Selective Activation of the Prostaglandin E$_2$ Circuit in Chronic Injury-Induced Pathologic Angiogenesis

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PURPOSE. Cyclooxygenase (COX)-derived prostaglandin E$_2$ (PGE$_2$) is a prevalent and established mediator of inflammation and pain in numerous tissues and diseases. Distribution and expression of the four PGE$_2$ receptors (EP1-EP4) can dictate whether PGE$_2$ exerts an anti-inflammatory or a proinflammatory and/or a proangiogenic effect. The role and mechanism of endogenous PGE$_2$ in the cornea, and the regulation of EP expression during a dynamic and complex inflammatory/reparative response remain to be clearly defined.

METHODS. Chronic or acute self-resolving inflammation was induced in mice by corneal suture or epithelial abrasion, respectively. Recipithelialization was monitored by fluorescein staining and neovascularization quantified by CD31/PECAM-1 immunofluorescence. PGE$_2$ formation was analyzed by lipidomics and polymorphonuclear leukocyte (PMN) infiltration quantified by myeloperoxidase activity. Expression of EPs and inflammatory/angiogenic mediators was assessed by real-time PCR and immunohistochemistry. Mice eyes were treated with PGE$_2$ (100 ng topically, three times a day) for up to 7 days.

RESULTS. COX-2, EP-2, and EP-4 expression was upregulated with chronic inflammation that correlated with increased corneal PGE$_2$ formation and marked neovascularization. In contrast, acute abrasion injury did not alter PGE$_2$ or EP levels. PGE$_2$ treatment amplified PMN infiltration and the angiogenic response to chronic inflammation but did not affect wound healing or PMN infiltration after epithelial abrasion. Exacerbated inflammatory neovascularization with PGE$_2$ treatment was independent of the VEGF circuit but was associated with a significant induction of the eotaxin-CGR3 axis.

CONCLUSIONS. These findings place the corneal PGE$_2$ circuit as an endogenous mediator of inflammatory neovascularization rather than general inflammation and demonstrate that chronic inflammation selectively regulates this circuit at the level of biosynthetic enzyme and receptor expression. (Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci. 2010;51:6311–6320) DOI:10.1167/iovs.10-4555

The successful execution of an acute inflammatory response is nowhere as critical and evolved as in the delicate visual axis because uncontrolled ocular inflammation impairs vision and leads to blindness. In particular, the transparent, avascular, and immune-privileged cornea has a tightly regulated and remarkable inflammatory/reparative response that is highly dependent on the generation and release of specific and temporally defined arrays of mediators. In this regard, lipid autacoids such as arachidonic acid (AA)-derived cytochrome P450 metabolites, lipoxins, and hydroxyeicosatetraenoic acids (HETEs) have emerged as key mediators of corneal inflammation and pathologic angiogenesis and the resolution of these responses.

Lipid autacoids are formed in most tissues and are essential regulators of inflammatory and immune responses. Recent findings have uncovered a critical role for resident protective lipid circuits, namely 12/15-lipoxygenase (12/15-LOX; Alox15), in the cornea. 12/15 LOX is highly expressed in mouse and human corneas and generates AA- and ω-3 polyunsaturated fatty acid-derived mediators (i.e., lipoxins, resolvins, and protectins) that inhibit inflammation and pathologic angiogenesis and promote wound healing. This emerging field underscores the importance of resident endogenous lipid autacoid circuits in the eye to maintain and execute essential acute inflammatory responses.

Cyclooxygenase (COX)-derived prostaglandins (PG) are of primary interest because they are critical and early response mediators that initiate or amplify inflammation. In particular, PGE$_2$ has traditionally been identified as a prevalent inflammatory mediator in many tissues and inflammatory diseases. More recently, it has been implicated in tumor-driven angiogenesis. Not surprisingly, it is a primary target of several important classes of clinically used drugs (i.e., nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs] and corticosteroids) for inflammation, pain, and colon cancer. PGE$_2$ is produced by many cells of the body, including fibroblasts, macrophages/monocytes, dendritic cells, and some types of malignant cells, and it exerts its effects through binding to G-protein-coupled receptors (EP). Four EP receptor subtypes have been identified—EP-1, EP-2, EP-3, and EP-4—which are coupled to different intracellular signal transduction pathways. EP-2 and EP-4 receptors are coupled to G$_i$ and mediate increases in cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP) concentrations, whereas activation of EP-3 inhibits adenylyl cyclase through G$_s$; EP-1 stimulates intracellular Ca$^{2+}$ mobilization through G$_q$. Hence, the distribution and relative expression of these four receptor subtypes provide an elegant system that can account for the ability of PGE$_2$ to evoke pleiotropic and sometimes opposing biological effects.
maintain intestinal homeostasis by downregulation of the immune response.22–25 Moreover, PGE_2 decreases macrophage production of proinflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α and stimulates anti-inflammatory cytokine production, mechanisms that both contribute to the resolution of inflammation. PGE_2 can also promote the resolution of inflammation through the induction of key enzymes, namely 12/15-LOX, in polymorphonuclear leukocytes (PMNs), and the formation of the anti-inflammatory and pro-resolving lipoxin A_4. Hence, the role of PGE_2 in inflammatory and immune responses is complex; it is temporally defined and largely dependent on EP receptor expression.

