Photorefractive keratectomy (PRK) with an argon fluoride laser (193 nm) was developed to alter the refractive power of the eye predictably and permanently. At PRK the central corneal epithelium is debrided mechanically and a disc 4 to 6 mm in diameter is ablated into the anterior stroma using computer controlled algorithms to control the depth of the wound. Theoretically for corrections of up to −7 dioptres less than 10% of the axial corneal thickness is removed.1 As there is little loss of corneal strength and minimal tissue distortion during surgery, reproducibility is enhanced, producing a potentially superior refractive technique to radial keratotomy.

Initial enthusiasm for PRK was based on the remarkable precision and smoothness of the ablated surface24 which it was hoped would be translated to an accurate change in refraction. An ideal result would be achieved if the corneal epithelium then assumed the contour of the ablated surface and there was no stromal regeneration. However, it is now apparent that an initial period of overcorrection is followed by regression to a relatively stable refraction and that in a proportion of cases stromal scarring can produce glare and a loss of best corrected visual acuity.24 Despite the precision of the PRK ablation the accuracy of the final refraction is at present only comparable to radial keratotomy. Accordingly 5 months after PRK approximately 55% of eyes have an unaided vision of 6/6, while 95% of eyes with −2.00 dioptres of error are within 1 dioptre of their intended refraction,1 but with considerable variation between individuals.25 This error in final refraction is due to the normal response of the cornea to an anterior keratectomy, which is to regenerate tissue to restore the integrity of the eye. Anterior stromal haze after PRK is thought to result from light scattered by scar tissue and has been shown to be more severe with increased ablation depth.7-11 Gartry et al detected a reduction in corneal transparency in 92% of patients, of whom 18% had lost one to two lines of best corrected Snellen acuity 1 year after surgery.1 Additionally, if a small ablation zone (4 mm) is used positive spherical aberration (creating a halo effect) occurs in conditions of reduced illumination as the pupil dilates past the edge of the ablation.12 Although these halos can be eliminated by using a larger ablation zone,13 this entails an increased depth of ablation with its associated increased risk of haze.4

A potential loss of transparency in the optical axis of an otherwise healthy eye must give cause for concern. Unfortunately, topical corticosteroid therapy following PRK has not been demonstrated to reduce subepithelial haze or regression significantly.4 Trials are therefore in progress to evaluate different postoperative regimens to minimise scar formation. As modification of the wound healing response may become an integral part of the management of patients following PRK it is opportune to review our current concepts of corneal scar formation.

Wound healing after PRK

Corneal wound healing passes through a series of well defined stages which are similar following laser or mechanical keratectomy. Tissue destruction stimulates a directed migration towards the wound of activated epithelial cells, fibroblasts, and macrophages which participate in the removal of damaged tissue and the de novo synthesis of ground substance; finally, there is a period of wound remodelling and increased collagen cross linkage in the mature scar. Elements of the healing process can be considered separately.

EPITHELIAL WOUND HEALING

Epithelial cell slide begins at the edge of the wound after a short latent phase during which structural proteins are synthesised, actin microfilaments polymerised, and damaged cells desquamated.11 Hemidesmosomal attachments to the basement membrane are released in a zone of 50 to 70 μm from the wound edge allowing these cells to move as a monolayer to cover the defect. This early movement is independent of cellular division13-14 but cell numbers are subsequently replaced by division and centripetal migration from a population of slow cycling stem cells in the basal layer at the limbus.15-17

Although permanent epithelial cell attachments are released during migration, adhesion to the corneal surface is maintained via transient macromolecular focal contacts. The principal components of these transient attachments are the dimeric glycoproteins, fibronectin and laminin, which bind to the type IV collagen of the basement membrane and to an integrin molecule in the cell membrane which in turn is linked to intracellular actin. Sliding cells release plasminogen activators which cleave these temporary focal contacts,16 and permanent anchoring filaments of type VII collagen are regenerated when movement is terminated by contact inhibition.19-21 Finally, the epithelial layer thins over protuberances and thickens over defects in the stroma – an overall effect that tends to smooth out irregularities in the corneal surface.

The synthesis of new, functional attachment complexes is complete 4 weeks after PRK but in monkey corneas there are still missing, fragmented, and thickened areas of basement membrane after 18 months20-25 with regions of the epithelium devoid of type VII collagen anchoring fibrils.26 A failure to re-establish firm anchoring points contributes to epithelial breakdown21 which occurs in 3% of eyes after PRK,2 and may contribute to the small number of patients who have either a foreign body sensation, watering, or tenderness on rubbing the eye up to 2 years following surgery.18

