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Citation for published version (APA):

Document status and date:
Published: 01/01/2003

DOI:
10.1046/j.1538-7836.2003.00077.x

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:
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von Willebrand factor stimulates thrombin-induced exposure of procoagulant phospholipids on the surface of fibrin-adherent platelets

J. J. BRIEDÉ,* S. J. H. WIELDERS,* J. W. M. HEEMSKERK, D. BARUCH,† H. C. HEMKER* and T. LINDHOUT* 
*Department of Biochemistry, Cardiovascular Research Institute Maastricht, Maastricht University, Maastricht, the Netherlands; and †INSERM U143, Le Kremlin-Bicêtre, France

Summary. Studies from our laboratory have demonstrated that von Willebrand factor (VWF) stimulates thrombin generation in platelet-rich plasma. The precise role of VWF and fibrin in this reaction, however, remained to be clarified. In the present study we utilized thrombin-free planar fibrin layers and washed platelets to examine the relationship between platelet–fibrin interaction and exposure of coagulation-stimulating phosphatidylycerine (PS) under conditions of low and high shear stress. Our study confirms that platelet adhesion to fibrin at a shear rate of 1000 s\(^{-1}\) requires fibrin-bound VWF. The cytosolic calcium concentration ([Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\)) of stationary platelets was not elevated and PS exposing platelets were virtually absent (2 ± 2%). However, thrombin activation resulted in a marked increase in the number of PS exposing platelets (up to 85 ± 14%) along with a transient elevation in [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\), from 0.05 μmol L\(^{-1}\) up to 1.1 ± 0.2 μmol L\(^{-1}\). Platelet adhesion to fibrin at a shear rate of 50 s\(^{-1}\) is mediated by thrombin but not by fibrin-bound VWF. The [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\) of these thrombin-activated platelets was elevated (0.2 ± 0.1 μmol L\(^{-1}\)), but only a minority of the platelets (11 ± 8%) exposed PS. The essential role of VWF in this thrombin-induced procoagulant response became apparent from low shear rate perfusion studies over fibrin that was incubated with VWF and botrocetin. After treatment with thrombin, the majority of the adherent platelets (57 ± 23%) exposed PS and had peak values of [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\) of about 0.6 μmol L\(^{-1}\). Taken together, these results demonstrate that thrombin-induced exposure of PS and high calcium response on fibrin-adherent platelets depends on shear- or botrocetin-induced VWF–platelet interaction.

Keywords: fibrin, platelet procoagulant activity, von Willebrand factor.

Thrombus formation at an injured vessel wall involves platelet adhesion, platelet activation and fibrin formation. Previous studies have provided evidence that fibrin, besides physically entrapping platelets [1], may also be involved in signal pathways that result in the exposure of anionic phospholipids (PS) at the plasma membrane of platelets [2,3]. The presence of PS in the outer leaflet of the platelet plasma membrane is of physiological importance because of its critical role in maintaining thrombin generation at the surface of a developing thrombus [4]. Platelets adhere to fibrin by molecular mechanisms that vary with the surface shear rate [5,6]. At low shear rates, platelet adhesion is mediated by integrin α\(_{IIb}\)β\(_3\) whereas at high shear rates an interaction between platelet glycoprotein (GP) Ib and fibrin-bound von Willebrand factor (VWF) tethers the platelets as a prerequisite for an irreversible, integrin α\(_{IIb}\)β\(_3\)-mediated, adhesion to fibrin [7–10].

Recently, conflicting reports appeared on the role for GPIb in the development of procoagulant platelets. Studies in platelet-rich plasma revealed that VWF supports thrombin generation by two mechanisms: one that involves integrin α\(_{IIb}\)β\(_3\) but not fibrin and another one that depends on both fibrin and GPIb [3]. Other investigators studied the thrombin-dependent expression of procoagulant activity in suspensions of gel-filtered platelets and found that the GPIb binding site for thrombin, but not that for VWF, has a key role in the exposure of procoagulant phospholipids on the platelet surface, implying that VWF does not function in this response [11]. Earlier studies, however, indicated that PAR1 is the primary mediator of thrombin-stimulated platelet procoagulant activity, implicating that GPIb does not play a major role [12]. Thus, it remains to be clarified what role GPIb and the interaction with its physiological ligand VWF plays in the exposure of procoagulant PS.