The capacity of ocular tissues to synthesize PGE_2 was initially determined on the basis of [14C]-AA conversion in vitro and in vivo.29–31 Subsequently, studies that used NSAIDs, PGE_2, and PGE_2 analogs, as well as EP receptor knockout mice, have demonstrated that in the eye, this prostanooid causes miosis, vasodilation, disrupts the integrity of the blood-aqueous barrier, and, through regulating the dynamics of aqueous humor flow, can increase or reduce intraocular pressure.32–35 Importantly, NSAIDs are a primary treatment option for ocular indications including the inhibition of intraoperative miosis and the management of postoperative inflammation and pain. However, in contrast to other tissues and despite reports of COX-2 upregulation and PG formation in models of ocular inflammation,36 the endogenous role of this prominent prostanooid and primary therapeutic target in the corneal inflammatory/repairative response, surprisingly, remains to be fully defined. To this end, we assessed the role of the PGE_2 circuit in mediating inflammatory responses in the cornea.

Here, we report that endogenous PGE_2 in the cornea is not a general inflammatory mediator. Increased PGE_2 formation and upregulation of EP-2 and EP-4 receptor expression were key features of a severe and chronic injury that was associated with inflammatory neovascularization but not a feature of chronic inflammation. A selective amplified leukocyte recruitment and pathologic angiogenesis in response to chronic inflammation but did not affect wound healing or leukocyte recruitment during acute epithelial injury, providing evidence for a selective role of the PGE_2 circuit in mediating corneal inflammatory responses.

**Materials and Methods**

**Animals**

Female C57Bl/6j stock 000664 mice (6–10 weeks old) were purchased from Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME). Mice were maintained on a 12-hour day/12-hour night cycle and fed a standard diet ad libitum (Rat/Mouse diet LM-485; Harlan Tekland, Madison, WI).

**Models of Corneal Injury and Treatment**

All animal studies were approved by the University of California at Berkeley in accordance with the National Institutes of Health Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals and in strict accord with the ARVO Statement for the Use of Animals in Ophthalmic and Vision Research. Mice were anesthetized with ketamine (Ketaset, 50 mg/kg; Fort Dodge Animal Health, Fort Dodge, IA) and xylazine (20 mg/kg) by intraperitoneal injection, and 1 drop of tetracaine-HCl 0.5% was applied to the eye to deliver local corneal anesthesia before subjecting animals to corneal injury. To induce a mild and self-resolving injury, the corneal epithelium up to the corneal/limbal border was removed by mechanical abrasion with a 0.5 mm-corneal rust ring remover (Algerbrush II; Alger Equipment, Lago Vista, TX) while leaving the underlying stroma intact, using a dissecting stereomicroscope (Carl Zeiss, Jena, Germany) as previously described.15,14 To induce a more severe and chronic injury, a single sterile 8-0 silk suture was placed intrastromally extending over the corneal apex, without disrupting the iris.13 Mice were treated topically three times a day with PGE_2 (100 ng; Cayman Chemical, Ann Arbor, MI) or sterile saline alone (HBSS, pH 7.4) for up to 7 days. Ethanol from the PGE_2 solution was rapidly removed under a gentle stream of nitrogen, and PGE_2 was immediately resuspended in sterile HBSS and applied to the eye (5 μL drop). Eyes were enucleated at the respective time points under a stereomicroscope, and corneas were carefully dissected on ice to remove the limbus area and all noncorneal tissue. Isolated corneas were either snap frozen for RNA or lipidomic analyses or immediately processed for immunohistochemistry.

**Assessment of Wound Healing, Neovascularization, and Inflammation**

Reepithelialization (wound healing) was assessed by fluorescein staining and digital image analyses.13,14 For quantification of neovascularization, isolated corneas were rinsed in PBS, fixed in acetone (100%) for 30 minutes, blocked in a 2% bovine serum albumin/PBS solution, and incubated in PBS containing fluorescein isothiocyanate-conjugated CD31/PECAM-1 monoclonal antibody overnight (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA; 1:100). Flat-mounts were prepared by sectioning the cornea and fixing them to slides. Mosaic images were taken with a microscope (Axioplan 2; Zeiss) equipped with a camera (AxioCam MR; Zeiss) and compiled using specialized software (Mosaix and AxioVision 4.5; Zeiss). Neovascularization was quantified by manually tracing the length of all vessels (Image Pro-Express software; Cyber Media, New Delhi, India) and was expressed as total pixels.

