ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore the effects of two Rehmanniae Radix formulae in patients with metabolic syndrome (MetS), a randomized controlled study was conducted.

Methods: MetS patients were randomly assigned to receive either a classic Rehmanniae Six Formula (R6, or ‘Liu Wei Di Huang Wan’) or a novel multi-herbal Rehmanniae Radix containing formula SUB889 for 8 weeks. Western medicine related clinical parameters, Chinese medicine defined symptoms and syndromes as well as metabolomic profiles were evaluated at different time points.

Results: R6 (n = 20) and SUB889 (n = 20) showed similar effects on MetS regarding the improvement of clinical parameters (waist circumference, body mass index, LDL-cholesterol, systolic blood pressure) and Qi/Yin deficiency (p < 0.05). Decreased levels of cholesteryl esters, phosphatidylcholines, triglycerides and sphingomyelins were found in the R6 group, while SUB889 formula resulted in increased levels of tricarboxylic acid cycle and glucose metabolism intermediates (malate, fumarate and pyruvate).

Conclusions: R6 and SUB889 have similar effects on the treatment of MetS by improving Chinese medicine and Western medicine defined clinical outcomes. R6 is more effective in improving lipid profiles compared to SUB889. The exact mechanisms of the two formulae on MetS remain to be elucidated.

Key words: Systems biology, Metabolic syndrome, Chinese medicine diagnosis, Metabolomics, Rehmanniae Radix formula

Abbreviation: ChE: cholesteryl ester; CM: Chinese medicine; DG: diglyceride; DHAP: dihydroxyacetone phosphate; F-6-P: fructose 6-phosphate; FA: fatty acid; G-6-P: glucose 6-phosphate; GADP: glyceralddehyde 3-phosphate; GC/MS: chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry; Gl-3-P: glycerol 3-phosphate; HbA1c: glycated hemoglobin; HDL-C: high-density lipoprotein cholesterol; LC/MS: liquid chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry; LPA: lysophosphatidic acid; LPC: lysophosphatidylcholine; MetS: metabolic syndrome; MG: monolinoleoglycerol; PA: phosphatidic acid; PC: phosphatidylcholine; R6: Rehmannia Six Formula; SPM: sphingomyelin; T-C: total cholesterol; TG: triglyceride; WM: western medicine

Received 19 September 2016; Accept 04 November 2016

Original Article

Introduction

Metabolic syndrome (MetS) is defined as a combination of central obesity, hyperglycemia, dyslipidemia and hypertension[1]. It is widely accepted that MetS is associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes[2]. MetS, as defined by Western diagnostics, has no corresponding syndrome described in Chinese medicine[3-4].

Chinese medicine (CM) is a descriptive medicine developed by the accumulation of empirical experience over thousands of years. In patients suffering from one disease defined by Western medicine (WM), a variety of CM syndromes may be observed[5-6]. Yin deficiency and Qi deficiency are two of the most generic CM syndromes. Syndrome differentiation is an essential diagnostic part of CM: a patient is diagnosed by observation, listening, questioning and pulse feeling. Diagnosis is followed by providing a CM therapy that corresponds to the syndrome, effecting multiple targets in the human body[7].

In contrast, WM is designed to work in a ‘one disease-one target’ mode. Often single biomarkers are used for diagnosis and monitoring disease progression (for example: fasting glucose level, blood pressure, cholesterol level)[8]. Techniques such as metabolomics are developed for biomarker discovery in complex diseases which are not properly characterized by single biomarkers. Metabolomics is the systematic analysis of metabolites in body fluids, providing a comprehensive view of metabolic changes. Those patterns of change are potential biomarkers/biosignatures which can be used to optimize disease diagnosis and treatment[9]. By unifying CM, WM and metabolomics technologies, different levels of organization within the body (metabolites, pathways, overarching processes, organ function, and even mental and emotional functioning) can be measured and integrated as individual system
response profiles. Based on the response profiles, a better understanding of how patients respond to treatments can be obtained, and guidance for personalized treatment can be provided.

