

# **Culturing Embryos From the Cleavage to Blastocyst Stage; an Opportunity to Improve Pluripotency and Embryonic Stem Cell Generation Efficiency**

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# Contents

Contents.....	ii
Abstract.....	xiii
Common Abbreviations .....	xviii
1.0 Literature review.....	1
1.1 Introduction .....	2
1.2 Embryonic stem cells .....	3
1.2.1 Definition of an embryonic stem cell.....	3
1.2.1.1 Pluripotency .....	5
1.2.1.1.1 In vitro differentiation.....	8
1.2.1.1.2 In vivo differentiation.....	9
1.2.1.2 Self renewal.....	9
1.2.2 Derivation of an ESC line .....	10
1.3 Applications of embryonic stem cells .....	13
1.3.1 Toxicity .....	13
1.3.2 Drug discovery.....	15
1.3.3 Developmental biology .....	16
1.3.4 Regenerative medicine .....	17
1.3.5 Comparison of embryonic stem cells and induced pluripotent stem cells.....	19
1.4 Current limitations of embryonic stem cells.....	20
1.4.1 Cell line quality .....	20
1.4.2 Comparison of mouse and human ESCs.....	22
1.5 The preimplantation embryo .....	24
1.5.1 In vitro fertilisation.....	29
1.5.2 Embryo Culture .....	30
1.5.2.1 Carbohydrates.....	31
1.5.2.2 Amino acids .....	32
1.5.2.3 Vitamins .....	33
1.5.2.4 Chelators .....	34
1.5.2.5 Macromolecules.....	35
1.5.2.6 Oxygen tension.....	36
1.5.2.7 pH .....	37
1.5.2.8 Cryopreservation.....	39

1.5.2.9	Sequential and Monoculture systems.....	40
1.6	Improving embryo quality.....	41
1.6.1	Growth Factors.....	41
1.6.1.1	A review of growth factors used to improve embryo health.....	41
1.6.1.2	Insulin, GM-CSF, FGF-4 and LIF .....	44
1.6.1.2.1	Insulin.....	46
1.6.1.2.2	GM-CSF.....	47
1.6.1.2.3	FGF-4 .....	48
1.6.1.2.4	LIF .....	48
1.7	Animal model .....	49
1.8	Conclusion and hypothesis .....	50
2.0	Materials and Methods.....	54
2.1	Media preparation .....	55
2.1.1	Preparation of glassware .....	55
2.1.2	Embryo culture and handling media.....	55
2.1.3	Culture media preparation.....	56
2.1.4	Hyaluronidase preparation .....	58
2.2	Preparation of pipettes .....	58
2.3	Animals and induction of ovulation .....	58
2.3.1	Animals.....	58
2.3.2	Induction of ovulation.....	59
2.4	Embryo culture.....	59
2.4.1	Collection of zygotes .....	59
2.4.2	Culture of embryos .....	60
2.4.3	Assessment of embryo morphology .....	60
2.5	Assessment of blastocyst differentiation.....	63
2.5.1	OCT4 and Nanog co-expression .....	63
2.6	Blastocyst outgrowth formation .....	66
2.6.1.	Gelatin coating dishes .....	66
2.6.2	MEF coating organ well dishes.....	66
2.6.2.1	Derivation of primary MEF lines.....	66
2.6.2.2	Creation of MEF cells for dishes.....	67
2.6.2.3	Creation of MEF coated dishes .....	68
2.6.3	Blastocyst outgrowth .....	68

2.7	PCR analysis of outgrowths.....	69
2.7.1	RNA extraction and reverse transcription.....	69
2.7.2	Real time PCR .....	70
2.8	Assessment of outgrowth differentiation.....	72
2.8.1	Immunocytochemistry .....	72
2.9	Derivation of primary ESC colonies.....	74
2.9.1	Preparation of dishes .....	74
2.9.2	Isolation, trypsinisation and replating .....	74
2.9.3	Identification of pluripotent colonies .....	75
2.9.3.1	Morphology.....	75
2.9.3.2	Immunocytochemistry .....	76
2.10	Characterisation of putative ESC lines .....	77
2.10.1	Passaging.....	77
2.10.2	Cryopreservation.....	77
2.10.3	Expansion of cell lines .....	78
2.11	Characterisation of an ESC line .....	78
2.11.1	Alkaline phosphatase staining.....	78
2.11.2	SSEA1 staining .....	79
2.11.3	Karyotyping .....	80
2.11.4	Directed differentiation .....	80
2.11.4.1	Mesoderm differentiation.....	81
2.11.4.2	Definitive endoderm differentiation.....	81
2.11.4.3	Neuroectoderm differentiation .....	81
2.11.4.4	Differentiation immunocytochemistry .....	82
3.0	Development of a mouse model for studying the effect of embryo culture on embryonic stem cell derivation. ....	84
3.1	Introduction .....	85
3.2	Experimental design.....	86
3.2.1	Statistics .....	87
3.3	Results .....	88
3.3.1	Blastocyst Development .....	88
3.3.2	Pluripotency of ICM Cells in Cultured Blastocysts .....	90
3.3.3	Gene Expression Levels in Outgrowths.....	93
3.4	Discussion.....	95

