Confocal Reflectance Microscopy in Dermatology: Promise and Reality of Non-Invasive Diagnosis and Monitoring

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Summary. *In vivo* reflectance confocal microscopy (RCM) constitutes a novel non-invasive imaging method that enables visualization of cells and structures in living skin in real time with resolution close to histological analysis. RCM has been successfully implemented in the assessment of benign and malignant lesions. It also enables monitoring dynamic changes in the skin over time and in response to different stimuli, such as ultraviolet exposure or specific treatments. The non-invasive nature of this technique allows repetitive sampling without biopsy collection, causing no further damage to the areas under investigation. In this article, I provide an overview of RCM, including the latest technological advances as well as novel applications in the characterization of both normal and pathological skin.

Key words: reflectance confocal microscopy, non-invasive imaging techniques, *in vivo* microscopy, skin cancer.

MICROSCOPÍA CONFOCAL DE REFLECTANCIA EN DERMATOLOGÍA: PROMESA Y REALIDAD DE DIAGNÓSTICO Y SEGUIMIENTO NO INVASIVOS

Resumen. La microscopía confocal de reflectancia (MCR) *in vivo* constituye un novedoso método de imagen no invasivo que permite la visualización de células y estructuras de la piel viva en tiempo real, con una resolución próxima al estudio histológico. La MCR también se ha implementado con éxito para la valoración de lesiones benignas y malignas. Asimismo, permite detectar los cambios dinámicos en la piel con el paso del tiempo y en respuesta a diferentes estímulos, como la exposición a la radiación ultravioleta o a tratamientos específicos. La naturaleza no invasiva de esta técnica permite repetir las muestras sin realizar una biopsia, evitando así causar más daño a las zonas que están siendo estudiadas. En este artículo se aporta una visión de conjunto sobre la MCR, incluyendo los últimos avances tecnológicos, así como las aplicaciones novedosas para la caracterización de la piel sana y enferma.

Palabras clave: microscopía confocal de reflectancia, técnica no invasiva, microscopía *in vivo*, cáncer cutáneo.

Introduction

Non-invasive techniques are the Holy Grail of diagnostic procedures. When applied to the field of dermatology, biopsy collection requires extra consideration, i.e. the additional damage caused to the affected area, which has both health and aesthetic ramifications.

The last 15 years have witnessed a surge of novel imaging techniques that provide information of the skin and external mucosa; many of these techniques are non-invasive and enable repetitive analysis of the affected area, conferring the medical practitioner not only immediate diagnosis capability, but also the ability to monitor the effect of time and treatments on the affected area of the skin without causing further damage and enhancing the precision of prognosis of the lesion. Some of these techniques include dermoscopy, optical coherence tomography, high-frequency ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), fluorescence-mode confocal microscopy, and reflectance-mode confocal microscopy (RCM). The interest in these novel modalities of evaluation of skin disease is illustrated by the fact that the number of citations in Medline for RCM has passed from 10 in 2000 to more than 250 in 2009.

As of present time, histology is still used as the reference for these applications due to its diagnostic and resolution power, thus an immediate challenge is to establish strong standards for these techniques. *In vivo* RCM offers several...
important advantages over conventional histology. Imaging is painless and non-invasive, causing no tissue damage. The skin is not altered by post-collection processing (fixation, sectioning, and mounting) or staining, which may cause disruption of the native structure of the tissue, thus reducing interpretive ambiguities. Real-time data collection is faster than routine histology, and the same location of the skin can be repeatedly imaged over time to evaluate dynamic changes such as tissue growth, wound healing, lesion progression or response to therapy. This is one of the main advantages of the technique compared to conventional histology, which can only reveal information about the tissue at the time of collection of the sample. However, the establishment of tight and reproducible correlations between conventional histology and RCM is an absolute requirement to support the implementation of RCM in general dermatology. In this regard, a recent report establishes a general glossary of terms for the RCM evaluation of melanocytic lesions, which constitutes a terminology consensus that permits direct correlation of RCM findings with those obtained through classic histology.

Reflectance Confocal Microscopy: Principles and Technology

The principle of confocal scanning microscopy was first described by Marvin Minsky in Harvard as early as 1957, but in vivo application has required extensive development of light sources and computerization technologies. Dating back to the 1980s, tandem scanning confocal microscopy has been successfully utilized to collect images of human and animal tissue in vivo. A breakthrough came in 1995, when confocal scanning laser microscopy was used to image human skin in vivo. Since then, many reports have suggested its possible applications in dermatology, particularly in the diagnosis of skin tumors.