Herbal medicine is one of the most commonly administered CM therapies due to its ease of use, low costs and good compliance. An herbal formula consisting of multiple herbal constituents can be considered as a holistic and synergetic medicine. Rehmannia Six Formula (R6 or ‘Liu Wei Di Huang Wan’) has been used in clinical practice for thousands of years in China and is now widely used as a combination treatment for metabolic disorder related diseases including diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia\(^{10-12}\). R6 is made from a concentrated water extract of six herbs: Rehmanniae Radix Praeparata, Dioscoreae Rhizoma, Corni, Poria, Alismatis Rhizoma and Moutan Cortex in a proportion of 8:4:3:3:3:3\(^{13}\). According to Chinese medicine principles, R6 is known to promote the health of patients with Yin deficiency by nourishing ‘Kidney-liver Yin-deficiency’. Based on our previous study, R6 can improve the lipids profiles of MetS patients. Furthermore, the CM syndrome Yin and Qi deficiency were found to be improved by using the herbal formula over 8 weeks, and a specific sequence of events in the timing of those effects was discovered—Yin deficiency was found to be improved first after which Qi deficiency was improved\(^{13}\). There are no other studies reporting the use of R6 as a treatment for MetS, but there is a randomized controlled trial which reported using R6 to treat chronic kidney disease induced by MetS\(^{14}\). R6 is also reported as effective when used in combination with Western drugs to treat type 2 diabetes or hypertension\(^{10-11}\). In addition, Huang et al. reported reduction of kidney failure risk among type 2 diabetic patients by taking R6\(^{15}\).

Based on CM guidelines and traditional practices, a novel formula SUB889 was designed for MetS subjects with Qi and Yin deficiency, but more focused on motivating ‘Yang’ without damaging ‘Yin’, an effect that is lacking in R6. SUB889 is a multi-component formula containing nine herbs: Rehmanniae Radix, Polygoni Multiﬂori Radix, Cisticans Herba, Lycii Fructus, Polygonati Rhizoma, Ganoderma, Acanthopanacis Senticosi Radix, Atractylodis Rhizoma, Ephedrae Herba in a proportion of 12:6:5:5:5:5:3:1.

Even though the two Rehmanniae Radix formulae, R6 and SUB889, have different herbal compositions, both formulae contain Rehmanniae Radix as the ‘emperor herb’. In CM theory an emperor herb is the principle herb in a formula, which plays a major role in the treatment effect. However, in the preparation of R6, Rehmanniae Radix is processed by repeated steaming and drying, which is named Rehmanniae Radix Preparata (Shu Di Huang); in the preparation of SUB889 dried rehmannia root is used without any processing (Sheng Di Huang). The processing procedure changes the properties of Rehmanniae Radix from ‘releasing the Heat’ to ‘tonifying Yin’\(^{16}\). Besides that, the chemical composition is also changed by the processing procedure. Iroids and oligosaccharides were reported to decrease while monosaccharides increase after processing\(^ {17-18}\). Dried Rehmanniae Radix was chosen instead of Rehmanniae Radix Preparata in SUB889 to focus on the blood-cooling and nourishing Yin, activating the pulse and eliminating stasis, to replenish the Kidney in a reasonable way. Except for Rehmanniae Radix, there is no overlap of herbs between R6 and SUB889. The ingenuity in SUB889 is that the combination of all herbs can nourish Yin and motivate Yang at the same time. The roles of other herbs of SUB889 were explained in the Supplementary Method ‘Roles of herbs in SUB889 except for Rehmanniae Radix’.

