 4, Detroit, MI 48201, USA, Telephone (313) 993-2700, Fax: (313) 993-2694, oerez@med.wayne.edu and prbchiefstaff@med.wayne.edu.

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Abstract

Objective—The aim of this study was to determine whether the activity of tissue factor (TF) and tissue factor pathway inhibitor (TFPI) in the plasma of women with preeclampsia (PE) and a small-for-gestational-age (SGA) neonate differs from that of women with normal pregnancy and whether they are related to specific placental lesions..

Methods—This cross-sectional study included the following groups: 1) normal pregnancy (n=68); 2) PE (n= 128); and 3) SGA (n=56). Maternal plasma TF and TFPI activity was determined with chromogenic assays.

Results—1) The median maternal plasma TF activity, but not TFPI activity, differed among the study groups ($p<0.0001$ and $p=0.4$, respectively); 2) patients with PE had higher median maternal plasma TF activity than women with normal pregnancy ($p<0.0001$) and mothers with SGA fetuses ($p=0.002$); 3) among patients with PE, those with distal villous hypoplasia had higher median maternal TF activity than those without these placental lesions ($p=0.018$); and 4) following adjustment for confounding variables, maternal plasma TF and TFPI activity was not associated with an SGA neonate.

Conclusions—Plasma TF activity is higher in women with PE than in those with SGA or normal pregnancy. We propose that these changes may be responsible, at least in part, for the increased *in-vivo* thrombin generation observed in this obstetrical syndrome.

Keywords

early onset preeclampsia; extrinsic pathway of coagulation; maternal underperfusion; obstetrical syndromes; thrombin generation

INTRODUCTION

The extrinsic pathway of the coagulation cascade is modulated by two major proteins; it is activated by tissue factor (TF) [1] Upon its exposure on the endothelium or on activated monocytes, TF activates factor VII (FVII) that, in turn, transform factor X to its activated form; the latter leads to the generation of thrombin from pro-thrombin [1]. The major inhibitor of TF is tissue factor pathway inhibitor (TFPI) that exerts its action on TF/FVIIa and Factor X through its three Kunitz domains [2, 3]. TF has a role in systemic inflammation [4–8], placental implantation [9, 10], and angiogenesis [11–16]. During normal pregnancy, TF is abundant in the uterine decidua, fetal membranes, and amniotic fluid [9–11], resulting in an efficient hemostatic mechanism activated during implantation and after delivery [17]. TF has also a soluble form — blood-borne TF — that can be detected in the maternal plasma. The plasma concentration of TF during normal pregnancy is comparable to the non-pregnant state [17, 18] and increases during labor [19, 20]. There is a positive correlation between TF concentration and activity in women with normal pregnancy [21], and TF activity is higher than the non-pregnant state [22].

Further support for the pro-coagulant state reported in preeclampsia and preterm prelabor rupture of the membranes (PROM) [23, 24] is the higher median maternal plasma TF concentration observed in these patients in comparison to women with normal pregnancy

[25–28] as well as the low plasma protein Z concentrations observed in women with preeclampsia [29] and those with idiopathic intrauterine bleeding and preterm labor [30]. In contrast, in spite of their increased thrombin generation, patients who delivered a small-for-gestational-age (SGA) neonate had a lower median maternal plasma TF concentration than that of women with normal pregnancy [19]. Patients with both preeclampsia and an SGA neonate have increased thrombin generation, as evident by elevated maternal plasma thrombin anti-thrombin (TAT) complexes concentrations [24, 31–33]. However, patients with these obstetrical syndromes differ in their maternal TF concentrations. Therefore, we conducted a study aimed to 1) test whether TF and TFPI activity can explain the increased thrombin generation in these syndromes and 2) whether the TF and TFPI activity is related to specific placental lesions in each study group.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study groups and inclusion criteria

This cross-sectional study included patients with singleton gestations in the following groups: 1) women with normal pregnancies (n=68); 2) patients with preeclampsia (n=128); and 3) women who delivered SGA neonates without preeclampsia (n=56). Patients with fetuses with congenital and/or chromosomal anomalies were excluded.

