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**Decellularised material as scaffolds for tissue engineering studies in long gap oesophageal atresia**

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**Review:****Decellularised material as scaffolds for tissue engineering studies in long gap****oesophageal atresia.****Esmond Lee**, BEng MSc PhD Candidate.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Centre for Cell, Gene &amp; Tissue Therapeutics, Royal Free Hospital, London UK

Stanford University, Institute for Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine, USA

Bioprocessing Technology Institute, A\*STAR, Singapore

**Anna Milan**, MD PhD.<sup>4</sup>

Stem Cells &amp; Regenerative Medicine Section

UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, London UK

**Luca Urbani**, PhD Research Associate.<sup>4</sup>

Stem Cells &amp; Regenerative Medicine Section

UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, London UK

**Paolo De Coppi**, MD PhD NIHR Professor of Paediatric Surgery.<sup>4</sup>

Head of Stem Cells &amp; Regenerative Medicine Section

UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, London UK

**Mark W Lowdell**, PhD.<sup>1</sup>

Director of the Centre for Cell, Gene &amp; Tissue Therapy

Royal Free Hospital, London UK

1 Centre for Cell, Gene &amp; Tissue Therapeutics, Royal Free Hospital, London UK

2 Stanford University, Institute for Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine, USA

3 Bioprocessing Technology Institute, A\*STAR, Singapore

4 Stem Cells and Regenerative Medicine Section, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health, London UK

**Corresponding Author:**

Anna Milan, MD PhD

Stem Cells and Regenerative Medicine Section,

UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health,

London UK

Dr.annamilan@gmail.com

TEL. +447453709522

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3 **Introduction:** Oesophageal atresia refers to an anomaly in foetal development in which the  
4  
5 oesophagus terminates in a blind end. Whilst surgical correction is achievable in most  
6  
7 patients, when a long gap is present it still represents a major challenge associated with  
8  
9 higher morbidity and mortality. In this context, tissue engineering could represent a  
10  
11 successful alternative to restore oesophageal function and structure. Naturally derived  
12  
13 biomaterials made of decellularised tissues retain native extracellular matrix architecture and  
14  
15 composition, providing a suitable bed for the anchorage and growth of relevant cell types.  
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19 **Areas covered:** This review outlines the various strategies and challenges in oesophageal  
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21 tissue engineering, highlighting the evolution of ideas in the development of decellularised  
22  
23 scaffolds for clinical use. It explores the interplay between clinical needs, ethical dilemmas,  
24  
25 and manufacturing challenges in the development of a tissue engineered decellularised  
26  
27 scaffold for oesophageal atresia.  
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31 **Expert opinion:** Current progress on oesophageal tissue engineering has enabled effective  
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33 repair of patch defects, whilst the development of a full circumferential construct remains a  
34  
35 challenge. Despite the different approaches available and the improvements achieved, a gold  
36  
37 standard for fully functional tissue engineered oesophageal constructs has not been defined  
38  
39 yet.  
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## 42 43 44 45 **1. Introduction:**

46  
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48 Oesophageal atresia (OA) is a congenital anomaly that affects 1:2500-5000 newborns [1]. In  
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50 children born with the condition the continuity of the oesophagus is interrupted by a blind  
51  
52 end. This prevents swallowed material from entering the stomach and requires surgery to  
53  
54 create a clear passage for food. Atresia presents most commonly with distal tracheo-  
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56 oesophageal fistula (TOF), where the proximal oesophagus ends blindly at the level of about  
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3 the third or fourth thoracic vertebra while the distal oesophagus, enters the posterior wall of  
4  
5 the trachea [1].  
6

7  
8 From a structural point of view, OA can be classified based on the presence and position of  
9  
10 the tracheo-oesophageal fistula (TOF) according to Gross classification [2]:  
11

- 12 • type A: isolated oesophageal atresia (8-9% of OA cases)
- 13
- 14 • type B proximal fistula with distal atresia (1%)
- 15
- 16 • type C: proximal atresia with distal fistula (85%)
- 17
- 18 • type D: double fistula with intervening atresia (1-2%)
- 19
- 20 • type E: isolated fistula (4-6%)
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27 When a distal TOF is not present (type A and B) there is usually a long gap between the 2  
28  
29 ends of the oesophagus and reconstruction is particularly challenging.  
30

31  
32 An antenatal ultrasound scan after 18 gestation weeks can detect signs of possible OA,  
33  
34 particularly when there is no distal fistula and the baby is unable to swallow amniotic fluid,  
35  
36 therefore making the stomach not visible. A definitive diagnosis however is usually made  
37  
38 once the infant is born (Fig.1). Due to the impossibility of feeding the baby and the high risk  
39  
40 of respiratory complications and failure, surgical intervention in the first days of life is  
41  
42 required to stabilise the patient and repair the anomaly [3]. From the first reported successes  
43  
44 in operative procedures in the 1940s, rates have been rising steadily due to improvements in  
45  
46 surgical techniques [1] and neonatal units today often report overall operative success rate  
47  
48 exceeding 95% [4]. However, these patients face post-operative complications that lead to a  
49  
50 lower quality of life. These comprise of anastomotic leakage or strictures, gastro-oesophageal  
51  
52 reflux and oesophageal dysmotility (Tab.1), all of which lead to recurrent hospitalisation and  
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54 multiple surgical treatments.  
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3 Patients with long gap oesophageal atresia (LGOA) however, suffer the highest complication  
4 rates. Since oesophageal continuity cannot be achieved in a single surgery, a multi-step  
5 approach is required. A common strategy is for the patient to undergo surgery for  
6 gastrostomy formation in the first days of life. This will allow the baby to be fed while  
7 waiting for the oesophagus to naturally grow until a tension free anastomosis is technically  
8 feasible. Throughout this waiting period, which could last weeks or months, patients cannot  
9 however be discharged home. They are bound to an intensive care unit in view of the high  
10 risk of respiratory complications related to the abundant secretions that need to be constantly  
11 removed from the upper pouch with the use of a suctioning tube. When, insufficient  
12 spontaneous growth is experienced or anticipated, a different approach is adopted which  
13 involves lengthening procedures performed to directly and progressively reduce the gap  
14 between the two oesophageal pouches, allowing a subsequent tension-free anastomosis.  
15 There are instances, finally, where the only feasible option is oesophageal replacement. In  
16 these settings, a gastric transposition, colonic interposition or jejunal interposition represent  
17 the best available options [5]. Among them the gastric route involves transposing the whole  
18 stomach into the thoracic region and is preferred for the excellent blood supply of the  
19 stomach. Nevertheless, several complications can occur including: anastomotic leaks,  
20 strictures, reflux, dumping, poor gastric emptying and Barrett's esophagitis [6].  
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24 In this context, developing a tissue engineered oesophageal replacement to repair a long gap  
25 defect would lead to better long term clinical outcomes [7]. Synthetic materials used in other  
26 surgical settings include polyglycolic acid (Vicryl®) and crystalline polypropylene and high-  
27 density polyethylene (Marlex®). They can provide mechanical support, but fail to fully  
28 mimic the specific host tissue function and would not follow the growth of the oesophagus  
29 during childhood. More recent approaches have used hybrid scaffolds containing cells or  
30 extracellular matrix (ECM), as well as decellularised tissues. These tissues are naturally  
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3 derived and can better mimic the complexity of native ECM architecture [8]. This review  
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5 aims to describe the development of tissue engineered oesophageal constructs for LGOA  
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7 with a focus on decellularised tissue. It expounds on the clinical relevance of these studies,  
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9 and on the hurdles to be overcome in developing such construct for clinical use.  
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## 12 13 14 15 **2. Discussion**

