

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO PAMPA
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM BIOQUÍMICA**

**EFEITO DA EXPOSIÇÃO CRÔNICA AO
CLORETO DE MERCÚRIO (HgCl₂) NO SISTEMA
REPRODUTOR DE RATOS MACHOS**

DISSERTAÇÃO DE MESTRADO

Caroline Silveira Martinez

URUGUAIANA

2013

CAROLINE SILVEIRA MARTINEZ

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SISTEMA REPRODUTOR DE RATOS MACHOS**

Dissertação apresentada ao programa de Pós-graduação *Stricto sensu* em Bioquímica da Universidade Federal do Pampa, como requisito parcial para obtenção do Título de Mestre em Bioquímica.

Orientadora: Giulia Alessandra Wiggers Peçanha

Co-orientador: Fábio Gallas Leivas

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Área de concentração: Bioprospecção Molecular

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DEDICO

*Aos meus pais Júlio e Glória, fonte
inesgotável de amor, proteção e incentivo.*

*Ao Leandro, pelo amor, compreensão
e incentivo durante todos esse anos.*

*À minha orientadora,
Profª Drª Giulia Wiggers Peçanha,
por ter confiado em mim e no meu trabalho,
pelo constante incentivo e
pelos ensinamentos transmitidos.*

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*“Suba o primeiro degrau com fé.
Não é necessário que você veja toda a escada.
Apenas dê o primeiro passo.”*

Martin Luther King

RESUMO

Dissertação de Mestrado
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Bioquímica
Universidade Federal do Pampa

EFEITO DA EXPOSIÇÃO CRÔNICA AO CLORETO DE MERCÚRIO (HgCl₂) NO SISTEMA REPRODUTOR DE RATOS MACHOS

Autora: Caroline Silveira Martinez

Orientadora: Giulia Alessandra Wiggers Peçanha

Co-orientador: Fábio Gallas Leivas

Local e Data da defesa: Uruguaiiana, 06 de setembro de 2013.

O mercúrio é um dos maiores poluentes ambientais, sua contaminação e toxicidade é um sério problema para a saúde humana. Embora estudos tenham demonstrado que o mercúrio em altas doses danifica a função reprodutiva masculina, esses efeitos e mecanismos em baixos níveis de exposição são desconhecidos. Dessa forma, o objetivo desse trabalho foi investigar os efeitos de uma exposição crônica a baixas concentrações de HgCl₂ no sistema reprodutor de ratos machos. Para isso, ratos machos *Wistar* de três meses de idade foram divididos em dois grupos e tratados por 30 dias: Controle (injeções intramusculares - *im* - de solução salina) e HgCl₂ (*im*, 1ª dose de 4,6 µg/kg, e doses subsequentes de 0,07 µg/kg/dia). Foram analisados parâmetros espermáticos (contagem, motilidade, morfologia e integridade de membrana), histologia, níveis hormonais e biomarcadores de estresse oxidativo em testículo, epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente. O tratamento com mercúrio causou alterações histológicas testiculares, perda de integridade de membrana, redução na contagem espermática (testículo e epidídimo), redução na produção diária de espermatozoide, redução na motilidade espermática e aumento nas anormalidades morfológicas de cabeça e cauda nos espermatozoides. O mercúrio aumentou o estresse oxidativo nos órgãos reprodutores, representado por aumento nos níveis de peroxidação lipídica, espécies reativas e redução nos níveis de tióis não proteicos (NPSH e GSH), modificou a atividade de enzimas antioxidantes: superóxido dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), glutatona peroxidase (GPx), glutatona S-transferase (GST) e glutatona redutase (GR) em órgãos reprodutores. A exposição ao mercúrio aumentou a expressão proteica da isoforma GPx4 no testículo e não modificou os níveis séricos do hormônio luteinizante (LH) em ratos. Esses resultados demonstram, pela primeira vez, que a exposição crônica por 30 dias em baixas concentrações de HgCl₂ causa efeitos tóxicos no sistema reprodutor de ratos machos e aumenta o estresse oxidativo em órgãos reprodutores, o que aponta o estresse oxidativo como um dos mecanismos de toxicidade do mercúrio nesse sistema.

Palavras-chaves: Mercúrio; Órgãos Reprodutores; Estresse Oxidativo.

ABSTRACT

Dissertation of Master's Degree
Post-Graduate Program in Biochemistry
Federal University of Pampa

THE EFFECT OF CHRONIC EXPOSURE TO MERCURY CHLORIDE (HgCl₂) ON MALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM

Author: Caroline Silveira Martinez

Advisor: Giulia Alessandra Wiggers Peçanha

Co-advisor: Fábio Gallas Leivas

Date and Place of Defense: Uruguaiana, September 06, 2013

Mercury is an ubiquitous environmental pollutant, its contamination and toxicity is a serious hazard to human health. Although several studies have demonstrated that mercury impairs male reproductive function at high levels, these effects and mechanisms at low levels of exposure are unknown. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of chronic exposure to low concentrations of HgCl₂ on male reproductive system of rats. In order to study, three-month-old male *Wistar* rats were treated for 30 days and divided in Control (saline - *i.m.* - intramuscular injection) and HgCl₂ group (*i.m.* 1st dose: 4.6 µg/kg, subsequent doses 0.07 µg/kg/day). We analyzed sperm parameters (count, motility, morphology and membrane integrity), histopathology (testis and epididymis), hormonal levels and biomarkers of oxidative stress in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens. The mercury treatment caused histopathological changes in testis, loss of sperm membrane integrity, reduction in sperm quantify (testis and epididymis), reduction in daily sperm production, following by decrease in sperm motility and increase on head and tail morphologic abnormalities in spermatozoa. HgCl₂ treatment increased levels of oxidative stress in reproductive organs, represented by augmented lipid peroxidation and reactive species levels as well as decreased on non-protein thiois levels (NPSH and GSH). Mercury exposure caused changes on antioxidant enzymes activity: superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), glutathione peroxidase (GPx), glutathione S-transferase (GST) and glutathione reductase (GR) in reproductive organs. HgCl₂ - chronic treatment increased GPx4 protein expression in testis of male rats and did not change luteinizing hormone (LH) levels. Ours results demonstrate, for the first time, that a 30-day chronic exposure to low doses of HgCl₂ causes male reproductive toxicity and increases oxidative stress in reproductive organs of male rats which point to the oxidative stress, at least in part, as a toxicity mechanism of mercury in this system.

Keywords: Mercury; Reproductive Organs; Oxidative stress.

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LISTA DE ABREVIATURAS E SIGLAS

Ácido tricloroacético - TCA

Ânion superóxido – $O_2^{\cdot-}$

Catalase – CAT

Cinábrio – HgS

Cloreto de mercúrio – $HgCl_2$

CDNB - 1-Cloro-2,4-dinitrobenzeno

Environmental Protection Agency – EPA

Espécie reativa de oxigênio – ERO

Espécie reativa de nitrogênio – ERN

Espécies reativas ao ácido tiobarbitúrico – TBARS

Estados Unidos da América – EUA

Glutathiona dissulfeto – GSSG

Glutathiona peroxidase – GPx

Glutathiona redutase – GR

Glutathiona reduzida – GSH

Glutathiona S-transferase – GST

Grupo sulfidril – SH

Hormônio luteinizante – LH

Hormônio liberador de gonadotrofina - GnRH

Hormônio folículo estimulante - FSH

Malondialdeído – MDA

Mercúrio – Hg

Mercúrio elementar – Hg^0

Metilmercúrio - MeHg

Microgramas por grama – $\mu\text{g/g}$

Microgramas por litro – $\mu\text{g/l}$

Microgramas por metro cúbico – $\mu\text{g/m}^3$

Microgramas por quilograma por dia – $\mu\text{g/kg/dia}$

Miligramas por litro – mg/l

Miligramas por metro cúbico – mg/m^3

Miligramas por quilograma – mg/kg

Mililitros – ml

Molécula de água – H_2O

Monóxido de carbono – CO

Nanogramas por mililitro – ng/ml

Nicotinamida adenina dinucleotídeo fosfato reduzido – NADPH

Organização Mundial de Saúde – OMS

Oxigênio molecular – O_2

Óxido nítrico – NO

Peróxido de hidrogênio – H_2O_2

Produção diária de espermatozoide - PDE

Radical hidroxil – OH^\bullet

Sistema Nervoso Central – SNC

Superóxido dismutase – SOD

Timerosal – EtHg

Tiól não-proteico – NPSH

Tiorredoxina reductase - TrxR

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PARTE I

INTRODUÇÃO

1 MERCÚRIO

1.1 Propriedades Físico-químicas, Vias de Exposição e Intoxicação

O mercúrio é um metal pesado encontrado no estado líquido à temperatura ambiente e a 0°C. Não apresenta funções biológicas, e é considerado um agente potencialmente tóxico por oferecer grande risco de contaminação ambiental ao ser humano (AZEVEDO, 2003). O mercúrio pode derivar de fontes naturais como vulcões, desgaste da crosta terrestre e /ou atividades antropogênicas como mineração, fundição de metais, produção de carvão, lâmpadas de vapor de mercúrio, refinarias, fábricas de adubos, pilhas e incineração de resíduos hospitalares e urbanos (FURST & RADDING, 1998).

No Brasil, a liberação do metal por atividades humanas duplicou nos últimos 100 anos, superando a forma natural de liberação do metal (SCHUSTER *et al.*, 2002) o que levou o Ministério da Saúde e da Agricultura a regulamentar o uso do mercúrio na indústria brasileira (BRASIL, 2010). Mesmo com a delimitação do uso do metal em processos industriais, a garimpagem de ouro e o uso do mercúrio na indústria, como na produção de cloro-álcali, na fabricação de baterias e de equipamentos eletroeletrônicos, são as principais fontes antropogênicas de liberação do mercúrio no Brasil (PNUMA, 2006). A região Amazônica apresenta sérios problemas de contaminação por mercúrio em virtude da mineração de ouro que levou ao acúmulo de níveis altos deste metal tanto no solo como nos rios e, em algumas regiões a concentração de mercúrio nos peixes excede os níveis permitidos por leis brasileiras (0,5mg/Kg, com consumo semanal de 400g / peixe) (BISINOTI & JARDIM, 2004).

O mercúrio pode se apresentar na forma elementar (Hg^0) e também nas formas oxidadas: mercurioso inorgânico (Hg^+) e sais mercúrico (Hg^{2+}) cada qual diferindo quanto aos níveis de toxicidade e propriedades físico-químicas (CLARKSON, 1997; GOLDMAN & SHANNON, 2001). As diferentes formas do mercúrio podem, no entanto, combinar-se com elementos como cloro, enxofre ou oxigênio e originar compostos de mercúrio inorgânicos, também designados como sais de mercúrio, assim como o mercúrio pode ligar-se covalentemente a um átomo de carbono e originar compostos de mercúrio orgânico

(metilmercúrio, etilmercúrio, fenilmercúrio) (CLARKSON, 1997; AZEVEDO, 2003). As diferentes formas do mercúrio participam do “Ciclo do Mercúrio” (Figura 1), onde após a emissão o Hg^0 , na presença de ozônio atmosférico, pode ser oxidado e retornar para a superfície pela precipitação seca e úmida, onde pela ação de bactérias presentes na água ou no solo o Hg inorgânico pode ser convertido a metilmercúrio, sendo incorporado a quase todas as espécies aquáticas em um processo chamado de bioacumulação que por meio da cadeia alimentar pode atingir a saúde humana (CLARKSON, 1997; RISHER *et al.*, 2003).

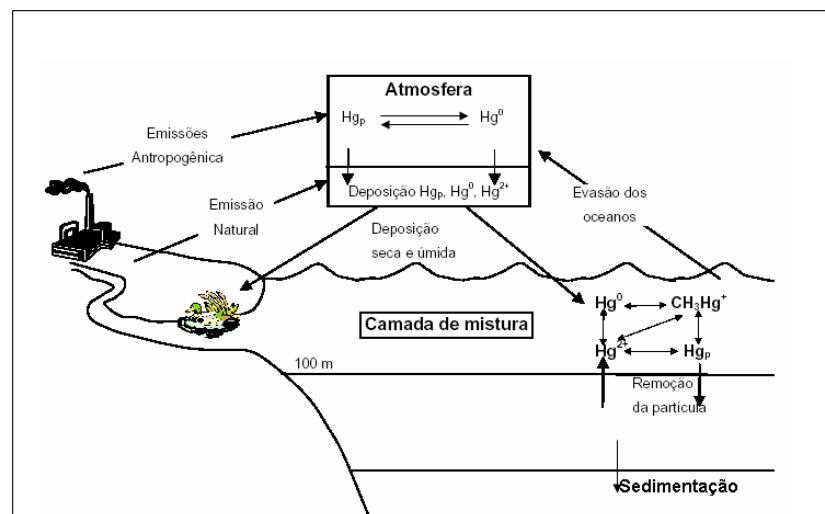


Figura 1. Representação do ciclo global do Hg (modificado de FITZGERALD & LAMBORG, 2003 e adaptado de MASON *et al.*, 1994).

Por possuir propriedades físico-químicas importantes como alta tensão superficial e gravidade específica, baixa resistência elétrica e um volume de expansão constante no estado líquido, o mercúrio ainda apresenta ampla aplicação na fabricação de termômetros, eletrodos, barômetros, esfigmomanômetros, na indústria de cloro-álcali, como corante na produção de tintas e na conservação de vacinas (timerosal) (RISHER *et al.*, 2003, PRADO *et al.*, 2004; O'REILLY *et al.*, 2010). O uso do mercúrio metálico para fabricação de amálgamas dentárias (50% de Hg combinado a outros metais) constitui atualmente uma das principais formas de exposição humana ao vapor de mercúrio expondo os profissionais da saúde e os usuários de restaurações dentárias a esta forma de contaminação (GIODA *et al.*, 2007; AZEVEDO *et al.*, 2012).

Cada forma química do metal apresenta fonte de contaminação e via de exposição humana diferentes. A contaminação com mercúrio elementar de forma não ocupacional (Hg^0) pode ocorrer por meio de termômetros, medicamentos populares, amálgamas dentárias, entre

outras sendo a inalação a principal via de exposição; enquanto que a contaminação por mercúrio inorgânico (cloreto de mercúrio – HgCl_2) ocorre principalmente por meio de lâmpadas fluorescentes, consumo de alimentos plantados em terrenos contaminados, cosméticos e timerosal, sendo a vias de entrada dérmica e por ingestão. Entre as formas orgânicas (metilmercúrio), a exposição humana ocorre principalmente pelo consumo de peixes - particularmente espécies predatórias - uma vez que todas as formas de organomercuriais têm potencial de bioacumulação elevado, a contaminação ocorre ainda por fungicidas e a exposição ao mercúrio orgânico acontece por ingestão, parenteral ou de forma transplacentária (O'REILLY *et al.*, 2010 & HOLMES *et al.*, 2009).

Uma vez absorvido pelo organismo o mercúrio é distribuído primariamente para o sistema nervoso central e rins e a eliminação do metal ocorre principalmente por vias urinária e fecal, mas também pode ocorrer pelas glândulas sudoríparas e salivares, via hepática-biliar, pele e leite materno (SWIFT, 1997). Cada forma do mercúrio difere em relação à meia-vida, o mercúrio inorgânico apresenta meia-vida no organismo de 37 dias, o mercúrio elementar ou metálico na forma de vapor apresenta uma meia-vida de 35 a 90 dias (GOYER, 1986) enquanto o metilmercúrio apresenta meia-vida de 50 a 70 dias (SKERFVING & COPPLESTONE, 1976). Mesmo havendo eliminação de boa parte do mercúrio em um período de até 70 dias os seus efeitos adversos podem ser observados em diferentes órgãos e sistemas devido ao alto poder de acumulação do metal (CLARKSON, 1997).

Após a ocorrência de catástrofes ambientais como a de 1953 no Japão onde o despejo de dejetos industriais que continham metilmercúrio na Baía de Minamata causou a contaminação da biota marinha e por meio da cadeia alimentar atingiu diretamente os consumidores de peixes, causando importantes alterações neurológicas e motoras até mesmo nas gerações futuras (BERINGHS-BUENO, 2005). Posteriormente, graves acidentes no Paquistão (1963), Guatemala (1966) e Irã (1971) pelo uso do mercúrio como fungicida em lavouras alertaram para a gravidade do uso indiscriminado do mercúrio e as suas consequências para a saúde humana (AZEVEDO, 2003).

As agências reguladoras tentam estabelecer padrões e limites de tolerância à exposição ao mercúrio, a fim de reduzir drasticamente a emissão deste metal pelas principais fontes poluidoras (Azevedo, 2003). A Organização Mundial de Saúde (OMS) considera como limites seguros a concentração sanguínea média de 5 a 10 ng/ml para populações não expostas ao mercúrio (WHO, 1990), entretanto a *Environmental Protection Agency* (EPA) estabelece como seguro valores sanguíneos de mercúrio de até 5,8 ng/ml. No Brasil o consumo de pescado é regulamentado em 500 $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}$ para peixes não predadores e 1000 $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}$ para peixes

predadores (LEI 685, 1998 - BISINOTI & JARDIM, 2004). Para as vacinas, as concentrações de timerosal no Brasil variam de 12,5 µg/Hg a 25 µg/Hg para cada dose de 0,5 ml de vacina, valor superior ao recomendado pela EPA (0,1 µg/kg/dia).

Em indivíduos que fazem uso de restauração de amálgama, a concentração de mercúrio inorgânico no sangue é de cerca de 4 ng/ml (VAMNES *et al.*, 2000) e, relata-se que 1 a 15 nmolHg / dia são ingeridos por indivíduos com um moderado número de restaurações de amálgama (CLARKSON *et al.*, 1993). A EPA estima que cada amálgama libere de 3000 ng a 17000 ng de vapor de mercúrio por dia. Já a concentração no sangue encontrada em populações não expostas ao mercúrio é de aproximadamente 3 ng/ml (WHO, 1990).

