Effects of Rapid Cooling Prior to Freezing on the Quality of Canine Cryopreserved Spermatozoa

Carmen RODENAS¹, Inmaculada PARRILLA¹, Jordi ROCA¹, Emilio Arsenio MARTINEZ¹ and Xiomara LUCAS¹

¹Department of Animal Medicine and Surgery, University of Murcia, Espinardo 30100, Spain

Abstract. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of rapid cooling prior to freezing on frozen-thawed canine sperm quality. In experiment 1, centrifuged ejaculates from 6 dogs were pooled, split into 4 aliquots and cryopreserved by the Uppsala procedure using different cooling rates (control, cooling speed 18 C/90 min and average cooling rate 0.2 C/min; rapid, cooling speed 18 C/8 min and average cooling rate 2.25 C/min) in combination with 2 glycerol addition protocols (fractionated or unfractionated). In experiment 2, centrifuged ejaculates from 4 dogs were processed individually using the same cooling rates described in experiment 1 in combination with an unfractionated glycerol addition protocol. Each of the experiments was replicated 5 times. Sperm quality was evaluated after 30 and 150 min of post-thawing incubation at 38 C. Total motility (TM), progressive motility (PM) and quality of movement parameters were assessed using a computerized system, and sperm viability (spermatozoa with intact plasma and acrosome membranes) was assessed using flow cytometry (H-42/PFT/FITC-PNA). Values for TM, PM, viable spermatozoa and the quality of movement parameters after thawing were not significantly affected by the cooling rate. The interaction between the cooling rate and the added glycerol protocol was not significant. There were significant differences among the males (P<0.01) in the sperm quality parameters evaluated after thawing. The interaction between the males and the cooling rate was not significant. In conclusion, canine spermatozoa can be cryopreserved using the Uppsala method at an average cooling rate of 2.25 C/min prior to freezing together with addition of fractionated or unfractionated glycerol.

Key words: Canine, Cooling-rate, Cryopreservation, Spermatozoa

Received: February 18, 2014
Accepted: June 2, 2014
Published online in J-STAGE: July 21, 2014
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Correspondence: X Lucas (e-mail: xlucas@um.es)

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Animals

The experimental protocols were conducted in accordance with Directive 2000/63/EU EEC for animal experiments and were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Experimentation with Animals of the University of Murcia, Spain. Six clinically healthy privately owned dogs (Canis lupus familiaris) of different breeds (1 Ibizan hound, 2 Scottish terriers, 1 French bulldog, 1 Jack Russell terrier and 1 Golden retriever) aged 2 to 5 years were used in this study. All dogs were of proven fertility and were trained semen donors, and none of them were preselected according to sperm freezability.

Semen collection

Ejaculates were collected by digital manipulation [19] into calibrated 15 ml Falcon conical tubes (Becton, Dickinson and Company, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA). Only the sperm-rich fraction (SRF) of the ejaculates was processed, while the first and third fractions were discarded. Only samples with a sperm concentration >200 × 10^6 spermatozoa/ml, a total motility > 80% and a normal morphology > 80% were included in the study.

Chemicals and media

All of the chemicals used in this study were of analytical grade and, unless otherwise stated, were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA). All media were prepared under sterile conditions in a laminar flow hood (MicroH; Telstar, Terrasa, Spain) using water from a Milli-Q Synthesis System (18 MΩ cm; Milli-Q; Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA).

The extender used during washing and evaluation of the spermatozoa and as a thawing medium was TRIS-citrate-fructose (TCF; composition: 249 mM Trizma base, 80 mM citric acid, 69 mM fructose, pH 6.7; 324 ± 3 mOsm/kg) supplemented with 1 mg/ml penicillin and 1 mg/ml streptomycin sulfate [12].

The cooling and freezing extenders used in this study were previously described for dog semen cryopreservation and were composed of TCF containing 20% egg yolk and variable glycerol concentrations with or without Equex STM Paste (Nova Chemical Sales, Scituate, MA, USA) [5, 12]. The compositions of the cooling extenders (C-Ext I and II) and the freezing extenders (F-Ext I and II) are shown in Table 1.

Phosphate-buffered saline solution (PBS: 137 mM NaCl, 2.7 mM KCl, 1.5 mM KH₂PO₄, 8.1 mM Na₂HPO₄·7H₂O, pH 6.8; 289 ± 4 mOsm/kg) was used to dilute the fluorochromes used for flow cytometric evaluation of sperm viability.