STROMAL WOUND HEALING

Stromal regeneration depends upon a coordinated interaction between epithelial cells and kerocytes. Epithelial cells maintain a protective environment suitable for stromal cell proliferation26 and release cytokines that stimulate kerocyte migration and division.27 Fibrin and fibronectin are deposited from the tear film onto the wound and act as a scaffold for the adhesion of neutrophils, macrophages, and lymphocytes. Simultaneously, kerocytes die back in a 200 μm zone from the exposed wound surface,21 and migrate back to the surface.
Changes in the ground substance in corneal scars can be demonstrated by staining the proteoglycans in full thickness or superficial keratectomy wounds. In early scar tissue the proteoglycan filaments are much larger than normal and contain mostly highly sulphated, high idurionate DSPG, which persists for months and is accompanied with a reduction in the concentration of the KSPG. These abnormal proteoglycans may contribute to the high water content and vacuolated appearance, which in turn contributes to the corneal haze. There are other changes in structure. Hyaluronic acid is present in only small quantities in human and rabbit cornea but is deposited in the rabbit cornea after laser keratectomy, and chondroitin-6-sulphate is not found in normal stroma but is uniformly distributed with chondroitin-4-sulphate in all scar tissue. The significance of these observations has not been established.

In some respects scar formation recapitulates fetal corneal formation. Fibrils secreted in the early stages of scar formation are similar in diameter to those of fibrils secreted in embryogenesis. However, there is no longer domain structure superimposed on newly synthesised collagen in scar tissue and the ratio of interfibrillar type VI collagen to type I collagen is reduced compared with developing cornea. Activated keratocytes also express fetal surface antigens for approximately 6 weeks after injury. During the development of the cornea there is normally a change in the component GAGs from DSPG in the fetus to KSPG which is the predominant proteoglycan in the adult of most species. Resorption and remodelling of damaged collagen is an integral component of wound repair. Resorption is initiated by proteolytic enzymes from polymorphonuclear leucocytes and is continued by macrophages, epithelial cells, and keratocytes. The degradation of collagen is catalysed at neutral pH by a group of structurally related metalloproteaseases (collagenase, stromelysin, gelatinase). Only very small quantities of type IV collagenase and gelatinase have been detected in the unwounded cornea, suggesting they play a role in the maintenance of the extracellular matrix, but following injury the expression of these enzymes is increased for prolonged periods as they are secreted into the extracellular matrix by epithelial and stromal cells or by invading inflammatory cells.

Regulation of repair and remodelling
The factors that control the maturation of scar tissue have become the subject of intense scrutiny. In the uninjured cornea there is a balance between cell production and loss, and the levels of stimulatory and inhibitory growth factors. Cells that are injured become activated and produce cytokines. These are potent peptide or glycoprotein regulatory factors that can act as autocrine or paracrine agents to mediate communications between cells and coordinate chemotaxis, cellular proliferation, and protein synthesis. By acting as competence factors or promoters of DNA synthesis they may have a primary action or they may allow a secondary effect. Signal transduction by cytokines is believed to require binding to a cellular receptor, where an active agent may be cleaved, producing stimulation of the cytoplasmic domain of the receptor and activated kinase. The signal thus stimulates the transcription of other signalling molecules and mediates the complex biological responses associated with inflammation and wound healing. Indeed, the pattern of cytokines may influence the degree of cellular infiltration in wounds, and the effect of a single agent may vary according to the cellular environment.

In the avascular corneal cytokines are probably derived from macrophages and fibroblasts. Platelet derived growth factor (PDGF), transforming growth factor beta (TGF-β), basic fibroblast growth factor (FGF), the interleukins (II-1,
Il-6, IL-8), and tumour necrosis factor alpha (TNF-α) all modulate wound healing. TGF-β and PDGF in particular are strong chemotactic agents and mitogens for fibroblasts, but they can also block cell differentiation and stimulate gelatinase production. TGF-β is auto-inductive in that it is a chemotactic factor for fibroblasts that in turn secrete more TGF-β; thus regulatory processes must exist which terminate stromal repair.

The inhibitory processes of corneal repair are understood poorly and may depend on whether the epithelium is stable or injured. Kerocytes probably secrete factors which inhibit their growth, and secreted TGF-β may both stimulate the deposition of extracellular matrix and suppress matrix degrading enzymes. The complexity of these inter-relationships suggests that any modulation of cytokines to control healing would require the use of combination therapies.

The clinical effect of wound healing
It has been demonstrated in rabbits, monkeys, and humans that scar tissue is formed following PRK and that the depth of scar tissue is roughly proportional to the depth of the ablation. The scarring is also proportional to ablation depth and, although there are large individual variations, the haze is maximal at 4 to 6 months and then diminishes. Any figure for the incidence of haze depends upon the definition of the term; Seiler et al reported ‘scarring’ in as few as 1-8% of patients with <6-0 D correction, while Gartry et al noted the development of ‘haze’ in as many as 92% of eyes after <7-0 D correction, of whom 18% lost Snellen acuity. Forward scatter from haze results in loss of low (5%) contrast sensitivity.