A intoxicação por mercúrio varia quanto a forma (aguda ou crônica) e quanto ao nível de exposição (baixos e altos níveis). A exposição crônica frequentemente resulta em absorção e acúmulo nos tecidos orgânicos de pequenas quantidades do metal por longo período de tempo. A grande maioria dos estudos avaliam os efeitos tóxicos do mercúrio em altos níveis de exposição, apontando as consequências adversas da contaminação por mercúrio em diferentes sistemas e órgãos. Entretanto estudos com animais experimentais utilizando baixas doses do metal (~8 ng/ml) alertam para efeitos tóxicos deste metal em níveis de exposição próximos aos considerados seguros pela EPA e OMS (WIGGERS *et al.*, 2008; PEÇANHA *et al.*, 2010).

1.2 Efeitos Tóxicos do Mercúrio em Diversos Sistemas e Órgãos

Um dos mecanismos pelos quais o mercúrio exerce o seu efeito tóxico em diferentes sistemas e órgãos esta relacionado a alta afinidade aos grupos tiol (-SH) de diferentes enzimas celulares nos microssomas e na mitocôndria, ligando-se covalentemente a elas e promovendo a interrupção do metabolismo e da função celular (STOHS & BAGCHI, 1995). Entre os possíveis mecanismos de toxicidade encontram-se inativação de enzimas, proteínas estruturais e processos de transporte ou alteração da permeabilidade da membrana celular (STOHS & BAGCHI, 1995). A alta toxicidade do mercúrio parece também estar relacionada com a capacidade de promover o aumento do estresse oxidativo, contribuindo para a geração de espécies reativas de oxigênio (ERO), como o radical hidroxil (OH[•]), o ânion superóxido (O₂^{•-}) e o peróxido de hidrogênio (H₂O₂) assim como promover a inibição da atividade e / ou reduzir os níveis de defesas antioxidantes enzimáticas e não enzimáticas (BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2008; RIBAROV & BENOVA, 1981).

Já foram descritos os efeitos tóxicos do mercúrio em diferentes sistemas e órgãos dentre os quais se destacam os sistemas nervoso central (SNC), reprodutor, digestivo, renal, cardiovascular e imunológico, nos pulmões, pele e tecidos orais em contato com amálgamas (FARINA *et al.*, 2011; HOLMES *et al.*, 2009; SILVA *et al.*, 2011; VASSALLO *et al.*, 1996; PIZZICHINI *et al.*, 2000; PIZZICHINI *et al.*, 2002; THRONHHILL *et al.*, 2003).

No SNC, a exposição pré ou pós-natal ao metilmercúrio (MeHg) pode levar a ocorrência de graves alterações neurológicas em crianças, pois esta forma do metal atravessa facilmente as barreiras placentária e hemato-encefálica (ASK *et al.*, 2002; BRIDGES & ZALUPS, 2010) e o sistema nervoso em desenvolvimento é mais vulnerável a toxicidade e os efeitos podem ser observados a longo prazo (WHO, 2007; GRANDJEAN & LANDRIGAN, 2006). Estudos relacionaram a exposição da mãe ao mercúrio no período pré-natal com atrasos no desenvolvimento psicomotor, déficit de atenção, memória, linguagem e alterações na função motora de crianças (GRANDJEAN, 1997, 1998). A intoxicação aguda por mercúrio relaciona-se com ataxia, disartria, parestesia, perda da audição, cegueira e retardo mental (VROOM & GREER, 1972). Elevadas concentrações extracelulares de glutamato, disfunção mitocondrial (SHANKER *et al.*, 2005) e inibição na atividade de selenoenzimas como glutathione peroxidase (GPx) e tioredoxina reductase (TrxR) com consequente aumento do estresse oxidativo contribuem para a neurotoxicidade induzida pelo mercúrio (FRANCO *et al.*, 2009; WAGNER *et al.*, 2010).

Vários estudos têm associado à exposição ao mercúrio com o desenvolvimento de doença renal, com alterações histológicas e perda da função glomerular (HODGSON *et al.*, 2007; YASUTAKE *et al.*, 1989). A exposição ao mercúrio, principalmente ao mercúrio inorgânico, pode desencadear reações autoimunes, com formação de glomerulonefrite e consequente proteinúria, oligúria e hematúria (PESCE *et al.*, 1977). Foi observado em animais necrose tubular e degeneração de células glomerulares com posterior piora da função renal após ingestão de mercúrio inorgânico (CARMIGNANI *et al.*, 1989). Os rins são conhecidos alvos de acúmulo de mercúrio após exposição a forma elementar e inorgânica, especialmente o córtex renal e os túbulos proximais (HAHN *et al.*, 1990; DANSCHER *et al.*, 1990).

Em relação aos efeitos tóxicos do mercúrio sobre o sistema cardiovascular, foi observada associação da exposição ao metal com maior risco de desenvolvimento de doenças cardiovasculares como hipertensão arterial, doença aterosclerótica em carótidas, doença arterial coronariana e infarto agudo do miocárdio (SALONEN *et al.*, 2000; VIRTANEN *et al.*, 2005). Estudos sugerem que o efeito do mercúrio no sistema cardiovascular é concentração-

dependente, pois em baixas concentrações o mercúrio tem efeito inotrópico positivo e em altas concentrações atua deprimindo a contratilidade cardíaca (VASSALLO *et al.*, 1999; DA CUNHA *et al.*, 2000; VASSALLO *et al.*, 2011). A exposição crônica a baixas doses de HgCl₂ causa disfunção endotelial secundária ao aumento do estresse oxidativo e dos prostanóides contráteis da via da ciclooxigenase 2, aumento da resposta contrátil a fenilefrina, redução das defesas antioxidantes e redução da biodisponibilidade de óxido nítrico (NO) (WIGGERS *et al.*, 2008; PEÇANHA *et al.*, 2010; FURIERI *et al.*, 2011) e, agentes antioxidantes podem reverter parcialmente essa disfunção endotelial (RIZZETTI *et al.*, 2013).

O sistema respiratório também pode ser afetado pelo vapor de mercúrio elementar que pode causar edema e congestão pulmonar, bronquiolite e pneumonia intersticial (AZEVEDO, 2003). Também há relatos de hepatotoxicidade e aumento do estresse oxidativo em ratos após a administração de mercúrio por *gavagem* (0,1mg/Kg) (BANDO *et al.*, 2005).

No sistema reprodutor feminino, a exposição de ratas ao vapor de mercúrio elementar (0, 1, 2 ou 4 mg/m³ durante 2 horas por 11 dias consecutivos) causou alterações no ciclo estral sem alterar a ovulação, implantações embrionárias e a manutenção da primeira prenhez (DAVIS *et al.*, 2001). Estudos epidemiológicos relatam anormalidades no ciclo menstrual e redução da fertilidade em mulheres expostas ao mercúrio elementar de forma ocupacional, como em assistentes de odontólogos (De ROSIS *et al.*, 1985; GONCHARUK, 1977; MARINOVA *et al.*, 1973; PANOVA & DIMITROV, 1974; ROWLAND *et al.*, 1994). Estudos com diferentes formas químicas do mercúrio em animais demonstram problemas reprodutivos como abortos espontâneos, malformações congênitas, infertilidade, desregulação do ciclo menstrual e ausência de ovulação (BARLOW & SULLIVAN, 1982; SCHUURS, 1999).

1.3 Efeitos Tóxicos do Mercúrio no Sistema Reprodutor Masculino

Embora não haja estudos definitivos que esclareçam os efeitos tóxicos do mercúrio sobre o sistema reprodutor masculino, principalmente de exposição a baixas concentrações ao metal, alguns estudos *in vitro* e *in vivo* utilizando modelos animais sugerem efeitos adversos em órgãos e sistema reprodutor masculino como consequência da toxicidade do metal (HOLMES *et al.*, 2009 - EUA EPA, 2001; CASTELLINI *et al.*, 2009; MOHAMED, 1987). Alterações morfológicas testiculares, danos à espermatogênese e apoptose de células germinativas foram observadas em ratos expostos por períodos de 30 a 90 dias a doses que variavam de 5 a 20 µg/dia (VACHHRAJANI *et al.*, 1992; HOMMA-TAKEDA *et al.*, 2001;

RAO, 1989), redução dos níveis de testosterona sérica e diminuição da motilidade e contagem espermática causadas por MeHg em ratos (SILVA *et al.*, 2011; RAO & GANGADHRAN, 2008). No entanto, MOUSSA *et al.*, (2009) não encontraram alterações histológicas e na contagem espermática de ratos tratados por 8 semanas com altas doses de MeHg (20mg/l⁻¹) oralmente.

Em estudos com mercúrio inorgânico, a exposição oral ao HgCl₂ levou a alteração da performance reprodutiva em ratos (KHAN *et al.*, 2004; RAO *et al.*; 2001, utilizando-se 0.25 – 1mg/kg/dia de peso corporal e 1.25mg/Kg/dia durante 45 dias, respectivamente). Outros estudos observaram redução da motilidade, contagem e viabilidade espermática em ratos tratados com HgCl₂ e esta forma do metal afetou o funcionamento de glândulas sexuais levando a deficiência de hormônios andrógenos (VACHRAJANI *et al.*, 1988). Em humanos, o mercúrio tem sido relacionado a problemas reprodutivos em trabalhadores ocupacionalmente expostos ao metal (POPESCU, 1978). KECK *et al.*, (1993) detectaram altos níveis de mercúrio em indivíduos inférteis que trabalhavam em indústrias de cloro-álcali e CHOY *et al.*, (2002) observaram correlação positiva entre o consumo de peixe e a alta concentração sérica de mercúrio em casais inférteis. Devido aos efeitos pró-oxidantes do mercúrio e, conseqüentemente, a sua capacidade de contribuir para a geração de espécies reativas de oxigênio (EROs) e alteração das defesas antioxidantes, sugere-se como um dos possíveis mecanismos tóxicos do mercúrio nesse sistema seja aumento do estresse oxidativo (BOUJBIHA *et al.*, 2009). Entretanto, devido à dependência androgênica do sistema reprodutor masculino e, alguns estudos terem recentemente demonstrado redução nos níveis hormonais de testosterona de ratos expostos ao mercúrio (SILVA *et al.*, 2011; COLE, *et al.*, 2012), esta também pode ser uma via de toxicidade reprodutiva do mercúrio.

Embora os efeitos de altos níveis de exposição ao mercúrio no sistema reprodutor masculino tenham sido investigados, os efeitos e os mecanismos de uma exposição a baixas doses são desconhecidos. Para analisar com precisão os efeitos da exposição crônica a doses extremamente baixas de mercúrio, recentemente, foi desenvolvido um modelo experimental animal de exposição crônica a baixas doses de HgCl₂, no qual, ao final de 30 dias de exposição ao metal, os ratos apresentaram concentrações sanguíneas semelhantes às encontradas em humanos que vivem em regiões contaminadas ou que sofrem exposição ocupacional (8 ng/ml) (WIGGERS *et al.*, 2008).

2 SISTEMA REPRODUTOR MASCULINO

O sistema reprodutor masculino da maioria dos mamíferos é composto por testículos, epidídimos, ductos deferentes, glândulas sexuais acessórias (como próstata e vesícula seminal) e pênis (SOKOL, 1997). A figura 2A e B ilustram algumas diferenças anatômicas entre órgãos do sistema reprodutor masculino humano e de ratos.

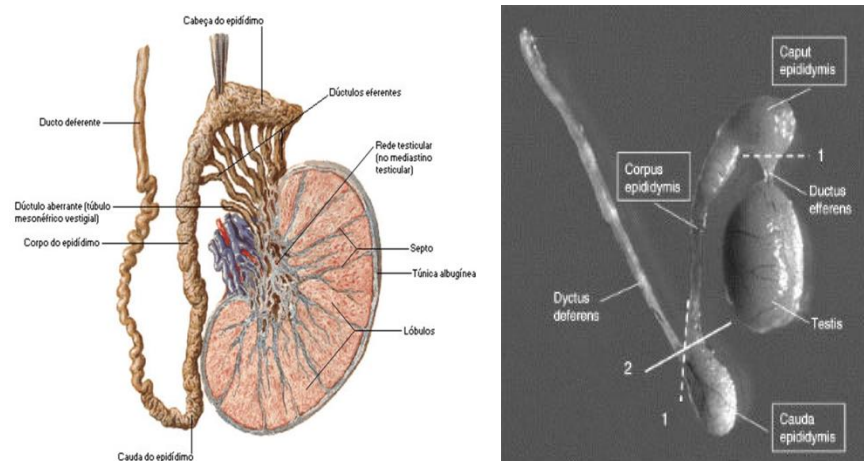


Figura 2. Representação do testículo e epidídimo humano (A) e de rato (B). A – NETTER, 2000; B - adaptado de TAYAMA *et al.*, 2006.

Cada testículo pode ser funcionalmente e estruturalmente dividido em duas partes: tecido intersticial e túbulos seminíferos. O tecido intersticial está localizado entre os túbulos seminíferos e é composto por vasos sanguíneos e linfáticos, nervos e as células intersticiais ou de Leydig responsáveis pela produção de testosterona (RUSSELL *et al.*, 1993). A espermatogênese por sua vez ocorre nos túbulos seminíferos e é um processo pelo qual células-tronco espermatogoniais sofrem diferenciações e especializações até a formação de células haploides e diferenciadas, os espermatozoides (CLERMONT, 1972).

No entanto, ao sair do testículo os espermatozoides são imóveis e incapazes de fertilizar um ovócito II (BROOKS, 1983; HERMO & ROBAIRE, 2002; GATTI *et al.*, 2004). É durante a passagem do espermatozoide pelo epidídimo que o mesmo sofre o processo de maturação, que confere aos gametas uma motilidade progressiva e a habilidade necessária para sofrer a reação acrossômica, interagir com a zona pelúcida, reconhecer e fundir-se com a membrana plasmática do ovócito II (JONES, 1999; CUASNICÚ *et al.*, 2002; GATTI *et al.*, 2004, SULLIVAN *et al.*, 2005). O epidídimo ainda é responsável pelo transporte, estocagem e proteção, dos gametas, sendo anatomicamente dividido em cabeça, corpo e cauda

(COSENTINO & COKETT, 1986; GATTI *et al.*, 2004; SULLIVAN *et al.*, 2005; HERMO & ROBAIRE, 2002).

O ducto deferente é um órgão que liga o epidídimo à uretra prostática e entre as suas funções estão o término do processo de maturação espermática, transporte e a participação na expulsão do sêmen durante a ejaculação (SETCHELL, 2002).

A vesícula seminal consiste de um ducto único muito dilatado e enovelado, o qual a luz é ocupada pela secreção hialina que contribui para viabilidade espermática, induz contrações musculares do trato genital feminino e possui atividade antibacteriana. (HAYWARD *et al.* 1996). A próstata está localizada na pelve, inferiormente à bexiga, onde circunda a uretra. Ela produz um líquido alcalino que neutraliza o conteúdo vaginal ácido, proporcionando nutrientes e transporte para os espermatozoides e liquefazendo o sêmen (KIERSZENBAUM, 2008).

3 ESTRESSE OXIDATIVO

Um grande número de evidências associam os danos causados pelo acúmulo do mercúrio no organismo às características pró-oxidantes deste metal e, conseqüentemente, a sua capacidade de contribuir para a geração de espécies reativas de oxigênio (EROs), como o radical ânion superóxido (O_2^-), radical hidroxil (OH^\bullet) e o peróxido de hidrogênio (H_2O_2) (STOHS & BAGCHI, 1995; BRANDÃO *et al.*, 2008). O estresse oxidativo é uma condição caracterizada por um desequilíbrio entre a produção de EROs e os sistemas de defesas antioxidantes (HALLIWELL & GUTTERIDGE, 2007). O termo ERO refere-se a uma molécula altamente reativa, que contém um átomo desemparelhado em sua última camada eletrônica, o que confere alta reatividade. Em condições fisiológicas do metabolismo celular aeróbio, o O_2 sofre redução tetravalente, com aceitação de quatro elétrons, resultando na formação de H_2O . Durante esse processo são formados intermediários reativos como: os radicais O_2^- , hidroperoxila (HO_2^\bullet) e o OH^\bullet e, o não radical H_2O_2 (HALLIWELL & GUTTERIDGE, 2007).

A produção de ERO e espécies reativas de nitrogênio (ERN), entre outras, é parte integrante do metabolismo humano e participam de eventos fisiológicos como fagocitose e sinalização celular (HALLIWELL & GUTTERIDGE, 2007; RAY, *et al.*, 2012). No sistema reprodutor masculino pequenas quantidades de EROs são necessárias para o funcionamento normal da célula espermática, já estando claro o papel do O_2^- e o do H_2O_2 , quando em baixas

concentrações, nos eventos que culminam com a fertilização em diferentes espécies (AITKEN, 1995). Entretanto, sabe-se que o excesso de EROs prejudica a viabilidade e a função espermática (MACLEOD, 1943) e relaciona-se com uma variedade de doenças em diversos sistemas e órgãos como Alzheimer, Parkinson, Síndrome de Down, Hipertensão, entre outras (VASCONCELOS, 2007).

Para combater os efeitos deletérios do aumento do estresse oxidativo o organismo conta com um poderoso sistema de defesa antioxidante enzimático e não enzimático. A exposição ao Hg além de promover o aumento da produção de EROs também pode alterar o sistema de defesa antioxidante do organismo, reduzindo a atividade de enzimas antioxidantes como a superóxido dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), glutaciona peroxidase (GPx) e glutaciona S transferase (GST) e, a concentração de antioxidantes não enzimáticos como a glutaciona (RIBAROV & BENOVA, 1981).

Dentre as enzimas, a GST e a GPx desempenham um papel fundamental na defesa do sistema reprodutor masculino. Já foi demonstrado que a inibição enzimática da GST e da GPx contribuem para o aumento da peroxidação lipídica testicular com consequente dano às células germinativas testiculares (ALVAREZ & STOREY, 1989; RAO & SHAHA, 2000). Os mamíferos apresentam 5 isoformas para GPx: citosólica (GPx1), gastrointestinal (GPx2), plasmática (GPx3) e a hidroperóxido fosfolípídeo (GPx4) (BRIGELIUS FLOHE, 2006). A GPx4 desempenha um papel crucial na proteção do sistema reprodutor masculino, uma vez que o testículo é o principal sítio de expressão desta isoforma (MORENO *et al.*, 2003) e, a falha na expressão dessa enzima em espermatozoides tem sido associado com casos de infertilidade masculina (FORESTA *et al.*, 2002; IMAI *et al.*, 2001).