4.0	Insulin in embryo culture medium from the cleavage stage increases epiblast cell number and percentage. ....	98
4.1	Introduction .....	99
4.2	Experimental design.....	100
4.2.1	Statistics .....	100
4.3	Results .....	102
4.3.1	Blastocyst Development .....	102
4.3.2	Pluripotency of ICM Cells in Cultured Blastocysts .....	103
4.4	Discussion.....	106
5.0	Insulin increases epiblast cell number of in vitro cultured mouse embryos via the PI3K/GSK3/p53 pathway.....	108
5.1	Introduction .....	109
5.2	Experimental design.....	111
5.2.1	Culture system .....	111
5.2.2	Statistics .....	115
5.3	Results .....	116
5.3.1	Experiment 1: Effect of PI3K inactivation on epiblast cell number in embryos cultured in the presence or absence of insulin.....	116
5.3.2	Experiment 2: Effect of GSK3 activation/inhibition on epiblast cell number in embryos cultured in the presence or absence of insulin.....	119
5.3.3	Experiment 3: Effect of p53 activation/inhibition on epiblast cell number in embryos cultured in the presence or absence of insulin.....	125
5.3.4	Experiment 4: Interaction of GSK3 and p53 signalling.....	129
5.5	Discussion.....	132
6.0	Epiblast cell number and primary embryonic stem cell colony generation are increased by culture of embryos with insulin from the cleavage stage.....	137
6.1	Introduction .....	138
6.2	Experimental design.....	139
6.2.1	Culture system .....	139
6.2.2	Statistics .....	140
6.3	Results .....	141
6.3.1	Experiment 1: Effect of insulin on blastocyst development .....	141
6.3.2	Experiment 2: Effect of insulin on outgrowth formation.....	145
6.3.3	Experiment 3: Effect of insulin on the derivation of primary ESC colonies from day 6 blastocysts .....	150
6.3.4	Experiment 3: Characterisation of an ESC line.....	155

6.4	Discussion.....	157
7.0	General Discussion .....	161
7.1	Introduction .....	162
7.2	Impact of culture conditions on epiblast and pluripotency.....	165
7.3	Insulin stimulation of pluripotency of post-compaction embryos.....	166
7.4	Molecular mechanism of action of insulin on pluripotency in the blastocyst.....	167
7.5	Expression of OCT4 and Nanog in blastocysts .....	168
7.6	Effect of insulin in embryo culture medium persists in outgrowths.....	168
7.7	Insulin in culture media and the effect of ESC colony generation .....	169
7.8	Conclusion .....	171
8.0	Appendix .....	172
8.1	Mouse embryo bioassay .....	173
8.2	Insulin dilution.....	175
8.3	Inhibitor dilutions.....	175
8.3.1	LY294002 .....	175
8.3.2	CT99021 .....	175
8.3.3	H-89 .....	176
8.3.4	Pifithrin- $\alpha$ .....	176
8.3.5	Nicotinamide.....	176
8.4	Hormone preparation .....	177
8.4.1	Saline solution .....	177
8.4.2	Equine chorionic gonadotropin (eCG).....	177
8.4.3	Human chorionic gonadotropin .....	177
8.5	Solutions for immunocytochemistry.....	177
8.5.1	Paraformaldehyde.....	177
8.5.2	Glycine.....	178
8.5.3	Triton-X solution.....	178
8.5.4	Donkey Serum .....	178
8.5.5	Dapi .....	178
8.6	Antibody validations .....	178
8.6.1	OCT4 and Nanog .....	178
8.6.2	SSEA1.....	179
8.6.3	Antibodies for markers of germ cell lineage .....	179
9.0	References.....	180

## Figures and Tables

**FIG. 1.1.** Schematic of a blastocyst; the zona pellucida is a glycoprotein membrane that surrounds the blastocyst, the trophoctoderm is a monolayer of cells that forms a sphere around the fluid filled blastocyst cavity and the ICM, the ICM is a group of cells attached to the inner surface of the trophoctoderm which is made up of primitive endoderm and epiblast cells.