Reflectance confocal microscopy is based on the illumination of a small region within translucent tissue, such as skin or mucosa. The reflected light (reflectance) is sent through a pinhole, which prevents out-of-focus light from reaching a detector, so that only light from the in-focus plane (confocal) is detected. In this manner, whole planes of the sample under study are collected by linear scanning of the point source beam, providing thin sections of horizontal tissue in vivo, similar to computerized tomography or MRI. Thus, optical sectioning allows intact tissue to be studied, avoiding invasive damage caused by sample collection for histological analysis.

Light reflection is caused by local variations of the refractive index within the tissue; it also occurs when the size of the tissue elements imaged is similar to the illuminating wavelength. For example, melanosomes produce strong reflectance when illuminated with near-infrared wavelengths because they contain material with a high refractive index relative to the surrounding skin, and have a size similar to the illuminating wavelength.

Technically, confocal microscopes used in dermatology are not very different from their counterparts used in basic sciences. Typically, confocal microscopy employs lasers as source of illumination due to their capability to generate monochromatic, coherent beams. Whereas fluorescent confocal microscopes use He/Ne, Kr or Ar lasers to illuminate fluorescent samples in a wavelength range of 400-700 nm, light transmittance in skin increases from 700-1400 nm. Due to the fact that resolution is related to the wavelength of the illuminating beam, higher wavelengths, which have increased light transmittance, have poor lateral resolution.

Therefore, confocal microscopes use sources of illumination near the infrared wavelength, 800-1064 nm; available devices have a wavelength centered at 830 nm and less than 30 mW to avoid tissue damage; this setup allows examination at a maximum depth of 200-250 μm, sufficient to image the upper reticular dermis.

The laser beam is sent through a beam splitter and a scanning/focusing lens attached to a contact device. Image resolution depends on the precise wavelength used, as well as the optical aperture of the lens and the size of the pinhole.

Newer microscopes include a single optical fiber for the illumination and detection optical paths that eliminates out-of-focus information collected by the lens, simplifying the confocal setup and enabling miniaturization into a hand-held device. A typical example of lens used in RCM is a 30x objective lens of numeric aperture (NA) of 0.9, which provides a lateral resolution of approximately 1 μm and an axial resolution (section thickness) of 3-5 μm.

Skin movement is an important limitation when imaging in vivo. To reduce motion blur and contain the water or gel interface when imaging, a skin contact device is used. Most typical contact devices consist of a metal ring that is attached to the skin with adhesive and to the lens by means of a magnetic or snap mechanism. In addition to its function to stabilize the setup, it also holds the immersion medium. These media are water or water-based gels, since their refractive index is very similar to that of human epidermis (1.33 to 1.34), which reduces the spherical aberration of the beam passing through air.

Images are obtained after sequential illumination (“scanning”) of multiple pixels within the focal plane, generating a 2D mosaic image, which enables evaluation of architectural patterns. Scanning of consecutive planes potentially allows the generation of 3D maps of the skin. Another application is the collection of time-lapse images of the same plane to produces movies that reveal dynamic events such as blood flow.
Applications of Reflectance Confocal Microscopy

Diagnosis

The immediate application of RCM derives from the visualization of normal and pathological skin, which bears enormous diagnostic promise. An obvious requirement is the establishment of clear correlations between RCM images and histology to disambiguate the information collected and to allow accurate diagnosis.

Normal Skin: Correlation with Histology

The application of real-time RCM to the study of the skin has two main differences compared to classical histology: the image represents horizontal or en face sections; in addition, collected images are transformed into intensity maps (brightness grayscale) that represent the differential reflectance of the different structures of the skin (fig. 1).

The most superficial images correspond to the stratum corneum. It consists of large (10-30\,\mu m), anucleated, polygonal corneocytes that are very bright due to the difference between the refractive indices of the immersion medium and the stratum. These cells are grouped in “islands” separated by skin folds, which appear very dark, compared to the cells.

