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The amino acid composition of human milk
- towards determining the amino acid
requirements of the human infant

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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**This thesis is dedicated to God,
for without him it would not exist,
both in concept and in completion.**

ABSTRACT

The overall aim was to determine the digestible amino acid composition of human milk. The gross amino acid composition of human milk was corrected for digestibility using true ileal amino acid digestibility coefficients for human milk determined in the piglet. The digestible amino acid composition of human milk was used to evaluate protein quality in a commercial infant formula.

In the first part of the study the piglet was evaluated as a model animal for studying aspects of protein digestion in human infants. Three-week-old male piglets and three-month-old male human infants were bottle-fed an infant formula over a 17 day balance study which included a 10 day total faecal collection period. Small but statistically significant differences between the piglets and infants were found for the apparent faecal digestibility of dietary dry matter, organic matter and total nitrogen. The faecal digestibilities for most of the amino acids, however, were not significantly different between the species. It was concluded that the digestion of protein, to the end of the gastrointestinal tract, appeared to be similar in the two species.

For application of an ileal digestibility assay, it is necessary to assume that amino acids are not absorbed in significant amounts posterior to the ileo-caecal junction. An experiment was conducted, therefore, to determine whether lysine and/or methionine, two dietary essential amino acids, were absorbed in nutritionally significant amounts from the large intestine of the three-week-old piglet. Piglets, surgically prepared with simple catheters which allowed infusion into the proximal colon, were given one of two milk-formula diets which were deficient in either lysine or in the sulphur amino acids, yet were balanced for all other amino acids. An isotonic solution containing the respective deficient amino acid or physiological saline was infused via the catheter at each feeding. Total daily excretions of urinary urea and total nitrogen were determined. There were no significant differences in urinary nitrogen metabolite excretion for piglets infused with amino acids compared with those infused with saline. Lysine and methionine did not appear to be absorbed in nutritionally significant amounts from the proximal colon of the milk-fed piglet.

Two experiments were conducted to develop a method for accurately determining the amino acid composition of human milk. In the first, a non-linear model, that describes the simultaneous processes of amino acid yield and decay that occur during acid hydrolysis of a protein prior to amino acid detection, was used to regress data derived from multiple hydrolysis intervals. Most of the amino acids

underwent some degree of loss during hydrolysis. Of particular note was the loss rate for cysteic acid, which was greater than that found for serine. Using the routine duplicate sampling system, a non-linear regression including 10 hydrolysis intervals resulted in a mean amino acid recovery of 100% and provided an acceptable compromise between accuracy and the cost of analysis. In the second experiment, the non-linear model was modified to account for samples, such as human milk, having amino acids in free form prior to hydrolysis. The original and new models were compared. A biological sample (human milk) was hydrolysed in acid for multiple hydrolysis intervals. As in the previous experiment, most of the amino acids (and in particular, cysteic acid) underwent some degree of loss during hydrolysis. It was concluded that using the original model to analyse data obtained from hydrolysis of a sample containing protein and free amino acids will not lead to the introduction of any large bias in the determination of amino acid composition. The modified model, however, is more accurate for application where a sample contains both protein-bound and free amino acids.

In the penultimate experiment of the study, human milk was collected from women in their 10th-14th weeks of lactation, and was analysed for amino acids with correction for losses of amino acids during acid hydrolysis, using the model parameters determined in the earlier experiment. The mean amino acid composition of the human milk was similar to previously reported estimates, though the cysteine content of the human milk was 20% higher than the mean literature estimate. True (corrected for endogenous amino acid excretion) ileal amino acid digestibility coefficients for human milk, determined in three-week-old piglets fed human milk, ranged from 81-101% with threonine (86%) being the least digestible essential amino acid. The overall digestibility of amino acid nitrogen was 95%. When the true ileal digestibility values were used to correct the amino acid composition of human milk, the pattern of amino acids absorbed from human milk was different compared to the currently recommended dietary pattern of amino acids for the infant.