In order to compare the effects of the R6 and SUB889 formulae, MetS patients were randomized into two groups and subjected to an 8-week treatment with either R6 or SUB889. During this period, metabolite profiles, clinical parameters, CM syndromes and related symptoms were measured at several time points up to 8 weeks after treatment. The measurements were analysed to evaluate treatment effects at different levels of organization within human body. The aim of the study is to combine all levels of data to explore the similarities and differences between MetS patients’ response profiles to the two Rehmanniae Radix formulae. Furthermore, the response profiles will not only provide a better understanding of the treatment mechanisms involved using CM multi-herbal formulae (e.g. R6 and SUB889), but also improve our understanding of the biology of MetS.

**Patients and methods**

The study design and subjects have been described by Wietmarschen et al. for MetS patients with R6 treatment\(^ {13}\), but also described here since it is essential for understanding the analysis presented in this paper.

**Subjects**

Human subjects were recruited from the Chengdu No. 1 People’s Hospital in China. Subjects with MetS (waist circumference for men ≥90 cm, for women ≥80 cm; systolic blood pressure ≥130 mmHg or diastolic blood pressure ≥85 mmHg) and diagnosed as Qi and Yin deficiency were recruited. Subjects with a diagnosis of another disease or using medication were excluded. This study followed guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and Tokyo for humans, and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Chengdu No.1 People’s Hospital. A doctor explained the details of the study to the subjects and ensured written informed consent of each subject.

**Study design**

The study was designed as a randomized controlled study in which two groups received an herbal formula for treating MetS, either R6 or SUB889 for 8 weeks. Qi /Yin deficiency and their related symptoms were recorded by one out of four CM doctors at the start of the study (T0), after 2 (T2), 4 (T4), 6 (T6) and 8 (T8) weeks of treatment. Fasting blood samples were collected and used to perform routine clinical chemistry (T0, T4, T8) and metabolic profiling (T0, T8).
Treatment

The R6 used in this study was an industrial and standardized product (batch number 4071161), manufactured by Beijing Tong Ren Tang Group Co., Ltd (Beijing, China). Daily intake of R6 was equivalent to active ingredients extracted from 9 g herbal mixture. The SUB889 was produced and tested for this study by Chengdu Jinhanfang Science and Technology Service Co., Ltd (Chengdu, China). Daily intake of SUB889 was equivalent to active ingredients extracted from 12 g herbal mixture (within the safety range of CM practice). In total 3 batches of SUB889 were produced for quality control, and one batch was used for the clinical study to minimize variation in the medication (batch number 050103). The procedure for producing SUB889 is described in the Supplementary Method section. Quality is controlled according to the Pharmacopoeia of P. C. China 2015. No other Chinese herbal medication or Western medicine was allowed during this period.

Western medicine diagnosis: clinical parameters

Fasting blood samples were obtained for the measurement of glucose, insulin, triglycerides (TGs), total cholesterol (T-C), high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C), low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C), glycated hemoglobin (HbA1c) and creatinine at T0, T4, T6 and T8. Age and gender was documented. Weight, waist circumference, body mass index (BMI), systolic blood pressure (SBP) and diastolic blood pressure (DBP) were measured at T0, T2, T4, T6 and T8. All clinical measurements were conducted by the Chengdu No.1 People’s hospital.

Chinese medicine diagnosis: syndrome differentiation

The Qi/Yin deficiency syndromes were diagnosed and corresponding symptoms were recorded by trained CM doctors. The typical symptoms of Yin deficiency are ‘heat sensation in the chest, palms and soles’, ‘hectic fever and night sweat’, ‘head giddiness’, ‘insomnia and dreamful’, ‘dry mouth and pharynx’, ‘constipation’, ‘thin tongue shape’, ‘red tongue substance’ (i.e. the color of tongue body), ‘yellow tongue coating’ and ‘weak pulse’. Qi deficiency is characterized by the symptoms ‘fatigue’, ‘spontaneous sweating’, ‘taciturn’, ‘weak joints and waist’, ‘head giddiness’, ‘tongue shape normal or enlarged’, ‘pale-red tongue substance’ and ‘thready and weak pulse’ (i.e. soft, feels like a sewing thread, weak, without strength but not scattered by pressure). Symptoms were measured as ordinal or nominal variables, and Qi- and Yin-deficiency scores were calculated by summing the related symptom scores. The calculation rules are described in Supplementary Table S1.