### 16 17 18 2.1 Anatomy of the oesophagus

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20 The oesophagus is a muscular tube that connects the pharynx to the stomach, enabling the  
21  
22 passage of food and liquids. In humans, the muscle layers in the upper (cervical) part of the  
23  
24 oesophagus are predominantly made of skeletal muscle, while the lower (thoracic) portion  
25  
26 consists predominantly of smooth muscle cells [9]. These muscle strata represent the external  
27  
28 layer of the oesophagus. Proceeding towards the lumen there is a second layer formed by  
29  
30 submucosa that contains the main blood vessels, the submucosal (Meissner) nerve plexus,  
31  
32 and oesophageal glands. Finally, the mucosa forms the innermost layer and is characterised  
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34 by a nonkeratinizing stratified epithelium that changes from squamous cell epithelium  
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36 (continuous with that of the pharynx) to columnar cell epithelium (at the gastroesophageal  
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38 junction). The oesophagus shows increasing stiffness with pressure. While small intraluminal  
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40 pressures are held by the muscle alone, mucosal contribution to strength increases after the  
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42 outer diameter of the oesophagus doubles [10].  
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### 50 51 2.2 Approaches to Oesophageal Regeneration

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53 Early approaches to tissue engineering of the oesophagus employed synthetic materials rolled  
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55 into a tubular configuration [11,12,13]. Although they provided mechanical support, these  
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57 constructs were not designed to interact with the in vivo environment to promote  
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3 regeneration. Most recent approaches combine synthetic materials with biological  
4 components to make a hybrid scaffold [14,15,16]. Materials of biological origin have been  
5 recognised as capable of better replicating the composition, microstructure, and properties of  
6 native tissue [8]. It is inevitable that the discussion on regenerative approaches for the  
7 oesophagus draws on the wealth of research involving naturally derived constructs such as  
8 decellularised tissues (Fig.2).  
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### 16 17 2.2.1 Synthetics and Hybrid Scaffolds 18

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20 For over 165 years, various techniques have been tested as oesophageal replacements in  
21 oesophageal cancer including decalcified ivory tubes and rubber tubes [17]. In more recent  
22 history, surgical polymers such as Dacron® and Marlex® have been used alone or in  
23 combination with silicone to produce synthetic grafts [12,13,14]. In 1983, Fukushima et al.  
24 reported the use of a silicone tube surrounded by a Dacron mesh [14]. The survival rate after  
25 implantation into canine models was 44% at 1 year and 25% at 6 years. They observed the  
26 regeneration of the submucosa and mucosa in contact with the anastomoses, but there were  
27 no glands or muscle tissue, and the central part of the tube consisted of fibrotic tissue. In  
28 2010, Liang [18] used a nitinol-silicon composite artificial oesophagus in pigs. The rate of  
29 stenosis was 60%, and regeneration of a stratified epithelium was only found near the  
30 anastomosis. These studies provide strong evidence that although they offer mechanical  
31 support, synthetic materials alone are unable to promote tissue regeneration.  
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47 Nakase in 2008 developed a scaffold consisting of absorbable polyglycolic acid associated  
48 with a sheet of amniotic membrane to which smooth muscle tissue was added [19].  
49 Resorbable scaffolds in one group were further seeded with keratinocytes and fibroblasts.  
50 After implantation in dogs, stenosis was observed less than a week after implantation in the  
51 scaffolds without seeded cells. This complication did not occur in the cell seeded group.  
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3 Beckstead in 2005 developed scaffolds composed of polylactic acid, poly(lactic-co-glycolic  
4 acid) or polycaprolactone with different porosities and studied the effects on cell adhesion  
5 and proliferation [20]. Studies exploring the balance between the rate of material degradation  
6 and tissue remodelling are crucial because rapid scaffold degradation can lead to the collapse  
7 of mechanical support, while too slow degradation may impede tissue remodelling  
8 [21,22,23]. Recently, biological components such as cells, proteins, or specific peptide motifs  
9 were included in tissue engineered constructs, leading to better outcomes. Kitajima worked  
10 on a cell-seeded poly-glycolic acid mesh containing collagen [24] while Zhu used a series of  
11 Poly-DL-lactide polymers in conjunction with ECM proteins to promote oesophageal tissue  
12 regeneration [25,26]. Other biological material such as Alloderm® (decellularised dermis) or  
13 amniotic membrane have also been used [20]. More recent studies explored the effect of  
14 seeding appropriate cell types onto scaffolds. Saxena [27,28] experimented seeding  
15 oesophageal epithelial cells onto collagen scaffolds as part of a composite scaffold-  
16 hetrocellular oesophagus, showing that seeding of a specific epithelial population leads to  
17 more viable scaffolds, while Nakase [19] described how seeding of a resorbable scaffold with  
18 keratinocytes and fibroblasts reduced complications of post implantation stenosis. 3D  
19 topography of scaffolds can also provide cues for regeneration. Hou in 2016 developed  
20 polyester-urethane scaffolds coated with vascular endothelial growth factor. The group  
21 showed that 3D patterned micro-grooves aligned in the direction of muscle fibres promoted  
22 muscle tissue regeneration [29].