The stratum corneum overlies the next two layers, the stratum granulosum (25-35\,\mu m) and the stratum spinosum (15-25\,\mu m). The stratum granulosum consists of two to four layers of cells; nuclei appear as dark central ovals, whereas the surrounding cytoplasm is bright and grainy (fig. 1A).

The stratum spinosum consists of a tight honeycomb pattern of smaller cells with clearly delineated cell edges. The deepest layer of the epidermis is the basal layer (7-12\,\mu m). Basal cells are very bright due to the “melanin hats”, which are supranuclear melanin aggregates. In this layer, melanin-rich melanocytes and pigmented keratinocytes appear as isolated, bright ovals.

The suprapapillary epidermal plate at the dermoepidermal junction is visualized as rings of bright basal cells surrounding dark dermal papillae (fig. 1B). These areas also show a central area of blood flow with papillary dermal vascular loops.

The papillary dermis is visualized as a network of reticulated fibers with central capillary vessels. The reticular dermis appears as a thick reticulated pattern because of the presence of collagen bundles and elastic fibers. Other structures can be visualized such as eccrine ducts, which appear as bright centrally hollow structures that spiral through the epidermis and dermis, and hair shafts with pilo-sebaceous units. These appear as hollow structures with elliptical elongated cells at the circumference and a central refractile long hair shaft.

The appearance of normal skin varies according to the anatomical site, sun-exposure, skin colour, age, and physiological condition being imaged. Sun-exposed or darkly pigmented skin, for example, is brighter because of increased pigmentation at the basal layer.

Non-Pigmented Lesions

The characterization of skin neoplasms using RCM is an important area of clinical research with potential for non-invasive diagnosis and management of a variety of skin cancers. The advent of newer, less invasive topical therapies such as topical imiquimod or photodynamic therapy demands the development of non-invasive diagnostic tools to identify tumour subtypes and tumour margins accurately, and to monitor the response to treatment.
Epithelial Cancer

Actinic Keratosis

Actinic keratoses (AKs) are the most common precancerous lesions that affect fair pigmented skin overexposed to UV light. AKs are keratinocytic dysplasias (fig. 2); they can evolve into squamous cell carcinomas (SCC). RCM features of AK include irregular hyperkeratosis with disruption (fig. 2A) and parakeratosis (fig. 2B), architectural disorganization and nuclear enlargement and pleomorphism of epidermal cells\textsuperscript{21,22} (fig. 2C). RCM images of AKs show thick bundles consistent with solar elastosis (fig. 2D). The shallow depth of the illuminating wavelength prevents accurate visualization of the dermo-epidermal junction, particularly in hyperkeratotic lesions, which has proven troublesome to distinguish between hypertrophic AK vs. SCC. A recent study has revealed the presence of multilocular preneoplastic changes in areas around the site of the lesion, with accuracy around 95 %\textsuperscript{23,24}.

Squamous Cell Carcinoma

Squamous cell carcinoma is the second most common skin cancer, and in many cases develops from AK. The confocal features of SCC include architectural disarray and nuclear enlargement with pleomorphism in the stratum granulosum and stratum spinosum, as well as modification of vascular patterns and keratin pearls\textsuperscript{21,25}. Currently, RCM does not enable distinguishing between hyperkeratotic AKs and SCC or between superficially invasive SCC and SCC \textit{in situ} (Bowen’s disease), as the dermo-epidermal junction cannot be clearly visualized. RCM has been applied to the diagnosis of oral cavity neoplasms. RCM showed densely packed, pleomorphic tumour nuclei, and epithelial disarray, as well as inflammation. \textit{In vivo}, imaging was possible up to 490 and 250 μm in the lip and tongue, respectively\textsuperscript{26,27}.

Basal Cell Carcinoma

Basal cell carcinomas (BCC) is the most common skin cancer in humans; RCM features of BCC have been defined: they include islands of monomorphic elongated tu-
mour cells with their nuclei oriented along the same axis (basaloid nuclei)²⁸ (fig. 3A).