O sistema não enzimático de defesa inclui compostos endógenos como bilirrubina, ceruloplasmina, hormônios sexuais, melatonina, coenzima Q, entre outros, e, ingeridos por meio da dieta como ácido ascórbico, α -tocoferol, β -caroteno, polifenóis, flavonoides e os tióis intracelulares como a glutaciona (GSH) (LIU, *et al.*, 2008).

A GSH é o mais abundante tiol celular de baixa massa molecular a qual possui papel central na biotransformação e eliminação de xenobióticos e na defesa das células contra o estresse oxidativo (CARSOL *et al.*, 1997). A biossíntese da GSH ocorre no meio intracelular (exceto em células epiteliais), pela ação consecutiva de duas enzimas a γ -glutamilcisteína sintetase e a glutaciona sintetase (CARSOL *et al.*, 1997) A GSH protege contra o estresse oxidativo por meio da oxidação da GSH à glutaciona dissulfeto (GSSG), entretanto, para que sua proteção seja mantida, a GSH precisa ser regenerada pela ação da enzima glutaciona reductase (GR) através do ciclo catalítico da glutaciona (HUBER *et al.*, 2008).

4 JUSTIFICATIVA

O aumento da presença do mercúrio e de outros metais pesados no meio ambiente tem provocado crescente preocupação em relação aos efeitos da exposição a estes metais sobre a saúde da população, especialmente os efeitos crônicos, ou seja, exposição permanente e por períodos prolongados a pequenas quantidades do metal; como ocorre com pessoas que trabalham em atividades que utilizam o mercúrio, como em garimpos.

Embora estratégias para redução da utilização do mercúrio estejam sendo adotadas (WHO, 2007) a presença do metal no meio ambiente tem levado a um aumento da exposição humana ao mercúrio, como por consumo de peixes contaminados ou uso de amálgamas dentárias. Sabendo que o mercúrio é extremamente tóxico e possui alto poder de bioacumulação, os seus efeitos podem ser observáveis em diferentes sistemas e em longo prazo.

Embora os efeitos de altos níveis de exposição ao mercúrio no sistema reprodutor masculino tenham sido investigados, os efeitos e os mecanismos de uma exposição a baixas doses são desconhecidos. Neste contexto, tornam-se necessários estudos utilizando modelos experimentais que mimetizem uma situação de exposição humana ao mercúrio (baixo nível e de forma crônica).

5 OBJETIVOS

5.1 Objetivo Geral

Verificar o possível efeito tóxico da exposição crônica a baixas concentrações de cloreto de mercúrio (HgCl_2) sobre o sistema reprodutor de ratos machos.

5.2 Objetivos Específicos

Verificar o efeito do mercúrio sobre:

- Parâmetros espermáticos (contagem, morfologia, motilidade e integridade de membrana espermática) e sobre a histologia de órgãos reprodutores (testículo e epidídimo);

- Níveis de peroxidação lipídica, espécies reativas e tióis não proteicos: glutathiona (GSH) e NPSH nos órgãos reprodutores testículo, epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente;
- Atividade de enzimas antioxidantes: SOD, CAT, GPx, GST e GR nos órgãos reprodutores testículo, epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente;
- Expressão proteica das isoformas GPx1 e GPx4 no testículo;
- Níveis séricos do hormônio luteinizante.

PARTE II

CHRONIC EXPOSURE TO LOW DOSES OF MERCURY IMPAIRS SPERM QUALITY AND INDUCES OXIDATIVE STRESS IN RATS

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Shortened version of the title: HgCl₂ Impair Sperm Quality by Oxidative Stress

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ABSTRACT

Mercury is a widespread environmental pollutant that adversely affects male reproductive system. The exact mechanisms underlying HgCl₂ toxicity are not fully understood, however some evidences point to oxidative stress in this process. Although, the toxic effects at high levels of inorganic mercury on the male reproductive system have been investigated, the effects at low levels of exposure are unknown. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of chronic exposure to low concentrations of HgCl₂ on sperm parameters, lipid peroxidation and antioxidant activity of male rats. Three-month-old male Wistar rats were treated for 30 days and divided in Control (saline *i.m.*) and HgCl₂ group (*i.m.* 1st dose: 4.6 µg/kg, subsequent doses 0.07 µg/kg/day). We analyzed sperm parameters (count, motility and morphology) and biomarkers of oxidative stress in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens. The mercury treatment caused a reduction in sperm quantify (testis and epididymis), daily sperm production, following by decrease in sperm motility and increase on head and tail morphologic abnormalities. HgCl₂ exposure related with increased levels of oxidative stress in reproductive organs, represented not only by augmented lipid peroxidation but also by changes in antioxidant enzymes activity, superoxide dismutase, catalase and non protein thiol levels (NPSH and GSH). Chronic exposure to low doses of mercury impairs sperm quality and causes toxic effects in all organs. These effects seem to be due, at least in part, to the increased oxidative stress in male reproductive tissues.

Keywords: Mercury; Reproductive organs; Oxidative stress.

INTRODUCTION

Heavy metals became one of many environmental contaminants and mercury (Hg) is one of the most widespread environmental pollutant (Orisakwe et al., 2001). Many populations worldwide are exposed to mercury at levels that exceed the recommended safety guidelines (Rice, 2004) and several anthropogenic sources of mercury still pose high risk to human and environmental health (Hylander & Goodsite, 2006). Exposure to mercury can occur from dental amalgam fillings (metallic mercury), fish and seafood (methylmercury), vaccines (ethylmercury) and water and air (mercury chloride) (Zhang et al., 2011; Nyland et al., 2012).

Mercury chloride (HgCl_2) is one of the most toxic forms of mercury because is able to easily forms organomercurial complexes with proteins (Lorschieder et al., 1995). The Hg has great affinity for SH groups of biomolecules, such as glutathione (GSH) and sulfhydryl proteins, which may contribute to its toxicity in many organs and tissues (Hansen et al., 2006; Houston, 2007; Clarkson et al., 2003). Inorganic mercury is well known by nephrotoxic (Sharma et al., 2007), hepatotoxic (Perottoni et al., 2004), neurotoxic (Franco et al., 2007), hematotoxic (Durak et al., 2010), cardiovascular (Peçanha et al., 2010) and genotoxic (Rozgaj et al., 2005) effects. Moreover, at high levels of exposure, it is reported that mercury has adverse effects on male reproductive system in experimental animals (Kalender et al., 2013; El-Desoky et al., 2013; Mohamed et al., 1987).

Mercury compounds are described to affect testicular spermatogenic and steroidogenic functions (Marquardt, 1999), to reduce secretory epididymal components necessary for sperm maturation (Rao, 1997), to cause adverse effects on the reproductive performance (Khan et al., 2004) and decrements in sperm count, motility and morphology in monkeys and rodents (Rao, 1989; Mohamed et al., 1987). In humans it was described reproductive toxic effects among workers occupationally exposed to mercury (Popescu, 1978; Choy et al., 2002) and

elevated testicular and blood mercury levels in an infertile man employed in the chloralkali industry (Keck et al., 1993; Cole et al., 2006).

The exact mechanisms underlying HgCl₂ toxicity in the reproductive organs are not fully understood, however some evidences point to oxidative stress in this process (Boujbiha et al., 2009; Su et al. 2008). The deleterious effects of mercury during its accumulation are mostly due to the increase of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and lipid peroxidation in the cells and depletion of GSH levels in different tissues, as well as inactivating antioxidant enzymes, such as glutathione peroxidase (GPx), glutathione *S*-transferase (GST), superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) (El-Desoky et al., 2013; Kalender et al., 2013).

Although, the toxic effects at high levels of inorganic mercury on the male reproductive system have been investigated, the effects on male reproductive system at low levels of exposure are unknown. Moreover, little information concerning the underlying mechanism in the mercury pathogenesis of male reproductive dysfunction, mainly at low levels of exposure is available.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of chronic exposure to low concentrations of HgCl₂ on sperm parameters (count, morphology and motility) as well as on lipid peroxidation and antioxidant activity in the reproductive system of male rats.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animals

Three-month-old male Wistar rats (310–390g) were obtained from the Central Animal Laboratory of the Federal University of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. During treatment, rats were housed at a constant room temperature, humidity, and light cycle (12:12h light-dark), free access to tap water and fed with standard chow ad libitum. All experiments were conducted in compliance with the guidelines for biomedical research stated by the Brazilian Societies of Experimental Biology and approved by the Ethics Committee on

Animal Use Experimentation of the Federal University of Pampa, CEUA, Uruguaiana, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil (Process Number: 036/2012).

Animals treatment

Twenty rats were divided into two groups (n=10) and treated for 30 days as follows: a) Control (saline solution, *i.m.*); b) Mercury (HgCl₂ - Sigma-Aldrich - St Louis, MO, USA) - mercury chloride (1st dose 4.6 µg/kg, subsequent doses 0.07 µg/kg/day, *i.m.*, to cover daily loss, using the model described by Wiggers et al. 2008). At the end of treatment, animals were euthanized by decapitation and testis, epididymis, prostate, vas deferens and seminal vesicle were immediately excised. The prostate and left testis, epididymis and right vas deferens were washed on ice-cold saline and rapidly homogenized in 50mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5 (1/5, w/v) and centrifuged at 2400×g for 15 min at 4°C and the resulting supernatant (S1) fraction was frozen at -80°C for further measurements of oxidative stress. The right testis, epididymis and left vas deferens were used for sperm parameters analysis.

Body weight and reproductive organs weights

The body weight, prostate, seminal vesicle (empty, without coagulation gland) and right testis, epididymis and vas deferens (absolute and relative to body weights) weights were determined.

Sperm motility

Sperm were removed from the left vas deferens (n=10) by internal rising with 1 ml of Human Tubular Fluid (DMPBS-Nutricell-SP-Brazil) pre-warmed to 34°C. Then, a 10 µl aliquot was transferred to a histological slide. Under a light microscope (20X magnification, Binocular, Olympus CX31, Tokyo, Japan), 100 spermatozoa were analyzed and classified as type A: motile with progressive movement, type B: motile without progressive movement and type C: immotile. Sperm motility was expressed as % total sperm (Perobelli et al., 2010).

Sperm morphology

Sperm were obtained from the left vas deferens (n=10) and stored with 1 mL of saline - formol until the analysis. For the analysis, smears were prepared on histological slides and 200 spermatozoa per animal were evaluated under magnification (400X magnification, Binocular, Olympus CX31, Tokyo, Japan). Morphological abnormalities were classified into head (amorphous, banana and detached head) and tail morphology (bent and broken tail) according to Filler (1993).

Daily sperm production per testis (DSP), sperm number and transit time in epididymis

Homogenization-resistant testicular spermatids (stage 19 of spermiogenesis) and sperm in the caput/corpus epididymis and cauda epididymis were counted (n=10) as described by Robb et al. (1978), with adaptations according to Fernandez et al. (2007). To calculate daily sperm production the number of spermatids at stage 19 was divided by 6.1, which is the number of days these spermatids are present in the seminiferous epithelium. The sperm transit time through the epididymis was determined by dividing the number of sperm in each portion by the DSP (Robb et al., 1978).

Lipid peroxidation in reproductive organs

The level of lipid peroxidation in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens were measured as malondialdehyde (MDA) using a colorimetric method, as previously described by Ohkawa et al. (1979), with modifications. An aliquot of each tissue was incubated with thiobarbituric acid 0.8% (TBA), phosphoric acid buffer 1% (H₃PO₄), and sodium dodecil sulphate 0.8% (SDS) at 100°C for 60 min. The color reaction was measured at 532 nm against blanks (Spectrophotometer Femto 600 S, FEMTO, São Paulo, Brazil). The results were expressed as nanomoles of MDA per gram of tissue.

Determination of non-protein thiols (NPSH)

NPSH in testis, epididymis and vas deferens were determined by the method of Ellman (1959). To determine NPSH, the homogenate was centrifuged at $4000\times g$ at $4^{\circ}C$ for 10 min and the supernatant was mixed (1:1) with 10% trichloroacetic acid. After centrifugation, the protein pellet was discarded and free -SH groups were determined in the clear supernatant. An aliquot of supernatant was added in potassium phosphate buffer 1M, pH 7.4, and 5,5'-dithio-bis (2-nitrobenzoic acid) (DTNB) 10mM. The color reaction was measured spectrophotometrically at 412 nm. The results were expressed as nmol of NPSH per gram of tissue.

Antioxidant enzymes assay

Superoxide dismutase (SOD) activity

Superoxide dismutase activity in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens homogenates was spectrophotometrically assayed as described by Misra and Fridovich (1972). This method is based on the capacity of SOD in inhibiting autoxidation of adrenaline to adrenochrome. The color reaction was measured at 480 nm. One unit of enzyme was defined as the amount of enzyme required to inhibit the rate of epinephrine autoxidation by 50% at $26^{\circ}C$. The tissues were diluted 1:10 (v/v) for determination of SOD activity in test day. Aliquots of tissues were added in a glycine buffer 50mM, pH 10.5. Enzymatic reaction was started by adding epinephrine, and results were expressed as Units (U) per milligram of protein.

Catalase (CAT) activity

The catalase activity in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens were assayed spectrophotometrically by the method of Aebi (1984), which involves monitoring the disappearance of H_2O_2 in the presence of tissues homogenates at 240 nm. An aliquot of each tissue was added in potassium phosphate buffer 50mM, pH 7.0, and the enzymatic reaction

was initiated by adding H₂O₂. The enzymatic activity was expressed in Units (1U decomposes 1 μmol H₂O₂/min at pH 7 at 25°C) per milligram of protein. Proteins for experiments were measured according to Bradford (1976) using bovine serum albumin as a standard.

Drugs and reagents

HgCl₂ was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St Louis, MO, USA). Salts and reagents were of analytical grade obtained from Sigma and Merk (Darmstadt, Germany).

Statistical analysis

Data are expressed as mean ± SEM of the number of animals used in each experiment. Statistical analysis was performed using Student's t test and Mann-Whitney test. Values of P<0.05 were considered statistically significant. Graphpad Prism 5 software was used for statistical analysis and for plotting graphs.

RESULTS

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on body weight and organ weights

The treatment with HgCl₂ did not alter the body weight and the absolute and relative organ weights (Table 1).

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on sperm parameters

Mercury treatment for 30 days significantly decreased sperm count in testis and epididymis (caput/corpus and cauda). Furthermore, there was a reduction in daily sperm production per testis in HgCl₂ treated rats (Table 2).

Regarding the sperm morphology, we observed increased abnormalities in rats treated with mercury at low doses with more head, tail and total sperm abnormalities in mercury group when compared with the control group (Table 3).

Sperm motility analysis revealed a significant decreased in type A sperm (motile with progressive movement) (Figure 1A) accompanied by increases in type C sperm (immotile) in HgCl₂-treated rats (Figure 1C).

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on lipid peroxidation and non-protein thiols (NPSH) levels

Mercuric chloride (HgCl₂) administration at low doses resulted in a significant elevation in the levels of MDA in testis, prostate and vas deferens (Figure 2A, C, D). However, in epididymis the mercury treatment did not change MDA levels (Figure 2B).

Regarding the NPSH levels, mercury treatment with low doses decreased the testicular and epididymal SH levels (Figure 3A, B), while those in vas deferens were not statistically different between groups.

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) activity

In rats exposed to mercury for 30 days, a significant increase on SOD activity was observed in all tissues evaluated (testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens) (Figure 4A, B, C, D).

On the other hand, the catalase activity after mercury treatment decreased in testis and epididymis (Figure 5A, B), without changes in prostate and vas deferens (Figure 5C, D).

DISCUSSION

Results of the present study suggest that the exposition of rats to low doses of mercury promotes male reproductive toxicity in rats. The current study found, for the first time, that mercury impairs sperm characteristics, as observed by reduction in sperm quantify in testis and epididymis and also in daily sperm production, following by decrease in sperm motility and increase on head and tail morphologic abnormalities in rats treated with inorganic mercury. These effects was associated with increased levels of oxidative stress and antioxidant biomarkers alterations in reproductive organs of male rats, represented not only by augmented lipid peroxidation but also by changes in antioxidant enzymes activity, SOD, CAT and NPSH levels.

Although adverse effects of metals on human reproduction and development continue to be a demanding challenge for researchers, mercury has been related with man infertility, mainly among workers occupationally exposed (Choy et al., 2002; Keck et al., 1993). In addition, in partners of men who had blood mercury levels between 0.7-1.0 and 1.9-4.8 µg/L it was observed a greater time to attain pregnancy (Cole et al., 2006). The United States Environmental Protection Agency recommends as free of adverse effects a maximum blood concentration of mercury of 5.8 ng/ml (Rice, 2004; NRC, 2000). In the present study, we used a controlled low-dose administration of mercury chloride and attained a blood mercury concentration of approximately 8 ng/ml (Wiggers et al., 2008), similar to human exposure levels (McKelvey et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2005).

Chronic treatment with HgCl₂ for 30 days of adult male rats brought about no change in body, testis, epididymis, prostate, vas deferens and vesicle seminal weights. Relative weights of these organs also did not reveal marked changes, when normalized to body weights. Other studies, also observed no changes in body and reproductive organs weights of animals treated with mercury at high levels. (Sharma et al., 1996; Silva et al., 2011). In contrast, some studies with high doses of inorganic mercury observed reduction in testis, epididymis and accessory sex organs weights in rats (El-Desoky et al., 2013; Boujbiha et al., 2009). Differences in mercury concentrations, treatment periods, animal model and/or administration routes would explain such discrepancies.

The present study shows that even at low doses mercury compromise sperm qualities. Increase on sperm abnormalities as well as reduction in daily sperm production and sperm number in testis and epididymis indicates an interference with spermatogenesis. Only specific chemical forms of the metal can pass through the blood–testis barrier. Methylmercury is known to pass through this natural barrier affecting testicular tissues (Guzzi & La Porta, 2008) and more recently this ability was demonstrated for mercury chloride (Bougbiha et al.,

2009). Induction of germ cell apoptosis that progressed to testicular atrophy, stage-specific germ cell deletion and suppression of sperm production was reported after methylmercury intoxication (Homma-Takeda et al., 2001). Supporting this, the adverse effects of HgCl₂ on mammalian testicular tissue have been reported with marked testicular spermatogenic degeneration at the spermatocyte level in rats (Vachhrajani et al., 1988).