**Assessment of Inflammation**

Myeloperoxidase (MPO) activity, a quantitative index of tissue leukocyte infiltration, was measured 48 hours after initiating injury, as previously described.15,16 In brief, corneas (1 cornea/data point) were homogenized with a hand-held tissue grinder in 450 μL of 50 mM potassium phosphate buffer containing 0.5% hexadecyltrimethylammonium bromide (pH 6.0). This was followed by sonication, three cycles of freeze-thaw, and a second sonication. After centrifugation, MPO activity in the supernatant was measured by spectrophotometry using o-dianisidine dihydrochloride oxidation as a colorimetric indicator. Calibration curves for conversion of MPO activity to PMN number were established with PMN collected from zymosan A-induced peritoneal exudates in mice.

**Gene and Protein Expression**

RNA from mouse corneas was isolated (RNeasy Mini Kit; Qiagen Sciences, Germantown, MD). RNA integrity was verified using agarose gel electrophoresis, quantified by spectrophotometry, and reverse transcribed (High-Capacity Reverse Transcription Kit; Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA). Nucleotide primer sequences are listed in Table 1 and were selected from the NIH GenBank database. (pga.mgh.harvard.edu/primerbank/) and verified by the NIH GenBank database. Real-time PCR was performed (Fast SYBR Green Master Mix; Applied Biosystems) with a quantitative PCR system (StepOnePlus; Applied Biosystems). Amplifications were run in duplicate, and efficiencies for each primer pair were established. Comparative quantification of gene expression was performed (StepOne software; Applied Biosystems) using the ΔΔC_T method. Expression of all genes is referenced to a positive mRNA control that was generated by pooling mRNA from C57Bl/6j mice kidney and spleen.

For immunohistochemical analyses of EP receptor expression, whole eyes were embedded in OCT and sectioned at 5-μm thickness. Sections were washed in PBS, followed by incubation at room temperature with 10% normal goat serum for 1 hour to block nonspecific antigenic binding sites. After overnight incubation at 4°C with the primary antibody (EP-2 or EP-4, 1:40 in 1% goat serum; Alpha Diagnostic International Inc., San Antonio, TX), the sections...
were washed in PBS and incubated for 3 hours at room temperature with an aminomethyl coumarin acetic acid-labeled goat–anti-rabbit secondary antibody (Jackson ImmunoResearch Laboratories, Inc., West Grove, PA). Positive staining was detected by immunofluorescence with a microscope (Axioplan 2; Zeiss).

**Lipid Autacoid Analysis**

Eicosanoids were identified and quantified by LC/MS/MS-based lipidomics. Endogenous lipid autacoid analysis was performed as previously described. In brief, corneas were immediately homogenized with a hand-held tissue grinder in 66% methanol (4°C); PGE2-d6, 15(S)-HETE-d6, and leukotriene B4-d4 (400 pg/each) were added as internal standards to calculate the recovery of prostanoids or monohydroxy- and dihydroxy-containing fatty acids. Lipid autacoids were extracted by solid phase using solid-phase extraction cartridges (SampliQ C18; Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA) and were analyzed by a triple quadruple linear ion trap LC/MS/MS system (MDS SCIEX 3200 QTRAP) equipped with a LUNA C18-2 mini-bore column using a mobile phase (methanol/water/acetate, 65:35:0.02, vol/vol/vol) with a 0.50 mL flow rate. MS/MS analyses were conducted in negative ion mode, and eicosanoids were quantified by multiple reaction monitoring (MRM mode) using specific transition ions for PGE2 (351/369 m/z), 12(S)-HETE (319/337 m/z), and 15(S)-HETE, and PGE2 and thromboxane B2, respectively after 4 days of suture injury (Fig. 1B). Corneal levels of endogenous PGE2 formation significantly increased 4.3-fold and 6.6-fold after 2 and 4 days of suture-induced chronic inflammation, respectively (774 ± 24 and 1123 ± 279 pg/cornea on day 2 and 4, respectively, vs. 147 ± 11 pg/cornea in uninjured corneas), and remained elevated through day 7 (825 ± 125 pg/cornea; Fig. 1C). Importantly, the increase in endogenous PGE2 formation correlated with pronounced neovascularization. In contrast, basal corneal levels of PGE2 demonstrated no significant increase throughout the course of injury and wound healing during an acute, self-resolving epithelial abrasion (Fig. 1C). To rule out strain-specific induction of PGE2 circuits as a consequence of chronic inflammation, we also assessed PGE2 formation in the Balb/c strain of mice, which exhibits a distinct phenotype of inflammation. The immune response in Balb/c mice is predominantly a humoral (TH2) response, whereas C57Bl/6j mice have a predominant cell-mediated (TH1) response. As seen in C57Bl/6j mice, PGE2 formation selectively increased in chronic inflammation that induced neovascularization (Supplementary Fig. S1, http://www.iovs.org/content/51/12/6311/suppl/DC1).