Samples and data were retrieved from the Bank of Biological Materials and the clinical databases of the Perinatology Research Branch, *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD/NIH/DHHS), Wayne State University, and the Detroit Medical Center. Many of these samples have been employed to study the biology of inflammation, hemostasis, angiogenesis regulation, and growth factor concentrations in non-pregnant women, women who had normal pregnancies, and those with pregnancy complications.

All women provided written informed consent prior to the collection of maternal blood. The Institutional Review Boards of Wayne State University and NICHD approved the collection and utilization of samples for research purposes.

Clinical definitions

Women with normal pregnancies met the following criteria: 1) no medical, obstetrical, or surgical complications at the time of the study; 2) gestational age ranging from 20 to 41 weeks; and 3) delivery of a term infant, appropriate for gestational age, without complications. Preeclampsia was defined as the presence of hypertension (systolic blood pressure ≥ 140 mmHg and/or diastolic blood pressure ≥ 90 mmHg on at least two occasions, 4 hours to 1 week apart) and proteinuria (≥ 300 milligrams in a 24-hour urine collection or one dipstick measurement $\geq 2+$) [34]. Preeclampsia diagnosed <34 weeks of gestation was defined as early onset. A small-for-gestational-age neonate was defined as birthweight < 10 th percentile [35]. Placental histologic findings were classified according to a diagnostic schema proposed by Redline et al [36].

Sample collection and immunoassays

All blood samples were collected into a vacutainer with 0.109M trisodium citrate anticoagulant solution (BD Biosciences; San Jose, CA, USA). The samples were centrifuged at 1300 g for 10 minutes at 4°C and stored at -70°C until assay.

Human tissue factor immunoassay

TF concentrations were determined by sensitive and specific immunoassays obtained from American Diagnostica (Greenwich, CT, USA), which recognize TF-apo, TF, and TF-FVII complexes. The assays were conducted according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The coefficient of variation (CV) calculated in our laboratory was 5.3%, and the sensitivity was 10 pg/ml.

Human tissue factor activity assay

TF activity was determined by a chromogenic assay obtained from American Diagnostica. The assays were conducted according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The calculated intra-assay CV was 1.83%, while the inter-assay CV was 3.58%, and the sensitivity of this assay was 0.596 pM.

Human tissue factor pathway inhibitor immunoassay

The concentrations of TFPI in maternal plasma were determined by sensitive and specific immunoassays obtained from American Diagnostica. The TFPI ELISA employs, as the capture antibody, a murine anti-TFPI monoclonal antibody directed against the Kunitz-1 domain of the TFPI molecule; therefore, it detects both TFPI-1 and TFPI-2 while measuring the total TFPI plasma concentrations. The assay was conducted according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The CV calculated in our laboratory was 6.6%, and the sensitivity was approximately 10 ng/ml.

Human tissue factor pathway inhibitor activity assay

TFPI activity was determined by a chromogenic assay obtained from American Diagnostica. The assays were conducted according to the manufacturer's recommendations. The calculated intra-assay CV was 5.51%, while the inter-assay CV was 8.74%, and the sensitivity was 0.017 unit/ml.

Statistical analysis

Maternal plasma concentrations and activity of TF and TFPI were not normally distributed. Thus, the Kruskal-Wallis test with post-hoc analysis by the Mann-Whitney U test was used for the comparison of continuous variables. Comparisons of proportions were performed by the Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests. The Spearman's rho test was used to detect a correlation between the concentrations and activity of TF, TFPI, and TFPI/TF ratio to the gestational age at sample collection. The ratio of TFPI/TF concentration was previously calculated [26] and included in the logistic regression models. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Analysis was performed with SPSS, version 12 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

RESULTS

Demographic and clinical characteristics

In comparison to women with normal pregnancies, patients with preeclampsia and those who delivered an SGA neonate had a higher median gestational age at sample collection, a lower median gestational age at delivery, and a lower median birthweight. Women with preeclampsia had a lower gestational age at delivery than women who delivered an SGA neonate (Table 1).