..... 3

**FIG 1.2.** Timeline depicting the first derivation of ESCs from various species. By species sources were mouse [16], hamster [21], mink [22], pig [23], monkey [20], chicken [24], human [1], cow [25], rat [26], and canine [27].

..... 4

**FIG. 1.3.** Pluripotent epiblast cells can be cultured and retain their pluripotency as ESCs, which can differentiate to the three cell types of the germ layer, ectoderm, endoderm and mesoderm, and give rise to all cell types found in the adult body

..... 5

**FIG. 1.4.** Brightfield image of a mouse outgrowth attached to a gelatin coated dish. The black arrow indicates the ICM outgrowth, surrounding cells are trophoctoderm. Scale bar is 50µm.

..... 11

**FIG. 1.5.** Diagram of the derivation of an ESC line from a blastocyst. Pluripotent epiblast/ESCs are shown in green, differentiated primitive endoderm cells are shown in red: The blastocyst is outgrown to isolate ICM cells, the outgrowth is then collected and trypsinised to disaggregate its cells so that when they are replated the epiblast cells are able to form clonal primary ESC colonies, which in turn can be collected, disaggregated, and propagated to an ESC line

..... 12

**FIG. 1.6.** Diagram depicting the morphological stages of embryo development from fertilisation to the hatched blastocyst stage. The zygote is formed by the fertilisation of the oocyte by the spermatozoa. The embryo then begins to divide by reductive cleavage creating the 2-cell, 4-cell and then 8-cell embryo. After this compaction begins to occur (8-cell for mouse, 10-cell for human) and cells polarise and flatten to maximise cell contacts, creating the morula. Fluid is secreted internally to form the blastocoel and the early blastocyst. The blastocoel continues to expand to form the blastocyst which can begin to herniate from the zona pellucida by hatching, ultimately creating the hatched blastocyst

..... 26

**FIG. 1.7.** A hatching blastocyst, immunocytochemically stained to differentiate epiblast, primitive endoderm and trophoctoderm nuclei, imaged by confocal microscopy and reconstructed as a 3D image using Z-stack. Yellow nuclei are epiblast cells, they have been stained for OCT4 (red), which is restricted to the ICM and Nanog (green), which is restricted to the epiblast (and occasional trophoctoderm cells), they have also been counter stained with Dapi (blue). Primitive endoderm cells are stained pink (red+blue), as they do not express Nanog, while trophoctoderm cells are stained blue as they do not express OCT4, and in this case none express Nanog

..... 28

**FIG. 2.1.** A; 8-cell embryo, B; Compacting embryo, C; Morula, D; Early blastocyst, E; Blastocyst, F; Hatching blastocyst, G; Hatched blastocyst. Scale bar 50µm.

..... 62

**FIG. 2.2** Representative images of and immunocytochemically stained blastocyst fixed at 115h post culture. Total cell number is stained blue with Dapi, OCT4 positive cell number is stained

red with rhodamine, and Nanog positive cell number is stained green with FITC. In the overlay those nuclei which are stained with Dapi but not OCT4 are trophectoderm cells, those nuclei stained with OCT4 but not Nanog are primitive endoderm (PE) and those nuclei which are stained with both OCT4 and Nanog are epiblast. Scale bar is 50µm. .... 65

**FIG.2.3.** Representative images of an immunocytochemically stained outgrowth from a blastocyst plated at 115h after culture and fixed 48h later. Total cell number is stained blue with Dapi, OCT4 positive cell number is stained red with rhodamine, and Nanog positive cell number is stained green with FITC. In the overlay those nuclei which are stained with both OCT4 and Nanog are epiblast cells. Scale bar is 50µm. .... 73

**FIG. 2.4.** Representative brightfield image of a primary ESC colony with a typical morphology seen 48h after the plating of the outgrowth, on a MEF feeder layer. Scale bar is 50µm..... 75

**FIG. 2.5.** Representative images of an immunocytochemically stained primary ESC colony stained 48h after the trypsinisation of the outgrowth from which it was derived and the identification of putative ESC morphology. Total cell number is stained blue with Dapi, OCT4 positive cell number is stained red with rhodamine, and Nanog positive cell number is stained green with FITC. As the cells of the colony are positive for both OCT4 and Nanog they are demonstrated to be pluripotent. Scale bar is 50µm..... 76