**Statistical Analysis**

All data are expressed as mean ± SEM unless otherwise indicated. Student’s t-test was used to evaluate the significance of differences between two groups, and multiple comparisons were performed by regression analysis and one-way analysis of variance. P < 0.05 was considered significant.

**RESULTS**

**Selective Formation of PGE2 during Chronic Injury**

In a previous study, LC/MS/MS-based lipidomic analyses demonstrated distinct and temporally defined formation of select COX- and LOX-derived autacoids in corneal pathologic angiogenesis. Importantly, PGE2 was the most prominent eicosanoid formed in the inflamed and vascularized cornea. Hence, to further define the role of endogenous PGE2 in the cornea during inflammation, we used two well-established and distinct injury models. Acute self-resolving inflammation was induced by epithelial abrasion, which creates a mild, reproducible, uniform and quantifiable epithelial injury without stromal injury and is characterized by transient PMN recruitment, temporally defined wound healing, and epithelial regeneration without neovascularization. After epithelial debridement, corneas were stained with fluorescein for direct quantification of the epithelial defect (Fig. 1A). Chronic inflammation and neovascularization were induced using the corneal suture model. In epithelial abrasion, placement of the suture penetrates and induces partial injury to the stroma and evokes a robust and nonresolving inflammatory response as a consequence of chronic injury and irritation. Neovascularization can be observed by day 2 and becomes pronounced by day 7 (Fig. 1A), and it persists as long as the sutures remain in the cornea. Consistent with our previous report, lipidomic analyses revealed select formation of LOX- and COX-derived autacoids (i.e., 5(S)-, 12(S)- and 15(S)-HETE, and PGE2 and thromboxane B2, respectively) after 4 days of suture injury (Fig. 1B). Corneal levels of endogenous PGE2 formation significantly increased 4.3-fold and 6.6-fold after 2 and 4 days of suture-induced chronic inflammation, respectively (774 ± 24 and 1123 ± 279 pg/cornea on day 2 and 4, respectively, vs. 147 ± 11 pg/cornea in uninjured corneas), and remained elevated through day 7 (825 ± 125 pg/cornea; Fig. 1C). Importantly, the increase in endogenous PGE2 formation correlated with pronounced neovascularization. In contrast, basal corneal levels of PGE2 demonstrated no significant increase throughout the course of injury and wound healing during an acute, self-resolving epithelial abrasion (Fig. 1C). To rule out strain-specific induction of PGE2 circuits as a consequence of chronic inflammation, we also assessed PGE2 formation in the Balb/c strain of mice, which exhibits a distinct phenotype of inflammation. The immune response in Balb/c mice is predominantly a humoral (TH2) response, whereas C57Bl/6j mice have a predominant cell-mediated (TH1) response. As seen in C57Bl/6j mice, PGE2 formation selectively increased in chronic inflammation that induced neovascularization (Supplementary Fig. S1, http://www.iovs.org/content/51/12/6311/suppl/DC1).

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PGE<sub>2</sub> Amplifies Inflammatory Angiogenesis

Although PGE<sub>2</sub> is an established and prominent inflammatory mediator in many tissues, our findings in Figure 1 indicate that an increase in endogenous PGE<sub>2</sub> formation is a feature of a more severe and chronic injury that is associated with inflammatory neovascularization rather than general inflammation of the cornea, suggesting an involvement of PGE<sub>2</sub> in mediating the angiogenic response. Thus, to directly examine the role of PGE<sub>2</sub> in neovascularization, mice were topically treated with PGE<sub>2</sub> (100 ng, three times a day) for 7 days after suture placement. Neovascularization, characterized by the development of new microvasculature arising from the limbus, was detected by vital microscopy and immunofluorescence using CD31/PECAM-1, a specific and established marker for vascular endothelial cells. Compared with saline-treated control mice, treatment with PGE<sub>2</sub> for 7 days markedly amplified pathologic neovascularization, as evidenced by a 54% increase in total blood vessels (Fig. 2B; PGE<sub>2</sub> vs. saline = 49,636 ± 3048 pixels vs. saline = 38,257 ± 1814 pixels). In contrast, topical treatment with PGE<sub>2</sub> did not affect the rate of epithelial wound healing in a model of acute, self-resolving injury that directly depends on the extent of inflammation (Fig. 2A). Two days after epithelial debridement, vehicle- and PGE<sub>2</sub>-treated mice exhibited 68% ± 3% and 71% ± 2% wound healing, respectively, and complete wound healing by 4 days. These findings demonstrate that PGE<sub>2</sub> specifically exacerbates inflammatory neovascularization, which correlates with its increased endogenous formation triggered by severe and chronic injury.