Metabolic profiling

Plasma samples collected at T0 and T8 were measured by the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) Zeist in the Netherlands. Extra plasma of the subjects was pooled and used to create quality control (QC) samples. The gas chromatography/mass spectrometry (GC/MS) platform measures a large variety of metabolite classes important for the biological functioning of humans, such as amino acids, fatty acids and sugars. Briefly, 100 µL of plasma was spiked with an internal standard (ISTD) mixture and extracted by methanol, followed by centrifugation and transferring the supernatant. After evaporating the supernatant to dryness, a two-step derivatization procedure was applied to the samples. The derivatized extracts were analyzed with an Agilent 6890N gas chromatograph equipped with an Agilent 5973 mass selective detector. Chromatographic separations were performed on a DB5-MS capillary column (30 m × 250 µm i.d., 0.25-µm film thickness; J&W Scientific, Folsom, USA), using helium as the carrier gas at a flow rate of 1.7 mL/min. The raw data were pre-processed using Chemstation G1701CA (Agilent, version D.01.02). The method used is described in detail by Koek et al[21].

The liquid chromatography/mass spectrometry (LC/MS) platform targets fatty acids, phosphatidylcholines, triglycerides and other lipid classes. In brief, 10 µL of plasma was deproteinized by adding isopropanol containing an ISTD mix. This lipid profiling was conducted using TSQ Quantum Discovery Triple Quad mass spectrometer equipped with a Surveyor MS HPLC system. Chromatographic separations were performed with Alltech Prophase C4 300Å column (150 × 3.2 mm i.d., 5 µm; Alltech, Lexington, USA) in combination with a Symmetry 300 C4 guard column (10 × 2.1 mm i.d., 3.5 µm; Waters, Milford, USA). The raw data were pre-processed using LCQuan (Thermo Fisher Scientific, version 2). The method used is described in detail by van Wietmarschen et al[13] and Draisma et al[22].

For each metabolite, the peak area was corrected for the appropriate internal standard (ISTD), and response ratios (Area_analyte/Area_ISTD) were then used in the subsequent analysis. An in-house developed algorithm was applied to compensate and correct for instrumental drift during the measurements. For each identified metabolite the standard deviation of its peak areas of the individual QC samples was computed relative to the average peak area over all QC samples (relative standard deviation, RSD)[22]. The RSDs of the metabolites in the QC samples to assess the quality of the measurements of the targeted metabolites in each analytical platform. Subject samples were measured in duplicate and the average value was calculated for each metabolite. Log transformation (generalized logarithm transformation) and auto scaling (mean-centered and divided by the standard deviation of each variable) were performed to normalize the metabolomics data before statistical analysis.

Statistical analysis

The aim of the data analysis was to discover similarities and differences of subjects’ response profiles between R6 and SUB889 therapy. Those similarities and differences are related to the various types of data—clinical parameters, CM syndromes and related symptoms and metabolite profiles. Statistical calculations were performed with MetaboAnalyst 3.0 (available at http://www.metaboanalyst.ca/)[23].
Results and discussion

Subjects

In total 67 subjects were recruited in the study and randomly assigned to receive R6 or SUB889 treatment. Seven included subjects dropped out at various time points of the trial. In total 60 subjects completed the study of which 29 were in the R6 group, and the other 31 subjects in the SUB889 group. Metabolomics analyses were performed on 20 samples from each group due to budget constraints, therefore all of the following analyses were performed on these 40 subjects. Independent student t-tests and Chi-square tests were applied to test for significant differences between two treatment group, as illustrated in Table 1 (R6 vs. SUB889, T0), there were no significant differences in clinical characteristics between the two groups at baseline (0 week).