We found decreased sperm motility and several studies in different mammalian species, including human, are in agreement with our findings (Castellini et al., 2009; Popescu, 1978; Rao, 1997). Sperm ultrastructure is the most sensitive endpoint for metal ions, independently on the chemical form of the metal compound (Castellini et al., 2009). Although, the mechanisms involved in the impairment of spermatozoa motility by mercury are not completely understood, mercury may interfere with cell membrane structure and also immobilizes sperm by inhibition of microtubule assembly (Mohamed et al., 1986; Rao, 1989).

Several *in vivo* and *in vitro* studies have reported that the mercury toxicity is related to oxidative stress induction (El-Desoky et al., 2013; Durak et al., 2010). Although, there are few studies evaluating oxidative stress parameters in male reproductive organs of rats exposure to mercury. In the present study, we showed for the first time, that HgCl₂ exposure correlated with elevated levels of oxidative stress, represented by increased lipid peroxidation in testis, prostate and vas deferens and increased on SOD activity in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens. Mercury treatment also decreased CAT activity and NPSH levels in testis and epididymis. It has been proposed that depletion of intracellular thiols by mercury may be a trigger for the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) (Hansen et al., 2006).

MDA is one of the major products of peroxidized polyunsaturated fatty acids and increased MDA content is an important indicator of lipid peroxidation. It has been previously shown previously that HgCl₂ increase MDA level in testicular tissue at high levels of exposure (Kalender et al., 2013; El-Desoky et al., 2013). Our results demonstrated that HgCl₂

at low doses also increased lipid peroxidation in testis, prostate and vas deferens of rats. Lipid peroxidation reaction leads to impairment of the membrane structure and integrity of cells, decreased sperm motility and increased in sperm morphology defects (Kistanova et al., 2009). In the present study, the loss of sperm function in rats exposure to mercury would be attributed to peroxidation of unsaturated fatty acids in the sperm membrane.

Cells have a number of mechanisms to protect themselves from the toxic effect of ROS. The main enzymes that provide cellular protection against damage by ROS in cells are SOD, CAT, and the selenoenzyme GPx. Therefore, any decrease in the activity of these enzymes may result in a number of deleterious effects due to accumulation of superoxide radicals and hydrogen peroxide (El-Desoky et al., 2013). Our study showed that exposure to mercury increased SOD activity in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens and decreased CAT activity in testis and epididymis. To our knowledge, this is the first study showing mercury induces oxidative stress / alters antioxidant enzymes in epididymis, prostate and vas deferens, since the majority of the experimental studies are usually focused on testis toxicity (Georgellis et al., 1988; Homma-Takeda et al. 2001, Kalender et al., 2013).

The enhanced SOD activity observed in this study suggests an adaptative onset of the redox defense system. Boujbiha et al. (2009) further observed that the antioxidant enzymes behave differently during chronic exposure to mercury and it is dose and time-dependent. Similarly, at the 30-day of exposition there was an increase on SOD activity and a decrease on CAT activity following 90 days of toxicity by HgCl₂ was reported in testis of rats (Bougbiha et al., 2009). The reduction of CAT activity, in testis and epididymis of HgCl₂-treated, could be due either to a loss of the cells expressing these enzymes, to a direct effect of ROS on the enzymes, or to a direct inhibition from mercury (Bando et al., 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, our results demonstrate for the first time that a 30-day chronic exposure to low doses of mercury chloride impairs sperm quality and exerts adverse effects on testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens. These effects seem to be due, at least in part, to the increased oxidative stress in male reproductive tissues.

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FIGURES

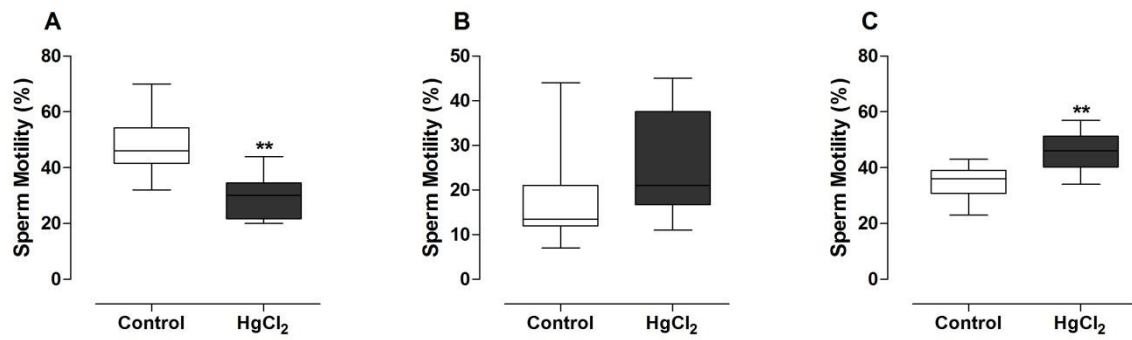


Figure 1

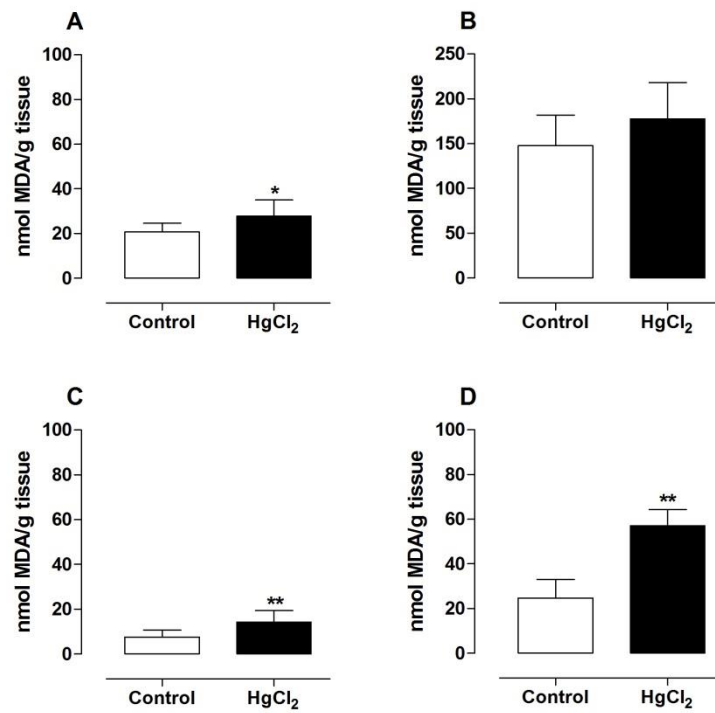


Figure 2

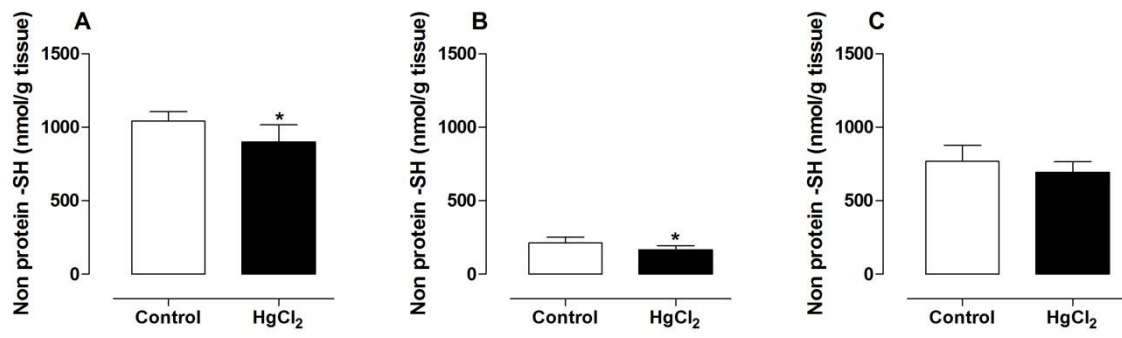


Figure 3

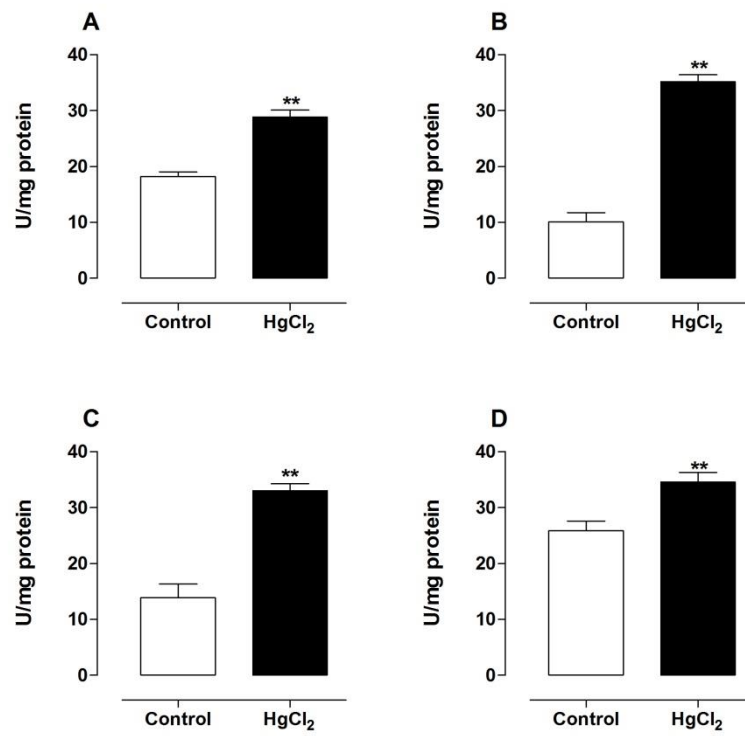


Figure 4

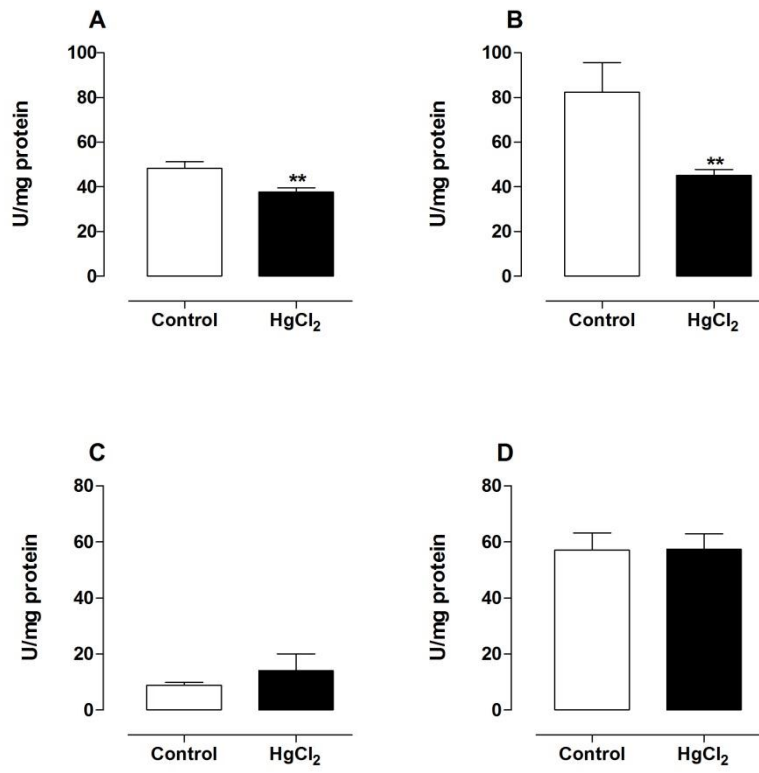


Figure 5

FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on sperm motility. Type A: motile with progressive movement (A), type B: motile without progressive movement (B) and type C: immotile (C). Data are expressed as median (Q₁ – Q₃), n=10. ** P<0.001 (Mann – Whitney).

Figure 2. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on lipid peroxidation. Values of TBARS on testis (A), epididymis (B), prostate (C) and vas deferens (D). Data are expressed as nmol MDA (malondialdehyde)/g tissue and reported as mean ± SEM (n=8). * P<0.05, ** P<0.01 (Student's t-test).

Figure 3. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on non-protein thiol groups (NPSH) content. Values of NPSH on testis (A), epididymis (B) and vas deferens (C). Data are expressed as mean ± SEM (n=5). * p<0.05 (Student's t-test).

Figure 4. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on superoxide dismutase (SOD) activity. Values of SOD activity on testis (A), epididymis (B), prostate (C) and vas deferens (D). One unit of enzyme was defined as the amount of enzyme required to inhibit the rate of epinephrine autoxidation by 50% at 26°C. Data are expressed as mean ± SEM (n=8). ** P<0.01 (Student's t-test).

Figure 5. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on Catalase (CAT) activity. Values of CAT activity on testis (A), epididymis (B), prostate (C) and vas deferens (D). One unit of enzyme was defined as the amount of enzyme required for monitoring the disappearance of H₂O₂. The enzymatic activity was expressed in Units (1U decomposes 1 μmol H₂O₂/min at pH 7 at 25°C). Data are expressed as mean ± SEM (n=7). *P<0.01 (Student's t-test).

TABLES

Table 1. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on body weight (g), absolute (g or mg) and relative (g/100g or mg/100g) weights of reproductive organs of male rats.

Parameters	Experimental groups	
	Control (n=10)	HgCl ₂ (n=10)
Initial body weight (g)	347.4 ± 7.8	360.9 ± 6.0
Final body weight (g)	392.4 ± 7.8	401.6 ± 6.5
Testis (g)	1.8 ± 0.02	1.9 ± 0.02
Testis (g/100g)	0.5 ± 0.01	0.5 ± 0.01
Epididymis (mg)	591.3 ± 11.2	616.7 ± 13.9
Epididymis (mg/100g)	150.6 ± 3.8	153.9 ± 3.9
Ventral prostate (mg)	539.0 ± 36.1	528.9 ± 36.2
Ventral prostate (mg/100g)	144.6 ± 6.9	128.8 ± 7.8
Full seminal vesicle (g)	1.4 ± 0.04	1.5 ± 0.05
Full seminal vesicle (g/100g)	0.3 ± 0.01	0.4 ± 0.01
Empty seminal vesicle (g)	0.5 ± 0.01	0.6 ± 0.06
Empty seminal vesicle (g/100g)	0.1 ± 0.01	0.1 ± 0.01
Vesicular secretion (g)	0.9 ± 0.04	0.9 ± 0.07
Vas deferens (mg)	107.1 ± 3.2	109.6 ± 5.8
Vas deferens (mg/100g)	27.3 ± 0.8	27.4 ± 1.7

Data are expressed as means ± SEM. The relative organ weight was calculated by use of the formula: organ weight/body weight x 100. Units: g: gram, mg: milligram. (Student's t-test).

Table 2 – Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on sperm counts in testis and epididymis of rats.

Parameters	Experimental groups	
	Control (n=10)	HgCl ₂ (n=10)
<i>Sperm count</i>		
<i>Testis</i>		
Sperm number (x10 ⁶)	136.4 ± 4.9	101.5 ± 4.9**
Sperm number (x10 ⁶ /g)	86.2 ± 3.1	63. ± 2.5**
DSP (x10 ⁶ /testis/day)	22.4 ± 0.8	16.6 ± 0.8**
DSPr (x10 ⁶ /testis/day/g)	14.1 ± 0.5	10.4 ± 0.4**
<i>Epididymis</i>		
<i>Caput/ Corpus</i>		
Sperm number (x10 ⁶)	85.2 ± 3.7	66.0 ± 4.1**
Sperm number (x10 ⁶ /g)	287.0 ± 11.2	201.3 ± 10.4**
Sperm transit time (days)	3.8 ± 0.2	4.0 ± 0.2
<i>Cauda</i>		
Sperm number (x10 ⁶)	130.4 ± 6.8	110.7 ± 4.3*
Sperm number (x10 ⁶ /g)	652.8 ± 34.5	483.0 ± 14.7**
Sperm transit time (days)	5.9 ± 0.4	6.8 ± 0.4

Data are expressed as mean ± SEM. Units: g: gram, mg: milligram. * P<0.05, ** P<0.01 (Student's t-test).

Table 3. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on sperm morphology of rats.

Parameters	Experimental groups	
	Control (n=10)	HgCl ₂ (n=10)
<i>Normal</i>	94.3 (93.4 – 95.1)	84.8 (77.0 – 90.3)**
<i>Head Abnormalities</i>		
Amorphous	2.0 (0.9 – 2.6)	2.3 (0.4 – 4.1)
Banana Head	0.5 (0.4 – 1.1)	1.3 (0.4 – 5.1)
Detached Head	2.8 (2.0 – 3.1)	4.0 (3.3 – 5.8)*
Total of Head Abnormalities	5.3 (3.9 – 6.5)	9.8 (5.1 – 12.4)*
<i>Tail Abnormalities</i>		
Bent Tail	0.0 (0.0 – 0.5)	3.8 (2.0 – 6.8)**
Broken Tail	0.0 (0.0 – 0.5)	0.5 (0.0 – 0.5)
Total of Tail Abnormalities	0.3 (0.0 – 0.6)	3.3 (0.0 – 7.5)*

Data are expressed as median (Q₁ – Q₃). *P<0.05, **P<0.01 (Mann – Whitney).

PARTE III**THE EFFECTS OF CHRONIC EXPOSURE TO LOW DOSES OF MERCURY ON
MALE REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS: ROLE OF GLUTATHIONE SYSTEM****This article will be submitted to Toxicological Sciences**

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ABSTRACT

Mercury is a ubiquitous environmental pollutant, its contamination and toxicity is a serious hazard to human health. Although several studies have demonstrated that mercury impairs male reproductive function at high levels, these effects and mechanisms at low levels of exposure on male reproductive organs are unknown. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of chronic exposure to low concentrations of HgCl₂ on structure, hormonal levels and oxidative stress, mainly the role of glutathione system on male reproductive system of rats. Three-month-old male Wistar rats were treated for 30 days and divided in Control (saline *i.m.*) and HgCl₂ group (*i.m.* 1st dose: 4.6 µg/kg, subsequent doses 0.07 µg/kg/day). We analyzed sperm membrane integrity, histopathology (testis and epididymis), hormonal levels and biomarkers of oxidative stress: reactive species levels and the glutathione system in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens. The mercury treatment caused a loss of sperm membrane integrity and histopathological changes in testis, following by increased levels of oxidative stress in reproductive organs, represented not only by augmented reactive species levels but also by changes on glutathione defense system (glutathione levels, glutathione peroxidase, glutathione S-transferase and glutathione reductase). Ours results demonstrate, for the first time, that a 30-day chronic exposure to low doses of HgCl₂ causes male reproductive toxicity with loss of sperm membrane integrity and testicular damage following by changes on glutathione system in reproductive organs which point to the oxidative stress as a main mechanism.