Regulation of Leukocyte Recruitment by PGE<sub>2</sub> Is Injury Specific

The normally avascular cornea in humans and mice is generally devoid of leukocytes. Suture-induced inflammatory neovascularization is a well-established model in which the underlying driving force of the neovascular response is inflammation. In this regard, leukocyte infiltration is an essential feature of suture-induced neovascularization. Thus, we assessed the effect of PGE<sub>2</sub>, a prominent inflammatory mediator, on leukocyte recruitment. The predominant leukocyte type in suture-induced chronic injury, even 7 days after suture placement, is the PMN. Compared with saline-treated control mice, treatment with PGE<sub>2</sub> increased PMN infiltration 4.5-fold (saline vs. PGE<sub>2</sub> = 45,223 ± 15,141 PMNs/cornea vs.

**Figure 1.** PGE<sub>2</sub> formation is a key feature of chronic inflammation and neovascularization. Endogenous lipid autacoids were quantified in uninjured corneas and corneas collected after 2, 4, and 7 days of acute (epithelial abrasion) or chronic (suture) injury (n = 4–7; *P < 0.05 vs. uninjured) from female C57Bl/6j mice by MS/MS-based lipidomic analyses using a triple quadrupole linear ion trap LC/MS/MS system and multiple reaction monitoring (MRM) for specific transition ions. (A) Representative images of epithelial abrasion and suture injury models of ocular inflammation. (B) Representative MRM lipidomic profile of prominent eicosanoids (PGE<sub>2</sub>, thromboxane B<sub>2</sub> [TXB<sub>2</sub>], 12-HETE, 5-HETE, 15-HETE) in uninjured corneas and corneas collected after 4 days of suture injury. (C) Quantification of endogenous PGE<sub>2</sub> formation in corneas with epithelial abrasion or suture injury.
**FIGURE 2.** PGE$_2$ treatment exacerbates inflammatory neovascularization but does not affect epithelial wound healing. Mouse eyes were treated topically with PGE$_2$ (100 ng, three times a day) for up to 7 days after epithelial abrasion or suture injury. (A) The corneal epithelium was removed by mechanical abrasion with an Algerbrush. Epithelial wound healing was assessed by fluorescein staining and digital image analyses 48 and 96 hours after epithelial removal with or without topical PGE$_2$ treatment ($n = 9$–12). (B) An 8-0 silk suture was placed intrastromally, extending over the corneal apex without disrupting the iris. Hemangiogenesis was assessed by immunohistochemistry using CD31 as a specific endothelial antigen. Corneas were collected after 7 days of suture injury with or without PGE$_2$ treatment and were incubated in PBS containing FITC-conjugated CD31/PE-CAM-1 monoclonal antibody and analyzed under a microscope ($n = 4$; *$P < 0.05$ vs. saline treatment). Images show representative whole corneal flat mounts. CD31$^+$ vessels in the entire cornea were traced manually and are expressed as total pixels.

PGE$_2$ treatment exacerbated inflammatory neovascularization. The bioactions of PGE$_2$ are mediated by binding to EP receptors, of which there are four known subtypes (EP-1, EP-2, EP-3, and EP-4). Importantly, EP receptor expression has been documented in “normal” human corneal tissue$^{44,45}$ and mouse ocular tissue by immunohistochemical analysis. However, the regulation of EP receptor expression during a highly dynamic and complex inflammatory/regenerative response is completely unknown in both human and mouse cornea. Thus, for direct detection of the PGE$_2$ circuit in the cornea, we used fluorescence-based kinetic (real-time) PCR. Quantitative real-time-PCR analysis established the basal expression of the two COX isoforms and four EP receptor subtypes in uninjured corneas (Figs. 4A, 4B). Although COX-1 expression was induced with suture injury (0.19 ± 0.01 vs. 0.30 ± 0.02 relative quantity (RQ) in uninjured and suture injury, respectively; *$P < 0.05$), gene expression of COX-2 was upregulated 54-fold (0.21 ± 0.04 vs. 11.46 ± 2.8 RQ in uninjured and suture injury, respectively; *$P < 0.05$), suggesting that the increased endogenous PGE$_2$ formation seen with neovascularization can likely be attributed to the induction of COX-2.