In this study, we examined the stimulatory effect of fibrin-bound VWF on the procoagulant response of fibrin-adherent platelets under flow conditions, utilizing a plasma free system to avoid any contribution of in situ generated thrombin. The procoagulant response was probed by the binding of annexin V in addition to changes in the cytosolic calcium concentration of adherent platelets. The data confirms that stable adhesion to fibrin requires VWF at high but not at low shear rate. This interaction does not result in increased cytosolic calcium levels, or in the exposure of PS. However, GPIb-VWF-mediated
adhesion of platelets to fibrin appears to be a prerequisite for thrombin to induce PS exposure in association with transiently increased cytosolic calcium levels.

**Materials and methods**

**Materials**

Unfractionated heparin and bovine serum albumin (Sigma, St. Louis, USA); chromogenic substrate for thrombin, S2238 (Chromogenix, Mölndal, Sweden); D-Phe-Pro-Arg chloromethylketone (Calbiochem, San Diego, USA); 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphocholine (DOPC) and 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphoserine (DOPS) (Avanti Polar Lipids, Alabaster, AL, USA); calcein acetoxymethyl ester and fura-2 acetoxymethyl ester (Molecular Probes, Leiden, the Netherlands) and botrocetin (Kordia, Leiden, the Netherlands) and were purchased from commercial sources as indicated.

**Proteins and antibodies**

Recombinant human tissue factor was a kind gift of Dr. Y. Nemerson (Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA) and was relipidated as described before [13]. Human α-thrombin was prepared as previously described [14]. An affinity purified polyclonal rabbit antihuman VWF antibody was obtained from the Central Laboratory of the Red Cross (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). Monovalent Fab fragments of a monoclonal antibody directed against GP Ib (6B4 Fab) described previously [15] were a kind gift of Dr. H. Deckmyn (Laboratory for Thrombosis Research, Kortrijk, Belgium). Fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) labeled swine antirabbit IgG was from Dako (A/S, Glostrup, Denmark). Purified VWF and a monoclonal antibody (MoAb 9) directed against the platelet α2β3 binding site on VWF were described before [16]. Oregon Green 488-labeled annexin V came from Nexins Research (Hoeven, the Netherlands). The source of the platelet α2β3 receptor blocker abeiximab was as described [17]. The specific protease-activated receptor 1 (PAR1) ligand SFLLRN was obtained from Bachem (Bubendorf, Switzerland).

**Platelets**

Suspensions of washed platelets were prepared as described previously [18]. The supernatant of the final wash-step contained less than 3 ng mL⁻¹ VWF. Where indicated, platelet-rich plasma was incubated with 2.5 μmol L⁻¹ calcein acetoxymethyl ester or 3 μmol L⁻¹ fura-2 acetoxymethyl ester in the presence of 0.1 U mL⁻¹ apyrase during 45 min at 37 °C. The platelets were then spun down and washed twice with Heps buffer pH6.6 (in mmol L⁻¹; 10 Heps, 136 NaCl, 5 glucose, 2.7 KCl, 2 MgCl₂, and 1 mg mL⁻¹ bovine serum albumin) containing apyrase (0.1 U mL⁻¹). Finally, the platelets were resuspended in Heps buffer adjusted to pH 7.4. Platelets were counted (Coulter, Miami, FL, USA) and the suspensions were adjusted to 3.0 × 10⁸ platelets mL⁻¹.

**Preparation of planar fibrin layers**

Fibrin layer was prepared as originally described by Remijn et al. [19]. A parallel plate flow chamber was filled with 0.3 mmol L⁻¹ tissue factor embedded in 30 μmol L⁻¹ DOPS (25 mol%/DOPC (75 mol%) vesicles and incubated for 20 min. Non-bound vesicles were removed by flushing the chamber with Tris-buffer (50 mmol L⁻¹ Tris, 175 mmol L⁻¹ NaCl, pH 7.9). Subsequently, the flow chamber was perfused with plasma that was diluted 5-fold with Tris-buffer containing 1 μL⁻¹ heparin and 3 mmol L⁻¹ CaCl₂. After 20 min, when a network of fibrin strands was formed, the flow chamber was flushed with Tris-buffer to remove plasma proteins. Immuno-staining with primary polyclonal rabbit anti-human VWF antibody (10 μg/mL) during 60 min and a secondary FITC-labeled swine antirabbit antibody (1:50 dilution) during 60 min revealed the presence of VWF. The fibrin layer was then incubated for 1 h with 50 μmol L⁻¹ D-Phe-Pro-Arg chloromethylketone (PPACK) and with purified plasma-derived human VWF (10 μg mL⁻¹). Finally, the flow chamber was rinsed with Heps buffer during 10 min at a shear rate of 1000 s⁻¹. Immuno-staining for VWF as described resulted in twofold increase in fluorescence intensity.