Keywords: Mercury; Reproductive organs; Oxidative stress; Glutathione system.

INTRODUCTION

Evidences have shown a considerable increase in male infertility together with a continuous decline in human sperm quality over the last years (Sheiner et al., 2003). The increase in environmental pollution in recent decades raises question about the contribution of environmental and occupational factors to the observed increase in male infertility (Queiroz and Waissmann, 2006).

Mercury (Hg) is a ubiquitous environmental pollutant, its contamination and toxicity is a serious hazard to human health (Orisakwe et al., 2001). Many populations worldwide are exposed to mercury at levels that exceed the recommended safety guidelines (Rice, 2004). Human exposure to mercury depends on its chemical form; therefore it can occur by inhalation, ingestion and consumption via food chain among other sources (Nyland et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2011).

The toxic effects of mercury chloride (HgCl_2) on central nervous system (Franco et al., 2007), cardiovascular (Carmignani and Boscolo, 1984; Peçanha et al., 2010), renal (Carmignani et al., 1992; Sharma et al., 2007) and hepatic system (Perottoni et al., 2004) are well described. The ability to easily form organomercurial complexes with proteins and great affinity for SH groups of biomolecules could contribute to its toxicity (Hansen et al., 2006; Houston, 2007; Clarkson et al., 2003).

At male reproductive system there is dearth of information on the toxic effects of mercury. In humans, it was described elevated testicular and blood mercury levels in an infertile man employed in the chloralkali industry (Cole et al., 2006; Keck et al., 1993) as well as azoospermia, oligozoospermia, teratospermia and hormonal imbalance in patients chronically exposed to mercury (Choy et al., 2002; Keck et al., 1993; Popescu, 1978).

At high levels of exposure, mercury is described to affect testicular spermatogenic and steroidogenic functions (Marquardt, 1999), reproductive performance (Khan et al., 2004),

disrupts the endocrine system (Silva et al., 2011), reduces secretory epididymal components necessary for sperm maturation (Rao, 1997), and impairs sperm parameters in experimental animals (Kalender et al., 2013; Mohamed et al., 1987; Rao, 1989).

The exact mechanisms underlying HgCl₂ toxicity in the reproductive organs are not fully understood. Mercury can affect the male reproductive system directly, such as induction of oxidative stress, or indirectly, when they act on the neuroendocrine system (Boujbiha et al., 2009; Silva et al. 2011). Reactive oxygen species (ROS) are important mediators of normal sperm function (Aitken, 1995), but excessive production of ROS results in the peroxidation of polyunsaturated fatty acids leading to membrane damage and loss of motility (Rao and Gangadharan, 2008). Mercury can also decrease glutathione (GSH) and other antioxidant levels, inactivate antioxidant enzymes, such as superoxide dismutase (SOD), glutathione peroxidase (GPx), glutathione *S*-transferase (GST) and glutathione reductase (GR) (El-Desoky et al., 2013; Kalender et al., 2013). The GPx and GR are enzymes of the catalytic cycle of the GSH, the inhibition on GPx and GR activities as well as decreased GSH levels are related with increased oxidative stress (Halliwell and Gutteridge, 2007).

The selenoprotein GPx have been described as important antioxidant enzyme in the cellular protection against damage caused by RS (reactive species) (Reeves and Hoffmann, 2009). Mammalian cells contain five isoforms of GPxs: cytosolic GPx (GPx1), gastrointestinal GPx (GPx2), plasma GPx (GPx3), phospholipid hydroperoxide GPx (GPx4), and, in humans GPx6, expressed on the olfactory system (Brigelius Flohe, 2006). The cytosolic GPx1 is the most prominent isoform, being able to reduce hydrogen peroxide and a range of organic peroxides, by expending GSH (Arthur, 2000). The testis is the site of the strongest expression of GPx4 (Moreno et al., 2003), moreover the failure of its expression in the spermatozoa is related with human infertility, demonstrating its essential role for the male

genital tract (Foresta et al., 2002; Imai et al., 2001). Recently, it was demonstrated a role of the selenoprotein GPx4 in MeHg induced neurotoxicity (Zemolin et al., 2012).

Although several studies have demonstrated that mercury impairs male reproductive function at high levels (El-Desoky et al., 2013; Silva et al., 2011), these effects and mechanisms at low levels of exposure on male reproductive organs are unknown. Our group developed a model of exposure to mercury chloride that attained a blood mercury concentration of approximately 8 ng/ml (Wiggers et al., 2008), similar to those found in blood after occupational exposure or released from removal of amalgam fillings (Bjorkman et al., 1997; McKelvey et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2005).

Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the effects of chronic exposure to low concentrations of HgCl₂ on structure, hormonal levels and oxidative stress mainly the role of glutathione system on male reproductive system of rats.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animals

Three-month-old male *Wistar* rats (310–390g) were obtained from the Central Animal Laboratory of the Federal University of Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. During treatment, rats were housed at a constant room temperature, humidity, and light cycle (12:12h light-dark), free access to tap water and fed with standard chow *ad libitum*. All experiments were conducted in compliance with the guidelines for biomedical research stated by the Brazilian Societies of Experimental Biology and approved by the Ethics Committee on Animal Use Experimentation of the Federal University of Pampa, CEUA, Urugaiana, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil (Process Number: 036/2012).

Animals treatment

Twenty rats were divided into two groups (n=10) and treated for 30 days as follows: a) Control (saline solution, *i.m.*); b) Mercury (HgCl₂ - Sigma-Aldrich - St Louis, MO, USA) -

mercury chloride (1st dose 4.6 µg/kg, subsequent doses 0.07 µg/kg/day, *i.m.*, to cover daily loss, using the model described by Wiggers et al. 2008). At the end of treatment, animals were euthanized by decapitation and testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens were immediately excised. The prostate and left testis, epididymis and right vas deferens were washed on ice-cold saline and rapidly homogenized in 50mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5 (1/5, w/v), centrifuged at 2400×g for 15 min at 4°C and the resulting supernatant (S1) fraction was frozen at -80°C for further measurements of oxidative stress. The right testis (n=5) was homogenized at 4°C in 300 µl of buffer (pH 7.0) containing 50 mM Tris, 1 mM EDTA, 0,1 mM phenylmethyl sulfonyl fluoride, 20 mM Na₃VO₄, 100 mM sodium fluoride and protease inhibitor cocktail (Sigma, MO). The homogenate was centrifuged at 1000 x g for 10 min at 4°C and the S1 collected and frozen at - 80°C for further analysis of Western Blot. The right testis and epididymis (n=5) were used for histological studies, and left vas deferens were used for sperm membrane integrity analysis.

Sperm membrane integrity

Sperm were removed from the left vas deferens by internal rising with 1 ml of Human Tubular Fluid (DMPBS-Nutricell-SP-Brazil) pre-warmed to 34°C. The functional integrity of sperm membrane was determined by hypoosmotic swelling test (HOS) as described by Lomeo and Giambierso (1991). The assay was performed mixing 10µL of sperm with 50µL of hypoosmotic solution and incubating at 37°C for 45 min. A total of 600 cells per animal were evaluated under magnification (400X magnification, Binocular, Olympus CX31, Tokyo, Japan). Spermatozoa with changes were denoted as swelled or HOS positive (HOS+).

Histological studies

The testis and epididymis were dissected apart, and were immediately fixed in alcoholic Bouin solution for 24 hours, then dehydrated and finally embedded in paraffin and were sectioned serially in 5 mm thick sections. The sections were stained with hematoxylin

and eosin (H&E) and all sections were analyzed with an optical microscope (100, 200 and 400X; Binocular, Olympus CX31, Tokyo, Japan).

Biochemical assays

Reactive species (RS) levels

The level of reactive species in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens were determined by a spectrofluorimetric method as described by Loetchutinat et al. (2005). The S1 was diluted (1:10) in 50mM Tris-Hcl (pH 7.4) and the 2', 7'-dichlorofluorescein diacetate (DCHF-DA; 1mM) was added to the medium. The DCHF-DA is enzymatically hydrolyzed by intracellular esterases to form nonfluorescent DCFH, which is then rapidly oxidized to form highly fluorescent 2', 7'-dichlorofluorescein (DCF) in the presence of RS. DCF fluorescence intensity is proportional to the amount of RS that is formed. The DCF fluorescence intensity emission was recorded at 520 nm (with 480 nm excitation) for 60 min at 15 min intervals. The RS levels were expressed as fluorescence unit (UF).

Glutathione (GSH) levels

The determination of GSH content in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens was measured by the fluorimetric method of Hissin and Hilf (1976). This method is based on the principle that glutathione reacts specifically with ophthaldehyde (OPT) at pH 8.0 and resulting in the formation of a highly fluorescent product which is activated at 350 nm with an emission at 420 nm. The amount of GSH was expressed as nmol/GSH per gram of protein.

Antioxidant enzymes assay

Glutathione peroxidase (GPx) activity

GPx activity in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens were assayed spectrophotometrically using the method of Wendel (1981) through the reduced glutathione (GSH)/b tetrasodium salt (NADPH)/glutathione reductase system by the dismutation of H₂O₂ at 340 nm. In this assay, the enzyme activity was indirectly measured using a NADPH decay.

H₂O₂ was decomposed, generating oxidized glutathione (GSSG) from GSH. GSSG was regenerated back to GSH by glutathione reductase present in the assay medium at the expense of NADPH. S1 was added to the GSH/NADPH/glutathione reductase system, and the enzymatic reaction was initiated by adding H₂O₂ 4 mM. The enzymatic activity was expressed as nmol NADPH/per min per milligram of protein.

Glutathione reductase (GR) activity

GR activity in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens were assayed spectrophotometrically at 340 nm by the method described by Calberg and Mannervick (1985). In this assay, GSSG is reduced by GR at the expense of NADPH consumption and GR activity is proportional to NADPH decay. An aliquot of S1 was added in the system containing 0.15 M potassium phosphate buffer (pH 7.0), 1.5 mM EDTA, 0.15 mM NADPH. After the basal reading, the substrate (GSSG 20 mM) was added. The enzymatic activity was expressed as nmol NADPH/min/mg protein.

Glutathione S-transferase (GST) activity

GST activity in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens were assayed spectrophotometrically at 340 nm by the method of Habig et al. (1974). The reaction mixture contained an aliquot of each S1, 0.1 M potassium phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), 100 mM GSH and 100 mM CDNB, which was used as substrate. The enzymatic activity was expressed as nmol CDNB per min per milligram of protein. Proteins for experiments were measured according to Bradford (1976) using bovine serum albumin as a standard.

Western blot analysis

Western blotting was performed according to Franco et al. (2010). The testis (n=5) was homogenized at 4°C in 300 µl of buffer (pH 7.0) containing 50 mM Tris, 1 mM EDTA, 0,1 mM phenylmethyl sulfonyl fluoride, 20 mM Na₃VO₄, 100 mM sodium fluoride and protease inhibitor cocktail (Sigma, MO). The homogenate was centrifuged at 1000 x g for 10

min at 4°C and the S1 collected. After total protein concentration (Bradford, 1976) using bovine serum albumin as a standard, β -mercaptoethanol was added to samples to a final concentration of 8 %. Then samples were frozen at – 80°C for further analysis. The proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE and transferred to nitrocellulose membranes. Then membranes were incubated with specific primary antibodies for the determination of GPx1, GPx4 and β -actin protein expression. The blots were developed using secondary antibody linked to peroxidase and luminescence was captured in a Carestream Image Station 4000MM PRO molecular imaging system.

Hormonal assay

The blood was collected (between 9:00 and 11:30 AM) and serum was obtained by centrifugation (1236 x g for 20 min at 4°C). The concentration of luteinizing hormone (LH) was determined by the technique of double antibody radioimmunoassay. The LH assay was done using specific kits supplied by the National Institute of Arthritis, Diabetes and Kidney Diseases (NIADDK, USA). All samples were assayed in duplicate and in the same assay to avoid inter-assay errors. The intra-assay error was 3.4%.

Drugs and reagents

HgCl₂ was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St Louis, MO, USA). All antibodies utilized in this study were purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Santa Cruz, CA, USA). Salts and reagents were of analytical grade obtained from Sigma and Merck (Darmstadt, Germany).

Statistical analysis

Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM of the number of animals used in each experiment. Statistical analysis was performed using Qui-square test for membrane integrity analysis and Student's t test for all other analysis. Values of P<0.05 were considered statistically

significant. Graphpad Prism 5 software was used for statistical analysis and for plotting graphs.

RESULTS

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on sperm membrane integrity analysis

Chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ decreased the percentage of spermatozoa with membrane integrity (Control group =56% vs HgCl₂ group=45% - P<0.05).

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on testicular and epididymal histology

Optical microscopic examination showed that in the control group, testis had a normal testicular architecture with an orderly arranged spermatogenic and sertoli cells. The spermatogonia and sertoli cells were rested on the basement membrane of the seminiferous tubules. The Leydig cells with large and acidophilic cytoplasm were located in the interstitial tissue among seminiferous tubules (Figure 1).

In the mercury group the spermatogenic cells in the germinal epithelium in testis were separated from each other by numerous empty spaces (Figure 2). Mature spermatozoa was rarely present and only few tubules contained mature spermatozoa. Many atypical tubules in the various stages of sperm development were found in exposed group that showed disorganization and or loss of spermatogenic epithelium. A large number of germ cells were also found in the lumen of seminiferous tubules (Figure 2). The Leydig cells in the interstitial spaces had a normal morphology. Regarding to the interstitium, there were congestion of the interstitial blood vessels and edema (Figure 2).

Histopathological analysis of epididymis from HgCl₂-treated rats showed that the morphological structures were similar to the control group, indicating the absence of pathological changes (data not shown).

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on reactive species (RS) and glutathione (GSH) levels

Mercury administration at low doses resulted in a significant elevation in the levels of RS in epididymis, prostate and vas deferens (Figure 3B, C, D). However, in testis the mercury treatment did not change RS levels (Figure 3A).

Regarding the GSH levels, mercury treatment with low doses decreases the prostate SH levels (Figure 4C), while those in testis, epididymis and vas deferens were not statistically different between groups (Figure 4A, B, D).

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on glutathione peroxidase (GPx), glutathione S-transferase (GST) and glutathione reductase (GR) activity

In rats exposed to mercury for 30 days, a significant decrease on GPx activity was observed in testis (Figure 5A) accompanied by no significantly changes on other tissues evaluated (epididymis and prostate) (Figure 5B, C).

On the other hand, the GST activity after mercury treatment increases in prostate of rats (Figure 6C), without differences in testis, epididymis and vas deferens (Figure 6A, B, D).

The mercury treatment at low doses decreases the GR activity in testis, prostate and vas deferens (Figure 7A, C, D), and increases GR activity in epididymis of rats (Figure 7B).

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on expression of glutathione peroxidase (GPx) in testis of rats

We analyzed the expression (protein levels) of GPx1 and GPx4 by Western blotting. Mercury treatment for 30 days significantly increased the levels of the selenoprotein GPx4 in the testis of treated rats (Figure 8C). However, there were no differences in the GPx1 levels among control and treated groups (Figure 8B).

Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on luteinizing hormone (LH) levels

Regarding the hormonal measurement, there were no significant differences in serum levels of LH in the mercury treated rats when compared with the control group (Figure 9).

DISCUSSION

Results of the present study demonstrate that chronic exposition to low doses of mercury promotes male reproductive impairments in rats and point to the oxidative stress, at least in part, as a main mechanism. The present investigation found that mercury reduces sperm membrane integrity and causes histopathological changes in testis. It was recently demonstrated that inhibition of antioxidant enzymes activity could be responsible for the oxidative damage caused by this metal (Boujbiha et al., 2009; Kalender et al., 2013). The main finding of our study was to demonstrate that mercury alters the glutathione system that beyond of changes in the activity of key enzymes and GSH levels, we also found, for the first time, the participation of GPx4 as a main target during HgCl₂ reproductive toxicity.

Mercury has been identified as a risk factor for decline in human sperm quality and infertility, mainly among workers occupationally exposed (Choy et al., 2002; Keck et al., 1993). Blood mercury level ranging from 7 to 10 ng/ml has been found in residents of contaminated areas and in mercury-exposed workers (McKelvey et al., 2007). The United States Environmental Protection Agency recommends as free of adverse effects a maximum blood concentration of mercury of 5.8 ng/ml (Rice, 2004; NRC, 2000). In the present study, we used a controlled low-dose administration of mercury chloride and attained a blood mercury concentration of approximately 8 ng/ml (Wiggers et al., 2008), similar to human exposure levels (McKelvey et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2005).

Mammalian spermatozoa are rich in polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) and are thus very susceptible to RS attack. The high concentration of PUFAs is required to sperm membrane integrity which gives the fluidity needed for sperm viability, motility and participates in the membrane fusion events associated with fertilization (Aitken et al., 1989; Rao and Gangadharan, 2008). The current study demonstrated that mercury causes loss of sperm membrane integrity as well as the histological studies showed altered sperm

development with only few mature spermatozoa in the seminiferous tubules. Other studies, also observed similar histological changes in testis of HgCl₂-exposed rats at high levels (Boujbiha et al., 2011; Orisakwe et al., 2001). This suggests that the HgCl₂ may interfere with spermatogenesis by crossing the blood – testis barrier and gaining access to germinal cells. Induction of germ cell apoptosis that progressed to testicular atrophy, stage-specific germ cell deletion and suppression of sperm production was reported after mercury intoxication (Homma-Takeda et al., 2001; Vachhrajani et al., 1988). In addition, it has been reported that inorganic mercury can accumulate in animal testis, epididymis and vas deferens (Boujbiha et al., 2009; Rao and Sharma, 2001).

Several *in vivo* and *in vitro* studies indicates an imbalance in pro-oxidant and antioxidant system, leading to oxidative stress in mercury exposed rats (Bando et al., 2005; Durak et al., 2010; El-Desoky et al., 2013; Rizzetti et al., 2013;). It has been proposed that the antioxidant GSH depletion by mercury may be a trigger for the production of RS that induces oxidative damage in lipid, protein, and DNA (Hansen et al., 2006). The present study shows that even with low doses mercury increased RS levels in epididymis, prostate and vas deferens as well as decreased GSH levels in prostate of rats. Demonstrating, that mercury exposition induces oxidative stress in several reproductive organs.