Although a large number of patients have undergone PRK for treatment of myopia, the presentation of systematic follow up data of refraction results is less common. It appears that after an initial overcorrection, which is proportional to the attempted correction, there is a rapid regression in the first 1 to 2 months (owing to epithelial hyperplasia); haze begins to develop 4 to 6 weeks after PRK (possibly as a result of stromal regeneration) and a relatively stable refraction is achieved by 3 to 5 months. The accuracy of the procedure is then usually defined as the percentage of eyes within the band ±1-0 dioptres of the intended refraction; this definition produces a natural bias toward greater accuracy for the correction of low refractive error. It can thus be expected that 95% of patients with 2 dioptres of error will achieve this target, but this figure falls to 20% when 7 dioptre corrections are attempted. Thus the greater the attempted correction the smaller the number of patients within these limits. There is a relationship between the amount of haze and the regression of refraction (mean correlation=0-68), suggesting that stromal regeneration is a major source of residual refractive error following PRK. The intensity of the haze is proportional to loss of contrast sensitivity, moderately correlated with Snellen acuity loss but not proportional to any halo effect. It is possible that regression is greater when a smaller diameter is used. Sher et al reported encouraging results for errors of up to 1-45 dioptres using beam diameter up to 60 mm and a cut depth as great as 230 μm; other studies in which regression has been a problem have used 3-5 to 48 mm discs. Seiler et al have claimed that undercorrection can be treated and scars removed by reablation after 6 months with a low incidence of recurrence, although their figure (1-8%) for scarring after PRK was already remarkably low. However, early repeat PRK (3 months post PRK) induced exaggerated response and opacification in monkeys.

The prevention of fibrosis
A number of approaches have been suggested to control scar formation after PRK. Corticosteroids are known to inhibit corneal stromal remodeling and to reduce the deposition of scar tissue in experimental models of PRK. Topical steroids have been incorporated in most postoperative regimens. It has even been suggested that the administration of steroid can be titrated against the extent of haze and the regression. The mechanism of this steroid effect is uncertain but may be by prevention of the recruitment of macrophages and lymphocytes to the wound, or via a distinct anti-inflammatory effect by reducing DNA synthesis and collagen deposition in activated fibroblasts.

In a randomised, double masked, prospective study examining the effect of topical corticosteroid at two discrete ablation depths, Gartry et al found a statistically significant improvement in the induced refraction in the steroid treatment group, but this effect was lost after 3 months when steroids were discontinued. For 6-0 D ablations the final effect was statistically insignificant in spite of a 0-78D difference between placebo and treatment groups, which may be clinically useful. No effect on haze was found and in view of the known complications the long term use of steroid would seem to be unacceptable.

Antimetabolites such as 5-fluorouracil and mitomycin-C have an established role in preventing fibrosis following drainage surgery for glaucoma, and they enhance the effect of topical steroids following experimental PRK. However, these agents are toxic both to epithelial cells and to fibroblasts, and topical application could delay epithelialisation. Their efficacy and safety therefore need to be validated.

Approaches to the prevention of fibrosis which mimic the natural signals to terminate scarring warrant further investigation. For example, recombinant human EGF stimulates epithelial maturation, while neutralising antibodies applied to the wound could reduce the concentration of TGF-β, the major fibroblastic cytokine of early wound healing.

Similarly, application of α 2-macroglobulin to bind TGF-β may augment natural cytokine clearance. Other agents, such as interferon α 2b, which inhibit fibroblast proliferation, migration, and collagenase production are being evaluated.

Any hyperplasia of the corneal epithelium over the bed of a PRK wound will reduce the induced refractive change, and the epithelium tends to be thicker at the edge of an ablation than at the centre. We are unaware of any method to prevent epithelial hyperplasia in this situation, but we hypothesise that the effect may be reduced by using a larger ablation diameter and blending the transition between the treated and untreated regions of the cornea.

The regenerative response of the cornea is less marked if an intrastromal keratectomy rather than an anterior keratectomy is performed, suggesting that the fibroblastic stimulus is augmented by epithelial destruction. Laser assisted keratomileusis has therefore been suggested for the correction of higher myopic errors where haze and regression would be greater.

Conclusions
At present the predictability of PRK can only be described as fair for myopia up to 4 dioptres. If predictability were increased and haze reduced the procedure would supplant all available refractive surgical procedures but at present enthusiasm is ahead of published data, and the maximum follow up is 3 years. However, it must be said that a high proportion of patients are very pleased with the outcome and objective assessment may not provide a true index of satisfaction. In many instances patients are impressed with the reduction, if not the elimination, of their myopia.
The justification for refractive surgery in an otherwise normal eye must centre on the accuracy of the procedure in the absence of any subsequent functional disability. Stromal regeneration following PK may produce corneal haze and regression of the induced refraction. Haze is the result of the scattering of light by the deposition of scar tissue. The major options for the development of PK are thus to limit the surgery to the correction of low myopia where small amounts of scar tissue are produced, to perform intrastromal ablation, or to inhibit scar formation. The development of effective methods to control the scar response will determine the future course of this procedure on ophthalmic practice.

STEPHEN J TUFT
DAVID S GARTRY

Moorfields Eye Hospital, City Road, London EC1V 2PD

Oxford Research Unit, The Open University, Foxcombe Hall, Berkshire Road, Boars Hill, Oxford OX1 3HR

IAN M RAWE
KEITH M MEEK


Photorefractive keratectomy: implications of corneal wound healing