## 23 2.2.2 Decellularised Scaffolds

### 24 2.2.2.1 Overview

25 Despite growing knowledge of synthetics constructs, naturally derived scaffolds such as  
26 decellularised tissue can better mimic the complexity of native ECM architecture [8] and  
27 have been successfully used to regenerate children airway tissue [30]. Naturally derived  
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3 scaffolds may better mimic the physical microenvironment; providing more physiological  
4 substrate rigidity which impacts on stem cell fate and endogenous repair [31,32]. In addition  
5 to structural support, ECM exerts pleiotropic effects on cells, enabling cell anchorage,  
6 growth, and signalling to occur [33,34,35]. Hence, the retention of native ECM architecture is  
7 a priority in the decellularisation process. Table 2 provides an overview on decellularisation  
8 agents, in vivo procedures and post-operative outcomes from each oesophageal engineering  
9 study.  
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19 Most studies involving decellularised tissue use scaffolds from the gastro-intestinal (GI) tract  
20 such as Surgisis®, which is an off-the-shelf product made from small intestinal submucosa  
21 (SIS). Its use in oesophageal tissue engineering has been studied in animal models (canine,  
22 porcine, rat) as well as in two clinical cases (Tab.2).  
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28 The majority of the published studies were conducted in the cervical region. Considering the  
29 differences in muscle types and nervous control, engineering and surgical implantation of a  
30 cervical tissue oesophageal segment may differ substantially from that of a thoracic segment.  
31 In the next future it will be important to address the dearth of studies on the replacement of  
32 the thoracic oesophagus, which may be more clinically relevant in LGOA.  
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#### 40 2.2.2.2 Strategies in repairing full circumferential defects

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42 Within the studies described in Table 2, there is a clear separation of outcomes between  
43 repair of patch defects and circumferential defects. Studies involving patch defects were most  
44 likely to lead to restored oesophageal function, while circumferential replacements often led  
45 to stricture formation. The difference in outcomes was striking in one study involving both  
46 patch and circumferential defects [36]: 11 dogs with patch grafts showed no clinical signs of  
47 oesophageal dysfunction. In contrast, all 4 dogs with complete circumferential segmental  
48 graft had clinical signs of stricture. A review proposed that to achieve successful application  
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3 the presence of intraluminal pressure is required– grafts used in vascular applications have  
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5 had better outcomes than those in the oesophagus, intestine, and ureter [36]. It was postulated  
6  
7 that since ECMs are collapsible in their native state, remodelling events occur in collapsed  
8  
9 tubes when there is no intraluminal pressure, ultimately producing non-functional structures.  
10  
11 This might indicate the necessity for stenting or the use of a hybrid scaffold consisting of  
12  
13 decellularised tissue and a harder synthetic material that can provide structural support. In a  
14  
15 study of allogeneic aorta using a Polyflex® stent in porcine, Gaujoux reported that a stent  
16  
17 was required for at least 6 months to avoid stenosis in the graft area. Using a temporary stent  
18  
19 to provide structure and patency to the implanted scaffold may be necessary during the initial  
20  
21 inflammatory response and tissue remodeling process before a patent oesophageal segment is  
22  
23 achieved [37]. The effect of a temporary stent has been evaluated in a study on oesophageal  
24  
25 reconstruction in piglets. A 5 cm long circumferential gap was repaired using a recellularised  
26  
27 scaffold of SIS, with or without the presence of an endoprosthesis to temporary support the  
28  
29 construct. The use of the scaffold alone was associated with a high mortality rate due to rapid  
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31 development of oesophageal stenosis, while the interposition of the endoprosthesis allowed  
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33 nutritional autonomy and tissue remodeling toward an esophageal phenotype [38].  
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39 The introduction of exogenous cross-links to collagen molecules is a recognized method to  
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41 stabilize collagen biomaterials and reduce antigenicity, while preserving mechanical  
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43 properties and natural compliance. Different cross-linking techniques have been applied to  
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45 oesophageal constructs with variable results, including the use of glutaraldehyde and genipin,  
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47 showing the superiority of the latter in supporting epithelial adhesion and proliferation [39].  
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50 Since 2000, Badylak and colleagues have published work on a urinary bladder matrix  
51  
52 (UBM)-ECM scaffold which promotes oesophageal reconstruction. In their first study, dogs  
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54 underwent circumferential endomucosal resection, followed by replacement with an UBM-  
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56 ECM scaffold leading to tissue regeneration and restored oesophageal function without  
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3 stricture formation in any of the dogs [36]. They later showed that, while ECM dependent  
4 cellular responses were observed in vitro, there was an indistinguishable constructive  
5 outcome between the use of implanted UBM and oesophageal ECM measured 14 days post  
6 surgery [40]. The success of these studies may be due to the intact muscularis externa since  
7 musculature and both parasympathetic (vagal nerve) and intrinsic innervation systems  
8 (submucosal and myenteric plexus), which are crucial to the maintenance of peristalsis,  
9 would have been left intact. This may be the common denominator in the relatively  
10 successful in vivo studies involving patch defects where only a small segment of the  
11 oesophagus is removed. This corroborates with evidence suggesting an extensive crossover  
12 of innervation within the oesophageal wall [41]. The presence of native tissue surrounding  
13 the injury may also be crucial in providing cues for regeneration. The same cannot be said for  
14 a circumferential resection of the entire oesophagus as this would lead to the discontinuity of  
15 nerve and muscular connections. In patients with atresia however, intrinsic innervation of the  
16 oesophagus is often already abnormal. Hence, although normal peristaltic activity throughout  
17 the oesophagus is the ideal outcome to work towards, the development of a circumferential  
18 oesophageal construct that remains patent post implantation may be a more realistic clinical  
19 outcome.

#### 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 2.2.2.3 Decellularisation Methods

42 The different methods of decellularisation must all balance the trade-offs between complete  
43 cell removal to minimise antigenicity, and preservation of structural and biological  
44 characteristics of the matrix. Decellularising methods are based on the combined effect of  
45 different agents [42], which can include:

46  
47  
48 1) Water: the first step in decellularisation often entails flushing with deionised water for a  
49 period of 24 to 72 hours [43,44,45]. Water flows into cells changing their osmotic pressure,  
50 causing them to lyse. In subsequent steps, other agents are used to remove cellular debris.  
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3 2) Chemical agents: detergent such as Triton X-100 or Sodium Deoxycholate (SDC) are then  
4  
5 often used to solubilise cell membranes and dissociate DNA from proteins [46,47,48,49]. A  
6  
7 comparison between detergents by Ozeki provided evidence that SDC was a better  
8  
9 decellularising agent compared to Triton X-100 [50]. The study found that oesophagi treated  
10  
11 with Triton X-100 had a more enlarged appearance after decellularisation and were more  
12  
13 fragile, while the use of SDC better maintained the mucosa and submucosal layers.  
14  
15 Moreover, the DNA content of SDC-treated oesophagi was significantly less than that of  
16  
17 those treated with Triton X-100. Hence SDC was better for both the preservation of ECM  
18  
19 characteristics and DNA removal from the matrix.  
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22  
23  
24 2) Enzymatic agents: enzyme such as DNase, are often part of a decellularising protocol, to  
25  
26 lyse the genetic material.  
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28  
29 3) Physical agents: pressure and temperature are often combined with the above agents to  
30  
31 optimise the decellularisation process.  
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33  
34 The way the different agents have been combined and applied in specific organs and tissues  
35  
36 has given rise to an array of decellularisation protocols. In 1975, Meezan [51] developed a  
37  
38 protocol for isolating basement membranes from a variety of tissues, including bovine retinal  
39  
40 and brain blood vessels. Conconi [52] later modified the protocol to include cycled repeats,  
41  
42 producing a decellularised donor trachea that was transplanted into a patient. This method  
43  
44 was then applied by Totonelli et al. in the decellularisation of rat small bowel and porcine  
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46 oesophagus, introducing a perfusion-based approach [8,53]. The preservation of the  
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48 oesophageal architecture was also demonstrated at x-ray phase contrast computed  
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50 tomography (PC-CT) [54].  
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#### 2.2.2.4 Removal of Antigenic Materials

Removal of nucleic acids and cell surface antigens such as the major histocompatibility complex are intuitively important in preventing rejection. Cells, however, are deeply anchored to their surrounding ECM and removal of all cell fragments is unlikely even with the most rigorous processing method. Additionally, the body has inherent cellular mechanisms, which facilitate the breakdown of DNA into nucleotides for future use [55,56]. Remnant DNA in decellularised-implanted matrices should be subject to the same degradation processes in vivo [57,58,59] as part of the remodeling process. Even commercially available biological scaffolds for clinical use contain trace amounts of DNA [60,61,62] and since the lengths of these fragments can also influence host response to the scaffold [60,63], some minimal criteria have been proposed to satisfy the intent of decellularisation [42].

Upon implantation, rejection may occur when there is recognition of cell membrane antigens by the immune system [58,64,65,66]. Particularly, the presence of the pig galactose- $\alpha$ 1,3-galactose (Gal) in xenografts has been implicated in the rejection of bioprosthetic heart valves, triggering a cascade that may lead to graft calcification and failure of the prosthesis [67]. This epitope is found in high density on the cell surface in most species but is absent in humans. The body produces large quantities of anti-Gal antibodies as a result of constant exposure to intestinal bacteria carrying the epitope. Although the decellularisation process removes most cells, cellular remnants containing the Gal epitope may still be present on the scaffold. Various strategies have been proposed to overcome this. The treatment of xenogenic tissue with  $\alpha$ -galactosidase has been proposed in non-decellularised porcine grafts for repair of cartilage and the human anterior cruciate ligament of the knee [68]. The production of Gal-deficient pigs for the purpose of xenotransplantation has also been successful, showing that the threat of antigenic epitopes can be mitigated [69].

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3 For every decellularisation process, trace amounts of host DNA or antigenic material will be  
4  
5 present, and the burden of proof is on those developing the process to provide evidence that  
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7 they do not contribute negatively to remodelling. Generally, ECM scaffolds have been shown  
8  
9 to be degraded rapidly by host cells post-implantation [70,71], followed by the formation of  
10  
11 site-specific functional host tissue. This process is influenced by several different factors  
12  
13 including the tissue source, the decellularisation protocol applied and the site of implantation.  
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15 Hence, process-specific animal implantation studies are necessary to investigate antigenicity  
16  
17 of the scaffold and tissue remodelling processes [72]. Preliminary data obtained by  
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19 implantation of decellularised xenogeneic scaffolds demonstrated that they induce anti-  
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21 inflammatory and immunosuppressive effects, characterized by a macrophage response toward  
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23 an M2 phenotype and an activation of the host responses away from a classical pro-  
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25 inflammatory TH1 profile [73].  
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#### 30 2.2.2.5 Cell Repopulation of Decellularised Scaffolds

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32 A decellularised construct with a well-preserved ECM provides physiological cues for cells  
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34 to attach and remodel the matrix. Several attempts of scaffold repopulation have been  
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36 described with the use of different protocols for cell seeding, including the ones proposed by  
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38 Tan [74], Marzaro [47], Wei [75] and Sjöqvist [49] (to note, there is at present an expression  
39  
40 of concern about this article from the Nature Communication editorial board). Alternatively,  
41  
42 direct implantation of the acellular construct has been proposed, allowing cell recruitment to  
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44 take place in vivo.  
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49 Appropriate cell types have been chosen targeting regeneration of either epithelial or muscle  
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51 layers. Ohki [76] engineered oral epithelial cells in sheets and endoscopically placed over a  
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53 mucosal resection to investigate their potential to eliminate stricture formation after  
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55 endoscopic mucosal resection. The sheets adhered to underlying muscle tissue at the site of  
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57 resection, providing an intact stratified epithelium and there was no evidence of stricture  
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3 formation. Wei [75] undertook a study to evaluate the combination of autologous oral  
4 mucosal epithelial cells and SIS for oesophageal repair in a canine model. The cell-seeded  
5 scaffolds showed faster recovery as demonstrated by barium oesophagram and body weight  
6 gain, and also promoted re-epithelialisation and skeletal muscle regeneration. In order to  
7 identify the best protocol for epithelial cells isolation and culture, Maghsoudlou and  
8 colleagues [77] have compared three commonly used techniques, including 1) mincing of the  
9 mucosa followed by trypsin incubation, 2) trypsin incubation of intact mucosa, 3) mucosa  
10 culture on collagen coated wells. They demonstrate that epithelial cells can be successfully  
11 isolated from fresh mouse oesophagi using two consecutive trypsin incubations of intact  
12 mucosal sheets.  
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26 In an attempt to repopulate the muscular layers of oesophageal scaffolds, Marzaro seeded  
27 autologous smooth muscle cells on a decellularised oesophageal segment to repair a circular  
28 defect in the thoracic oesophagus of neonate pigs [47]. Patches composing only of acellular  
29 matrices showed a more pronounced pro-inflammatory response with granulocyte and  
30 macrophage infiltration and were negative for smooth muscle actin. Whereas cell-seeded  
31 implants presented in-growth of smooth muscle cells, showing an organisation into small  
32 fascicles. Bone marrow derived mesenchymal stem cells (BMMSC) have also been thought  
33 to promote regeneration of the muscle. Tan showed that the grafting of BMMSC to SIS in a  
34 patch defect model in canine cervical oesophagus promoted re-epithelialisation with almost  
35 no pro-inflammatory reaction [74]. At 12 weeks post-surgery, long bundles of skeletal  
36 muscles and greater micro vessel density were observed. The study also showed that  
37 implanted BMMSC engrafted and differentiated into myocyte-like cells at the implant site.  
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53 In the context of scaffold repopulation, future possible options could include the use of a  
54 modular approach and seeding cells of autologous source. A modular approach would aim to  
55 recognize the biological and mechanical function of the different tissue layers in the  
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oesophagus. This could involve the repopulation of individual tissue layers, combined together in a later step, or the simultaneous seeding of multiple cell types onto the same scaffold. The use of site-specific cues provided by the ECM could favour this modular approach, as seen in the regeneration of rat forearms using decellularised scaffolds repopulated with cell types of appropriate phenotype [78]. Moreover, whilst the use of autologous colonic and gastric interpositions is associated with long-term complications [5,6,79,80], the use of autologous cells for recellularisation of a scaffold should not be excluded – more so if the cells can be retrieved through non-invasive methods that leave no permanent damage. Recellularising a scaffold surface with autologous cells would allow self-recognition of the construct by the patient's immune system, avoiding a rejection response towards the cell component.