Despite we did not find alterations in RS and GSH levels in testis, it does not mean that there was not oxidative damage in this tissue. Such damage can sometimes be the trigger leading to adaptation of redox system, mainly in a chronic exposition (Halliwell and Gutteridge, 2007). Corroborating with this hypothesis, we observed testicular damage after 30-day chronic exposure to mercury. Furthermore, the oxidative stress can also be result from failure of antioxidant defense systems (Halliwell and Gutteridge, 2007).

The current study not only showed decreases in GPx and GR activity in testis of HgCl₂-treated rats, corroborating with recent researches (El-Desoky et al., 2013; Kalender et

al., 2013), but also demonstrated the participation of GPx4 in mercury male reproductive toxicity. Showing an adaptive increased in GPx4 expression as a consequence of the inhibitory action of mercury towards selenoprotein GPx activity. In general GPx4 activity in tissues is lower than that GPx1. Testis is an exception, with high Gpx4; this enzyme plays a key role in sperm maturation by catalyzing oxidation of protein groups in the sperm head (Halliwell and Gutteridge, 2007). It was described that lipid peroxidation increased significantly by the inhibition of GPx action in human spermatozoa *in vitro* (Alvarez and Storey, 1989). The importance of GPx action in protecting sperm cells and tissues is further enhanced by the fact that catalase was shown to be present at extremely low levels in human and rat spermatozoa (Alvarez et al., 1987). Thus, GPx becomes the major protection against peroxidative injury on spermatozoa and tissues of the male genital tract (Drevet, 2006).

On the contrary Zemolin et al. (2012) recently described that MeHg at 40 mg/L in drinking water for 21 days decreased the selenoprotein GPx4 expression in brains of rats. However, there are many differences between the above study and the present investigation, such as mercury concentration and chemical form, treatment period, administration route and tissues evaluated.

The present study didn't find differences among GPx1 protein expression between groups that suggest an absence of a role of GPx1 towards male reproductive toxicity by HgCl₂. This may be due, at least in part, the GPx1 be a ubiquitous and not specific cytosolic protein that is expressed at low levels in the male genital tract (Drevet, 2006).

Increased oxidative damage can result not only from more oxidative stress, but also from failure of repair or replacement systems, diminished antioxidant enzymes levels can also lead to oxidative stress (Halliwell and Gutteridge, 2007). Our study showed that exposure to mercury for 30 days alters antioxidant enzymes activity in reproductive organs, as observed by decrease in GR activity in testis, prostate and vas deferens, together with increase in GR

activity in epididymis, decrease in GPx activity in testis as well as increased GST activity in prostate. This shows a role of glutathione system on male reproductive toxicity induced by mercury at low levels.

In fact, increased oxidative stress by mercury in different organs and systems is well documented even *in vivo* and *in vitro* (Bando et al., 2005; Durak et al., 2010). Mercury was reported to cause inhibition in the activity of antioxidant enzymes such as CAT, SOD and GPx in the blood, liver and kidneys of mercury rats (Benov et al., 1990). On the contrary, mercury increases GSH levels, GR and CAT activity in erythrocytes of human chronically exposure to metal (Kobal et al., 2008). This is the first study to demonstrate that mercury at low levels increased oxidative stress in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens of rats.

However the oxidative stress induced by mercury in testis, epididymis, prostate and vas deferens of rats needs to be more investigate, therefore is possible to postulate that these organs are target from mercury reproductive toxicity, since it is known that mercury can accumulate in male reproductive organs of human and animals (Boujbiha et al., 2009; Rao and Sharma, 2001; Keck et al., 1993).

The prostate is a key gland in the sexual physiology which influences several reproductive functions, like provide some of the constituents of seminal fluid, seminal emission and ejaculation necessary for sperm maturation (Hernandez et al., 2006). Mercury treatment at low doses increased RS production in prostate of rats as well as altered some components of the GSH system, as evidenced by decrease in GR activity and in GSH levels. The GR does not act directly in the removal of RS, but is responsible for the regeneration of oxidized glutathione (GSSG) from GSH at the expense of NADPH, aiming to maintain the glutathione metabolic cycle (Halliwell and Gutteridge, 2007).

We also observed a compensatory mechanism with increased GST activity and decreased GSH levels probably as an attempt to prevent the oxidative damage in prostate.

GST is a primary phase II detoxification enzymes involved in the metabolism of xenobiotics and also provide protection against oxidative stress (Halliwell and Gutteridge, 2007). At male reproductive system, GST has a crucial importance in male germ cell and epididymal spermatozoa survival (Gopalakrishnan et al., 1998; Rao and Shaha, 2000). It was demonstrated that an inhibition in GST activity with suitable inhibitors results in increased germ cell apoptosis (Rao and Shaha, 2000). The effects of mercury intoxication in prostate are less well documented. To our knowledge, this is the first study showing mercury induces oxidative stress and alters the glutathione system in prostate of rats.

Steroidogenesis in the male rat is regulated by hypothalamic gonadotropin releasing hormone (GnRH) which stimulates the release of pituitary LH, which up-regulates androgen production by binds to Leydig cell LH surface receptors (LHR) (McVey et al., 2008). Chronic treatment with HgCl₂ for 30 days of adult male rats brought about no change in serum LH levels. Silva et al. (2011) also observed no changes in LH or follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) levels of animals treated with mercury at high levels. In contrast, some studies observed reduction in serum testosterone levels in rats after mercury exposure (Heath et al., 2012; Moussa et al., 2011). Really, metals are known as endocrine disruptor which may interfere with the synthesis, secretion, transport, binding, action or elimination of natural hormones, being able to alter the endocrine system (Pizent et al., 2012). However, further studies are necessary to investigate the effects of this chronic exposure to low doses of mercury in respect to other hormones such as FSH and testosterone levels.

In summary, our results demonstrate for the first time that a 30-day chronic exposure to low doses of HgCl₂ causes male reproductive toxicity with loss of sperm membrane integrity and testicular damage with changes on glutathione system in reproductive organs which point to the oxidative stress as a main mechanism.