**Platelet flow studies**

The flow chamber used in this study was as described previously [20]. Perfusion experiments with washed platelets (3.0 × 10⁸ platelets mL⁻¹) in Heps buffer containing 3 mmol L⁻¹ CaCl₂ were performed at 100 μL min⁻¹ in flow chambers with a slit depth of 200 μm (shear rate 50 s⁻¹) and at 125 μL min⁻¹ in flow chambers with a slit depth of 50 μm (shear rate 1000 s⁻¹). All procedures were performed at ambient temperature (21–22 °C).

**Perfusion with thrombin-activated platelets**

The inlet of the flow chamber was connected to two syringes; one containing the platelet suspension (3.8 × 10⁸ platelets mL⁻¹) in Heps buffer containing 3 mmol L⁻¹ CaCl₂ and the other containing 0.5 μmol L⁻¹ thrombin in Heps buffer. The pump-driven syringes were set at flow rates of 80 and 20 μL min⁻¹, respectively, resulting in the perfusion of platelets that were activated with 100 nmol L⁻¹ thrombin, just before they entered the flow chamber.

**Phase contrast and fluorescence microscopy**

Phase contrast and fluorescent real-time images were recorded as described before [18]. Briefly, the flow chamber was placed on the stage of an inverted microscope (Diaphot 200, Nikon, Tokyo, Japan). Phase contrast and fluorescence images are recorded via a 40 × quartz oil-immersion objective coupled to a high-resolution and a low-light level intensified, charge-coupled device camera, respectively. Oregon Green 488, calcein and FITC fluorescence were observed with a 485-nm excitation filter (bandpass of 40 nm), a 505-nm dichroic long-pass filter,
and a 530-nm emission filter (bandpass of 30 nm). Four fluorescence images were taken every 10 s, digitized and averaged after subtraction of background images, and the resulting images were stored. Image analysis was performed off-line using Quanticell 700/900 software (Visitech, Sunderland, UK). Fura-2 fluorescence, as a probe for intracellular calcium concentration, was measured with alternating 340 nm and 380 nm excitation filters (bandpass 15 nm), a 400-nm dichroic mirror and a 510-nm emission filter (bandpass 40 nm). Four fluorescence images were taken every 3 s, averaged, background subtracted and ratio images were calculated. Calibration of fluorescence ratio to molar concentrations of intracellular calcium was according to Grynkiewicz et al. [21].

Platelet adhesion is expressed as the percentage of total area covered with fluorescent (calcine-loaded) stationary platelets, and was calculated from at least five different microscopic fields in three independent experiments. PS exposure is expressed as the percentage of total area covered with platelets that bind Oregon Green-labeled annexin V, and was calculated from at least five different microscopic fields in three independent experiments.

Statistics

To determine the significance of differences, P-values were obtained with a non-parametric test for two independent variables (Mann–Whitney test).

Results and discussion

Shear-induced adhesion of platelets to fibrin and exposure of anionic phospholipids

A thin fibrin layer was formed under flow from tissue factor-driven coagulating human plasma at the glass coverslip surface mounted in a parallel plate flow chamber as described in Materials and methods. Scanning electron microscopy showed an homogeneous coverage of the coverslip area with fibrin strands varying in thickness from 0.1 to 0.3 µm and aligned in the direction of the flow. No binding of Oregon Green-labeled annexin V to the phospholipids layer underneath the fibrin layer could be detected, suggesting a complete coverage of the glass surface with fibrin. In all perfusion experiments fibrin layers were used that were incubated with PPACK and VWF to inactivate fibrin-bound thrombin and to saturate the fibrin with VWF, respectively.