**FIG. 2.6.** Representative bright field image of an ESC colony which has stained positive for alkaline phosphatase (AP) activity, as shown by pink staining. Scale bar is 50µm. .... 79

**FIG.2.7.** A brightfield image of ESC colonies and an epifluorescent image of those same colonies stained for SSEA1, shown in green. Scale bar is 50µm. .... 80

**FIG. 2.8.** Brightfield and epifluorescent images of differentiated cells from the established commercial D3-ES cell line which have been subjected to the indicated differentiation protocol. Definitive endoderm: green is CXCR4 (fusin), cell surface marker of definitive endoderm and mesoderm; red is SOX17, nuclear marker of endoderm (primitive and definitive). Co-expression shows definitive endoderm. Mesoderm: green is CXCR4 (fusin), cell surface marker of mesoderm and definitive endoderm; red is VEGFR11 (FLK-1), cell surface marker of mesoendoderm and mesoderm. Co-expression shows mesoderm. Neuroectoderm: green is Nestin, cytoskeletal marker of neuroectoderm. Scale bar is 50µm. .... 83

**FIG. 3.1.** Representative images of immunocytochemically stained blastocysts. All cell nuclei are stained blue with Dapi, Nanog positive cells are stained green with FITC. Scale bar equal to 50µm. A; Simple / Simple, B; Simple / G2, C; G1/G2, D; Negative control. .... 92

**FIG. 3.2.** Gene expression of outgrowths cultured in different culture systems. Data are mean±sem. N=5 samples per treatment. Significantly different from control G1/G2, \* (P<0.05). .... 94

**FIG. 4.1.** Blastocyst culture in the presence of insulin. A; Total cell number as shown by Dapi staining, B; ICM cell number as shown by OCT4 staining, C; epiblast cell number as shown by OCT4 and Nanog staining, D; percentage of ICM cells that are epiblast cells, E; Trophectoderm cell number as shown by total cell number minus ICM cell number, and F; primitive endoderm cell number as shown by ICM minus epiblast cell number, in the blastocysts of embryos cultured in insulin at the concentrations indicated. Data are mean ± sem. Superscripts a and b are significantly different at P<0.01, N≥ 34 blastocysts per treatment. .... 104



**FIG. 4.2.** Representative images of immunocytochemically stained blastocysts after culture in the indicated concentration of insulin. All cell nuclei are stained blue with Dapi, OCT4 positive cells are stained red with rhodamine, Nanog positive cells are stained green with FITC. Scale bar equal to 50µm. A; G2+0pM insulin, B; G2+0.17pM insulin, C; G2+1.7pM insulin, D; G2+1700pM insulin, E; Negative control ..... 105

**FIG. 5.1.** PI3K inhibition during blastocyst culture in the presence of insulin. A; TCN as shown by Dapi staining, B; ICM cell number as shown by OCT4 staining, C; epiblast cell number as shown by OCT4 and Nanog staining and D; percentage of ICM cells that are epiblast cells in the blastocysts of embryos cultured in insulin at 1.7pM and/or 50µM of the PI3K inhibitor LY294002 (LY). Data are mean ± sem. Superscripts a and b are significantly different at P<0.01, N≥34 blastocysts per treatment. .... 118

**FIG. 5.2.** GSK3 activation during blastocyst culture in the presence of insulin. A; TCN as shown by Dapi staining, B; ICM cell number as shown by OCT4 staining, C; epiblast cell number as shown by OCT4 and Nanog staining and D; percentage of ICM cells that are epiblast cells in the blastocysts of embryos cultured in insulin at 1.7pM and/or 10µM of the GSK3 activator H-89. Data are mean ± sem. Superscripts a, b and c are significantly different at P<0.05, N≥26 blastocysts per treatment. .... 121

**FIG. 5.3.** Results for GSK3 inhibition. A; TCN as shown by Dapi staining, B; ICM cell number as shown by OCT4 staining, C; epiblast cell number as shown by OCT4 and Nanog staining and D; percentage of ICM cells that are epiblast cells in the blastocysts of embryos cultured in different concentrations of the GSK3 inhibitor CT99021. Data are mean ± sem. Superscripts a, b, c and d are significantly different at P<0.05, N≥46, 3 replicates. .... 124

