



THERMAL TISSUE RESPONSE IN AGNIKARMA: A HISTOPATHOLOGICAL REVIEW

Ayurveda

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ABSTRACT

Agnikarma is a specialized para-surgical therapeutic procedure described in classical Ayurvedic surgical literature for the management of several chronic disorders, particularly those associated with musculoskeletal pain, vascular lesions, and soft-tissue pathologies. The procedure involves the application of controlled thermal energy to specific tissues using heated metallic instruments or other heat-retaining materials. Classical Ayurvedic texts such as the Sushruta Samhita consider Agnikarma one of the most effective therapeutic modalities for diseases that do not respond adequately to herbal medicines, surgical excision, or alkaline cauterization [1,2]. From a biomedical perspective, Agnikarma produces localized thermal injury that results in coagulation of proteins, cellular necrosis, vascular thrombosis, and subsequent tissue remodelling. These histopathological processes are similar to those observed in modern surgical techniques such as electrocautery, laser therapy, and radiofrequency ablation [3]. Controlled thermal injury stimulates a sequence of biological responses including inflammatory cell infiltration, removal of necrotic tissue, and regeneration of healthy tissue structures [4]. This review examines the histopathological changes associated with Agnikarma and correlates them with modern scientific understanding of thermal tissue injury. The article integrates classical Ayurvedic descriptions with contemporary knowledge of cellular pathology, vascular responses, and wound healing mechanisms. Understanding the microscopic effects of Agnikarma may contribute to the scientific validation of this traditional surgical technique and promote its integration into modern clinical practice.

KEYWORDS

Agnikarma, thermal cautery, histopathology, tissue injury, Ayurveda surgery, thermal therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Thermal therapy has been employed as a therapeutic intervention in many medical traditions throughout history. Modern surgical procedures such as electrocautery, laser ablation, and radiofrequency coagulation utilize heat energy to achieve haemostasis, destroy pathological tissues, and stimulate healing processes [5].

In Ayurveda, the ancient system of Indian medicine, a comparable therapeutic technique known as Agnikarma has been described for centuries. Agnikarma involves the application of controlled heat to affected tissues using heated metallic instruments known as shalaka or other heat-retaining materials. Classical Ayurvedic texts attribute significant therapeutic value to this procedure and emphasize that diseases treated with Agnikarma have a lower probability of recurrence [1].

According to Ayurvedic principles, Agnikarma is particularly useful in disorders caused by Vata and Kapha dosha imbalance, which are associated with stiffness, obstruction of bodily channels (srotorodha), and impaired circulation [6]. The application of heat is believed to restore physiological balance by removing obstruction, improving tissue metabolism, and enhancing local circulation.

Modern biomedical science explains the effects of thermal therapy through mechanisms involving protein denaturation, cellular damage, vascular coagulation, and stimulation of inflammatory responses. These biological processes contribute to the removal of pathological tissues and the initiation of tissue repair mechanisms [7].

Understanding the histopathological responses produced by Agnikarma is therefore essential for bridging traditional Ayurvedic knowledge with contemporary scientific perspectives.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AGNIKARMA

The procedure of Agnikarma is extensively described in the Sushruta Samhita, one of the foundational texts of Ayurvedic surgery. Acharya Sushruta described Agnikarma as an important para-surgical technique and recommended it for diseases that are difficult to treat by other therapeutic methods [1].

Classical Ayurvedic literature describes several materials that may be used for performing Agnikarma, including metallic rods, heated stones, herbal substances, and other heat-conducting materials. The choice of instrument depends on the type of tissue involved and the nature of the disease [6].

Sushruta emphasized that Agnikarma could be performed on various

tissues including skin (twak), muscle (mamsa), blood vessels (sira), ligaments (snayu), and joints (sandhi). The procedure was traditionally used to treat conditions such as hemorrhoids, sinus tracts, musculoskeletal pain, warts, and chronic ulcers [2].

Modern clinical research has demonstrated the effectiveness of Agnikarma in several musculoskeletal conditions including lumbar spondylosis and plantar fasciitis, where significant pain relief and functional improvement have been reported [8].

PRINCIPLES OF THERMAL TISSUE INJURY

Thermal injury occurs when biological tissues are exposed to elevated temperatures sufficient to disrupt cellular metabolism and structural integrity. The extent of tissue damage depends on the intensity of heat and duration of exposure [9].