In the final study, true ileal amino acid digestibility coefficients for a commercial infant formula were determined using the three-week-old piglet. Coefficients ranged from 95% for lysine to 103% for arginine, indicating near-complete digestion of the protein in the infant formula. The profile of absorbed amino acids for the infant formula was compared with that for human milk to evaluate protein quality in the infant formula. It was concluded that the protein in the formula was of high quality.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xiii
GENERAL INTRODUCTION	1
<u>Chapter 1</u> REVIEW OF LITERATURE	
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Defining the protein requirements of infants	4
1.3 Determining the protein requirements of the infant	8
1.3.1 Factorial Method	9
1.3.2 Nitrogen Balance Studies	11
1.3.3 Isotope Tracer Methods	13
1.3.4 Epidemiological Approach	16
1.3.5 Summary	20
1.4 Determining the amino acid requirements of infants based on the gross amino acid composition of human milk	20
1.4.1 The role of milk	20
1.4.2 The adequacy of breast milk	21
1.4.3 Measurement of milk intake by the breast-fed infant	23
1.4.4 Definition of a representative milk sample	24
1.4.4.1 <i>Stage of Lactation</i>	25
1.4.4.2 <i>Variations during a single breast-feeding, and during the day</i>	26
1.4.4.3 <i>Dietary Influences</i>	26
1.4.4.4 <i>Other factors affecting composition</i>	27
1.4.5 Accurate determination of the amino acid composition of human milk	27
1.4.5.1 <i>Collection and storage procedures</i>	28
1.4.5.2 <i>Amino acid analysis</i>	29
1.4.6 Summary of compositional data on the amino acids in human milk	32

1.5	Non-nutritional role of human milk proteins	34
1.5.1	Proteins in human milk and their possible function	35
1.5.2	Digestion of the human milk proteins	37
	1.5.2.1 <i>The digestion and absorption of protein</i>	37
	1.5.2.2 <i>Digestion of milk proteins in infancy</i>	39
1.5.3	The profile of amino acids in human milk which are available for nutrition	42
1.6	Determining the profile of digestible amino acids in human milk	45
1.6.1	Plasma amino acid profiles	45
1.6.2	Digestibility of human milk proteins	46
	1.6.2.1 <i>Faecal and ileal digestibility assays</i>	46
	1.6.2.2 <i>Correction for endogenous amino acid excretion</i>	48
1.6.3	Need for a model animal	50
1.7	Model animals in the study of aspects of protein digestion in infants	50
1.7.1	Choice of Model Animal	50
1.7.2	Comparison of the piglet and human infant	52
	1.7.2.1 <i>Digestive physiology</i>	52
	1.7.2.2 <i>Comparison of the digestibility of milk protein in the piglet and human infant</i>	55
1.7.3	Summary	55
1.8	Overall conclusion and inferences from the review of literature	55
1.9	References	56

Chapter 2 THE THREE-WEEK-OLD PIGLET AS A MODEL ANIMAL FOR STUDYING PROTEIN DIGESTION IN HUMAN INFANTS

2.1	Abstract	85
2.2	Introduction	86
2.3	Experimental	87
2.3.1	Subjects	87
2.3.2	Diet and Feeding	87
2.3.3	Experimental Procedure	89
2.3.4	Chemical Analysis	90

2.3.5	Data Analysis	91
2.4	Results	92
2.5	Discussion	96
2.6	References	98

**Chapter 3 ABSORPTION OF LYSINE AND METHIONINE
FROM THE PROXIMAL COLON OF THE PIGLET**

3.1	Abstract	101
3.2	Introduction	102
3.3	Experimental	103
3.3.1	Animals and housing	103
3.3.2	Surgical preparation	103
3.3.3	Diets	104
3.3.4	Experimental procedure	106
3.3.5	Chemical Analysis	109
3.3.6	Data Analysis	110
3.4	Results	110
3.5	Discussion	117
3.6	References	120

**Chapter 4 CORRECTION FOR AMINO ACID LOSS DURING
ACID HYDROLYSIS.
I. LOSSES IN A PURIFIED PROTEIN**

4.1	Abstract	124
4.2	Introduction	125
4.3	Experimental	127
4.3.1	Chemical Analysis	127
4.3.2	Data Analysis	128
4.4	Results	129
4.5	Discussion	135
4.6	References	139
4.7	Appendix	140

**Chapter 5 CORRECTION FOR AMINO ACID LOSS DURING
ACID HYDROLYSIS.
II. LOSSES IN A PROTEIN MIXTURE CONTAINING
FREE AMINO ACIDS**