Nodules or islands of tumour cells are seen as distinct aggregates of tightly packed cells, frequently surrounded by cleft-like dark spaces and stromal tissue (fig. 3B) showing a peripheral row of tumor cells containing elongated monomorphic nuclei arranged in parallel to one another and perpendicular to the edge of the tumor aggregate (palisading). In many BCCs, islands may be seen as dark refractile areas compared to the surrounding stroma (termed dark silhouettes-like islands) (fig. 3C). The area also displays prominent, enlarged blood vessels, in which lymphocytes rolling can be occasionally observed; other inflammatory cells can be observed among tumour cells (fig. 3D). Other common features include keratinocyte disarray, epidermis destruction and reactive fibrosis; these are usually due to actinic damage and/or reactivity to the tumour.

A recent study has evaluated the sensitivity and specificity of five independent morphological parameters (presence of basaloid nuclei; nuclei polarization; inflammatory infiltrate; increased vasculature; actinic damage) by RCM for the diagnosis of BCC in 152 lesions²⁹. Of these, polarized nuclei exhibited high sensitivity and specificity; other parameters such as elongated monomorphic nuclei were very sensitive, but specificity was below 75%; correlation of parameters showed that presence of two or more parameters was 100% sensitive, and four or more was 95.7% specific. These results exhibited little variability across BCC locations and subtypes.

RCM may be also useful to non-invasively assess the response to cryotherapy or new therapies such as topical imiquimod or photodynamic therapy³⁰,³¹.

**Mycosis Fungoides**

RCM has also been used to visualize epidermotropic lymphocytes, Pautrier’s microabscesses, spongiosis, and tagging of the dermo-epidermal junction by lymphocytes³². Some features include darkening of basal cells around the dermal papillae, corresponding to inflammatory infiltration of the basal layer, and dark spaces filled with dim, small, oval cells, corresponding to Pautrier’s microabscesses.
es. The latter was typically limited to plaque-type mycosis fungoides (MF). Some of these features are also observed in lichenoid dermatitides and allergic contact dermatitis, making a clear diagnosis difficult.

Pigmented Non-Melanocytic Lesions

Seborrheic Keratosis

Seborrheic keratosis is a common benign epidermal proliferation, sometimes pigmented. RCM reveals marked acanthosis, including epidermal thickening without keratinocytic disarray and long, parallel, dermal papillae; the lesion is usually well delimited by bright rings of basal keratinocytes (edged papillae). Pigmented seborrheic keratoses include bright cell clusters (melanophages) and dark canalicular structures, i.e. blood vessels.

Dermatofibroma

Dermatofibroma (DF) is a benign dermal proliferation of histiocytes, typically seen in young adult women. Dark pigmented lesions are similar to dysplastic nevi or melanoma. RCM reveals a normal epidermis with homogeneously bright papillary rings and bright keratinocytes above the dermoepidermal junction, corresponding to pigmentation of the basal layer. Moreover, the dermis shows bright collagen bundles corresponding to fibrotic stroma. Whereas analysis of DF by RCM is hampered by the fact that the spindle fibroblast-like cells, histiocytes and sclerotic stroma are too deep in the reticular dermis, it may still be useful to distinguish it from cutaneous tumours, especially when DF is darkly pigmented and resembles melanocytic lesions.

Pigmented Basal Cell Carcinoma

Pigmented BCC is a variant of BCC that may be difficult to distinguish clinically from benign pigmented lesions or melanoma. RCM features are similar to those previously described for BCC. Melanin distribution is not homogeneous; it is present in benign epidermal keratinocytes, melanocytes interspersed among tumour cells, and in melanophages in the papillary dermis, particularly compared to the surrounding edematous or mucinous dermal stroma of BCCs under RCM.

Pigmented Mammary Paget Disease

Pigmented mammary Paget disease is a rare variant of mammary Paget disease, clinically and histologically similar to melanoma. RCM reveals the presence of large atypical cells resembling pagetoid melanocytosis observed in malignant melanocytic lesions; as well as epidermal disarrangement and dedifferentiation of the papillary edges. Whereas these data suggested a superficial spreading melanoma, immunohistochemical analysis provided conclusive evidence because most of the Paget cells were positive for c-erb-b2.

Melanocytic Lesions

RCM is a particularly useful tool to diagnose melanocytic lesions due to the high contrast provided by melanin-containing cells.