Perfusion of washed platelets at a wall shear rate of 1000 s⁻¹ over the VWF-fibrin layer resulted in a rapid surface coverage with stationary (irreversibly bound) platelets (Fig. 1). After 10 min perfusion, the surface coverage was 75 ± 7% (mean ± SD; n = 15). This is slightly less than in similar perfusion experiments with PPACK anticoagulated whole blood (data not shown). Adhesion of stationary platelets appeared to depend on the interactions between VWF and the platelet receptors GPIb and integrin α₂β₃β₃ for the following reasons: less than 1% of the surface was covered after 10 min perfusion with stationary platelets when the fibrin layer was pretreated with [1] a polyclonal antihuman VWF antibody (10 µg mL⁻¹) or [2] a blocking antibody (20 µg mL⁻¹) against the integrin α₂β₃β₃ binding site on VWF (MoAb 9). Moreover, essentially no platelets adhered when the platelets were incubated prior to perfusion with [1] Fab fragments of MoAb 6B4 (10 µg mL⁻¹) directed against the VWF binding site on GP Ib or [2] abciximab (20 µg mL⁻¹) an integrin α₂β₃ antagonist. Taken together, these findings are compatible with the notion that VWF must sequentially engage both GPIbα and α₂β₃β₃ to achieve surface coverage with stationary platelets [22–24]. It has been proposed that the interaction between immobilized VWF and GPIbα, generates an intracellular second messenger that signals the conversion of α₂β₃β₃ from a low affinity to a high affinity receptor for immobilized VWF [25,26].

Analysis of the changes in [Ca²⁺]ᵢ of the stationary platelets revealed that virtually all platelets exhibited low, non-oscillating [Ca²⁺]ᵢ of around 50 nmol L⁻¹. However, the platelets might have exhibited transient increase in [Ca²⁺]ᵢ immediately after platelet interaction with fibrin-bound VWF, as have been described by Nesbitt et al. [26] for interaction between immobilized VWF and platelets. Accordingly, under these experimental conditions, platelet binding via activated integrin α₂β₃β₃ is not associated with at least a persistent rise in [Ca²⁺]ᵢ. Similar observations have earlier been made with platelets adhering to fibrinogen [18] or monomeric fibrin [27]. The observation that only 2 ± 2% (mean ± SD; n = 20) of the adherent platelets bound annexin V is in accordance with the notion that, regardless of the agonist, a high elevation in [Ca²⁺]ᵢ (µmol L⁻¹ range) persisting during a certain time (minute range) is required for evoking membrane PS exposure [18,28].

When a thrombin solution (100 nmol L⁻¹) was passed over fibrin-adherent platelets, [Ca²⁺]ᵢ transiently increased from 50 nmol L⁻¹ to a peak values of 1.1 ± 0.2 µmol L⁻¹ (mean ± SD, n = 5) (Fig. 2a,b). The rapid increase in [Ca²⁺]ᵢ was accompanied with a slow increase in the number of platelets.

Fig. 1. VWF-mediated platelet adhesion on fibrin. Calcein-loaded washed platelets (3.0 × 10⁸ cells mL⁻¹) resuspended in Hepes buffer pH 7.4 (in mmol L⁻¹: 10 Hepes, 136 NaCl, 5 glucose, 2.7 KCl, 2 MgCl₂, 3 CaCl₂, and 1 mg mL⁻¹ bovine serum albumin) were perfused at a wall shear rate of 1000 s⁻¹ over a fibrin layer that was incubated with human VWF (10 µg mL⁻¹) and PPACK (50 µmol L⁻¹). Fluorescence images were captured at different time intervals and off-line analyzed for surface coverage. Symbols indicate: (●), control and (■), VWF-fibrin incubated for 1 h with polyclonal antihuman VWF antibody (10 µg mL⁻¹) prior to perfusion with platelet suspension.

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that bound annexin V (Fig. 2c). It could be argued that transport limitations are causing the relatively slow binding of annexin V. Control experiments, however, showed that fibrin-adherent platelets that were pretreated with a calcium ionophore (5 μmol L\(^{-1}\) ionomycin in the presence of 3 mmol L\(^{-1}\) CaCl\(_2\)) rapidly bound annexin V when perfused under the same conditions (data not shown).