### 2.2.3 Scaffolds source and Ethics

Before development of a therapeutic, careful consideration is needed for the choice of tissue for the scaffold, its ease of obtainability, and ethical implications that may arise. The sections below outline 2 main possible tissue sources.

#### 2.2.3.1 Allogeneic scaffold source

Since the pioneering work of Alexis Carrel, surgical transplantation of human organs from deceased and living donors to patients has become a worldwide practice, saving the lives of many [81,82]. Currently, the oesophagus is not an organ that is harvested for transplantation, and could be a potential tissue source. There are two difficulties to this in context of neonatal oesophageal atresia. Firstly, there is little precedent from obtaining tissues from neonates. Organ donation can only proceed if consent is available under the Human Tissue Act 2004 [81]. In neonates, there can be no consent given by the donor, hence clinicians need to consider that asking for consent and undertaking any medical procedures on the infant may be a source of distress for the family. There may also be procedural complications since it is



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2  
3 difficult to confidently diagnose brain-stem death in infants from 37 weeks gestation to two  
4  
5 months [83]. The field of neonatal organs transplantation is rapidly evolving due to the  
6  
7 constant demand of organs as well as to the development of specific guidelines, including the  
8  
9 ones recently produced by a task force of experts in the UK and endorsed by the local Royal  
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11 College of Paediatrics [84]. So far only a few cases of neonatal organ donation have been  
12  
13 described, a first but significant step to address issues arising from this area of transplant  
14  
15 medicine. In this context, we cannot exclude that in the next future oesophagi of allogeneic  
16  
17 source could be harvested from neonatal donors and decellularised to produce scaffold for  
18  
19 LGOA repair.  
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22  
23 The development of advanced therapeutic medical products (ATMPs) is likely to follow a  
24  
25 mixed funding route with some private sector investment. Private investment in the  
26  
27 development of an ATMP would require financial remuneration, but many individuals may  
28  
29 be averse to a process where organs donated through philanthropy are used to generate a  
30  
31 product that can be sold for profit. These issues should be explored through wider public  
32  
33 discourse since such a model will have social and political ramifications.  
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#### 36 37 2.2.3.2 Xenogenic scaffold source

38  
39 One way to circumvent the issues faced by allogeneic donor material is the use of  
40  
41 oesophageal matrices of xenogenic origin, readily available on demand and prepared in a way  
42  
43 that reduces variability of the scaffold.  
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46  
47 In addition to being readily available, there is also precedence for the use of porcine tissue in  
48  
49 humans. Porcine patellar tendons have been shown to successfully replace human anterior  
50  
51 cruciate ligaments in cases of injury [85], while glutaraldehyde fixed porcine aortic valves  
52  
53 have been used as a bioprosthetic heart valve replacement since the 1960s. The latter has  
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55 improved clinical outcomes by reducing the need for lifelong anticoagulation required in  
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3 mechanical valves, but studies have also highlighted risks when xenogenic antigens were not  
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5 fully removed [65,67,86,87].  
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### 11 **3. Conclusion**

12  
13 This review has described the clinical need for a tissue engineered oesophageal construct in  
14 neonatal long gap oesophageal atresia. The evolution of ideas in the field can be tracked –  
15  
16 from the use of synthetic materials for mechanical support in initial studies to the  
17  
18 introduction of biological components such as ECM proteins and cells as part of the  
19  
20 construct. In the field of oesophageal tissue engineering, current progress has enabled full  
21  
22 repair of patch defects due to the retention of innervation and the presence of autologous  
23  
24 tissue, which provides cues for regeneration. Challenges to the development of a full  
25  
26 circumferential construct remain, including the lack of normal innervation and post  
27  
28 implantation stricture formation.  
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34 This review has also explored the specific challenges in decellularised matrices for LGOA  
35 repair in the neonatal population. These include: 1) antenatal diagnosis, planned birth in a  
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37 paediatric center that offers antenatal parental counseling, neonatal intensive care and  
38  
39 neonatal surgery; 2) development of a full circumferential tubular construct, ideally prepared  
40  
41 in advanced and stored as an off-the shelf product to be immediately available after birth to  
42  
43 avoid intermediate surgery (gastrostomy) and prolonged mechanical ventilation; 3) avoidance  
44  
45 of life-long immunosuppression that would negatively affect the growth and development of  
46  
47 the child, preferring therefore repopulation techniques that involve cells of autologous  
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49 source; 4) use of a scaffold that "grows" with the patient to avoid recurrent surgical  
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51 interventions to substitute/upsized the construct itself; 4) future possible use of decellularised  
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oesophagi from allogeneic sources, in view of the new guidelines on neonatal organs transplantation.

As a limitation it is important to note that, although animal studies are a necessary pre-clinical step, they may not closely reflect the specific clinical problem. We recognise that the research cited might not be specifically focused on the paediatric population, and knowledge had to be inferred from the valuable studies conducted on adult oesophageal reconstruction. Lastly, in vivo studies on tissue engineered oesophagus concentrated mostly on the cervical oesophagus. This may be less relevant since most clinical needs in LGOA are in the thoracic oesophagus, which has different musculature and innervation.