Melanocytic Nevi

RCM features of common melanocytic nevi include the presence of a homogeneous population of monomorphic,
oval bright cells with centered nuclei (nevomelanocytes)\(^{19,38}\). Benign nevi exhibit unaltered spinous and granular layers, consisting of homogenous, bright, well-delineated keratinocytes (cobblestone pattern). Dermal papillae are uniformly distributed and delineated by a belt of small, normal melanocytes and basal keratinocytes (edged papillae). Junctional nevi are characterized by nevomelanocytes at the dermoepidermal junction, typically surrounding dermal papillae\(^{38}\). In compound nevi, clusters (“nests”) of nevomelanocytes (fig. 4) may be observed at the dermoepidermal junction, often near blood vessels. In both types of nevi, single-cell or clusters of melanocytes can be found in higher layers of the epidermis, but the architecture of the epidermis remains otherwise unchanged.

**Dysplastic Nevi**

RCM features of dysplastic nevi include irregular shape of dermal papillae and bright rings of keratinocytes. Nevomelanocytes in dysplastic nevi are heterogeneous in brightness, size and shape; they tend to be round or oval resembling those in common nevi, rather than dendritic as in melanomas\(^{19,38}\). Atypical melanocytes appear as isolated large epithelioid cells, with peripheral nuclei, and are weakly bright (fig. 4B)\(^{39}\). Atypical keratinocytes lose their demarcation at the spinous layer and exhibit dendrite-like projections; “melanin dust” (high refractive granular particles that probably represent melanin bodies) is occasionally observed. Facial atypical nevi typically exhibit disruption of the dermoepidermal junction and focal loss of the cell–cell keratinocytic boundaries\(^{40}\).

**Melanoma**

Melanoma is a malignant proliferation of melanocytes. Prognosis is related to the depth of invasion. Superficial spreading melanomas are characterized by superficial growth followed by vertical invasion and dermal growth. They account for roughly 70% of diagnosed melanomas. Nodular melanoma accounts for 15% of diagnosed melanomas and is the most aggressive variant. Lentigo maligna accounts for 10% of diagnosed melanomas, whereas 5% are acral lentiginous melanomas\(^{41,42}\). The first three classes have been investigated using RCM. Finally, amelanotic (or amelanocytic) melanoma is characterized by cells that do not produce high amounts of melanin.

**Superficial Spreading Melanoma**

RCM features of superficial spreading melanoma include the presence of enlarged atypical nucleated cells with pleomorphic morphology, variable brightness and angular nuclei, which may be found in several layers of the epidermis (pagetoid dissemination) (fig. 5) and in the dermis. These cells are oval, fusiform or coarsely dendritic, and bear eccentrically placed large dark nuclei. The normal morphology of the stratum spinosum is also altered, including indistinct cell edges and bright, grainy particles (“melanin dust”)\(^{39}\). These alterations in suprabasal layers are defined as keratinocytic disarray, including atypical cobblestone patterns. In basal layers, cells may be grouped, simulating a dysplastic nevus, or isolated. The architecture of dermal papillae is also in disarray, asymmetrical in size and brightness, and includes poorly defined borders (non-edged papillae) (fig. 5A) and even sheet-like structures\(^{43,44}\). In the dermis, cerebriform clusters (nodular areas) or sparse cell nests are observed, bearing non-demarcated cell borders and pleomorphism, and surrounded by thick (1-3 \(\mu m\)) “melanin dust” along the epidermis\(^{45}\). On the face, RCM reveals atypical cobblestone patterns with asymmetrical bright boundaries, surrounding follicular apertures with bright dendrites or atypical nucleated bright cells. These patterns are clear indications of malig-
nant melanoma. The architecture of dermal papillae is similarly disrupted in lentigo maligna melanoma, including bright anucleated cells (melanophages) within the dermis.

**Nodular Melanoma and Nodular Areas of Superficial Spreading Melanoma**

Nodular areas of superficial invading melanoma or bona fide nodular melanomas have not been studied as thoroughly as superficial melanomas by RCM. The features of bona fide nodular melanoma are not as discernible as in superficial melanoma, since epidermal disarray and pagetoid melanocytosis are not apparent; these features are present in superficial invading melanoma. At the dermoepidermal junction, nodular areas of bona fide nodular and superficial spreading melanomas have similar RCM features. Papillary apertures are surrounded by bright rings of cells not apparent in non-pathological nodular areas. RCM also reveals pleomorphic cells with bright cytoplasms and dark nuclei (atypical melanocytes) distributed in sheet-like structures between the basal layer and upper dermis, sometimes aggregated in heterogeneous clusters. At the reticular dermis, RCM reveals aggregates of dark, nucleated lobe-shaped cells called cerebriform nests, which correlate with deep melanoma infiltration. Other structures revealed by RCM are plump-shaped dermal melanophages and enlarged blood vessels situated below the nodular areas, consistent with angiogenesis in thick malignant lesions.