**FIGURE 3.** PGE$_2$ regulation of neutrophil infiltration is injury specific. Corneas were collected from uninjured eyes and after 48 hours of epithelial abrasion or suture injury with or without PGE$_2$ treatment (100 ng, three times a day). PMN content in corneas was quantified by measuring MPO activity as a specific marker for PMN ($n = 4$–10; *$P < 0.05$ vs. saline treatment). An MPO calibration curve was established with inflammatory exudate peritoneal PMNs and was used to calculate relative tissue PMN numbers.

**PGE$_2$ Circuit Is Regulated by Inflammatory Neovascularization**

COX-1 and COX-2 have traditionally been defined as the constitutive and inducible isoforms, respectively. However, basal expression of COX-2 has been detected in several tissues, including the corneal epithelium and endothelium,$^{44,45}$ and the role of COX-1 in mediating inflammatory responses is now appreciated.$^{45}$ In this regard, it is important to define the expression and role of COX-1 and COX-2 in corneal inflammatory neovascularization. The bioactions of PGE$_2$ are mediated by binding to EP receptors, of which there are four known subtypes (EP-1, EP-2, EP-3, and EP-4). Importantly, EP receptor expression has been documented in “normal” human corneal tissue$^{44,45}$ and mouse ocular tissue by immunohistochemical analysis.$^{45}$ However, the regulation of EP receptor expression during a highly dynamic and complex inflammatory/regenerative response is completely unknown in both human and mouse cornea. Thus, for direct detection of the PGE$_2$ circuit in the cornea, we used fluorescence-based kinetic (real-time) PCR. Quantitative real-time-PCR analysis established the basal expression of the two COX isoforms and four EP receptor subtypes in uninjured corneas (Figs. 4A, 4B). Although COX-1 expression was induced with suture injury (0.19 ± 0.01 vs. 0.30 ± 0.02 relative quantity (RQ) in uninjured and suture injury, respectively; *$P < 0.05$), gene expression of COX-2 was upregulated 54-fold (0.21 ± 0.04 vs. 11.46 ± 2.8 RQ in uninjured and suture injury, respectively; *$P < 0.05$), suggesting that the increased endogenous PGE$_2$ formation seen with neovascularization can likely be attributed to the induction of COX-2.

More importantly, expression of the EP receptors was regulated by chronic inflammation. After 2 days of suture injury, the gene expression of EP-1 was unchanged, whereas expression of EP-2, EP-3, and EP-4 all increased, with EP-2 and EP-4 exhibiting 14-fold and 8-fold increases, respectively (*$P < 0.05$). Based on reports that EP-3 signaling upregulates tumor-associated angiogenesis and tumor growth,$^{46}$ we treated mice with sulprostone, a selective EP-3 agonist, to assess its role in corneal inflammatory neovascularization. Sulprostone did not affect pathologic angiogenesis during chronic injury (Supplementary Fig. S2, http://www.iovs.org/content/51/12/6311/suppl/DC1). These results are in agreement with our gene expression data and suggest that EP-3 does not play a major role in regulating corneal inflammatory neovascularization. Immunohistochemical analysis demonstrated the distinct expression of both EP-2 and EP-4 receptors in uninjured corneal epithelium and endothelium, with a weak expression in the stroma (Fig. 4C). In correlation with their upregulated gene expression, immunohistochemical detection of EP-2 and EP-4 receptors was markedly enhanced in the stroma and was ex-
pressed in infiltrating leukocytes after 7 days of suture injury compared with uninjured corneas. In contrast, no changes in EP-2 or EP-4 receptor expression were detected 4 days after initiating abrasion injury. Taken together, these data demonstrate that the PGE2 circuit is expressed in the uninjured cornea and, moreover, is differentially regulated by corneal inflammatory responses. A more severe and chronic injury that was associated with inflammatory neovascularization, but not an acute self-resolving epithelial injury, upregulated the PGE2 circuit.