5.1	Abstract	142
5.2	Introduction	143
5.3	Experimental	145
	5.3.1 Milk Collection	145
	5.3.2 Chemical Analysis	145
	5.3.3 Data Analysis	146
5.4	Results and Discussion	147
5.5	References	156
5.6	Appendices	157

**Chapter 6 THE AMINO ACID COMPOSITION OF HUMAN
MILK CORRECTED FOR AMINO ACID
DIGESTIBILITY**

6.1	Abstract	160
6.2	Introduction	161
	Part I: Determination of the amino acid composition of mature human milk	162
6.3	Experimental	162
	6.3.1 Collection of milk samples	162
	6.3.2 Chemical Analysis	163
	6.3.3 Data Analysis	164
	Part II: Determination of true ileal amino acid digestibility in human milk	
6.4	Experimental	165
	6.4.1 Animals and housing	165
	6.4.2 Diets	165
	6.4.3 Experimental Procedure	166
	6.4.4 Chemical Analysis	168
	6.4.5 Data Analysis	168
6.5	Results	169

6.6	Discussion	174
6.7	References	179

Chapter 7 **ILEAL AMINO ACID DIGESTIBILITY IN AN INFANT
FORMULA DETERMINED USING THE THREE-
WEEK-OLD PIGLET AS A MODEL ANIMAL FOR
THE HUMAN INFANT**

7.1	Abstract	184
7.2	Introduction	185
7.3	Experimental	186
7.3.1	Animals and housing	186
7.3.2	Diet and feeding	186
7.3.3	Experimental Procedure	188
7.3.4	Chemical Analysis	188
7.3.5	Data Analysis	189
7.4	Results and Discussion	190
7.5	References	195

Chapter 8 **GENERAL SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION** 197

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1.1	Classification of essentiality of amino acids in the human infant.	7
1.2	The protein requirement of infants aged 3 months.	9
1.3	Different estimates of the amino acid requirements of human infants aged 0-6 months.	19
1.4	The amino acid composition of mature human milk.	33
1.5	The protein content of mature human milk.	35
1.6	Faecal excretion (expressed as a percentage of intake) of protective proteins in term and preterm infants.	41
1.7	The gross and digestible amino acid composition of human milk.	44
1.8	Approximate relative activities of the major digestive enzymes in suckled or milk-fed human infants and piglets at birth and at the time of peak lactation in the dam.	54
2.1	Ingredient and nutrient composition of a commercially prepared bovine-milk-based infant formula.	88
2.2	The ages and weights of the infants participating in a 17 day nitrogen balance study.	92
2.3	Apparent faecal digestibilities (%) of gross nutrients in a commercially prepared bovine-milk based infant formula fed to three-month-old human infants and three-week-old piglets.	94
2.4	Apparent faecal digestibilities (%) of amino acids in a commercially prepared bovine-milk based infant formula fed to three-month-old human infants and three-week-old piglets.	95
3.1	Composition of the milk-formula diets.	105
3.2	Nutrient composition of the experimental milk-formula diets.	106
3.3	Dietary essential amino acid intakes of 4 kg piglets given either the L- or S- diets, compared with recommended amino acid intakes for the milk-fed piglet.	107
3.4	The design of the experiment.	107
3.5	Mean daily urinary N metabolite excretion rates for piglets infused colonically with either physiological saline or free lysine, while fed with a milk-formula diet 40% deficient in lysine.	112
3.6	Mean daily urinary N metabolite excretion rates for piglets infused colonically with either physiological saline or free methionine, while fed with a milk-formula 60% deficient in methionine and 40% deficient in cysteine.	113
4.1	Hydrolysis rates for amino acids in egg-white lysozyme during acid hydrolysis, and determined by non-linear least squares regression of different sequences of hydrolysis intervals.	132