**FIG. 5.4.** p53 activation during blastocyst culture in the presence of insulin. A; TCN as shown by Dapi staining, B; ICM cell number as shown by OCT4 staining, C; epiblast cell number as shown by OCT4 and Nanog staining and D; percentage of ICM cells that are epiblast cells in the blastocysts of embryos cultured in insulin at 1.7pM and/or 10µM of the p53 activator nicotinamide (Nic). Data are mean ± sem. Superscripts a, b and c are significantly different at P<0.05, N≥38 blastocysts per treatment. .... 127

**FIG. 5.6.** Dual inhibition of GSK3 and p53. A; TCN as shown by Dapi staining, B; ICM cell number as shown by OCT4 staining, C; epiblast cell number as shown by OCT4 and Nanog staining and D; percentage of ICM cells that are epiblast cells in the blastocysts of embryos cultured in 0.3µM of GSK3 inhibitor CT99021 (CT) and/or 30µM of p53 inhibitor pifithrin-α (Pft-α). Data are mean ± sem. Superscripts a and b are significantly different at P<0.05, N≥35 blastocysts per treatment. .... 131

**FIG. 5.7.** Schematic of insulin signalling and its relationship to regulating Nanog expression and pluripotency. Green arrows indicate reactions with a stimulatory effect on their target, red closed bars indicate reactions with a retarding effect on their target. P marks reactions where phosphorylation occurs, Ub marks reactions where ubiquitination occurs. Insulin binds the insulin receptor (IR), a tyrosine kinase which is then able to phosphorylate the IRSs. PI3K is able to bind to the phosphorylated IRSs by its SH2 domains, resulting in activation. PI3K phosphorylates the phospholipid PIP2, producing PIP3, which can be bound by the pleckstrin homology domains of PDK-1 and Akt. Results presented in this chapter have shown that activation of PI3K is necessary for insulin to increase the number of Nanog positive epiblast

cells during embryo culture. When PDK-1 and Akt are colocalised to the cell membrane PDK-1 is able to phosphorylate and activate Akt. Active Akt can phosphorylate GSK3, inactivating it. When active GSK3 is able to phosphorylate  $\beta$ -catenin, Hedgehog, and c-Myc; all factors which safeguard pluripotency through interactions with other second messengers. Additionally, active GSK3 phosphorylates and protects the intracellular domain of Notch, promoting differentiation. Further, inactivation of GSK3 is necessary for insulin to increase the number of Nanog positive epiblast cells during embryo culture. Akt is also able to phosphorylate and activate MDM2 which ubiquitinates the proapoptotic factor p53, causing its inactivation and removal from the nucleus, where it would bind to the *Nanog* promoter and suppresses its expression. Inactivation of p53 is necessary for insulin to increase the number of Nanog positive epiblast cells during embryo culture. GSK3 and p53, are able to form a dimer, resulting in the phosphorylation of p53 and the increased activity of both factors. GSK3 is also able to phosphorylate and activate MDM2. However, despite these interactions the interaction of GSK3 and p53 do not have a significant effect on Nanog positive epiblast cell number during embryo culture..... 135

**FIG. 6.1.** Confocal slices of blastocysts stained for total cell number (TCN, Dapi; blue), OCT4 (Rhodamine; red) and Nanog (FITC; green). Scale bar is 50 $\mu$ m. A; Negative control where staining was performed without primary antibodies. B; A day 4 blastocyst fixed as it began cavitation, C; A day 5 hatching blastocyst, D; A day 6 hatched blastocyst. .... 143

**FIG. 6.2** A hatching day 6 blastocyst, immunocytochemically stained for total cell number, OCT4 positive cell number and Nanog positive cell number, imaged by confocal microscopy and reconstructed as a 3D image using Z-stack. Examination of 3D models showed that in day 6 blastocysts all OCT4 positive nuclei were in the ICM as were all cells also positive for Nanog. .... 144

**FIG. 6.3.** Confocal slices of outgrowths stained for total cell number (Dapi; blue), OCT4 (Rhodamine; red) and Nanog (FITC; green). Scale bar is 50 $\mu$ m. A; Negative control where staining was performed without primary antibodies, B; An outgrowth from a blastocyst plated on day 4, C; An outgrowth from a blastocyst plated on day 5, D. An outgrowth from a blastocyst plated on day 6. .... 147