Among women with a normal pregnancy, 1) gestational age at sample collection positively correlated with maternal plasma TFPI activity ($r = 0.3$, $p = 0.01$); 2) the correlation between maternal plasma TFPI concentration and activity did not reach statistical significance ($r = 0.3$, $p = 0.06$); and 3) maternal plasma TF activity was negatively correlated with the TFPI/TF ratio ($r = -0.3$, $p = 0.006$).

Changes in the median plasma activity of TF and TFPI in the different study groups

The median maternal plasma TF activity, but not TFPI activity, differed among the study groups (Kruskal Wallis, $p < 0.0001$, $p = 0.4$, respectively). Patients with preeclampsia had a higher median maternal plasma TF activity than women with normal pregnancies (16.1 pM, range 2.9–91.2 vs. 9.9 pM, range 0.7–37.6, respectively; $p < 0.0001$), and patients with SGA fetuses (12.9 pM, range 2.5–74.4, $p = 0.002$). The latter group had higher median maternal plasma TF activity than women with normal pregnancies ($p = 0.0001$) (Figure 1).

Early-onset preeclampsia was associated with higher median maternal plasma TF activity than term preeclampsia (18.7 pM, range 8.4–65.9 vs. 15.3 pM, range 2.9–91.2, respectively; $p = 0.016$) (Figure 2).

To determine the association between maternal plasma TF and TFPI activity and preeclampsia or SGA, we have constructed three multivariate logistic regression models and demonstrated that 1) maternal plasma TF activity and gestational age at sample collection, but not TFPI activity, were independently associated with the development of preeclampsia (Table 2); 2) the independent association between TF activity and the development of preeclampsia remained significant even after the introduction of the TFPI/TF ratio into the model (Table 3); and 3) by contrast, only gestational age at sample collection, but not TF or TFPI activity, was associated with the delivery of an SGA neonate (Table 4).

Placental histological findings in patients with preeclampsia and SGA and their association with the changes in TF and TFPI concentrations and their ratio (TFPI/TF)

Placental histology was available from 88.3% (113/128) of patients in the preeclampsia group and 78.6% (44/56) of patients from the SGA group, and the specific findings are presented in Table 5. Increased syncytial knots were more frequent in the placentae of patients with preeclampsia than in those of patients with SGA neonates [54% (61/113) vs. 27.3% (12/44), respectively; $p = 0.004$]. Among patients with preeclampsia, those with distal villous hypoplasia had higher median maternal TF activity than those without this lesion (20.1 pM, range 8.4–91.2 vs. 16.1 pM, range 2.9–59.3, respectively; $p = 0.018$).

DISCUSSION

Principal findings of the study

1) Patients with preeclampsia or women who delivered an SGA neonate had higher median maternal plasma TF activity than those with normal pregnancies; 2) by contrast, the maternal plasma TFPI activity did not differ significantly among the study groups; 3) patients who developed early-onset preeclampsia had higher median maternal plasma TF activity than those who developed this syndrome at term; 4) maternal plasma TF activity was independently associated with the development of preeclampsia even after adjustment for gestational age at sample collection and with the maternal TFPI/TF ratio; and 5) there was no association between the delivery of an SGA neonate with maternal plasma TF and TFPI activity after adjustment for gestational age at sample collection.

Changes in maternal plasma TF during normal and complicated pregnancies

During normal pregnancy, TF is abundant in the uterine decidua [37, 38], fetal membranes, and amniotic fluid [9, 10, 20, 21], resulting in an efficient hemostatic mechanism activated during implantation and after delivery [17]. The maternal plasma concentrations of TF during normal pregnancy is similar to the non-pregnant state and increase during labor [11, 15].