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FIGURES

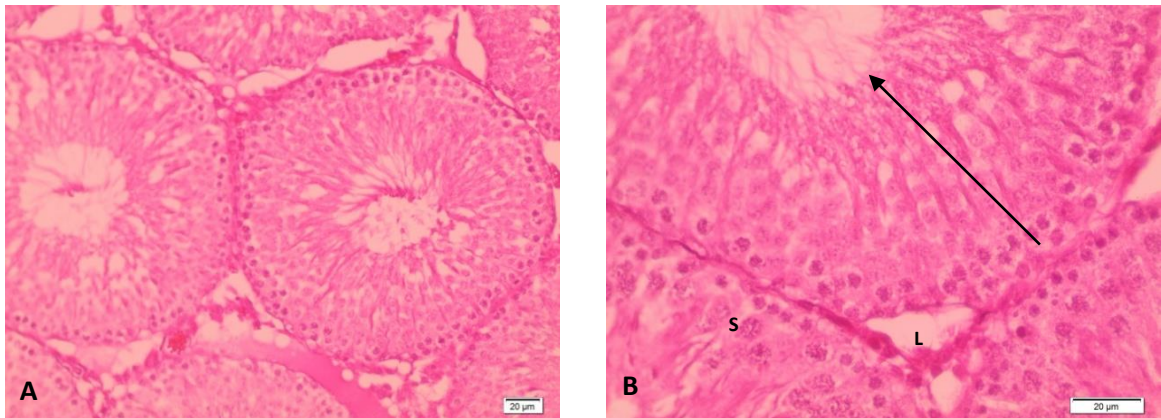


Figure 1

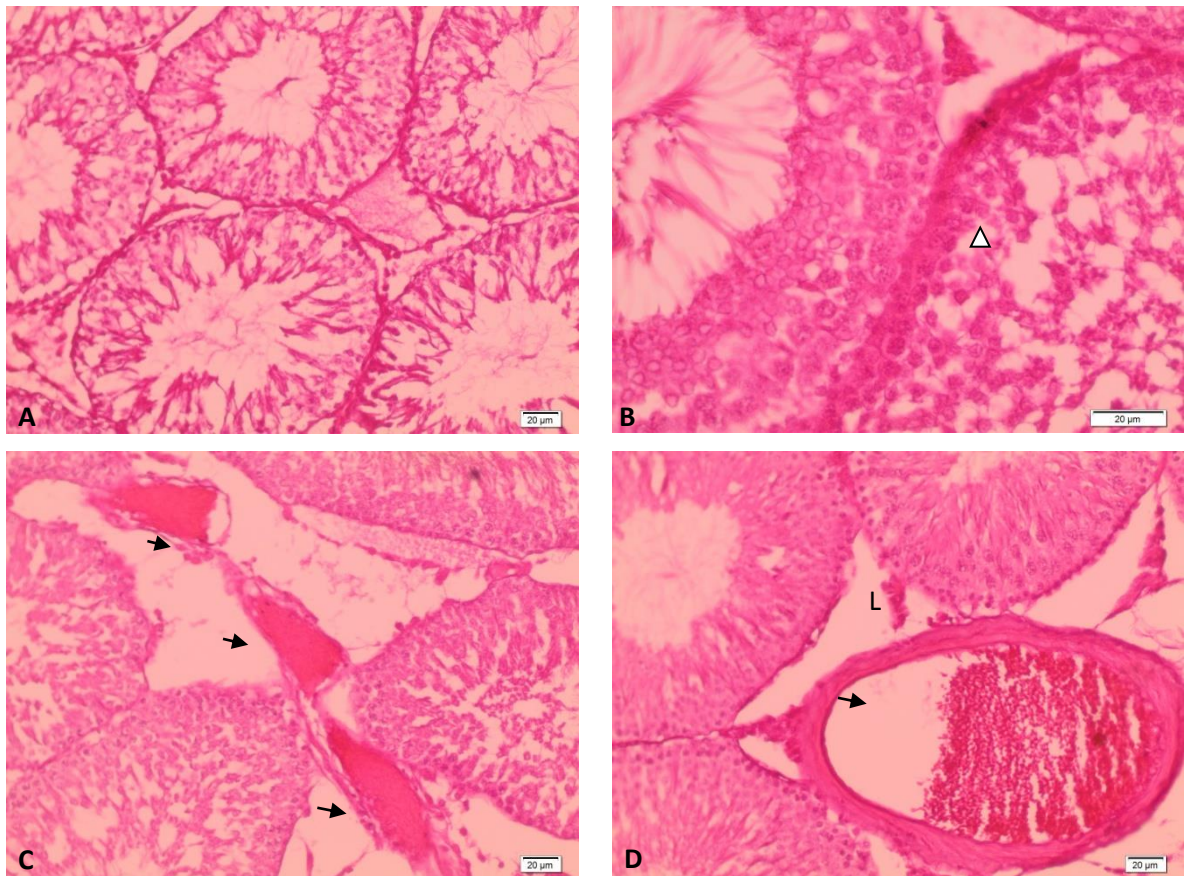


Figure 2

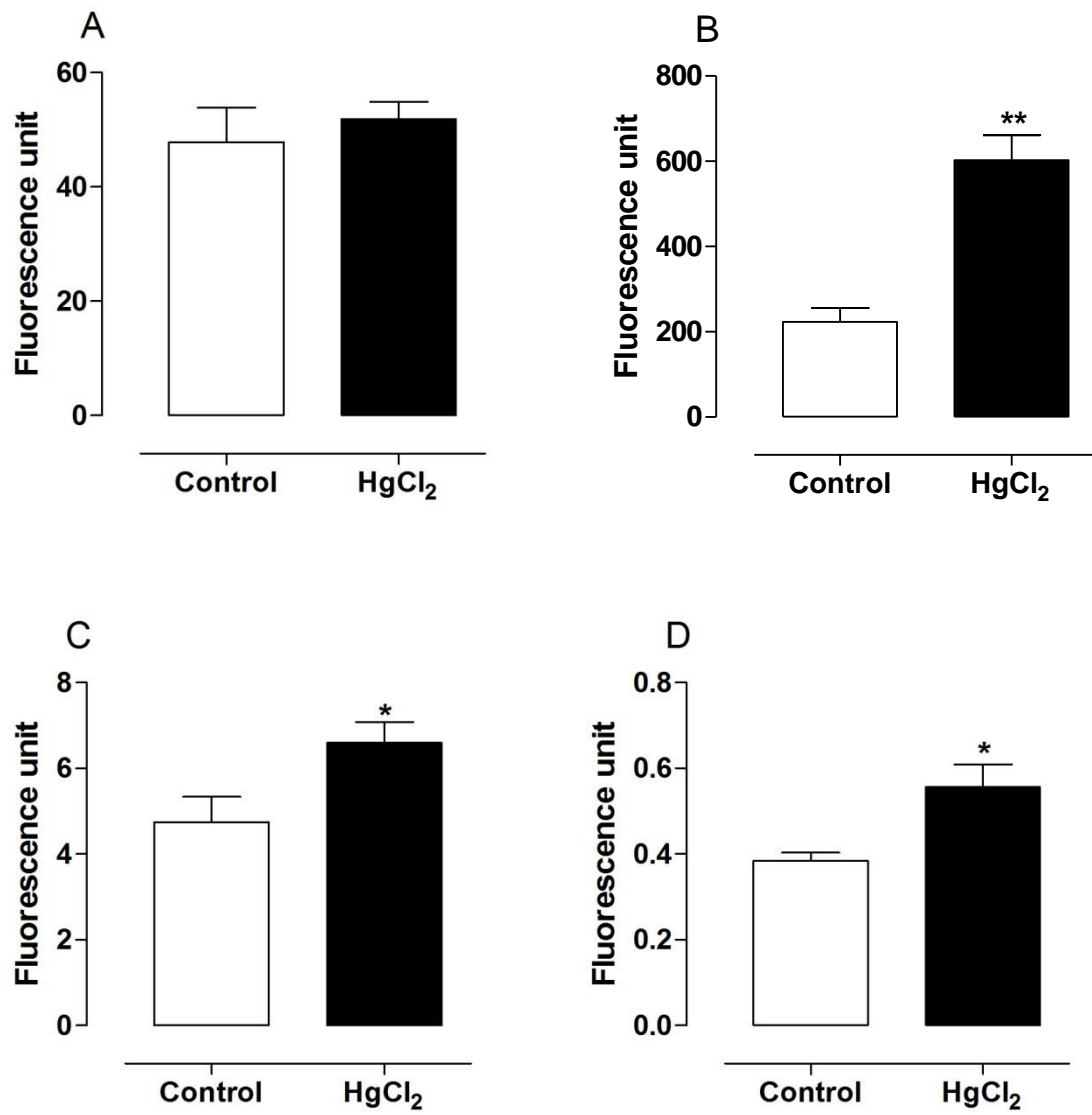


Figure 3

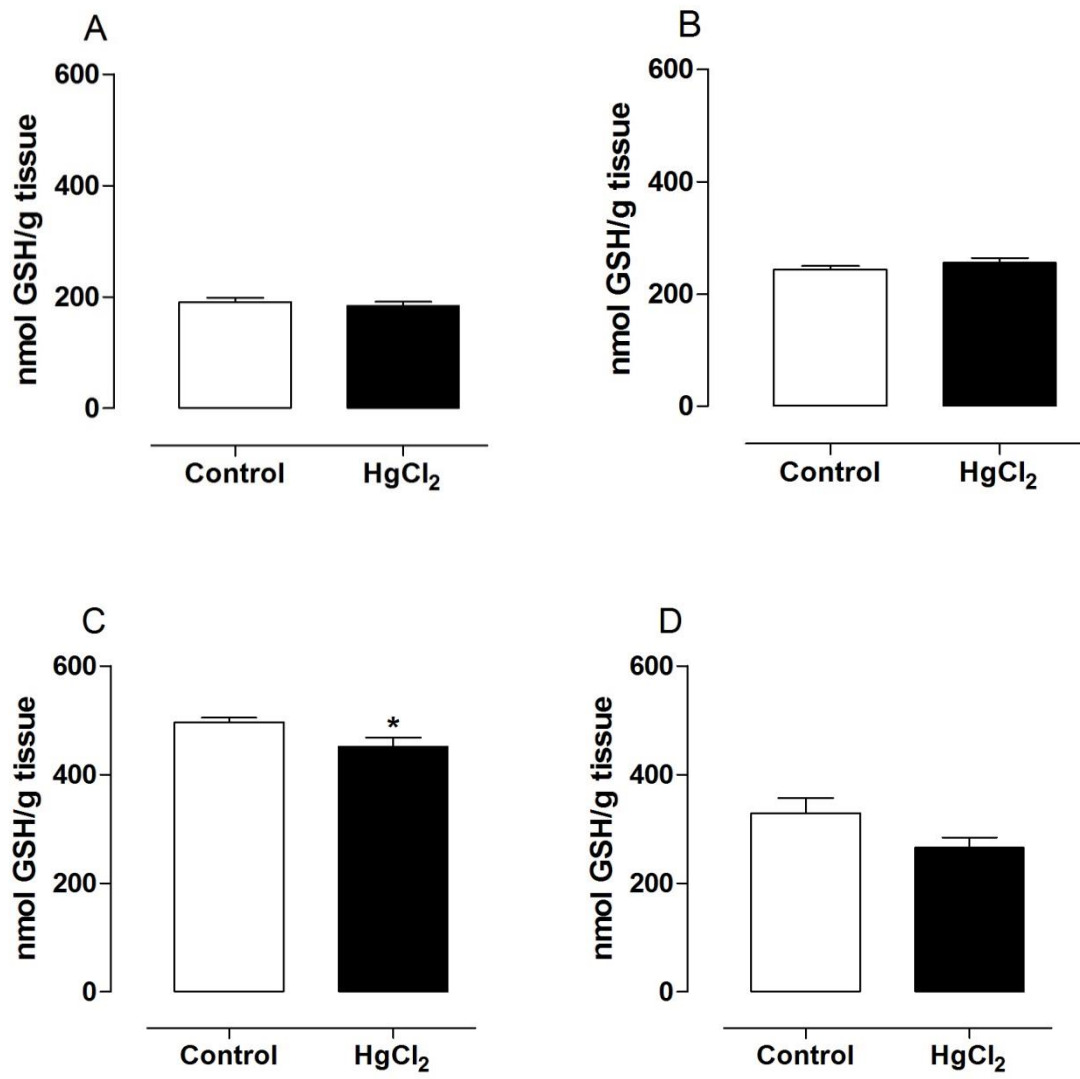


Figure 4

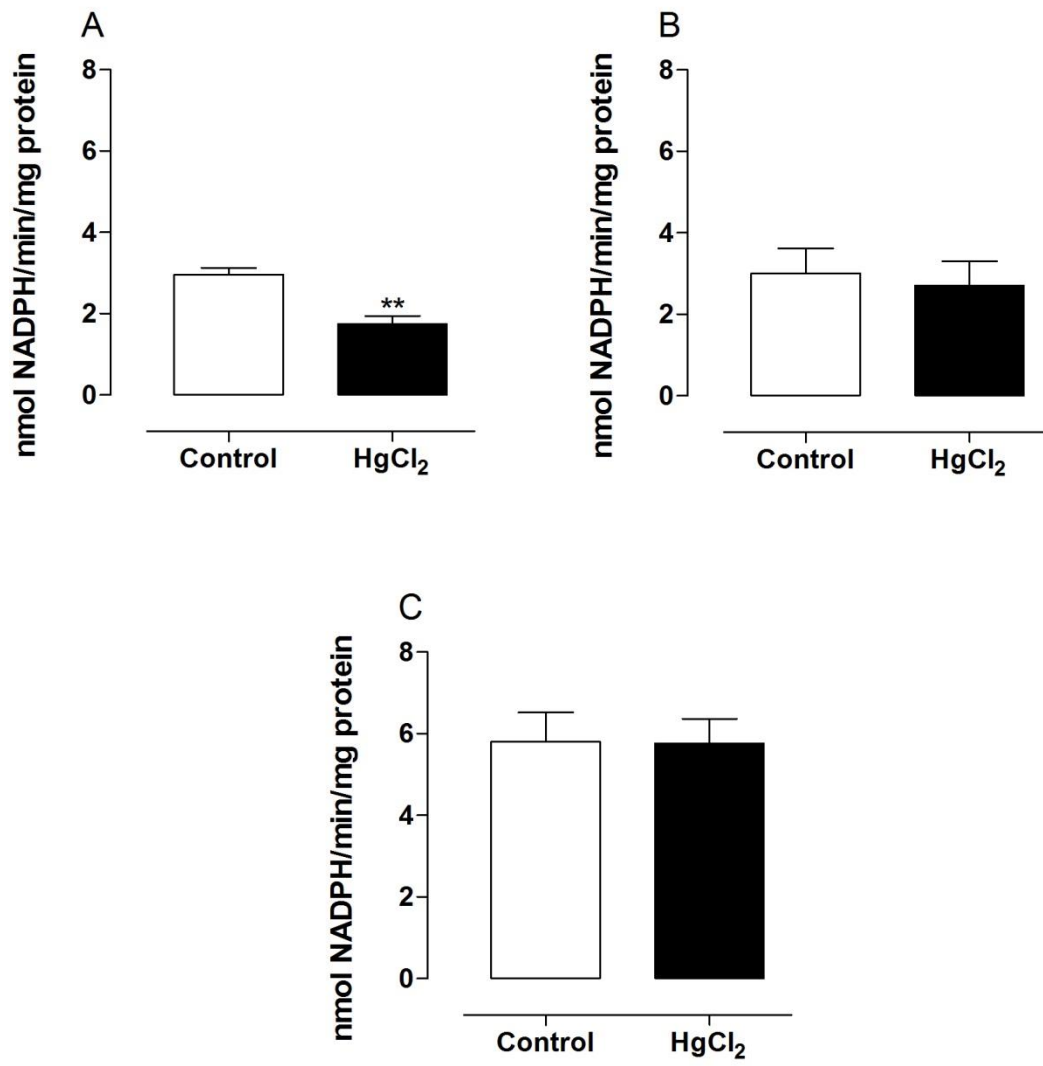


Figure 5

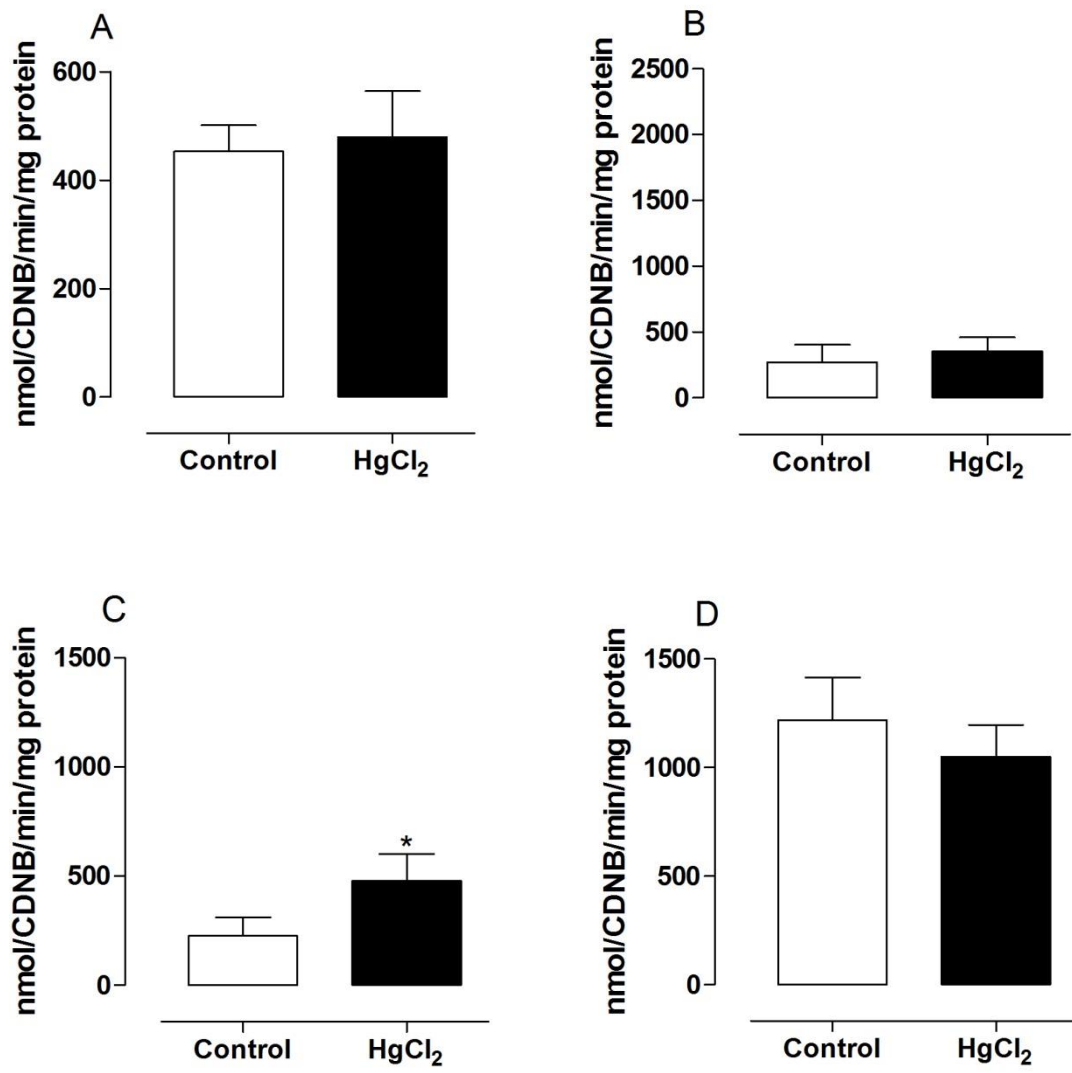


Figure 6

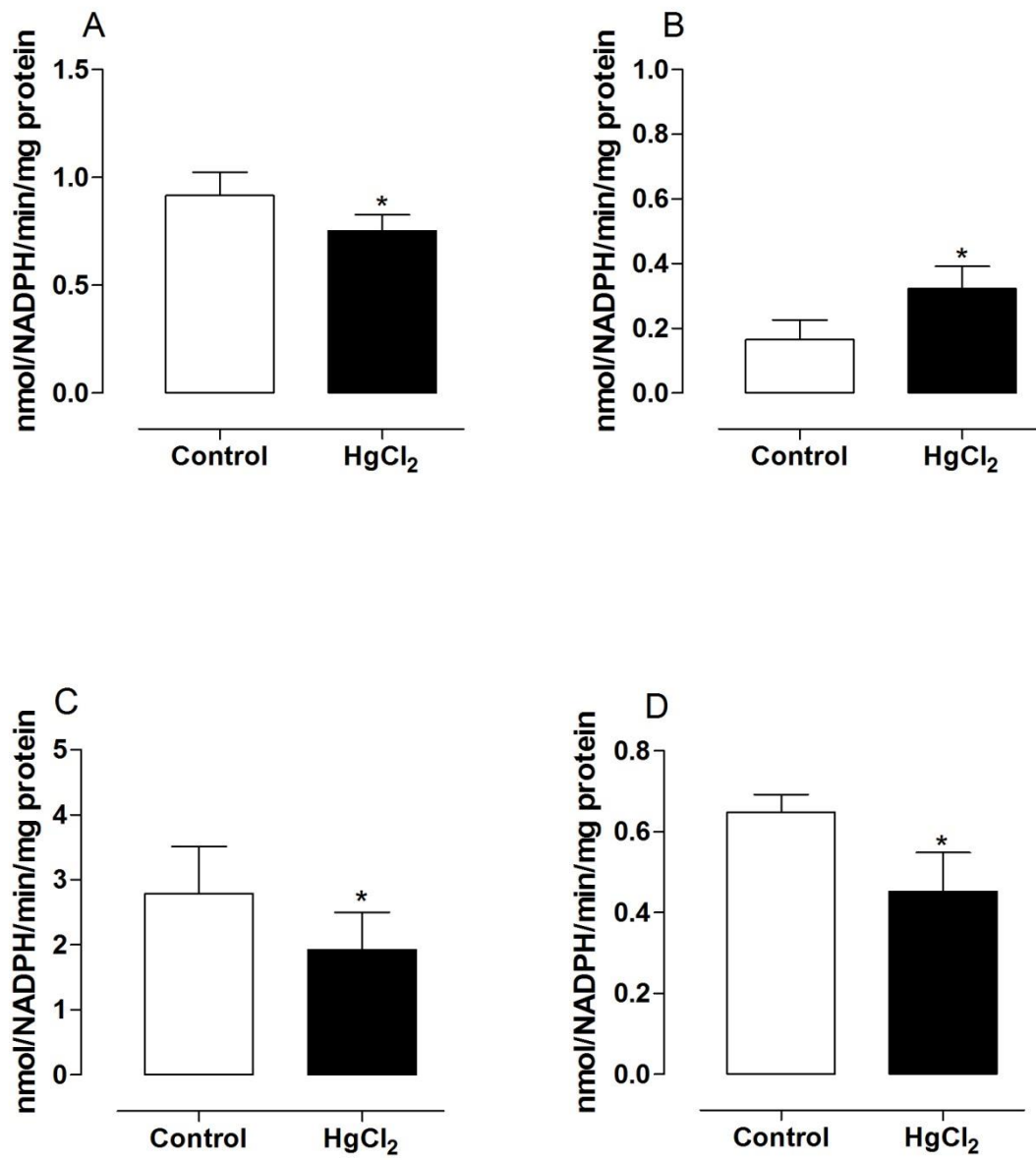


Figure 7

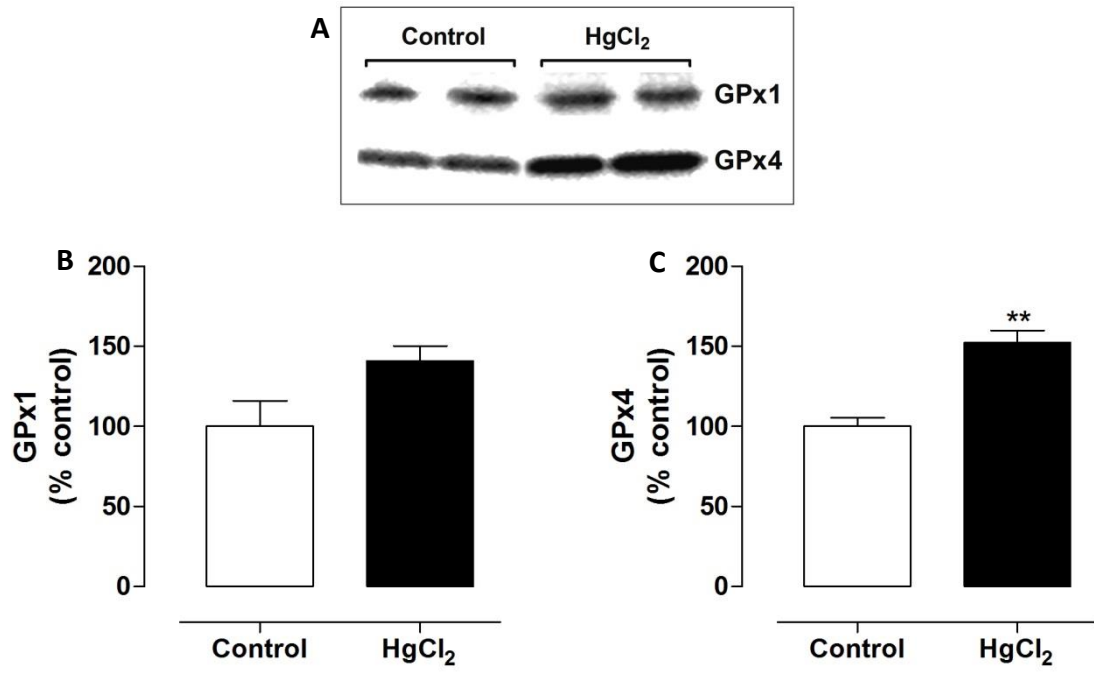


Figure 8

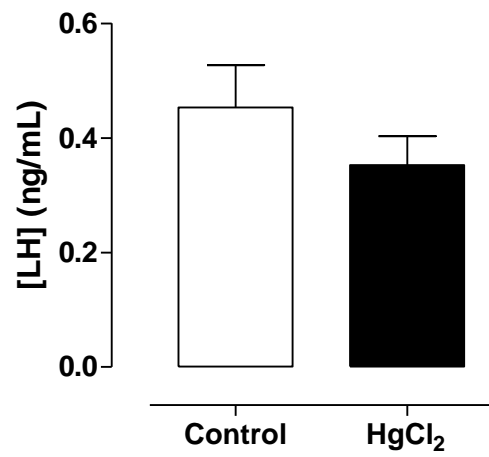


Figure 9

FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. Photomicrograph of seminiferous tubules from rats in control group: [A] Normal testicular architecture, [B] Note normal spermatogenic epithelium composed of different spermatogenic cells (arrow), Sertoli cells (S), Leydig cells (L). HE staining.

Figure 2. Photomicrograph of seminiferous tubules from rats treated at low doses of HgCl₂: [A] Disorganized seminiferous tubules, [B] Note intercellular spaces (Δ), Leydig cells (L) and [C-D] Congestion of the blood vessels (arrows). HE staining.

Figure 3. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on reactive species (RS) levels. Values of RS on testis (A), epididymis (B), prostate (C) and vas deferens (D). Data are expressed as fluorescence unit (UF) and reported as mean \pm SEM (n=5). * P<0.05, ** P<0.01 (Student's t-test).

Figure 4. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on Gluthathione (GSH) levels. Values of GSH content on testis (A), epididymis (B), prostate (C) and vas deferens (D). Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM (n=8). * P<0.05 (Student's t-test).

Figure 5. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on Gluthathione Peroxidase (GPx) activity. Values of GPx activity on testis (A), epididymis (B) and prostate (C). Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM (n=8). **P<0.01 (Student's t-test).

Figure 6. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on Glutathione S-transferase (GST) activity. Values of GST activity on testis (A), epididymis (B), prostate (C) and vas deferens (D). Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM (n=6). * P<0.05 (Student's t-test).

Figure 7. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on Glutathione Reductase (GR) activity. Values of GR activity on testis (A), epididymis (B), prostate (C) and vas deferens (D). Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM (n=7). * P<0.05 (Student's t-test).

Figure 8. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on GPx1 and GPx4 expression in testis of rats. (A) Representative immunoblots showing the expression levels of GPx1 and

GPx4. (B) Densitometric analysis of GPx1 immunoreactive bands. (C) Densitometric analysis of GPx4 immunoreactive bands. Specific protein levels were normalized by β -actin immunocontent and expressed as a percentage of control. Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM (n=6). ** P<0.01 (Student's t-test).

Figure 9. Effect of chronic treatment at low doses of HgCl₂ on serum luteinizing hormone (LH) levels. Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM (n=10). (Student's t-test).

PARTE IV

DISCUSSÃO

Os resultados deste trabalho demonstram que a exposição crônica a baixas doses de HgCl_2 promove efeitos adversos no sistema reprodutor de ratos machos e apontam o estresse oxidativo como um dos mecanismos de toxicidade nesse sistema. Observou-se que o mercúrio é capaz de comprometer a qualidade espermática, reduzindo a contagem de espermatozoide em testículo e epidídimo, a produção diária de espermatozoide (PDE), a motilidade espermática e a integridade da membrana espermática, além de aumentar o número de espermatozoides com anormalidades morfológicas de cabeça e cauda. A exposição crônica ao mercúrio também provocou alterações na histologia testicular, com redução de espermatozoides maduros no lúmen dos túbulos seminíferos e presença de edema testicular. Esses efeitos parecem estar relacionados com o aumento do estresse oxidativo, uma vez que neste estudo foi observado pela primeira vez que a exposição crônica a baixas doses de mercúrio promove o aumento de espécies reativas de oxigênio (EROs), peroxidação lipídica e também modifica a atividade e /ou expressão de defesas antioxidantes enzimáticas (SOD, CAT, GPx, GST, GR) ou não enzimáticas (GSH, NPSH) de órgãos reprodutores: testículo, epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente.