**FIG. 6.4.** The effect insulin at 1.7 $\mu$ M in embryo culture media from the compacting stage of development on the outgrowths of early blastocysts plated on day 4, blastocysts plated on day 5 and blastocysts plated on day 6 on outgrowth cell number and differentiation. A; Total cell number of outgrowths plated day 4, B; OCT4 positive cell number of outgrowths plated day 4, C; Epiblast cell number of outgrowths plated day 4, D; Total cell number of outgrowths plated day 5, E; OCT4 positive cell number of outgrowths plated day 5, F; Epiblast cell number of outgrowths plated day 5, G; Total cell number of outgrowths plated day 6, H; OCT4 positive cell number of outgrowths plated day 6, I; Epiblast cell number of outgrowths plated day 6. Data are mean $\pm$ sem. N $\geq$ 27 (3 replicate experiments). Superscripts a and b differ at P<0.05. .... 148

**FIG. 6.5.** Confocal slice of a primary ESC colonies stained for TCN (Dapi; blue), OCT4 (Rhodamine; red) and Nanog (FITC; green). A; Negative control where staining was performed without primary antibodies, B; A primary ESC colony which is positive for both OCT4 and Nanog. Scale bar is 50 $\mu$ m. .... 151

**FIG. 6.6.** The effect of morphological state on days 4, 5 and 6 on the likelihood of blastocysts giving rise to ESC colonies. A; Percentage of blastocysts cultured in control conditions at the indicated morphological states which ultimately gave rise to a primary ESC colony, B; Percentage of blastocysts cultured with insulin at the indicated morphological states which ultimately gave rise to a primary ESC colony. Data are the number of blastocysts which generated ESCs expressed as a percentage of all blastocysts at that morphological stage. N≥44 (9 replicate experiments). Superscripts a and b within paired columns differ at P<0.05..... 153

**FIG. 6.7.** Characterisation of a mESC line from an embryo cultured with insulin at passage 10. Scale bar is 50µm. A; Alkaline phosphatase activity: red staining indicates alkaline phosphatase activity; B; SSEA1 staining: green indicates cells positive for the cell surface marker SSEA1; C; Definitive endoderm staining: green is CXCR4, cell surface marker of definitive endoderm and mesoderm; red is sox17, nuclear marker of endoderm (primitive and definitive) – co expression shows definitive endoderm; D; Mesoderm staining: green is CXCR4, cell surface marker of mesoderm and definitive endoderm; red is VEGFR11, cell surface marker of mesoendoderm and mesoderm – co expression shows mesoderm; E; Neuroectoderm staining: green is Nestin, cytoskeletal marker of neuroectoderm; F; Normal male mouse karyotype of cell line. .... 156

**FIG. 7.1.** Summary of main findings of thesis. D4, D5 and D6 are day 4, day 5 and day 6 respectively. Pluripotent cells are shown in green, differentiated cells are shown in red..... 164

**FIG. 7.2** Summary of the culture effects investigated in this thesis and their observed effect on the retention of pluripotency towards ESC derivation. .... 170

**FIG. 8.1** Differential stain of a blastocyst. ICM nuclei stained blue, trophectoderm nuclei stained pink. Scale bar is 50µM ..... 174

TABLE 1.1A. EFFECT OF GROWTH FACTORS ON MOUSE EMBRYONIC CHARACTERISTICS ..... 42

Table 1.1B. EFFECT OF GROWTH FACTORS ON MOUSE EMBRYONIC CHARACTERISTICS ..... 43

TABLE 1.2. MATERNAL REPRODUCTIVE TRACT AND EMBRYO EXPRESSION OF GROWTH FACTORS AND THEIR RECEPTORS IN THE MOUSE AND HUMAN ..... 45

TABLE 2.1. MEDIA FORMULATIONS ..... 57

TABLE 2.2. MARKERS OF THE DIFFERENT CELL TYPES OF THE DEVELOPED BLASTOCYST ..... 63

TABLE 2.3. DETAILS OF PRIMERS USED FOR GENE EXPRESSION ANALYSIS OF INNER CELL MASS OUTGROWTHS ..... 71

TABLE 3.1. EXPERIMENTAL CULTURE SYSTEM ..... 87

TABLE 3.2. THE EFFECT OF CULTURE SYSTEMS ON DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLASTOCYST AT 96h ..... 89

TABLE 3.3. THE EFFECT OF CULTURE SYSTEMS ON DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLASTOCYST AT 115h ..... 89