Changes in the maternal plasma TF concentration have been reported in several pregnancy complications. Indeed, in comparison to normal pregnancy, the median maternal plasma TF concentration increases in patients with preeclampsia [39] or in those with preterm PROM [25], decreases in those who deliver an SGA neonate [39], and does not change significantly in patients with preterm labor [19] or in women with a fetal demise [21]. Along with the increased maternal plasma TAT III complexes concentration reported in these obstetrical syndromes [23, 25–27, 29, 40], the changes in the maternal plasma TF concentration were regarded as additional evidence for the presence of a procoagulant state in preeclampsia and preterm PROM.

The association between maternal plasma TF concentration and procoagulant activity

It is unclear whether the maternal plasma TF concentration reflects a state of activation of the coagulation cascade, systemic maternal inflammation, or both. Indeed, the pro-coagulant activity of plasma immunoreactive TF (blood-borne TF) of non-pregnant patients is a controversial topic. While Butenas et al [41] demonstrated that blood-borne TF has very little or no pro-coagulant activity, and that only the administration of exogenous, active TF generates a whole blood and plasma clot after the inhibition of the contact factor (factor XIIa) [41], others [42–46] have proposed that blood-borne TF does not initiate the coagulation cascade, but rather propagates clot formation by attaching to activated platelets, further enhancing this process.

The assay used in this study measures TF activity through the generation of factor Xa (FXa) in a given sample. Thus, increased TF activity is reflected in elevated FXa formation that leads to increased thrombin generation. Therefore, the positive correlation between maternal plasma TF concentration and activity in women with normal pregnancy, previously reported

by our group [19], suggests that during gestation circulating TF has pro-coagulant properties that may be part of the hypercoagulable state of normal pregnancy.

Preeclampsia, SGA, and TF activity

The finding that maternal plasma TF activity was independently associated with the development of preeclampsia, but not with the delivery of an SGA neonate, is novel.

What are the possible mechanisms leading to increased TF activity among patients with preeclampsia?

The following are possible factors contributing to the higher TF plasma concentration among patients with preeclampsia: 1) the exaggerated systemic maternal inflammation characterizing patients with preeclampsia [47–55]. Indeed, patients with this syndrome have increased monocyte activation when compared to those with a normal pregnancy [49, 55–64] as well as higher monocyte metabolic activity and oxidative burst than those delivering an SGA neonate [65]. Peripheral blood monocytes from the uterine vein of patients with preeclampsia showed a higher degree of activation in comparison to those obtained from their cubital vein [60], and this has been proposed to be the consequence of maternal monocyte activation during their passage through the placental bed of patients with preeclampsia [60]. 2) A second mechanism to consider is the production of microparticles containing TF and their release into the maternal circulation. Activated monocytes are a possible source of such microparticles that express TF on their membranes [5, 41, 66–72] and shed microparticles containing TF [41, 46, 73–76] into the plasma during systemic inflammation. The placenta may be an additional source for microparticles. Indeed, patients with preeclampsia have increased syncytiotrophoblast and endothelial macrovesicle production [77–82]. Additionally, a higher apoptosis rate was observed in cultured cytotrophoblasts of patients with preeclampsia and fetal growth restriction, and the primary placental tissues of these patients had 1.8- and 1.9-fold increases in the apoptosis rate compared to the controls [83]. Placentas of patients with preeclampsia have higher degrees of ischemia [84] and apoptosis [82] associated with microparticle generation. Placental microparticles that would carry the placental isoform of TF, which is different than recombinant TF and has a higher affinity for FVIIa [85], and syncytiotrophoblast microvesicles released from placentas of patients with preeclampsia, exhibit increased TF activity than that of women with a normal pregnancy; a recent study suggested that macrovesicles released from the placentas of patients with preeclampsia exhibit increased TF activity, and when they were added to platelet-poor plasma, they led to increase thrombin generation [86]. 3) Patients with preeclampsia had a significant reduction in their microparticle-induced thrombin generation after treatment with anti-FVII antibodies [87]. Thus, the authors [87] concluded that a higher proportion of thrombin generation is derived from the extrinsic pathway of coagulation in patients with preeclampsia. This is in accord with our own findings, since TF is the activator of the extrinsic pathway of coagulation, and the increased maternal plasma activity of this coagulation factor among patients with preeclampsia reported herein may contribute to the observation made by VanWijk et al [87]. Moreover, maternal plasma TF activity is increased in patients who developed early-onset preeclampsia, suggesting an association between TF activity and the severity of this syndrome.