As the field continues to develop, the gold standard for fully functional tissue engineered constructs in LGOA has not been defined yet, leaving the medical field in need of a definitive solution for those suffering from the disease.

#### 4. Expert Opinion

Long gap oesophageal atresia (LGOA) continues to represent a major challenge in paediatric surgery. Available options involve multiple stage procedures and are associated with low success rate and high risk of long-term complications.

In this context, a tissue engineering approach could be a better option. The possibility envisioned is to pre-build a tubular oesophagus substitute, transplant it in the recipient and allow it to grow with the patient for a life-long result. The initial studies involving silicon/collagen stents or absorbable constructs were associated with high rate of oesophageal leakage or stenosis. Even when successful, they only provided a regain of organ continuity while lacking in the ability to restore function. Decellularised matrices have therefore been suggested as a better tool. These can be derived from oesophagi, harvested and processed to

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2  
3 remove the cell content while preserving the 3D structure of the extra cellular matrix (ECM).  
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5 The latter works as a scaffold that supplies the structure and retains appropriate structural and  
6  
7 biochemical signalling to guide cell repopulation.  
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10 While different decellularisation protocols have been described and successfully applied,  
11  
12 more work needs to be done to overcome the following two main challenges: developing a  
13  
14 multi-strata tubular structure and achieving appropriate repopulation of the construct itself  
15  
16 prior to its transplant. While superficial patch repairs of the oesophageal mucosa may be  
17  
18 achievable [71, 94, 96], the successful rate falls when moving toward longer full-thickness  
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20 tubular repairs, reaching some results only when the recipient muscularis externa is preserved  
21  
22 [93]. Moreover the tubular matrices so far attempted have been mainly designed to repair  
23  
24 cervical defects, while LGOA affects the intra-thoracic part of the oesophagus. This is  
25  
26 possibly due to the ease of access during surgery and follow-up in the animal models  
27  
28 described and to a major focus on other clinical causes of oesophageal replacement that  
29  
30 involve the cervical portion of the organ. In our opinion, while smart polymers capable of  
31  
32 recruiting cells in vivo could be developed in the future as off-the-shelf products, good  
33  
34 functional outcome still requires appropriate recellularisation of the scaffold prior to  
35  
36 transplantation. This should be ideally achieved using cells derived from the recipient to  
37  
38 generate a non-antigenic construct, avoiding the need of a long-term immunosuppressive  
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40 treatment. Cellular seeding is particularly relevant when engineering of a long segment of  
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42 oesophagus is required. In order to have functional peristalsis, such oesophagus would in fact  
43  
44 required functional integration and differentiation of neurocrest cells.  
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50 Revascularisation of the whole construct is an additional challenge. The timeframe required  
51  
52 for spontaneous vascular growth of the recipient network into the construct is inadequate in  
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54 ensuring scaffold survival in vivo. A suggested option includes wrapping the scaffold in  
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56 muscle or omentum prior to the thoracic transplantation [8]. This approach would not be free  
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3 from the complication of a second surgery and vascular reconnection. Additionally, to  
4  
5 facilitate revascularisation in vivo, the use of appropriate angiogenesis stimuli and factors has  
6  
7 been suggested, including studies on matrices enriched with growth factors. Type, amount  
8  
9 and delivery profile of these factors should be carefully identified in order to optimise  
10  
11 revascularisation. Initial release of vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) and basic  
12  
13 fibroblast growth factor (bFGF) could be necessary to promote the formation of new vessels,  
14  
15 followed by their maturation guided by factors like transforming growth factor b (TGF-b),  
16  
17 platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF), and angiopoietin-1 (Ang1). An intriguing suggested  
18  
19 option is therefore to enrich the scaffolds with biodegradable micro-carriers loaded with  
20  
21 factors and able to release them in a timely controlled fashion.  
22  
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24  
25 Alternatively, engineering of a vascularised oesophagus with its vascular supply could be  
26  
27 envisaged, similarly to the jejunal transplant with vascular anastomosis. However, this is  
28  
29 particularly difficult due to the complex vascular supply of the oesophagus and its difficult  
30  
31 preservation after decellularization.  
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34  
35 Lastly but not less importantly, researchers will need to translate the results achieved in  
36  
37 animal models into a feasible and successful application in humans. This will require a  
38  
39 further joint effort between basic research and medicine in order to create an off-the shelf  
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41 product that could be developed, stored and delivered to a surgical facility to answer a patient  
42  
43 need.  
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46  
47 In conclusion, it has become clear how a simple decellularised matrix may not provide an  
48  
49 efficient treatment in LGOA, unless it is further engineered and modified as to develop a  
50  
51 more complex "smart-matrix". This could be the result of different single layer scaffolds,  
52  
53 combined together and enriched with proangiogenic factors, possibly associated with tailor  
54  
55 made polymers to maintain desired structure and guarantee layers interaction, and with  
56  
57 absorbable engineered stents to avoid early stage stenosis.  
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3 The numerous efforts and attempts described in literature have not yet identified an optimal  
4 approach in the use of decellularised matrices in LGOA. Nevertheless, the presence of  
5 promising results obtained with the use of these matrices in other organs and the growing  
6 knowledge in the field of TE represent a constant drive towards the development of a  
7 functional repair option in LGOA.  
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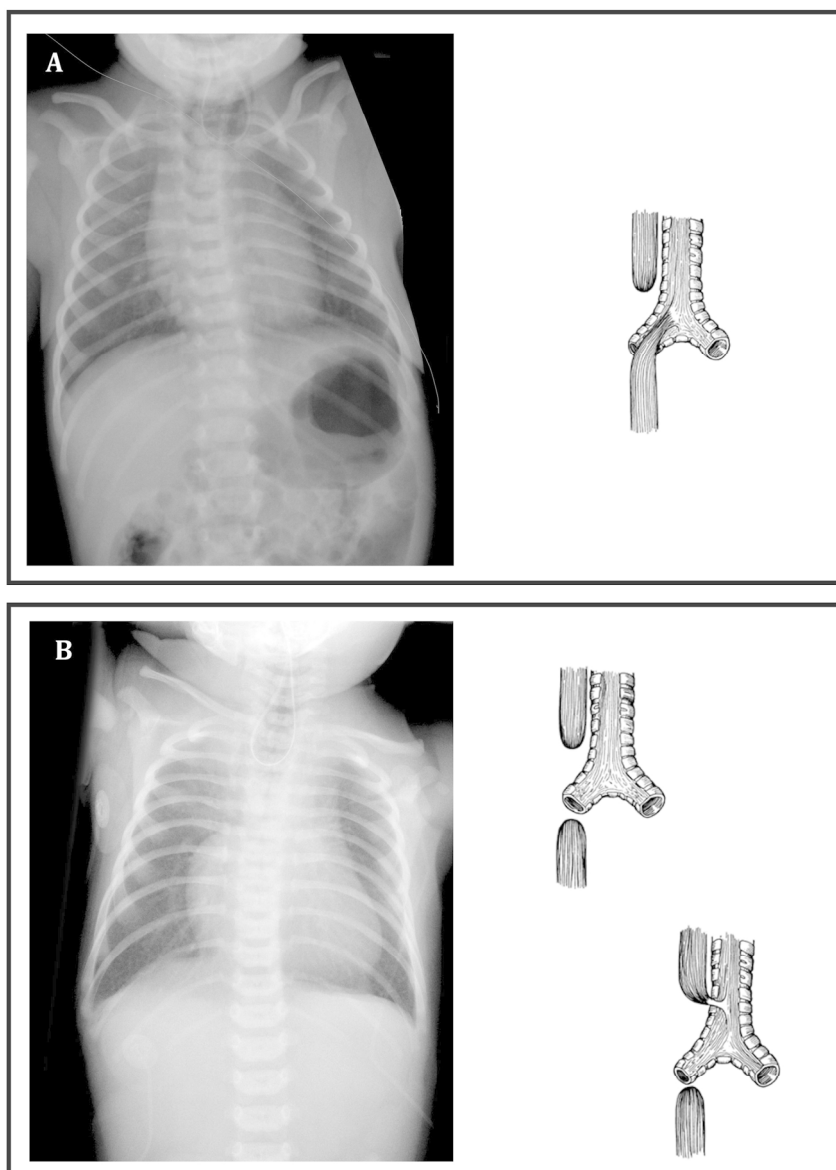
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28 **Article highlights box:**  
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- 30  
31 • Oesophageal atresia is a congenital anomaly in which the continuity of the  
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33 oesophagus is interrupted and a fistula often connects the oesophagus to the trachea.  
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36 • Whilst less severe cases can be successfully corrected through surgery, long gap  
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38 atresia (LGOA) is often associated with low successful rate and high risk of long-term  
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40 complications. Optimal treatment has not been established.  
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43 • Tissue engineering could represent a better treatment option for patients with LGOA.  
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45 Synthetic and hybrid scaffolds have been attempted, with variable suboptimal results.  
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48 • Decellularised oesophageal scaffolds are now considered a better option because: 1)  
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50 preservation of oesophageal extracellular matrix mimics the 3D structure of the native  
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52 organ and stimulates cell repopulation in vivo; 2) removal of cell content reduces the  
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54 risk of rejection and prevents the need of life long immunosuppression and 3) natural  
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3 constructs can "grow" with the patient through childhood, avoiding the need of  
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5 multiple surgical interventions.  
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- 8 • Challenges in decellularised oesophageal scaffolds production include the need to  
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10 identify the best tissue source and optimal decellularisation protocol, develop and  
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12 maintain a tubular patent structure, repopulate the scaffolds in its different layers,  
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14 stimulate revascularisation, promote structural and functional integration with the  
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16 host.  
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Figure 1. X-Ray findings and schematic representation of oesophageal atresia in newborns. Notice on X-Ray the feeding tube inserted and coiling in the upper oesophageal pouch suggesting Oesophageal Atresia. A: in the most common form the Tracheo-Oesophageal Fistula connects the trachea to the distal oesophagus (Type C of Gross classification) allowing the stomach to be filled with air (gastric bubble visible on X-Ray). B: when the fistula is not present or is connected to the upper oesophagus (Type A and B of Gross classification) no gastric bubble can be detected on X-Ray. These forms usually require a more challenging surgical reconstruction due to the long gap between the upper and lower ends of the oesophagus.