Changes of clinical parameters

The results of the comparisons between the R6 and SUB889 groups as well as within each of the treatment groups are shown in Table 1. SBP and Central obesity related parameters—waist circumference and BMI decreased significantly after 8-week treatment in both groups. The body weight declined (67.1 ± 12.4 kg vs. 65.0 ± 11.9 kg, \( p = 0.001 \)) in the SUB889 group while in the R6 group the decrease was not significant (63.5 ± 5.7 kg vs. 62.7 ± 5.7 kg, \( p = 0.055 \)). It seems that SUB889 has more effect on losing weight. In both groups, SBP and LDL-C decreased significantly. The decrease of T-C (5.4 ± 0.8 mmol/L vs. 4.6 ± 1.0 mmol/L, \( p = 0.003 \)) and the increase of insulin level (9 ± 5 μU/mL vs. 10 ± 5 μU/mL, \( p = 0.038 \)) were only found in R6 group. Therefore, R6 may improve the lipid profiles through affecting the insulin level in the human body. The change ratios of clinical parameters between the groups were similar (Table 1, R6 vs. SUB889). All the clinical parameter changes over time are shown as bar plots in Supplementary Fig S1.

Changes of symptoms and syndromes

According to CM, a syndrome is defined on the basis of the mixture of clinical symptoms. An overview of Qi/Yin deficiency-based symptom classifications and changes of symptoms (week 0 vs. week 8) with R6 or SUB889 therapy are presented in Fig 1. All of the Qi-deficiency symptoms (fatigue, spontaneous sweating, taciturn and pale-red tongue substance) and Yin-deficiency symptoms (hectic fever, heat sensation, constipation and red tongue substance) improved significantly in both groups. In the R6 treatment group, symptoms of weak joints and waist, yellow tongue coating, thready and weak pulse improved, while in the SUB889 group symptoms of weak pulse, dry mouth and pharynx, tinnitus and head giddiness improved. The changes of these symptoms

| Table 1. T-tests of clinical parameters within and between R6 (n=20) and SUB889 (n=20) group. |
|-----------------------------------------------|------|-----------------|------|------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|--- |
| Age (years) | 49±10 | 50±12 | 50±12 | 50±12 | 50±12 | 50±12 | 50±12 | 50±12 | 50±12 |
| Gender (male/female) | 5/15 | 8/12 | 8/12 | 8/12 | 8/12 | 8/12 | 8/12 | 8/12 | 8/12 |
| Body weight (kg) | 63.5±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 | 62.7±5.7 |
| Waist circumference (cm) | 88.9±6.2 | 87.6±5.7 | 87.6±5.7 | 87.6±5.7 | 87.6±5.7 | 87.6±5.7 | 87.6±5.7 | 87.6±5.7 | 87.6±5.7 |
| Body mass index (kg/m²) | 24.9±2.3 | 24.5±2.2 | 24.5±2.2 | 24.5±2.2 | 24.5±2.2 | 24.5±2.2 | 24.5±2.2 | 24.5±2.2 | 24.5±2.2 |
| Plasma glucose (mmol/L) | 5.4±0.7 | 5.5±0.8 | 5.5±0.8 | 5.5±0.8 | 5.5±0.8 | 5.5±0.8 | 5.5±0.8 | 5.5±0.8 | 5.5±0.8 |
| Plasma insulin (μU/mL) | 9±5 | 10±5 | 10±5 | 10±5 | 10±5 | 10±5 | 10±5 | 10±5 | 10±5 |
| Total cholesterol (mmol/L) | 5.4±0.8 | 4.6±1.0 | 4.6±1.0 | 4.6±1.0 | 4.6±1.0 | 4.6±1.0 | 4.6±1.0 | 4.6±1.0 | 4.6±1.0 |
| Triglyceride (mmol/L) | 3.1±2.7 | 2.4±1.7 | 2.4±1.7 | 2.4±1.7 | 2.4±1.7 | 2.4±1.7 | 2.4±1.7 | 2.4±1.7 | 2.4±1.7 |
| LDL-cholesterol (mmol/L) | 3.4±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 | 2.9±0.8 |
| HDL-cholesterol (mmol/L) | 1.4±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 | 1.3±0.3 |
| HbA1c (%) | 5.7±0.7 | 5.7±0.4 | 5.7±0.4 | 5.7±0.4 | 5.7±0.4 | 5.7±0.4 | 5.7±0.4 | 5.7±0.4 | 5.7±0.4 |
| Systolic blood pressure (mmHg) | 135±4 | 126±7 | 126±7 | 126±7 | 126±7 | 126±7 | 126±7 | 126±7 | 126±7 |
| Diastolic blood pressure (mmHg) | 75±6 | 74±6 | 74±6 | 74±6 | 74±6 | 74±6 | 74±6 | 74±6 | 74±6 |
| Creatinine (μmol/L) | 64±19 | 63±18 | 63±18 | 63±18 | 63±18 | 63±18 | 63±18 | 63±18 | 63±18 |