Since the presence of nodular features correlates with deep melanoma infiltration, such RCM features require further validation and investigation aimed at developing prognostic uses.

**Lentigo Maligna Melanoma**

Many of the RCM features of lentigo maligna melanoma are similar to superficial spreading melanoma. They include general or focal disruption of the epidermal layers, with numerous scattered large pleomorphic cells with prominent dendritic processes; atypical bright cells around hair follicles; plump-shaped melanophages and nests of atypical nucleated cells in the papillary dermis.

**Amelanotic Melanoma**

Features typical of melanoma can also be detected in amelanotic melanoma using RCM, such as the presence of melanocytes, detected by the size and presence of melanin in pre-melanosomes. RCM revealed bright round, oval or fusiform cells, sometimes with dendritic processes. These cells were present either isolated around the dermoepidermal junction and spinous layer, or in confluent, poorly-defined groups. In addition, the architecture of the epidermis was in disarray and distinct cell borders were lacking. These RCM features correlated well with conventional histology.

**RCM-Based Diagnosis of Melanoma**

Criteria to accurately distinguish between benign and malignant pigmented lesions need to be further defined, developed, refined and tested; however, it is already possible to distinguish between benign nevi and atypical or malignant melanocytic lesions. A recent study described the application of RCM to distinguish between benign and melanocytic skin tumours. That study found the images derived from the dermoepidermal junction to be the most useful for diagnosis. Melanocytic cytomorphology and architecture, as well as assessment of the edges of keratinocytes were the most useful markers. On the other hand, evaluation of melanocytic cell brightness and dendrite-like structures showed no relevance regarding diagnostic value. It was interesting to note that evaluators without skin histopathological training performed better than trained dermatopathologists, which suggests that the two approaches are not completely equivalent. Also, the use of a diagnostic algorithm for evaluation of RCM images has been recently proposed. This algorithm has two major and four minor RCM criteria associated to malignancy. Major criteria (2 points) include the presence of non-edged papillae and cytological atypia, whereas minor criteria (1 point) include the presence of round, bright, and nucleated cells within the epidermis, widespread pagetoid cells, cerebriform clusters and bright nucleated cells within the dermal papilla. Lesions with a score equal to or greater than three showed 97% sensitivity and 72% specificity.

Infiltration of the epidermis by melanocytes (pagetoid melanocytosis) is considered a relevant factor for diagnosis of melanoma, although it is also occasionally present in benign melanocytic lesions. RCM evidences pagetoid melanocytosis in the external layers of the skin, indicating that melanoma diagnosis should be considered, although it cannot be excluded in the absence of pagetoid cells, which are absent in more than 10% of malignant lesions. Similar results are shown for eczematous lesions. Thus, although the presence of pagetoid dissemination is relevant, observation of round pagetoid cells is more specific and it can be considered a further criterion for melanoma.

**Guidance for Collection of Biopsy Samples**

RCM has shown preliminary promise in the guidance of collection of biopsy samples. A recent report describes the
use of RCM in collecting samples for the diagnosis of mi-
cosis fungoides, a hard-to-diagnose lesion due to the lack
of clear histological markers and clinical diversity, which
frequently requires multiple sampling for accurate diagno-
sis. RCM can also be useful to collect samples from aes-
thetically compromising areas, such as the face. For
example, RCM analysis of lentigo in the face allows a clear,
non-invasive diagnosis of solar lentigo, and reduces the
size of the sample required to diagnose lentigo maligna
melanoma. Finally, RCM reduces the need of collect-
ing simples in the evaluation of nevi, most of which are
benign upon histological examination.

Assessment of the Margins and Adjunct to Surgery

RCM can be used to define the margins of a lesion before
surgical or non-surgical therapy. This is particularly helpful
in margin assessment of tumours with radial growth pha-
es, including lentigo maligna melanomas or some basal
cell carcinomas, or hard-to-detect tumours, such as
amelanotic melanomas or infiltrative basal cell carcino-
mas. The main caveat is the limited depth that RCM
enables, which prevents accurate imaging at depths below
the superficial dermis. Other caveats include lack of con-
trast, which can be potentially resolved by the future de-
velopment of exogenous contrast agents.