Tissue factor and maternal thrombin generation in women who delivered an SGA neonate

The finding that women who delivered an SGA neonate have higher median maternal plasma TF activity than women with a normal pregnancy is novel. TF activity, however, was not independently associated with the delivery of an SGA neonate. The association between the higher TAT III complexes concentration reported in these patients [24] and the activation of TF in the maternal plasma is not clear. Our group reported that although women who delivered an SGA neonate have faster thrombin generation kinetics, they do not generate significantly more thrombin than women who had a normal pregnancy [88]. In addition, the median maternal plasma TF concentration was lower in the SGA group than in the preeclampsia as well as the normal pregnancy groups, while the TFPI concentration and activity did not differ from that of women with a normal pregnancy [39]. Collectively, these findings suggest that patients with an SGA neonate have higher TF activity compared to women who had a normal pregnancy, and this may contribute to the faster thrombin generation kinetics in these patients. However, the low maternal plasma TF concentration and the normal TFPI concentration result in a higher TFPI/TF ratio that may lead to less activation of the extrinsic pathway of coagulation.

In conclusion, maternal plasma TF activity, although high in patients who developed preeclampsia and those who delivered an SGA neonate, is independently associated only with the development of preeclampsia and is higher in patients with the early-onset form than in those who developed preeclampsia later during gestation. This finding supports the procoagulant activity of blood-borne TF in complicated pregnancies, especially among patients with preeclampsia, and further emphasizes the role of the extrinsic pathway of coagulation in this obstetrical syndrome.