Off-line analysis of the fluorescence images of randomly chosen microscopic fields, taken 10 min after the influx of thrombin and OG-labeled annexin V, revealed that 85 ± 14% (mean ± SD; \(n = 30\)) of the surface was covered with annexin V binding platelets (Fig. 2d). By varying the thrombin concentration it appeared that 5 mmol L\(^{-1}\) of thrombin was sufficient to induce within 10 min the appearance of annexin V binding sites on 50% of the adherent platelets (data not shown). This finding sharply contrasts from the situation where thrombin is added to platelets on fibrinogen in the absence of flow and VWF. Thrombin causes under these conditions a repetitive spiking instead of a continuous elevation in [Ca\(^{2+}\)], [29] that is not followed by significant exposure of annexin V binding sites [30].

To explore whether the thrombin receptors PAR1 and/or GPIb are involved in the thrombin-induced responses of fibrin-adherent platelets, experiments were performed in which fibrin-adherent platelets were incubated with the PAR1 ligand SFLLRN (150 μmol L\(^{-1}\)). Like thrombin, SFLLRN caused a rapid and transient increase in [Ca\(^{2+}\)] with a peak value of about 0.25 mmol L\(^{-1}\). This response was lower than the response seen with thrombin. In contrast to the observation with thrombin, no increase in the number of annexin V binding platelets was observed. That is, surface coverage with annexin V binding platelets prior to and after treatment with SFLLRN was 2 ± 2% (mean ± SD, \(n = 5\)) and 2 ± 2% (mean ± SD, \(n = 5\)), respectively. It is apparent that in this flow system PAR1-signaling alone is unable to translocate sufficient PS from the inner leaflet to the outer leaflet of the platelet plasma membrane to bind annexin V. This could support the previous observation that in thrombin-induced platelet activation a cooperative role of PAR1 and GPIb is involved [31]. When the SFLLRN-treated platelets were subsequently exposed to thrombin (100 mmol L\(^{-1}\)), a slight increase (10%) in surface coverage with annexin V binding platelets was found. This finding is compatible with the notion...
that SFLLRN desensitizes the thrombin-induced procoagulant response of platelets [11].

Taken together, these results confirm that under conditions of high shear stress, attachment of stationary platelets on fibrin requires GPIb–VWF interaction to initiate a firm interaction between integrin $\alpha_{IIb}\beta_{3}$ and VWF or fibrin. These GPIb- and integrin $\alpha_{IIb}\beta_{3}$–mediated interactions do not result in a substantial increase in $[\text{Ca}^{2+}]_{i}$, nor in exposure of PS in the outer leaflet of the plasma membrane. Furthermore, under these shear conditions, additional activation by thrombin is required to increase the cytosolic calcium concentration to levels that are sufficiently high to trigger PS exposure. The PAR1 agonist, SFLLRN, when compared with thrombin, fails to induce PS exposure under the present flow conditions.

**Platelet adhesion at low shear rate and exposure of anionic phospholipids**

To find support for the notion that the shear dependent VWF–platelet interaction, contributes to the thrombin-induced platelet procoagulant response, similar perfusion experiments were performed under conditions of low shear stress. In agreement with earlier published data [32], nonactivated platelets do not adhere on fibrin. After 10 min perfusion at a shear rate of 50 s$^{-1}$, the area coverage with stationary platelets was less than 1%.

In contrast, the number of stationary platelets greatly increased in time when the platelets were activated with thrombin (100 nmol L$^{-1}$) just before they entered the flow chamber (Fig. 3a). After 10 min perfusion, 12 ± 7% (mean ± SD; $n = 15$) of the total area was covered with adherent platelets (Fig. 3b). In comparison with high shear condition, the rate at which thrombin-activated platelets adhered to fibrin at low shear stress was much slower. We note that this is likely due to the lower transport rate of platelets to the adhesive surface. Phase contrast microscopy (Fig. 3c) showed that in addition to single adherent platelets also small aggregates (5–20 platelets) attached to the fibrin surface. Aggregation in the thrombin-activated platelet suspension was however, not observed. Cytosolic calcium concentrations were measured in adherent platelets 10 min after the start of the perfusion. The $[\text{Ca}^{2+}]_{i}$ of these thrombin-activated platelets was 0.2 ± 0.1 mmol L$^{-1}$ (mean ± SD; $n = 5$) and thus higher than the basal level of 50 nmol L$^{-1}$ of platelets that adhered to VWF in the absence of thrombin under high-shear conditions. Yet, after low-shear perfusion only a few platelets (11 ± 8%; mean ± SD, $n = 30$) bound annexin V.