*Paired t-tests were applied to compare the clinical parameters between 0 week and 8 weeks within group.

Independent t-tests were applied to compare the change ratios of clinical parameters between R6 and SUB889.
over time were similar comparing the R6 and SUB889 groups (Supplementary, Fig S2).

According to CM, treatment effects can be observed as improvements of the corresponding CM syndrome. The operational definitions of the clinical diagnosis are not mutually exclusive, for example Qi and Yin deficiency contain overlapping symptoms (head giddiness, thready and weak pulse). Furthermore, a patient can show mixed syndromes, and syndromes can change during treatment. In this study, syndromes were represented by deficiency scores, and these scores were calculated by summing related symptom variables (Fig 1). The higher the deficiency score, the worse the patient is with regard to the corresponding syndrome. For each treatment time point the scores are plotted in Fig 2. It shows that both Rehmanniae Radix formulae reduced the deficiency scores after 8 weeks.

R6 is traditionally used to treat Kidney- and Liver-Yin deficiency, leading to a decrease of Yin-deficiency. However, in our study Qi-deficiency scores also decreased. This phenomenon may be explained by the observation that Qi- and Yin deficiency was present in all patients in the study, and moreover there was a significant correlation between these two deficiency scores (Pearson correlation coefficient= 0.362, p < 0.001). Furthermore, according to CM theory, Deficiency is the results of an imbalance in the human body, which can be restored with the use of herbal formulae[7]. As both Qi and Yin are essential components to maintain this balance, the reduction of Yin deficiency may cause the
improvement of Qi deficiency. This can explain that the improvement of Qi-deficiency scores together with Yin-deficiency scores during the R6 treatment. However, the mechanism behind it still needs to be further studied. Interestingly two different formulae demonstrated similar effects on CM syndrome deficiency scores—although the sequential events on improvement of symptoms were not exactly the same.

Mann-Whitney U-tests were applied to compare the R6 and SUB889 treatment in the deficiency scores, no significant differences were found at all the time points. Therefore, R6 and SUB889 have a similar effect over 8 weeks when considering the syndrome level. However, the decrease of the Yin deficiency score between T2 and T4 (Yin deficiency scoreT2 – Yin deficiency scoreT4) during SUB889 treatment was larger than that during R6 treatment (p = 0.020). Both Qi- and Yin-deficiency scores decreased after 8-week treatment (p < 0.001), which means R6 and SUB889 have significant effects in treating MetS based on CM diagnosis.

Associations between WM diagnosis and CM diagnosis

To investigate the associations between WM diagnostic clinical parameters and CM diagnostic scores for Qi/Yin deficiency, correlation analyses (Spearman’s rho) were applied to the clinical parameters and deficiency scores containing all subjects with the R6 and SUB889 treatment (n=40) in week 0, 4 and 8. The results are shown in Supplementary Table S2. Qi- and Yin-deficiency scores were found to be highly correlated to systolic blood pressure (SBP) (Fig 3).