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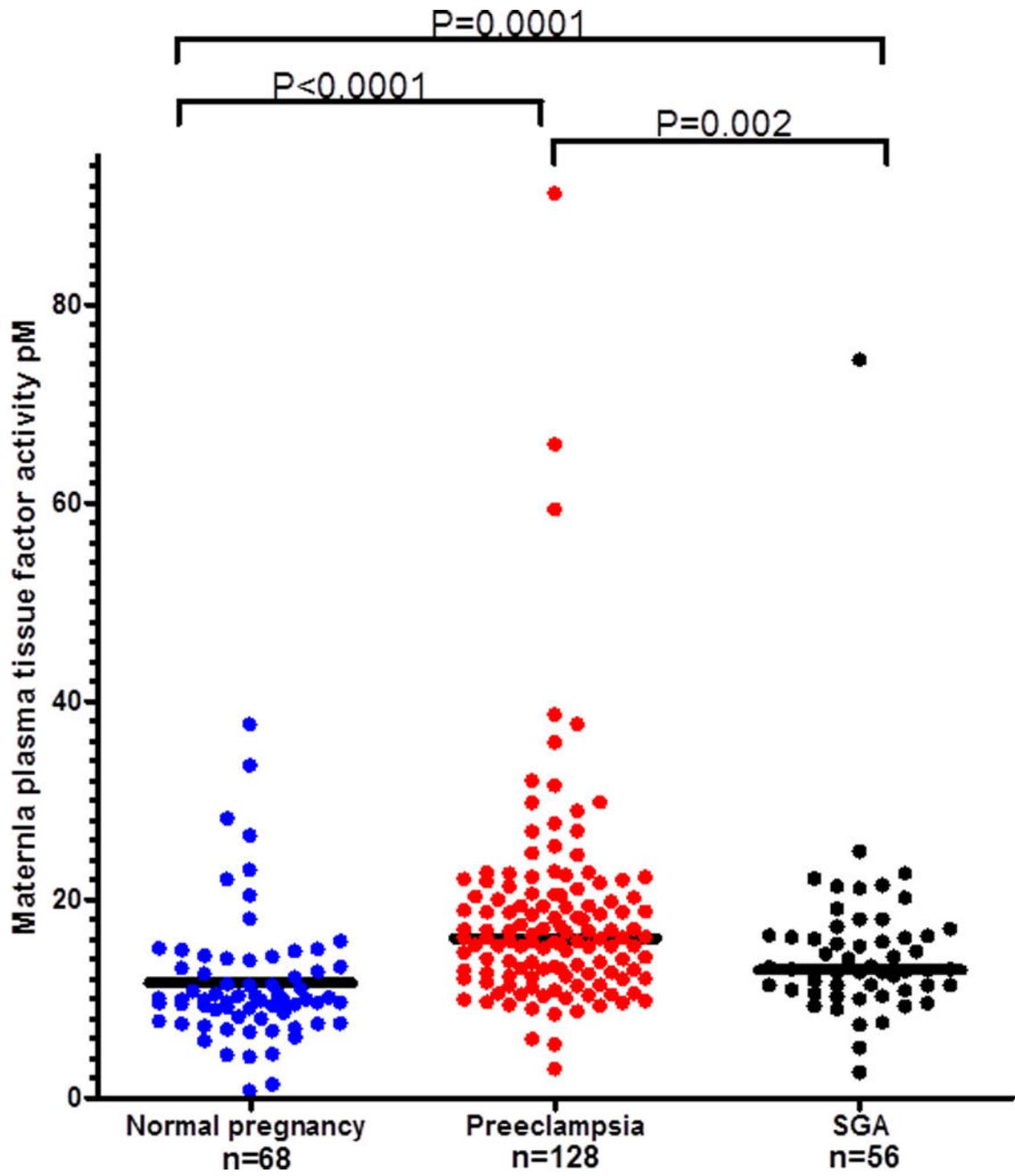


Figure 1. Maternal plasma tissue factor activity in women with normal pregnancies, preeclampsia, or SGA neonates.