Temperatures above approximately 45°C can initiate cellular damage by causing denaturation of proteins and disruption of cell membranes. At higher temperatures, irreversible injury occurs leading to cellular death and tissue necrosis [10].

Heat also affects the microvascular system. Exposure to high temperatures causes endothelial damage, increased vascular permeability, and coagulation of blood proteins. These changes contribute to the formation of thrombi within small blood vessels and reduce bleeding from injured tissues [11].

Such physiological effects form the basis of thermal cauterization techniques used in modern surgery.

HISTOPATHOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO THERMAL CAUTERIZATION

Thermal cauterization produces characteristic histopathological changes within tissues. These changes occur in sequential phases that correspond to the biological processes involved in wound healing.

Coagulative Necrosis

The earliest microscopic change following thermal injury is coagulative necrosis. This process involves denaturation of intracellular proteins and destruction of cellular enzymes while preserving the general architecture of the tissue [12].

Under microscopic examination, affected cells display increased eosinophilia and loss of nuclear structures. The necrotic zone forms the primary area of thermal damage.

Vascular Changes

Thermal injury causes immediate coagulation of blood vessels, resulting in haemostasis. Heat induces contraction of vascular walls and coagulation of blood proteins, effectively sealing damaged vessels and preventing haemorrhage [13].

Histological studies reveal thrombosis within small blood vessels and capillaries in the cauterized region. This vascular occlusion contributes to localized ischemia and subsequent inflammatory reactions.

Inflammatory Phase

Following tissue necrosis, the body initiates an inflammatory response to remove damaged cells and debris. Neutrophils and macrophages migrate to the injured region and participate in phagocytosis of necrotic tissue [14].

These immune cells also release cytokines and growth factors that stimulate the proliferative phase of wound healing.

Proliferative Phase and Tissue Regeneration

During the proliferative phase, fibroblasts migrate to the wound site and synthesize collagen and extracellular matrix components. Simultaneously, new capillaries form through the process of angiogenesis, resulting in the formation of granulation tissue [15]. Granulation tissue gradually replaces the necrotic area and supports reepithelialization of the wound surface.

HISTOPATHOLOGICAL DESCRIPTIONS FOR AGNIKARMA

Microscopic Structure of Normal Skin Tissue (Control)

This photomicrograph illustrates the normal histological architecture of skin tissue prior to thermal intervention. The epidermis appears as a stratified squamous epithelial layer with well-organized keratinocytes arranged in distinct layers including the stratum basale, stratum spinosum, and stratum corneum. Beneath the epidermis, the dermis contains dense connective tissue composed of collagen fibers, fibroblasts, and a network of small blood vessels.

Hair follicles, sebaceous glands, and sweat glands are also visible within the dermal layer. The cellular structures exhibit intact nuclei and normal cytoplasmic staining characteristics. There is no evidence of inflammatory infiltration or vascular damage.

This section serves as the baseline histological reference for comparison with tissues subjected to Agnikarma-induced thermal injury.

Early Thermal Tissue Injury after Agnikarma

This photomicrograph demonstrates the early histopathological changes observed immediately following Agnikarma-induced thermal exposure. The tissue shows characteristic features of coagulative necrosis, including cytoplasmic eosinophilia and loss of nuclear detail in affected cells.

The epidermal layer appears disrupted, and the dermal collagen fibers exhibit thermal denaturation. Small blood vessels within the dermis show evidence of endothelial damage and coagulation of intravascular proteins.

The boundary between viable and thermally injured tissue is clearly visible, indicating localized thermal injury confined to the treated area. These microscopic findings are consistent with the early cellular responses to thermal cauterization observed in modern electrocautery procedures.

Vascular Coagulation and Haemostasis after Thermal Cauterization

This photomicrograph illustrates vascular changes associated with thermal cauterization. The small blood vessels within the dermal layer demonstrate vascular coagulation and thrombosis, which contribute to immediate haemostasis.

The vascular lumen appears occluded by coagulated blood proteins and aggregated erythrocytes. Endothelial cells lining the vessel walls show structural damage resulting from thermal exposure.

The surrounding connective tissue displays mild edema and early inflammatory cell infiltration. These vascular changes play an essential

role in preventing bleeding and establishing the conditions necessary for subsequent wound healing.