TABLE 3.4. THE EFFECT OF DIFFERENT CULTURE SYSTEMS ON THE PRESENCE OF NANOG IN THE BLASTOCYST ..... 91

TABLE 4.1 EXPERIMENTAL CULTURE SYSTEM .....	100
TABLE 4.2. THE EFFECT OF INSULIN ON DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLASTOCYST AT 96h .....	102
TABLE 4.3. THE EFFECT OF INSULIN ON DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLASTOCYST AT 115h .....	102
TABLE 5.1. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 96 HOURS OF PI3K INHIBITION .....	117
TABLE 5.2. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 115 HOURS OF PI3K INHIBITION .....	117
TABLE 5.3. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY after 96 HOURS OF GSK3 ACTIVATION .....	120
TABLE 5.4. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 115 HOURS OF GSK3 ACTIVATION .....	120
TABLE 5.5. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 96 HOURS OF GSK3 INHIBITION .....	123
TABLE 5.6. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 115 HOURS OF GSK3 INHIBITION .....	123
TABLE 5.6. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY after 96 HOURS OF p53 ACTIVATION .....	126
TABLE 5.7. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 115 HOURS OF p53 ACTIVATION .....	126
TABLE 5.8. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 96 HOURS OF p53 INHIBITION .....	128
TABLE 5.9. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY after 115 HOURS OF p53 INHIBITION .....	128
TABLE 5.10. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 96 HOURS OF BOTH GSK3 and P53 INHIBITION .....	130
TABLE 5.11. DEVELOPMENTAL MORPHOLOGY AFTER 115 HOURS OF BOTH GSK3 and P53 INHIBITION .....	130
TABLE 6.1. PRESENCE OF EPIBLAST CELLS IN OUTGROWTHS PLATED AT DIFFERENT TIMES ...	149
TABLE 6.2 EFFICIENCY OF PRIMARY EMBRYONIC STEM CELL COLONY GENERATION .....	150
TABLE 6.3 EFFECT SIZES FOR THE PREDICTIVE POTENTIAL OF MORPHOLOGICAL MARKERS FOR ESC GENERATION .....	154

## Abstract

Human embryos for embryonic stem cell (ESC) derivation have often been cryopreserved for 5-10 years prior to their donation for research purposes. Many of these embryos will have been cultured in media conditions now known to be perturbing to embryo viability and which support only low levels of blastocyst development, necessitating that cleavage stage transfers be utilised for the majority of IVF cycles performed. As such, embryos for hESC derivation are often donated at the cleavage stage and require further culture to the blastocyst stage before hESC derivation can be attempted. These embryos are normally of poor quality and the efficiency of hESC derivation is low. This thesis investigated the hypothesis that the culture of cleavage stage embryos to the blastocyst stage represents a window of opportunity during which embryo culture conditions can be optimised to produce blastocysts with a greater potential to give rise to ESCs.

Using a mouse model it was demonstrated that the culture of embryos in simple medium, which models the aforementioned historic conditions, perturbs their development and reduces the number of ESC progenitor epiblast cells within the blastocyst. Furthermore, the transfer of embryos exposed to simple medium during the cleavage stage in a modern complex medium purpose designed to support embryo development from the 8-cell stage was insufficient to restore these embryos, despite improving epiblast cell number somewhat. As such, it was shown that additional interventions are necessary to fully utilise the 8-cell to blastocyst period of culture.

The growth factor insulin, despite having previously been shown to increase inner cell mass (ICM) cell number and improve embryo viability, is not routinely included in the majority of embryo culture media commercially available for the culture of human embryos. It was demonstrated in this thesis that supplementation of culture medium from the 8-cell to blastocyst stage with 1.7pM insulin is able to increase the epiblast cell number (as shown by OCT4 and Nanog co-expression) as well as the proportion of the ICM which is made up of epiblast cells. The molecular mechanism of this effect was investigated using small molecule inhibitors, and it was shown that insulin increased epiblast cell number via the activation of phosphoinositide-3-kinase, which subsequently inactivates glycogen synthase kinase 3 and p53, which, when active, inhibit the transcription of pluripotency supporting transcription factor *Nanog* through direct and indirect means.

Culture in the presence of insulin was shown to increase the number of OCT4 and Nanog positive cells in blastocysts on days 4 and five as well as day 6. However, OCT4 and Nanog co-expression was only restricted to the epiblast on day 6. Prior culture of embryos with insulin had no effect on the number of epiblast cells in outgrowths when blastocysts were plated on days 4 or 5. However, when blastocysts were plated on day 6 blastocysts which had been cultured with insulin from the cleavage stage gave rise to outgrowths with more epiblast cells compared with blastocysts cultured in control conditions. Efficiency of attachment and the percent of outgrowths which contained an epiblast were also improved by prior culture with insulin for blastocysts plated on day 6. When blastocysts cultured in control conditions were plated day 6 they were shown to give rise to outgrowths with increased numbers of epiblast cells compared with day 4 and day 5; demonstrating that, as with humans, the optimal time for plating mouse blastocysts is after lineage restriction has occurred.