Also, RCM can contribute to the rapid establishment of
tumour margins by examining excised specimens during
procedures such as Mohs micrographic surgery. Mohs
micrographic surgery is a histologically guided method of
removing skin cancers aimed to preserve the maximum
amount of unaffected tissue. Consecutive thin layers of skin
are examined by conventional histology to determine if
cancerous cells remain. Selective removal of the residual tu-
mour is performed until tumour-free margins are obtained.
RCM of ex vivo unprocessed tissue can detect neoplastic
cells by using 5% acetic acid and cross-polarized illumina-
tion. This technique makes the neoplastic nuclei more
bright and surrounding dermis dark. Recently, it has been
demonstrated that RCM may be useful to examine
non-melanoma skin cancers in ex vivo tissue during Mohs
micrographic surgery without frozen sections. This
novel application of RCM offers the advantage of rapid
visualization of margins compared to permanent sectioning
and confers the capability to do special stains in ambiguous
areas. RCM has also been used in vivo during Mohs sur-
gery to help visualize the margins of BCC and melanoma
tumours. However, poor visualization of non-flat wounds,
wound fluid interference, and limited depth are caveats that
need to be solved before implementing the routine appli-
cation of RCM jointly with Mohs surgery.

Evaluation of Response to Treatment

Biopsy is the most common way to assess histological
changes during and after treatment. RCM enables repeti-
tive analysis of the same skin lesion or site. This enables
evaluation of dynamic processes such as epidermal archi-
tectural changes or inflammatory infiltrates.

Recent studies have assessed the applicability of RCM
to evaluate the response of actinic keratoses to treatment
with imiquimod or 5-aminolevulinic acid and photody-
namic therapy, as well as of basal cell carcinomas treated
with imiquimod. To date, RCM has accurately established
the presence of BCC before treatment and its responsive-
ness to the treatment regimen with imiquimod. A more
recent report has evaluated the use of RCM for the evolu-
tion of BCC treated with imiquimod and photodynamic
therapy; and also correlated the RCM findings with FCM
(fluorescence confocal microscopy).

These studies may be also useful in order to understand
the physiopathological mechanisms (inflammatory re-
sponse, microvascular changes, tissue restitution, etc.) in-
volving these novel non-invasive therapies.

Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Despite its limitations in terms of probing depth and at-
tachment to the skin, reflectance-mode confocal micros-
copy represents the beginning of a new era for dermatology,
particularly oncologic dermatology. In research, it offers
advantages both ex vivo and in vivo over conventional his-
tology. RCM permits examination of samples without
previous manipulation of the tissue, which may hinder fur-
ther testing of the same sample. In vivo, RCM can be used
to study normal processes or physiopathologic processes
non-invasively over time. It can also be used to establish
the presence or absence of reactive immunologic events;
to guide tissue sampling including fine needle aspiration
of cells for molecular analysis (DNA, RNA or proteins) or
detection of specific immunological responses against neo-
plastic cells; finally, RCM can be used to establish timing
and dosing responses to non-invasive therapies such as
cryotherapy, imiquimod, or photodynamic therapy.

Clinically, RCM has value both ex vivo and in vivo. Bi-
opies can first be evaluated using RCM, using conven-
tional histology to confirm or refute the RCM findings on
the same sample. However, it is in vivo where RCM ex-
hibits its maximum potential, being useful for in vivo diag-
nosis, assessment of the boundaries of the lesion pre- or
post-surgery; and monitoring response to non-invasive
therapies.

The year 2008 saw the formation of an international
RCM group (www.skinconfocalmicroscopy.org), consti-
tuted by basic researchers, clinicians using RCM for diag-
nosis and monitoring and experts related to different aspects of the application of RCM to dermatology. The aim of this group is to spread the use of RCM in dermatology, providing a forum for free communication of results and the establishment of meaningful collaborations, as well as to educate potential new users in the power of this technology.

Despite the plethora of applications already described, RCM is just starting to deliver its promise, and further investigations will determine its real potential in the future management of skin cancer.

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Conflict of interest

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