O efeito tóxico do mercúrio sobre a reprodução humana tem sido investigado e, o metal parece estar relacionado com casos de infertilidade masculina principalmente entre trabalhadores ocupacionalmente expostos (CHOY *et al.*, 2002; KECK *et al.*, 1993). COLE *et al.* (2006) relataram níveis sanguíneos de mercúrio entre 0.7-1.0 e 1.9-4.8 $\mu\text{g/L}$ em homens cujas mulheres apresentavam dificuldades reprodutivas (COLE *et al.*, 2006). O modelo crônico de exposição ao mercúrio utilizado no presente estudo alcança uma concentração sanguínea de aproximadamente 8 ng/ml (WIGGERS *et al.*, 2008), muito próximo ao considerado seguro pelas agências de proteção ambiental (5.8 ng/ml - RICE, 2004; NRC, 2000) e similar aos níveis de exposição humana (MCKELVEY1 *et al.*, 2007; CHEN *et al.*, 2005). Uma vez que foi observado concentração sanguínea de até 18 nmol/l após exposição ao vapor de mercúrio (LANGWORTH *et al.*, 1997) e concentração plasmática de 5 nmol/l após remoção de amálgama dentária (BJORKMAN *et al.*, 1997).

Neste estudo não foi observada influência da exposição ao mercúrio sobre o peso corporal e dos órgãos reprodutores: testículo, epidídimo, próstata, ducto deferente e vesícula seminal. Similarmente, outros autores observaram que o mercúrio nas doses de 1.25 mg/Kg e 3 mg/Kg não influenciou o peso de órgãos reprodutores (SHARMA *et al.*, 1996; SILVA *et*

al., 2011). Entretanto essa ausência de efeitos sobre o peso de órgãos não é consenso, uma vez que alguns estudos relatam a redução do peso testicular, epididimal e de órgãos sexuais acessórios em ratos expostos a altas doses de mercúrio (EL-DESOKY *et al.*, 2013; BOUJBIHA *et al.*, 2009). Provavelmente a grande variedade de protocolos experimentais (concentração de mercúrio, tempo de exposição e /ou via de administração) e modelos animais utilizados possam explicar tais discrepâncias.

O tratamento crônico a baixas doses de mercúrio alterou a qualidade espermática, reduziu o número de espermatozoides e a PDE pelo testículo e, aumentou as anormalidades morfológicas, o que indica uma interferência na espermatogênese. Apenas algumas formas químicas específicas de metais ultrapassam a barreira hemato-testicular e, foi observado que o $HgCl_2$ possui essa característica e ainda pode acumular-se em outros órgãos reprodutores como o epidídimo e o ducto deferente (BOUJBIHA *et al.*, 2009; RAO & SHARMA, 2001). Alterações na histologia testicular e na qualidade espermática encontradas neste estudo suportam a hipótese de que o $HgCl_2$ tenha atingido células germinativas testiculares. Ademais, VACHHRAJANI *et al.* (1988) observaram degeneração espermatogênica nos espermatócitos de ratos jovens expostos a altas doses $HgCl_2$ por 90 dias e, em relação ao MeHg, HOMMA-TAKEDA *et al.* (2001) demonstraram que a forma orgânica do metal induz apoptose de células germinativas, com progressiva atrofia testicular e supressão da produção espermática em ratos submetidos a altas doses de MeHg por 14 dias.

Diversos estudos *in vivo* e *in vitro* indicam um desequilíbrio entre o sistema pró-oxidante e antioxidante, com consequente aumento do estresse oxidativo como um dos principais fatores de toxicidade do mercúrio em diferentes órgãos e sistemas (BANDO *et al.*, 2005; DURAK *et al.*, 2010; EL-DESOKY *et al.*, 2013; RIZZETTI *et al.*, 2013). Entretanto, no sistema reprodutor masculino há poucos estudos avaliando o efeito deste metal sobre biomarcadores de estresse oxidativo em órgãos reprodutores. Este trabalho demonstrou, pela primeira vez, que a exposição crônica ao mercúrio aumenta o estresse oxidativo em testículo, epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente. O que foi evidenciado não apenas pelo aumento da peroxidação lipídica e níveis de EROS, como também por alterações no sistema de defesa antioxidante.

Os espermatozoides são ricos em ácidos graxos poli-insaturados, sendo facilmente alvos de EROS. A alta concentração de ácidos graxos poli-insaturados é essencial para a manutenção da integridade de membrana espermática o que por sua vez determina a fluidez necessária para a viabilidade e motilidade do espermatozoide, assim como participa do evento de fusão de membranas durante a fertilização (AITKEN *et al.*, 1989; RAO &

GANGADHRAN, 2008). A exposição crônica a baixas doses de mercúrio causou alterações na função espermática como perda de integridade de membrana e redução da motilidade espermática em ratos, o que pode ser explicado, ao menos parcialmente, pelo aumento do estresse oxidativo. Neste estudo foi observado aumento das EROs em epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente assim como níveis elevados de peroxidação lipídica em testículo, próstata e ducto deferente. MDA é um dos maiores produtos da peroxidação de ácidos graxos poli-insaturados e um importante indicador de peroxidação lipídica. Corroborando com os achados do presente estudo, recentemente observou-se altos níveis de MDA no tecido testicular de ratos expostos ao HgCl₂ em altas doses (KALENDER *et al.*, 2013; EL-DESOKY *et al.*, 2013), assim como KISTANOVA *et al.* (2009) relataram que a peroxidação lipídica causa danos a estrutura de membrana e integridade celular, reduz a motilidade espermática e aumenta o número de anormalidades morfológicas em espermatozoides. Os resultados do presente estudo demonstram que não apenas os testículos, como também os demais órgãos reprodutores são susceptíveis ao dano oxidativo induzido por baixas concentrações de HgCl₂.

Tem sido proposto que a depleção de tióis (SH) intracelulares, como a glutathiona (GSH) seja um dos fatores cruciais para a produção excessiva de EROS (HANSEN *et al.*, 2006). A exposição crônica ao mercúrio causou uma redução nos níveis de tióis não-proteicos no epidídimo, testículo e próstata.

A próstata é uma glândula chave para o perfeito funcionamento do sistema reprodutor masculino, secretando importantes constituintes do fluido seminal, necessários a maturação espermática (HERNANDEZ *et al.*, 2006). Neste estudo foi observado um aumento nos níveis de EROs e de peroxidação lipídica em próstata de ratos. Também foi observado um mecanismo compensatório com aumento da atividade da enzima GST, depleção nos níveis de GSH e redução da atividade da enzima GR. A GR não age diretamente na remoção de espécies reativas, porém é responsável pela regeneração da glutathiona à sua forma reduzida (GSH) na presença de nicotinamida adenina dinucleotídeo fosfato (NADPH), tendo como objetivo impedir a paralisação do ciclo metabólico da glutathiona (JUNIOR *et al.*, 2000). Assim, a redução da atividade da GR seguido pela redução nos níveis de GSH demonstra um possível efeito do mercúrio sobre o sistema glutathiona, mesmo não sendo evidenciado efeito sobre a atividade da GPx na próstata. A GST é uma enzima de fase II envolvida no metabolismo de xenobióticos e na proteção contra o estresse oxidativo (HALLIWEL & GUTTERIDGE, 2007). No sistema reprodutor masculino a GST apresenta um importante papel na proteção de espermatozoides e células germinativas (GOPALAKRISHNAN *et al.*, 1998; RAO & SHAHA, 2000). Foi demonstrado que o uso de inibidores específicos para a

GST aumenta a apoptose de células germinativas testiculares (RAO & SHAHA, 2000). Os efeitos da intoxicação por mercúrio na glândula prostática ainda são pouco conhecidos. Este é o primeiro estudo a evidenciar que a exposição de ratos ao mercúrio em baixas doses aumenta o estresse oxidativo prostático e altera o funcionamento de importantes enzimas do sistema reprodutor masculino.

As células apresentam inúmeros mecanismos de proteção contra o excesso de EROS, dentre as quais, destacam-se enzimas antioxidantes que desempenham importante papel contra o dano oxidativo. Entretanto qualquer alteração na atividade ou nos níveis dessas enzimas pode resultar em efeitos deletérios devido a acumulação de EROS ou radicais livres (EL-DESOKY *et al.*, 2013). Neste trabalho observamos que a exposição crônica a baixas doses de mercúrio é capaz de alterar o funcionamento de diferentes enzimas antioxidantes em todos os órgãos reprodutores avaliados. O mercúrio administrado cronicamente aumentou a atividade da SOD em testículo, epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente, reduziu a atividade da CAT em testículo e epidídimo, aumentou a atividade da GST na próstata, reduziu a atividade da GR no testículo, próstata e ducto deferente e aumentou no epidídimo e, reduziu a atividade da GPx no testículo da mesma forma que aumentou a expressão da isoforma GPx4 nesse mesmo órgão.

De fato, o aumento do estresse oxidativo e a alteração no funcionamento de enzimas antioxidantes pelo mercúrio são bem documentados em diferentes sistemas (BANDO *et al.*, 2005; DURAK *et al.*, 2010). A inibição na atividade de enzimas como SOD, CAT e GPx em eritrócitos, fígado e rim de ratos (BENOV *et al.*, 1990), assim como, o aumento na atividade da GR e CAT em células eritrocitárias de humanos cronicamente expostos ao mercúrio já foram evidenciados (KOBAL *et al.*, 2008). Entretanto, essa é a primeira vez que se observam tais efeitos em epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente de ratos, uma vez que a maioria dos estudos sobre o sistema reprodutor masculino focam a atenção sobre a toxicidade testicular causada pelo mercúrio (GEORGELLIS *et al.*, 1988; HOMMA-TAKEDA *et al.* 2001, KALENDER *et al.*, 2013).

O aumento na atividade da SOD em todos os tecidos e da GR no epidídimo observado neste estudo sugere um mecanismo compensatório de defesa. BOUJBIHA *et al.* (2009) observaram que o comportamento de defesa enzimático varia ao longo de uma exposição crônica ao mercúrio sendo dose e tempo-dependentes. Similar aos achados do presente estudo, os mesmos autores observaram no 30º dia de exposição um aumento na atividade da SOD assim como uma redução na atividade da CAT em ratos expostos ao mercúrio na água de beber por 90 dias.

A redução na atividade da CAT, GR e GPx observadas neste estudo, podem ser por uma perda na expressão dessas enzimas, um efeito direto das EROS sobre a atividade enzimática ou por um efeito inibitório do mercúrio (BANDO *et al.*, 2005). O presente trabalho não apenas demonstrou uma redução na atividade da GPx em testículos, corroborando com recentes estudos (El-DESOKY *et al.*, 2013; KALENDER *et al.*, 2013), como também observou aumento na expressão proteica da isoforma GPx4. O aumento na expressão sugere um mecanismo compensatório como consequência da inibição da atividade da selenoproteína GPx pelo mercúrio.

A atividade da GPx4 nos tecidos geralmente é baixa, com exceção dos testículos onde essa isoforma desempenha um papel fundamental na maturação espermática além de ser o principal sítio de expressão para GPx4 (HALLIWELL & GUTTERIDGE, 2007). Estudos descrevem o papel protetor da GPx sobre células espermáticas humanas e de roedores (ALVAREZ *et al.*, 1987; ALVAREZ & STOREY, 1989). Foi observado um aumento significativo na peroxidação lipídica após a inibição da GPx em espermatozoides humanos *in vitro* (ALVAREZ & STOREY, 1989). A importância da GPx na proteção contra o estresse oxidativo espermático pode ser também relacionando com o baixo nível de CAT nos espermatozoides (ALVAREZ *et al.*, 1987), dessa forma a GPx é descrita como um dos principais mecanismos de defesa contra a peroxidação lipídica em espermatozoides e no trato genital masculino (DREVET, 2006). Provavelmente, o aumento nos níveis de peroxidação lipídica e as alterações funcionais e estruturais espermáticas encontradas neste estudo, possam ser explicados pelo fato de que tanto a GPx como a CAT apresentavam suas atividades reduzidas, reforçando a hipótese do aumento na expressão proteica da GPx4 ser compensatório devido a inibição da atividade enzimática.

ZEMOLIM *et al.* (2012) entretanto observaram redução na expressão proteica da GPx4 em cérebro de ratos tratados com 40 mg/L de MeHg na água de beber por 21 dias. Isso evidencia que a GPx4 é um importante, e novo, biomarcador de neurotoxicidade *in vivo* induzida pelo mercúrio. Porém, há muitas diferenças entre o modelo de exposição supracitado e o utilizado no presente estudo, como a concentração e a forma química do mercúrio, período de tratamento, via de administração e tecidos avaliados.

Não foi observado diferenças entre a expressão proteica da isoforma GPx1 entre ratos controle e tratados com HgCl₂ e provavelmente deve-se, pelo menos parcialmente, ao fato da GPx1 ser uma enzima citosólica não específica e apresentar baixa expressão nos órgãos reprodutores masculinos (DREVET, 2006).

Dentre os possíveis mecanismos de toxicidade do mercúrio sobre o sistema reprodutor masculino este estudo avaliou o estresse oxidativo e a dosagem hormonal e, observou que o tratamento crônico a baixas doses de HgCl_2 não alterou os níveis séricos de LH; resultado semelhante foi notado por SILVA *et al.* (2011) que não observaram diferenças entre os níveis de LH e hormônio folículo estimulante (FSH) e, em relação a testosterona houve redução apenas na dose mais alta empregada (3mg/Kg) de MeHg diariamente por 14 dias. Alguns autores também verificaram redução nos níveis de testosterona sérica em ratos expostos a MeHg e HgCl_2 em altas doses (HEATH *et al.*, 2012; MOUSSA *et al.*, 2011). A esteroidogênese é regulada pelo hormônio liberador de gonadotrofina (GnRH) o qual estimula a liberação do hormônio luteinizante (LH) pela pituitária e este, por sua vez, estimula a produção androgênica ao ligar-se a receptores específicos nas células de Leydig (MCVEY *et al.*, 2008). Parece que os metais pesados podem agir como desreguladores endócrinos interferindo, por exemplo, na síntese, secreção, transporte e / ou ação de hormônios naturais e, sendo o sistema reprodutor masculino andrógeno-dependente qualquer alteração dessa natureza poderia influenciar negativamente as funções reprodutivas (PIZENT *et al.*, 2012). Entretanto, o modelo de exposição ao HgCl_2 utilizado neste estudo não modificou os níveis hormonais avaliados.

CONCLUSÕES

Com este estudo podemos concluir que o tratamento crônico a baixas doses de HgCl_2 :

- Não influenciou o peso corporal e o peso absoluto e relativo dos órgãos reprodutores: testículo, epidídimo, próstata, ducto deferente e vesícula seminal;
- Causou redução no número de espermatozoides no testículo e epidídimo, redução na produção diária espermática, redução na motilidade espermática com maior número de espermatozoides imóveis e menor número de espermatozoides com movimento progressivo, aumentou o número de anormalidades morfológicas de cabeça e cauda, principalmente do tipo cabeça isolada e cauda dobrada, provocou perda de integridade de membrana espermática e alterações na histologia testicular com redução de espermatozoides maduros no lúmen dos túbulos seminíferos e edema testicular;
- Aumentou os níveis de peroxidação lipídica em testículo, próstata e ducto deferente e não alterou os níveis de peroxidação lipídica no epidídimo;
- Aumentou os níveis de espécies reativas em epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente e não alterou os níveis em testículo;
- Modificou os parâmetros não-enzimáticos de estresse oxidativo avaliados, com redução dos níveis de NPSH em testículo e epidídimo e redução dos níveis de GSH em próstata, no ducto deferente não houve alteração;
- Aumentou a atividade da SOD em todos os órgãos avaliados: testículo, epidídimo, próstata e ducto deferente;
- Reduziu a atividade da CAT em testículo e epidídimo e não modificou a atividade da CAT na próstata e ducto deferente;
- Reduziu a atividade da GPx no testículo e não modificou a atividade desta enzima no epidídimo e próstata;
- Aumentou a atividade da GST na próstata e não modificou a atividade dessa enzima no testículo, epidídimo e ducto deferente;
- Reduziu a atividade da GR no testículo, na próstata e no ducto deferente e aumentou a atividade da GR no epidídimo;
- Aumentou a expressão da isoforma GPx4 e não influenciou a expressão proteica da GPx1 em testículo;
- Não influenciou os níveis séricos do LH.

Em resumo, os nossos resultados demonstram que a exposição crônica a baixas doses de HgCl_2 causou danos funcionais e estruturais no sistema reprodutor de ratos machos e apontam o estresse oxidativo como um dos mecanismos de toxicidade do mercúrio nesse sistema.

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ANEXO I

MINISTÉRIO DA EDUCAÇÃO
FUNDAÇÃO UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO PAMPA
(Lei nº 11.640, de 11 de janeiro de 2008)

Pró-Reitoria de Pesquisa

COMISSÃO DE ÉTICA NO USO DE ANIMAIS - CEUA

Fone: (55) 3413 4321, E-mail: ceua@unipampa.edu.br

PROTOCOLO N° 036/2012**Título:**

EFEITO DA EXPOSIÇÃO CRÔNICA AO CLORETO DE MERCÚRIO (HGCL₂) NO SISTEMA REPRODUTOR DE RATOS

Pesquisador: Giulia Alessandra Wiggers Peçanha

Campus: Uruguaiana

Telefone: 55 99147174

E-mail: giuliawp@yahoo.com

Após a análise detalhada do projeto de pesquisa a relatoria da CEUA-Unipampa emite parecer **FAVORÁVEL** para o cadastro do protocolo e execução do referido projeto.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Luiz E. Henkes'.

Luiz E. Henkes
Professor Adjunto
Coordenador do CEUA/Unipampa

ANEXO II

 inglês ▾ > português ▾ Traduzir mensagem Desativar para: inglês ×

Dear author,

Your manuscript "Chronic Exposure to Low Doses of Mercury Impairs Sperm Quality and Induces Oxidative Stress in Rats" was received and is now under review.

Best Regards,

Dr. Fernando Barbosa

De: "Caroline Martinez" <caroline.s.martinez@gmail.com>

Para: ibamttox@fcrp.usp.br

Enviadas: Terça-feira, 30 de Julho de 2013 23:37:07

Assunto: Manuscript - Chronic Exposure to Low Doses of Mercury Impairs Sperm Quality and Induces Oxidative Stress in Rats

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