(Fig.1)

168x231mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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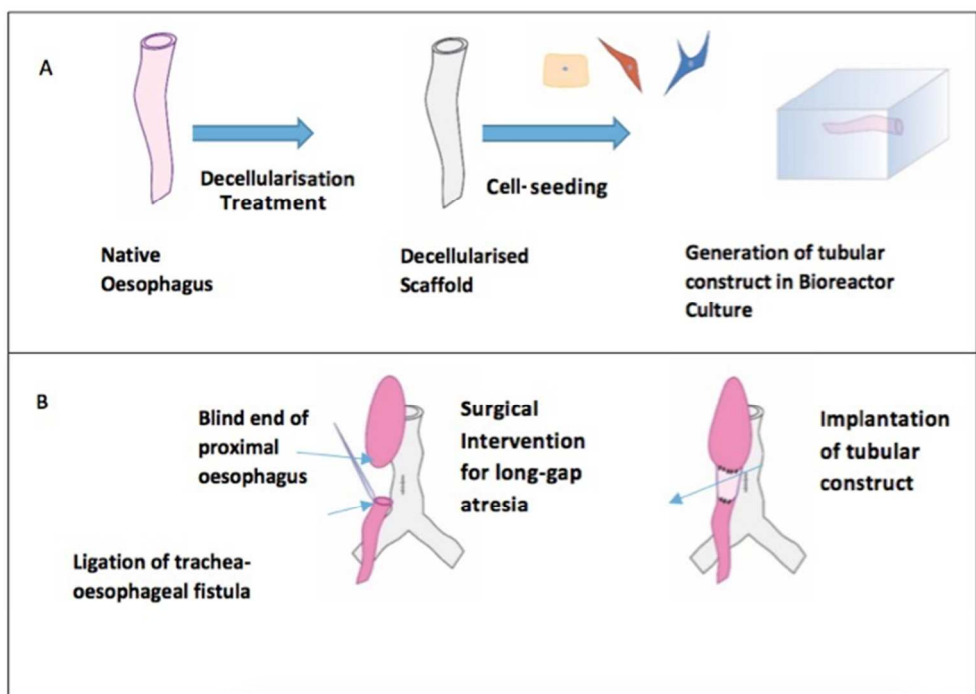


Figure 2 . Production of a tissue engineered oesophageal construct for neonatal oesophageal atresia(A). Surgical application for engineered segment in long-gap atresia with distal tracheo-oesophageal fistula (B) (Fig.2) 196x140mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Condition	Description
15-20% <b>Anastomotic Leakage</b> [88]	Less than 30% comprise of major leaks that occur in early postoperative period (<48 hours), presenting with life-threatening tension pneumothorax.  <u>Treatment:</u> emergency surgery required for major leaks. Minor leaks will heal spontaneously.
30-40% <b>Anastomotic Stricture</b> [89]	Risk factors include anastomotic tension, leakage, and gastroesophageal reflux.  <u>Treatment:</u> most strictures will respond to one or two dilatations.
40% <b>Gastro-oesophageal reflux</b> [90,91]	More common following anastomosis under tension. Implicated in the pathogenesis of anastomotic stricture.  <u>Treatment:</u> half of the cases do not respond to antireflux medication and require surgery.
75-100% <b>Dysmotility</b> [92]	Uneven coordination of contractions due to abnormal innervation. Dysmotility is a major factor in long-term swallowing problems.  <u>Treatment:</u> patients are advised to take fluids liberally with meals and avoid foodstuffs which exacerbate the problems.