PGE2 Regulates Expression of Inflammatory and Angiogenic Mediators

Angiogenic growth factors, including those of the vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) family, have been implicated in mediating neovascularization in the normally avascular cornea.39,47,48 Traditionally, hemangiogenesis has been attributed to the actions of VEGF-A39,47; however, VEGF-C is now recognized as another important mediator of inflammatory hemangiogenesis.49,50 VEGF-mediated inflammatory hemangiogenesis is governed through binding to specific tyrosine kinase receptors, of which three isoforms—VEGFR-1/FLT-1, VEGFR-2/FLK-1, VEGFR-3/FLT-4—have been identified. In addition, a soluble form of VEGFR-1, sFLT-1, exists in the cornea and acts to trap VEGF-A. Thus, to further characterize the angiogenic response to suture injury, we examined the gene expression of select key mediators of inflammation and angiogenesis in uninjured corneas and, after 2 days of suture injury, with and without PGE2 treatment. Consistent with the model of inflammatory neovascularization and our previous findings,15 key members of the VEGF circuit were markedly upregulated with suture injury, including VEGFA and VEGFC, as well as VEGFR-3/FLT-4, the receptor for VEGF-C (Fig. 5). Interestingly, topical treatment with PGE2 during chronic inflammation did not alter the expression of VEGF-A or other key mediators of the VEGF circuit. In fact, PGE2 treatment tended to reduce the expression of these mediators, indicating that PGE2 exacerbation of inflammatory neovascularization is independent of the VEGF circuit.

Given that PGE2 exacerbation of inflammatory neovascularization was shown to be independent of the VEGF circuit, we analyzed the possible involvement of the eotaxin-CCR3 axis because this circuit has recently been shown to contribute to choroidal neovascularization characteristic of age-related macular degeneration.51 CCR3 gene expression was markedly increased after 2 days of suture injury and remained elevated at 7 days compared with corneas from uninjured eyes (Fig. 6). More importantly, topical PGE2 treatment for 7 days significantly increased CCR3 expression 1.2-fold compared with suture alone (0.18 ± 0.04 vs. 0.08 ± 0.01 RQ, respectively). We then examined the gene expression of eotaxin-1 and eotaxin-2 (CCL11 and CCL24, respectively), the principal mouse ligands for CCR3, after 7 days of suture injury. Although eotaxin-1 gene expression was unaffected by PGE2 treatment, the gene expression of eotaxin-2 was increased 3.4-fold with PGE2 treatment com-
pared with suture alone (0.61 ± 0.14 vs. 0.14 ± 0.03 RQ, respectively; *P < 0.05). Collectively, these data suggest that PGE2 exacerbation of inflammatory neovascularization involves regulation of the eotaxin-CCR3 circuit.

DISCUSSION

Lipid autacoids, such as COX-derived prostaglandins, mediate a broad range of physiological processes and, more importantly, are some of the earliest signals triggered by injury and stress. Among the five classical prostanoids derived from COX-dependent metabolism of AA, PGE2 is the major product in most tissues. Indeed, it is one of the most prominent inflammatory mediators released in response to injury. Although it has long been detected in animal models of ocular inflammation,52 the role of the PGE2 circuit in mediating inflammatory responses in the cornea remains poorly defined. Using two well-established and distinct injury models, the present study demonstrates for the first time that endogenous PGE2 in the cornea is not a general inflammatory mediator. Lipidomic analyses revealed that endogenous levels of PGE2 do not significantly increase after initiating an acute epithelial abrasion injury (Fig. 1). In sharp contrast, PGE2 formation markedly increased with a more severe and chronic corneal injury that correlated with the development of pathologic angiogenesis and induction of EP-2 and EP-4 expression in the stroma (Fig. 4). Hence, our findings indicate an injury-specific and selective role for the PGE2 circuit in mediating corneal inflammatory responses, whose induction likely depends on the extent and duration of tissue injury. In this regard, it is important to note that in a model of hypoxia-induced corneal inflammation, the induction of COX-2 expression was not associated with a parallel increase in PGE2 formation.53 In accordance with the induction of PGE2 formation as a selective response to chronic injury, amplification of the PGE2 circuit by topical treatment with PGE2 amplified inflammatory neovascularization (Fig. 2). In sharp contrast, treatment with PGE2 did not affect the wound healing response induced by acute epithelial abrasion. Inflammation and angiogenesis are intimately linked and fundamental responses to injury. Indeed, a body of evidence indicates that many of the cell types involved in inflammatory processes also release several factors that act directly or indirectly on endothelial cells to promote an angiogenic response.54 Moreover, suture-induced inflammatory angiogenesis, with both inflammatory and angiogenic components, is a dynamic response. In this regard, our data show that PGE2 treatment amplified both pathologic angiogenesis and PMN recruitment in response to chronic suture injury (Figs. 2, 3). Indeed, the ability of PGE2 to induce an angiogenic response and to modulate inflammatory and immune responses is well documented.18,34,55,56 Hence, we cannot discern whether
PGE₂ exacerbation of inflammatory neovascularization is the result of direct amplification of angiogenesis or enhancement of the inflammatory response; further studies are needed to dissect the contribution of these two components to PGE₂ regulation of corneal inflammatory neovascularization. PGE₂ is produced by two important enzymes, COX-1 and COX-2. Because of the ubiquitous and constitutive expression of COX-1, it has been widely associated with homeostatic functions, whereas COX-2 is mainly an inducible enzyme that has been linked to pathophysiological PG generation.⁶⁵ Consistent with the increased levels of PGE₂ in the cornea, we observed a robust induction of COX-2 gene expression with chronic injury (Fig. 4). Expression of COX-1 was also upregulated, suggesting that the increase in endogenous PGE₂ formation and the subsequent neovascularization seen with suture injury may be attributed to COX-1, COX-2, or both. Indeed, early studies in rabbits and rats have shown that topical application of both selective COX-2 and nonselective COX inhibitors reduced corneal neovascularization induced by silver/potassium nitrate catarization.⁵⁸-⁶⁰ However, the pronounced induction of COX-2 in our study suggests that it is the prominent source of PGE₂ in the cornea, which is consistent with the role of inducible COX-2 activity in many inflammatory responses.