To investigate whether at low shear rate VWF was also involved in fibrin adhesion of thrombin-activated platelets, we investigated the effect of a blocking polyclonal rabbit antihuman VWF antibody (10 μg mL$^{-1}$). With this antibody

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**Fig. 3.** Effect of thrombin on platelet adhesion to fibrin under low shear stress. (a) Calcein-loaded washed platelets ($3.9 \times 10^{8}$ cells mL$^{-1}$) resuspended in Hepes buffer (see Fig. 1) were perfused in the absence (■) and presence of 100 nmol L$^{-1}$ thrombin (●) at a wall shear rate of 50 s$^{-1}$ over a fibrin layer that was treated with human VWF (10 μg mL$^{-1}$) and PPACK (50 μmol L$^{-1}$) as described. Fluorescence images were captured and analyzed off-line for the surface coverage with platelets. (b) Following a 5-min rinse with Hepes to remove non-bound platelets, fluorescence images were captured from 5 different microscopic fields and off-line analyzed for surface coverage with stationary platelets. VWF and PPACK treated fibrin were perfused with: non-treated, washed platelets (control) and thrombin-activated platelets (thrombin). In addition, thrombin-activated platelets were perfused over fibrin that was incubated with 10 μg mL$^{-1}$ polyclonal antihuman VWF antibody (Thrombin + a-VWF). (c) Phase contrast image of the fibrin layer after 10 min perfusion with thrombin-activated platelets and subsequent rinse with Hepes.
present, the area coverage with adherent platelets was 27 ± 9% (mean ± SD; n = 15), which is not significantly different (P = 0.13) from that observed in the control experiment, i.e. 12 ± 7% (mean ± SD; n = 15). Accordingly, at low shear rate, VWF does not appear to play a significant role in the adhesion of thrombin-activated platelets to fibrin.

**Botrocetin and exposure of PS at fibrin-adherent platelet**

To achieve VWF-mediated platelet adhesion at a low shear rate (50 s⁻¹), washed platelets were passed over a VWF-fibrin layer that was preincubated with botrocetin (5 U mL⁻¹). Ten minutes after the start of the flow 11 ± 4% (mean ± SD; n = 10) of the area was covered with platelets. The cytosolic calcium concentration, amounting to 70 nmol L⁻¹, of these platelets was not substantially increased above the basal level of 50 nmol L⁻¹. The percentage of adherent platelets that bound annexin V also remained low, namely 1.3 ± 2.3% (mean ± SD; n = 20). However, when a thrombin solution (100 nmol L⁻¹) was passed over the fibrin/botrocetin-adherent platelets, [Ca²⁺], immediately increased to 0.7 μmol L⁻¹ (Fig. 4a), while 57 ± 23% (mean ± SD; n = 20) of the adherent platelets bound annexin V, as measured 10 min after the start of the perfusion with a thrombin-annexin V solution (Fig. 4b). That under these conditions platelet adhesion was mediated by VWF appeared from the observation that preincubation of the botrocetin-contained coverslip with anti-VWF antibody completely abolished botrocetin-induced platelet adhesion.

In conclusion, this study that utilized a plasma-free flow system clearly demonstrated that shear-induced platelet adhesion to fibrin is not accompanied with substantially elevated [Ca²⁺], nor associated with exposure of annexin V binding sites on the platelet surface. Thrombin, however, induced a transient increase in [Ca²⁺], of the adherent platelets, which at high shear but not at low shear was followed by the exposure of annexin V binding sites. This indicates that VWF-mediated adhesion of platelets to fibrin is a prerequisite for thrombin to expose PS on the outer leaflet of the platelet plasma membrane. It is apparent that sufficiently high [Ca²⁺] levels for maximal PS exposure in fibrin-adherent platelets are obtained by a synergistic signal mechanism in which both VWF and thrombin need to interact with their receptors on fibrin-adherent platelets.

**Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by grants 902-26-192 and 902-68-241 from the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and grant 910-408-027 from ZonMw-NWO/INSERM.

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