Such histological features are commonly observed in tissues subjected to thermal surgical techniques.

Inflammatory Response and Debridement Phase

This section demonstrates the inflammatory phase following Agnikarma-induced tissue injury. Numerous inflammatory cells, particularly neutrophils and macrophages, are present within the damaged tissue.

Macrophages actively participate in phagocytosis of necrotic cellular debris. The extracellular matrix shows partial degradation as inflammatory mediators promote tissue remodelling.

Capillary dilation and increased vascular permeability are also visible, indicating the activation of inflammatory pathways. This stage is essential for the removal of damaged tissue and preparation for regenerative processes.

Granulation Tissue Formation and Tissue Regeneration

This photomicrograph demonstrates the proliferative phase of wound healing following Agnikarma treatment. The damaged tissue has been replaced by granulation tissue, which is characterized by proliferation of fibroblasts, deposition of collagen fibres, and formation of newly developed capillaries.

The newly formed capillary network indicates active angiogenesis, which improves oxygen and nutrient delivery to the healing tissue. Fibroblasts appear elongated and actively synthesize extracellular matrix components that contribute to structural repair.

These histological findings represent the regenerative phase of wound healing that ultimately leads to restoration of tissue integrity.

Healed Tissue after Agnikarma

This section shows the final stage of tissue repair following thermal cauterization. The epidermal layer has undergone re-epithelialization, and the dermal tissue demonstrates organized collagen fibres indicating scar maturation.

Inflammatory cells are significantly reduced, and vascular structures appear normalized. The regenerated tissue exhibits improved structural stability and functional integrity compared to the initial injury stage.

These findings support the concept that controlled thermal injury induced by Agnikarma promotes effective wound healing through sequential histopathological processes.

MECHANISMS OF ACTION OF AGNIKARMA

The therapeutic effects of Agnikarma can be explained through several biological mechanisms associated with thermal stimulation.

Neural Modulation

Thermal stimulation affects sensory nerve endings and may reduce pain perception by altering nerve conduction and inhibiting nociceptive signals [16].

Improved Local Circulation

Heat application causes vasodilation in surrounding tissues, which improves blood circulation and enhances oxygen delivery to the affected area [17].

Destruction of Pathological Tissue

Thermal cauterization destroys abnormal tissues such as fibrotic lesions, infected tissue, and degenerative structures. This controlled tissue destruction facilitates regeneration of healthy tissue [3].

Anti-Inflammatory Effects

Heat therapy may reduce inflammation by increasing metabolic activity and promoting removal of inflammatory mediators from damaged tissues [18].

COMPARISON WITH MODERN THERMAL SURGERY

Modern surgical techniques such as electrocautery, laser ablation, and radiofrequency therapy utilize thermal energy to achieve therapeutic outcomes similar to those observed in Agnikarma [5].

Both approaches produce comparable histopathological effects including coagulative necrosis, vascular thrombosis, and stimulation of wound healing responses.

Clinical studies comparing Agnikarma with electrocautery have demonstrated comparable therapeutic outcomes in certain surgical conditions, suggesting that traditional techniques may have a valid scientific basis [3].

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite its long history, scientific research on Agnikarma remains limited. Future investigations should focus on:

- Further Histopathological Studies of Agnikarma Lesions
- Thermal Imaging Analysis of Tissue Temperature Distribution
- Molecular Studies of Heat-Induced Cellular Responses
- Randomized clinical trials comparing Agnikarma with modern cautery techniques

Such research may provide stronger scientific evidence supporting the therapeutic benefits of Agnikarma.

CONCLUSION

Agnikarma represents an important therapeutic modality in Ayurvedic surgery that utilizes controlled thermal energy to treat various pathological conditions. Histopathological studies indicate that thermal cauterization produces characteristic changes including coagulative necrosis, vascular thrombosis, inflammatory cell infiltration, and tissue regeneration.

These biological responses explain many of the therapeutic benefits associated with Agnikarma, including pain relief, haemostasis, and removal of diseased tissue. The similarities between Agnikarma and modern thermal surgical techniques suggest that ancient Ayurvedic surgeons possessed a sophisticated understanding of thermal therapy.

Further scientific investigation into the histopathological mechanisms of Agnikarma may contribute to its wider acceptance in modern integrative medical practice.

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