The myriad and specificity of bioactions of PGE₂ can be attributed to the four EP receptor subtypes, whose cellular expression can be regulated by inflammation and PGE₂ itself.⁶¹,⁶² It is well established that all four EP receptors contribute to the regulation of cell proliferation, tumor angiogenesis and growth, including mammary epithelial hyperplasia and breast and colon carcinogenesis.⁶³,⁶⁴ The role of EP receptors in the cornea is just beginning to unfold. In particular, their regulation during the highly dynamic and complex inflammatory neovascularization has not been determined. We detected basal gene expression of all four EP receptor subtypes in uninjured corneal tissue (Fig. 4), findings that are supported by immunohistochemical data previously reported.⁶⁵ Importantly, though gene expression of EP-3 showed a trend to increase, the expression of EP-2 and EP-4 receptors was markedly upregulated with chronic but not acute injury, correlating with the selective induction of the PGE₂ circuit during inflammatory neovascularization. Indeed, recent evidence implicates a role for EP receptors in ocular angiogenesis. Activation of the EP-4 receptor is reported to contribute to laser-induced choroidal neovascularization and oxygen-induced retinopathy in rat models.⁶⁶ In dogs, corneal neovascularization was a toxic side effect associated with topical administration of a selective EP-4 receptor agonist used to lower intraocular pressure.⁶⁷ In side effect associated with topical administration of a selective COX-2 inhibitor is the prominent source of PGE₂ in the cornea, which is consistent with the role of inducible COX-2 activity in many inflammatory responses.

In this regard, our study uncovers a previously unknown association of the PGE₂ circuit with the eotaxin-CCR3 axis (Fig. 6), a newly identified pathway that contributes to ocular pathologic angiogenesis, which is currently being investigated. In other tissues, evidence has demonstrated PGE₂ to be a potent modulator of angiogenesis ex vivo and in vitro through the induction of angiogenic regulatory proteins such as basic fibroblast growth factor and amphiregulin, a ligand for epidermal growth factor receptors.⁷¹,⁷²,⁷³ We also cannot exclude a direct effect to promote angiogenesis because PGE₂/EP has been reported to enhance the survival of endothelial cells and to promote endothelial cell proliferation, migration, and tube formation.⁷⁴,⁷⁵ Pathologic angiogenesis in the cornea and retina affects millions of people worldwide and is a key feature of several forms of ocular disease, including age-related macular degeneration, retinopathy of prematurity, and keratitis (herpetic and bacterial). Thus, elucidation of endogenous pathways that regulate or promote inflammatory neovascularization is of primary interest. PGE₂ is a prevalent inflammatory mediator in many tissues, but the endogenous role of the PGE₂ circuit in mediating inflammatory responses in the cornea remains to be clearly defined. Our data demonstrate that the PGE₂ circuit is present in the cornea and is selectively upregulated in response to a more severe and chronic nonresolving inflammation. Moreover, amplification of this endogenous circuit with topical PGE₂ selectively exacerbated PMN trafficking and angiogenesis in the chronically inflamed cornea but did not alter the sequelae of an acute injury response. PGE₂ exacerbation of inflammatory neovascularization was unexpectedly independent of the VEGF circuit and was associated with induction of the eotaxin-CCR3 axis, a novel regulator of ocular angiogenesis. Together, our data provide strong evidence for an injury-specific and selective role for the PGE₂ circuit in mediating corneal inflammatory and angiogenic responses, which is of interest given the fact that this lipid circuit is a major clinical target for current treatment options for ocular diseases.
References