The culture of embryos from the cleavage stage to the blastocyst stage in the presence of insulin was validated as a strategy for improving their capacity to give rise to ESCs by generating primary ESC colonies from day 6 plated outgrowths and confirming their pluripotency by OCT4 and Nanog staining. Embryos cultured with insulin had a two fold increase in their probability of successfully giving rise to an ESC colony. As embryos were cultured individually embryo morphological development was able to be tracked and compared to ESC generation success. Interestingly, which markers most successfully predicted ESC generation success differed for control and insulin cultured embryos. The most predictive morphological marker of future ESC generation was cavitation on day 4 for blastocysts cultured in control conditions, while for blastocysts cultured with insulin the most predictive marker was being hatched on day 6. The capacity of the model system used to support the derivation of a genuine ESC line was validated by generating a line from a blastocyst cultured in the presence of insulin and characterising it for pluripotency and self renewal by directed differentiation and karyotyping after multiple passages.

These results show that culture of embryos from the cleavage stage with insulin to day 6 increases the epiblast cell number of blastocysts, a property which is conserved through the outgrowth stage and results in an increased capacity to give rise to ESCs which can be serially passaged without losing their pluripotency or self renewal. As such, culture of embryos with insulin may represent a potentially useful strategy to exploit the opportunity created by the donation of human embryos at the cleavage stage for hESC derivation.

## Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University or other tertiary institution to Jared Michael Campbell and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in text.

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September 2012

## **Publications arising from thesis to date**

Data presented in Chapter 3.0 have previously been published as follows:

Campbell JM, M Mitchell, MB Nottle and M Lane. (2011). Development of a mouse model for studying the effect of embryo culture on embryonic stem cell derivation. *Stem Cells Dev* 20:1577-86.

Data presented in Chapter 4.0 and Chapter 5.0 have previously been published as follows:

Campbell JM, MB Nottle, I Vassiliev, M Mitchell and M Lane. (2012) Insulin increases epiblast cell number of in vitro cultured mouse embryos via the PI3K/GSK3/p53 pathway. *Stem Cells and Dev* 21:2430-41

Data presented in Chapter 6.0 have been published as follows:

Campbell JM, M Lane, I Vassiliev, and MB Nottle. (2012) Epiblast cell number and primary embryonic stem cell colony generation are increased by culture of cleavage stage embryos in insulin. *J Reprod Dev*



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*'I don't know if it's good, but in hardback it could be used to stun a burglar' Neil Gaiman*

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## Common Abbreviations

AP	Alkaline Phosphatase
ART	Assisted Reproduction Technology
Ct	CT99021
Dapi	4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole
DMSO	Dimethyl sulphur oxide
eCG	Equine Chorionic Gonadotropin
ESC	Embryonic Stem Cell
FCS	Fetal Calf Serum
FGF	Fibroblast Growth Factor
GSK3	Glycogen Synthase Kinase 3
hCG	Human Chorionic Gonadotropin
HSA	Human Serum Albumin
ICM	Inner Cell Mass
ICSI	Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection
ip	Intraperitoneal
iPSCs	Induced Pluripotent Stem Cells
IR	Insulin Receptor
IRS	Insulin Receptor Substrate
IVF	In Vitro Fertilisation
LIF	Leukaemia Inhibitory Factor
LSD	Least Significant Difference
MAPK	Mitogen Activated Protein Kinase
MDM2	Murine Double Minute 2
MEF	Mouse Embryonic Fibroblasts

NEAA	Non Essential Amino Acid
Nic	Nicotinamide
OCT4	Octamer 4
PBS	Phosphate Buffered Saline
PDK1	Phosphoinositide Dependent Kinase 1
PE	Primitive Endoderm
Pft- $\alpha$	Pifithrin- $\alpha$
PI3K	Phosphoinositide 3-kinase
RT	Room Temperature
SH2	Src Homology 2
SIRT	Silent Mating Type Information Regulation 2 Homolog
SSEA	Stage Specific Embryonic Antigen
TCN	Total Cell Number