Blood pressure is the diagnostic standard for hypertension according to WM, and the regulation of blood pressure involves a system intervention including the kidney, and the central or peripheral nervous systems in WM[26]. There is no concept of hypertension in CM, but according to symptoms it could be divided into three major CM syndromes, including deficiency syndrome[27]. There are many studies pointing out the relationship between hypertension and Yin/- Qi-deficiency. Although the mechanism behind this relationship is still unknown, deficiency in general may be a basic pathogenesis related to hypertension[28-30].

Changes of metabolites

Fasting blood samples collected from subjects treated with R6 (n=20) and SUB889 (n=20) at T0 and T8 were analyzed with a LC/MS method to obtain lipid profiles and with a GC/MS method to obtain global profiles. There were 95 and 127 metabolites measured with the LC/MS and GC/MS platforms respectively. After data pre-processing and quality checking, three statistical outliers were detected and therefore removed—one from the R6 group (patient ID: 37) and two from the SUB889 group (patient ID: 18, 40).

Paired t-tests and independent t-tests were applied to the normalized metabolomics data of the remaining 37 patients, and results are shown in Supplementary Table S3 (R6: week 8 vs. week 0; SUB889: week 8 vs. week 0). In the R6 group, 75 metabolites changed significantly after 8weeks of treatment (p < 0.05), and most of the decreased metabolites were lipids, which consisted of six classes: cholesteryl esters (ChEs, n=8), fatty acids (FAs, n=7), phosphatidylcholines (PCs, n=12), triglycerides (TGs, n=16), diglycerides (DGs, n=2) and sphingomyelins (SPMs, n=18). The downregulated lipids measured by metabolomic profiling are consistent with the decrease of clinical parameter T-C and LDL-C during the R6 treatment. In the SUB889 group, 13 metabolites were found significantly upregulated, and most of them were organic acids, including malic acid, fumaric acid, pyruvic acid and a few FAs, while 5 metabolites including glucose were found to be significantly downregulated.

Figure 3. Relationship between systolic blood pressure and Qi deficiency score (A) and Yin deficiency score (B) during 8-week treatment of the two Rehmanniae Radix formulae. Graphs depict linear regression lines as well as Spearman correlation coefficients and their p values.

© World Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine | Systems response of metabolic syndrome patients to Rehmanniae Radix formulae

2017 | Vol. 3 | Issue 1

www.wjtcm.org
A hierarchical cluster analysis was performed on the top 30 metabolite ratios of metabolites T8/T0 (Supplementary Table S3, Ratio) ranked by the independent t-tests, since these metabolites show the largest difference in response to R6 versus SUB889. Euclidean distance was used as the similarity measure and average linkage (clustering uses the centroids of the observations) was used as the clustering algorithm. The clustering results were visualized as a heatmap with the samples as the rows and metabolites as the columns, and each colored cell corresponding to a normalized metabolite ratio value (Fig 4). Most patients were found to be clustered correctly in their respective treatment group, and the misclassification rate was 16.22% (6 subjects misclassified). Comparing the two groups, metabolites in the R6 group, especially SPMs, PCs and FAs, were downregulated (color blue), while in the SUB889 treatment group the metabolites from these classes were relatively stable or slightly increased (color red).

Hypothetical mechanisms of the two Rehmanniae Radix formulae

In the present study, responses of subjects to R6 or SUB889 were measured at multiple levels, and it is interesting to investigate the mechanisms of these two formulae by combing metabolomics data and clinical parameters. Metabolites which were changed after 8 weeks (Supplementary Table S3, T0 vs. T8) of treatment were selected. These selected metabolites and clinical lipid parameters (TG, HDL-C, LDL-C) were mapped on metabolite pathways taken from KEGG[31].