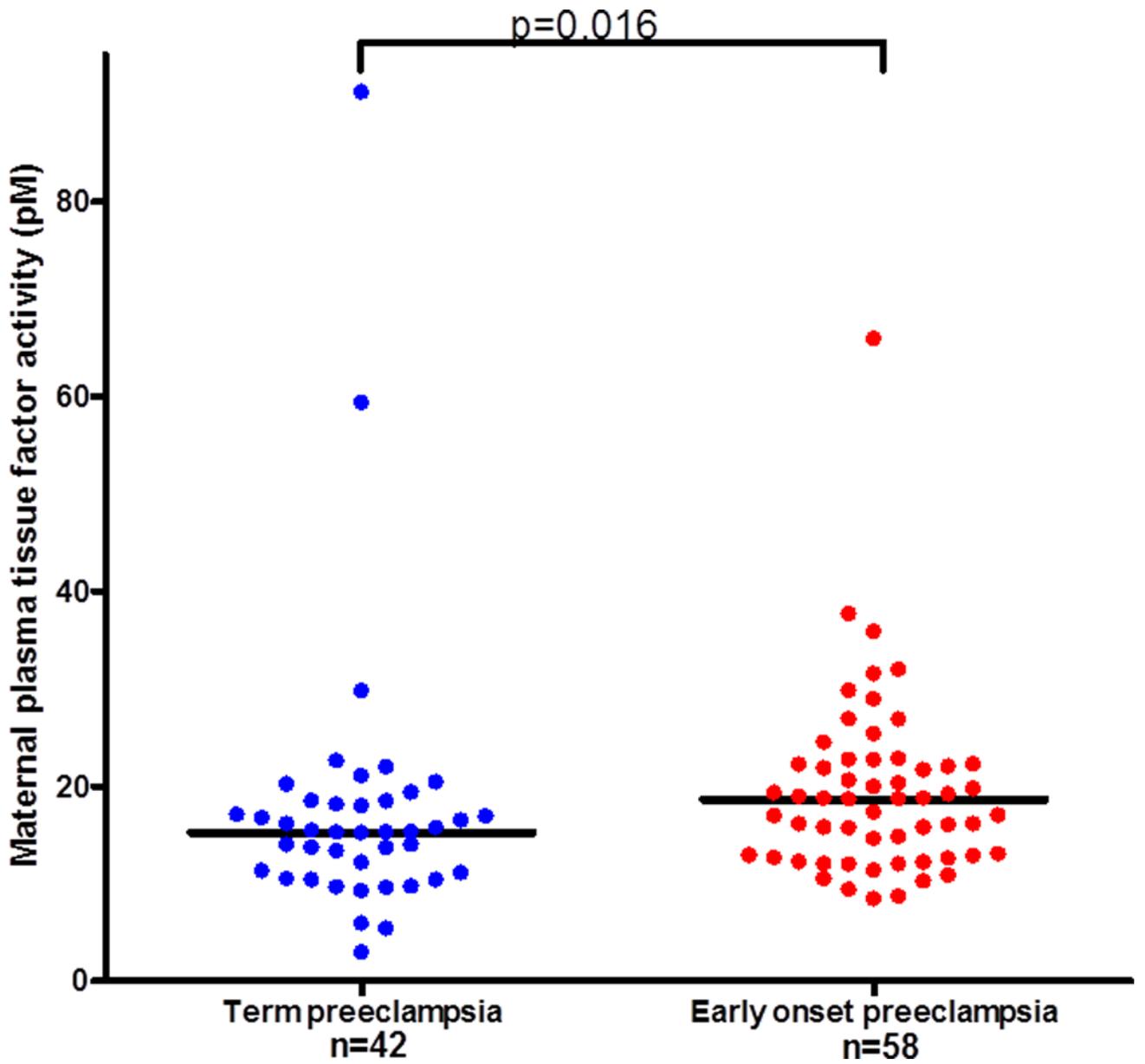


Figure 2. Maternal plasma tissue factor activity in women with early-onset or term preeclampsia.

Table I

Demographic and clinical characteristics of the study population

	Normal pregnancy (n=68)	Preeclampsia (n=128)	SGA (n=56)
Maternal age (years)	24 (21–27)	25(20–31)	25 (20–30)
Gravidity ^a			
1	14 (21.2)	43 (33.9)	11 (20.4)
2–5	42 (63.6)	70 (55.1)	36 (66.7)
6	10 (15.2)	14 (11.0)	7 (13.0)
Parity ^b			
1	37 (55.2)	93 (73.2)	34 (61.8)
2–5	29 (43.3)	30 (23.6)	20 (36.4)
6	1 (1.5)	4 (3.1)	1 (1.8)
Ethnic origin ^c			
• African-American	50 (76.9)	106 (84.1)	46 (86.8)
• Caucasian	11(16.9)	13 (10.3)	4 (7.5)
• Hispanic	2 (3.1)	5 (4.0)	1 (1.9)
• Asian	2 (3.1)	1 (0.8)	1 (1.9)
• Other	0	1 (0.8)	1 (1.9)
Gestational age at blood collection (weeks)	31.8 (27.7–34.8)	34.3 [*] (30.2–37.6)	37.2 [*] (31.7–38.4)
Gestational age at delivery (weeks)	39.6 (38.5–40.5)	34.6 [‡] (31.0–37.9)	37.6 [*] (34.4–39.0)
Neonatal birthweight (grams)	3335 (3014–3695)	1920 [*] (1215–2702)	2110 [*] (1490–2510)

Data are presented as median (minimum, maximum) or numbers (%).