4.2	Loss rates for amino acids in egg-white lysozyme during acid hydrolysis, and determined by non-linear least squares regression of different sequences of hydrolysis intervals.	133
4.3	Estimates of the amino acid composition of egg-white lysozyme determined by non-linear least squares regression of different sequences of hydrolysis intervals compared with the conventional 24 hour hydrolysis value and the composition based on sequencing.	134
5.1	Free amino acids present in mature human milk.	148
5.2	Hydrolysis and loss rates for amino acids in a mature human milk sample during acid hydrolysis determined by non-linear least squares regression for multiple hydrolysis intervals using either a three-way compartmental model or a four-way compartmental model.	151
5.3	The amino acid composition of a biological sample containing a mixture of proteins and free amino acids determined by either non-linear regression (Model I or Model II) for multiple hydrolysis intervals or by the routine 24 hour acid hydrolysis.	153
5.4	Mean estimates of amino acid composition, h and l derived using either Model I or Model II to analyse three simulated sets of data.	155
6.1	Ingredient composition of the protein-free diet used to determine endogenous amino acid flows at the terminal ileum of the three-week-old piglet.	166
6.2	The chemical composition of mature human milk.	170
6.3	The amino acid composition of mature human milk.	171
6.4	The mean endogenous flows of total nitrogen, amino acid nitrogen and individual amino acids at the terminal ileum of three-week-old piglets fed a protein-free diet.	172
6.5	Mean apparent and true ileal digestibility of the nitrogen and amino acids in mature human milk given to piglets.	173
6.6	The profile of digestible essential amino acids in mature human milk compared with the profile of amino acids deemed to be required by the human infant.	178
7.1	Ingredient and tabulated nutrient composition of a commercial bovine-milk-based infant formula.	187
7.2	The mean apparent and true ileal digestibility of nitrogen and amino acids in a bovine-milk-based formula fed to three-week-old piglets.	191
7.3	Comparison of digestible amino acid profiles in human milk and a bovine-milk-based infant formula and anticipated daily amino acid intakes by three-month-old breast-fed or formula-fed infants.	193

8.1	Estimates of the apparent faecal nitrogen digestibilities in milk-formula-fed human infants.	198
8.2	The true ileal digestibility of amino acids in mature human milk and a bovine-milk-based infant formula.	204
8.3	The profile of digestible essential amino acids in mature human milk, recommended profile as required by the human infant, in bovine milk protein, and in soya protein.	205

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
2.1	The number of discrete defecations over a 10 day period for three-week-old piglets and three-month-old human infants, fed a bovine milk-based infant formula.	93
3.1	Comparison of the mean daily urinary excretion of total N (TN) and urea-N (UN), and the ratios between TN and the mean daily urinary creatinine-N (CN) excretion (TN:CN), and between UN and CN (UN:CN) in time-period 2 for catheterized piglets and unoperated piglets.	111
3.2	Comparison of the mean daily urinary excretion of total N (TN) and urea-N (UN), and the ratios between TN and the mean daily urinary creatinine-N (CN) excretion (TN:CN), and between UN and CN (UN:CN) in time-period 3 for catheterized piglets fed with a milk-formula diet balanced for all amino acids except cysteine and unoperated piglets fed with a diet 60% deficient in methionine and 40% deficient in cysteine.	114
3.3	Comparison of the mean daily urinary excretion of total N (TN) and urea-N (UN), and the ratios between TN and the mean daily urinary creatinine-N (CN) excretion (TN:CN), and between UN and CN (UN:CN) for catheterized piglets fed with a milk-formula diet 40% deficient in lysine during time-period 2 and the same piglets fed on a milk-formula diet balanced for all amino acids during time-period 3.	115
3.4	Comparison of the mean daily urinary excretion of total N (TN) and urea-N (UN), and the ratios between TN and the mean daily urinary creatinine-N (CN) excretion (TN:CN), and between UN and CN (UN:CN) for catheterized piglets fed with a milk-formula diet 60% deficient in methionine and 40% deficient in cysteine during time-period 2 and the same piglets fed on a milk-formula diet balanced for all amino acids except cysteine during time-period 3.	116
4.1	Effect of hydrolysis time during amino acid analysis on the mean yield of amino acids in egg white lysozyme.	130
4.2	Effect of hydrolysis time during amino acid analysis on the mean yield of amino acids in egg white lysozyme.	131
5.1	Effect of hydrolysis time during amino acid analysis on the mean yield of amino acids in human milk.	149
5.2	Effect of hydrolysis time during amino acid analysis on the mean yield of amino acids in human milk.	150