R6 treatment significantly decreased lipid related metabolites (FAs, SPMs, TGs, DGs, PCs and ChEs) and clinical parameters (T-C and LDL-C) (Fig 5A). The decrease of lipids may be explained by the increased insulin level. Insulin can activate the synthesis of lipids and inhibit their degradation[32]. R6 treatment might stimulate insulin secretion, leading to reductions of the plasma lipids and LDL-C; downregulated FAs indicated that R6 may also promote the β-oxidation of FAs for energy generation. Since the lipid levels substantially declined during the R6 treatment, the BMI and waist circumference were reduced after 8 weeks. In addition, decreased SPMs could lead to changes in cell membrane composition and related signaling pathways. Many studies have already revealed the role of SPMs and related signaling pathways in obesity, insulin resistance, and other metabolic disorders[33-35]. It is reported that R6 may affect endocrine and excretory systems related pathways, such as peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor (PPAR) signaling pathway and...
aldosterone-regulated sodium reabsorption, which play important roles in lipid metabolism, glucose uptake and blood pressure regulation[36-37].

However, lipid levels were not substantially changed during the SUB889 treatment, only a few lipid metabolites were slightly altered (Fig 5B). Malic acid/malate and fumaric acid/fumarate, which are important intermediates of the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle, increased dramatically after 8 weeks, indicating that the TCA cycle may be stimulated with the SUB889 treatment. Besides, as an important response of metabolic syndrome patients to Rehmanniae Radix formulae 2017 | Vol. 3 | Issue 1 www.wjtcm.org

Figure 5. Pathway analysis of metabolites which were affected by 8-week treatment of R6 (A) or SUB889 (B).
intermediate of gluconeogenesis and glycolysis, pyruvic acid/ pyruvate was also upregulated significantly, which may also induce the TCA cycle. Therefore, we hypothesize that SUB889 did not change the lipid homeostasis in plasma, but it might treat MetS by regulating glucose metabolism (gluconeogenesis, glycolysis) and the TCA cycle to achieve an improvement of clinical outcomes in MetS patients.

It is likely that the formulae both lead to improvement of MetS even though the herbal components have effects on a variety of different metabolic targets. This indicates that these pathways are interconnected in the regulation of human physiological states. Multi-herbal formulae consisting of numerous active components inducing complex interactions within the human body, might therefore be especially suitable for treating complex disease (e.g. MetS) and offer valuable alternatives to Western single target medicines. Since the R6 and SUB889 formulae have very similar effects with respect to CM, we assume that the regulation of lipid metabolism, glucose metabolism or the TCA cycle by different formulae may result in the same therapeutic outcomes. From a Chinese medical point of view, one Western medical defined disease can be treated with different approaches, much according to the CM statement ‘Tong Bing Yi Zhi’ (same disease, different treatment).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study shows that R6 and SUB889 have similar effects on the treatment of MetS by improving CM deficiency syndromes and WM clinical outcomes (central obesity and systolic blood pressure). R6 is more effective in decreasing lipid profiles compared to SUB889, indicating that the two formulae target different metabolic pathways in the patients. Even though the two multi-herbal Rehmanniae Radix formulae induce different metabolic changes, the therapeutic effect can be similar according to both CM and WM diagnosis. In the future, SUB889 may be developed as a candidate treatment for MetS patients or the prevention of cardiovascular disease. Further studies are needed with larger cohorts as well as healthy control groups to elucidate the mechanism of actions for the two Rehmanniae Radix formulae in MetS.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Data deposit

The metabolomics dataset along with CM- and WM-based measurements used in this study was uploaded onto the Figshare data repository for open access. The DOI is https://dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.3814275.v1.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank Dr. A C. Harms for reading and commenting on the paper and J. C. Schoeman for the assistance with the pathway analysis. The China Scholarship Council is acknowledged for grant to J Fu.

References