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Author	Model	Construct	Outcomes						
			Survival	Vascular Growth	Mucosa / epithelial coverage	Muscle Organisation	Contractility	Stricture	Fibrotic Tissue
<b>Badylak 2000 [36]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dog (n=15)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ A: 50% circular; B: 100% circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Porcine ECM (SIS or UBM)</li> <li>▪ SIS: 0.1% Peracetic Acid; UBM: 1.0N NaCl</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>		<b>A:</b> Yes	<b>A&amp;B:</b> Yes (after 50 days)	<b>A:</b> Yes	<b>A:</b> Yes	<b>A:</b> No <b>B:</b> Yes	
<b>Badylak 2005 [93]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dog (n=22)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ Circular endomucosal layer</li> </ul> <p><b>A:</b> muscularis externa intact</p> <p><b>B:</b> not intact</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ECM sheet from UBM</li> <li>▪ 0.1% Peracetic Acid</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>	<p><b>A:</b> 10/12 for 26 – 230 days</p> <p><b>B:</b> Sacrificed at 3 wks due to stricture</p>					<b>A:</b> No; <b>B:</b> Yes but lumen circumference <20% native	<b>A:</b> Collagenous connective tissue present near sutures <b>B:</b> Yes

<b>Freund 2009 [62]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dog (n=10)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ Circular endomucosal resection</li> </ul> <p><b>A:</b> with scaffold placement</p> <p><b>B:</b> without scaffold</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ECM sheet from UBM</li> <li>▪ 0.1% Peracetic Acid</li> </ul>	<p>A: Yes;</p> <p>B: 3 required early euthanasia, inability to tolerate oral intake.</p>	(I) Yes	<p>A: Yes;</p> <p>B: Yes incomplete</p>			A&B: Yes	A: No
<b>Isch 2001 [94]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dog (n=12)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ 2x1cm patch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ DHS (AlloDerm)</li> </ul>	100% survival 1-3 months	Yes	Yes			No	
<b>Bozuk 2006 [95]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Human (n=1)</li> <li>▪ Thoracic</li> <li>▪ Post-operative dehiscence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ DHS (AlloDerm)</li> </ul>	Patient survived the operation					No	
<b>Urita 2007 [48]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rat (n=27)</li> <li>▪ Abdominal</li> <li>▪ 3-4mm by 5mm patch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rat GAM</li> <li>▪ 4% SDC, DNase I, 1M NaCl</li> </ul>	24 survived without complications		Yes	No		No	

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<b>Lopes 2006 [96]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rat (n=85)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ A: Patch</li> <li>▪ B: Circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Porcine SIS</li> <li>▪</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>	Survival only in A		A: Yes	A: Yes	A: Yes	A: No B: Yes	
<b>Wei 2009 [75]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dog (n=12)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ 5cm, 50% circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Porcine SIS</li> <li>▪ Peracetic acid</li> <li>▪ Oral mucosal epithelial cells</li> </ul>			Yes	Yes			
<b>Poghosyan 2015 [38]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Minipig (n=18)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ Circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Porcine SIS (Surgisis)</li> <li>▪</li> <li>▪ Skeletal Myoblasts</li> <li>▪ A: SC + PS</li> <li>▪ B: SC</li> <li>▪ C: PS</li> </ul>	A: 6/6 B: 1/6 C: 1/6		Yes	Yes			
<b>Clough 2011 [97]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Human (n=1)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ Perforation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Porcine SIS</li> <li>▪</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>					Disrupted		
<b>Doede 2009 [98]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Piglet (n=14)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ Circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Alloplastic SIS</li> <li>▪</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>	1/14 survived over 4 weeks					Yes	



<b>Gaujoux 2010 [37]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Minipig (n=18)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ Circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fresh pig aortic allograft</li> <li>▪</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>	33% mortality first month. Stenting for 6 mths crucial.	No. Stopped by fibrosis	Yes	Yes. Fascicles and bundles observed	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Kajitani 2001 [46]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pig (n=10)</li> <li>▪ Distal</li> <li>▪ Circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pig Aorta</li> <li>▪ DNase-I;</li> <li>▪ Triton-X</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>	10/10 survived over 6-16 wks		Yes			Yes	
<b>Marzaro 2006 [47]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pig (n=6)</li> <li>▪ Thoracic</li> <li>▪ Circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Osophagus</li> <li>▪ 4% SDC, DNase-I, 1M NaCl</li> <li>▪ Autologus Smooth Muscle Cell</li> </ul>			Yes Capillary ingrowth observed	Yes Fasciclues observed			
<b>Sjoqvist 2013 [48]</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rat (n=10)</li> <li>▪ Cervical</li> <li>▪ Circular</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ooesophagus</li> <li>▪ 4% SDC, DNase-I, EDTA</li> <li>▪ Mesenchymal Stromal Cell</li> </ul>	10/10, 14 days	Yes	Yes	Yes			

Aspect Characterised	Technique	Examples
ECM architecture	Staining	Hematoxylin and Eosin, Masson's Trichrome, Alcian Blue, Van-Gieson's stain
	Immunohistochemistry	Laminin, Fibronectin, Collagen I & IV, Elastin
	Protein	Collagen, Glycosaminoglycan
	Mechanical Tests	Pressure vs Distensibility, Burst Pressure, Force at break, % Elongation at break
	Imaging	Transmission Electron Microscope, Scanning Electron Microscope
Immunogenicity of matrix	Immunohistochemistry	Major histocompatibility complex I & II Alpha-Gal
	Assay	DNA Assay
	In Vivo	Subcutaneous Implantation
Potential for Vascularisation	Immunohistochemistry	Fibroblasts Growth Factor, Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor, Von Willebrand Factor
	In Vivo	Chick Chorioallantoic Membrane assay, Subcutaneous Implantation