SGA: small for gestational age.

^aNormal pregnancy (n=66); preeclampsia (n=127); SGA (n=54).

^bNormal pregnancy (n=67); preeclampsia (n=127); SGA (n=55).

^cNormal pregnancy (n=65); preeclampsia (n=126); SGA (n=53).

* p<0.05 in comparison to normal pregnancy.

[‡] p<0.05 in comparison to SGA.

Table 2

Multiple logistic regression analysis of the association of maternal plasma tissue factor pathway inhibitor and tissue factor concentrations — activity as well as the interactions between each analyte concentration and activity and preeclampsia.

Factor	OR (95% CI)
Gestational age at sample collection (weeks)	1.09 (1.03–1.14)
TF activity (pM)	1.07 (1.04–1.11)
TFPI activity (unit/ml)	1.6 (0.8–3.2)

OR: odds ratio; CI: confidence interval; TF: tissue factor; TFPI: tissue factor pathway inhibitor.

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Table 3

Multiple logistic regression analysis of the association of maternal plasma tissue factor pathway inhibitor / tissue factor ratio and preeclampsia.

Factor	OR (95% CI)
Gestational age at sample collection (weeks)	1.13 (1.06–1.22)
TF activity (pM)	1.08 (1.02–1.13)
TFPI/TF ratio	0.97 (0.96–0.98)
TFPI activity (unit/ml)	2.8 (0.94–8.35)

TFPI/TF: Tissue factor pathway inhibitor/Tissue factor; OR: odds ratio; CI: confidence interval.

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Table 4

Multiple logistic regression analysis of the association of maternal plasma tissue factor pathway inhibitor and tissue factor concentrations, activity as well as the interaction between each analyte concentration and activity and SGA.

Factor	OR (95% CI)
Gestational age at sample collection (weeks)	1.12 (1.05–1.2)
TFPI activity (unit/ml)	0.93 (0.38–2.25)
TF activity (Pm)	0.99 (0.96–1.2)

OR: odds ratio; CI: confidence interval; TF: tissue factor; TFPI: tissue factor pathway inhibitor.

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Table 5

A comparison of placental histologic lesions between patients with preeclampsia and patients who delivered an SGA neonate.

Placental histologic findings	Preeclampsia (n=113)	SGA (n=44)	p value
Findings consistent with amniotic fluid infection			
Chorioamnionitis, maternal response	7 (6.2)	4 (9)	0.5
Funisitis, fetal response	2 (1.8)	4 (9)	0.05
Findings consistent with maternal underperfusion			
Remote villous infarcts	21 (18.6)	5 (11.4)	0.3
Recent villous infarcts	6 (5.3)	0	0.2
Increased syncytial knots	61 (54)	12 (27.3)	0.004
Villous agglutination	14 (12.4)	7 (15.9)	0.6
Increased intervillous fibrin	26 (23.0)	7 (15.7)	0.4
Distal villous hypoplasia	28 (24.8)	6 (13.6)	0.19
Persistent muscularization of basal plate arteries	4 (3.5)	2 (4.5)	0.6
Mural hypertrophy of decidual arterioles	8 (7.1)	4 (9.1)	0.7
Acute atherosclerosis of basal plate arteries/ decidual arterioles	16 (14.2)	2 (4.5)	0.1
Findings consistent with fetal vascular thrombo-occlusive disease			
Villous changes	9 (6.1)	4 (9.1)	0.8
Chronic villitis with obliterative fetal vasculopathy	9 (8)	5 (11.4)	0.5

Data are presented as numbers (%)