Freezing method

The semen was frozen using the Uppsala method, which consisted of 2 dilution steps before freezing [12]. Briefly, after semen collection, the SRFs were washed by centrifugation (700 g/5 min/room temperature; Megafuge 1.0 R, Heraeus, Hanau, Germany). The supernatant was removed, and the resulting sperm samples were pooled or processed individually, depending on the experiment. Samples were diluted at 23 C with a cooling extender (C-Ext I or II) to a concentration of 400 × 10^6 spermatozoa/ml and were then cooled to 5 C using 2 different cooling rates (see the experimental design). Once at 5 C and just prior to freezing, the samples were diluted slowly by adding an equal volume of freezing extender (F-Ext I or II) that was previously cooled to 5 C using the same cooling rate as the corresponding diluted semen samples, resulting in a final concentration of 200 × 10^6 spermatozoa/ml. After 10 min of equilibration with the freezing extender, the semen was packed into 0.5 ml plastic straws (Minitüb, Tiefenbach, Germany) placed horizontally on a rack situated above the surface of LN₂ at a distance of 4 cm in a closed Styrofoam box for 10 min (freezing unit reference no. 15043/0636, Minitüb). Finally, the straws were plunged directly into the LN₂. The semen straws were kept frozen in LN₂ for at least 2 weeks before being thawed for evaluation. The straws were thawed in a water bath at 70 C for 8 sec, and the content of each straw was immediately diluted in TCF (1:2, v/v) and incubated at 38 C for 150 min.

Sperm quality assessment

The motility of the spermatozoa was evaluated objectively using a computer-assisted analysis system (ISAS; Proiser R+D, Paterna, Spain). The samples were analyzed at a concentration of 20 × 10^6 spermatozoa/ml. For each evaluation, an aliquot of 5 µl was placed in a Makler counting chamber (Sefi Medical Instruments, Haifa, Israel) that was pre-warmed to 38 C. A minimum of 200 spermatozoa per sample were analyzed. Before the track sequence was analyzed, the trajectory of each spermatozoon was identified and recorded in each field, and each was assessed visually to eliminate possible debris and to decrease the risk of including unclear tracks in the analysis. The sperm motility variable recorded was the overall percentage of

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Table 1. Composition of extenders used for semen cooling and freezing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>C-Ext I</th>
<th>C-Ext II</th>
<th>F-Ext I</th>
<th>F-Ext II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trizma base</td>
<td>3.025 g</td>
<td>3.025 g</td>
<td>3.025 g</td>
<td>3.025 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citric acid</td>
<td>1.7 g</td>
<td>1.7 g</td>
<td>1.7 g</td>
<td>1.7 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fructose</td>
<td>1.25 g</td>
<td>1.25 g</td>
<td>1.25 g</td>
<td>1.25 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streptomycin</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penicillin</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
<td>1 mg/ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glycerol</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equex STM Paste</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egg yolk</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milli-Q water</td>
<td>77 ml</td>
<td>80 ml</td>
<td>72 ml</td>
<td>69 ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>6.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osmolarity</td>
<td>870 mOsm</td>
<td>335 mOsm</td>
<td>1570 mOsm</td>
<td>1978 mOsm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cooling extenders (C-Ext I and II)/freezing extenders (F-Ext I and II).
the total motility (TM) and the progressive motility (spermatozoa moved fast and progressively; PM) in all samples. Spermatozoa with an average path velocity (VAP) ≥ 20 µm/s were considered motile, and spermatozoa with 75% linear movement were designated as spermatozoa with PM, in accordance with the parameters provided by the manufacturer. In the frozen-thawed semen samples, the following quality of movement parameters were measured: curvilinear velocity (VCL; µm/s), straight line velocity (VSL, µm/s), linear coefficient (LIN %) and amplitude of the lateral head displacement (ALH, µm).

Sperm viability was evaluated by simultaneous cytometric assessment of the plasma and acrosomal membrane’s integrity using a triple-fluorescence procedure, as described previously by Rodrénas et al. [20] and modified slightly. Briefly, 2 × 10^6 spermatozoa were transferred to tubes containing 50 µl of TFC-Ext, 4 µl of H-42 (0.05 mg/ml in PBS), 1 µl of propidium iodide (PI, 0.5 mg/ml in PBS, Invitrogen; Molecular Probes, Eugene, OR, USA) and 2 µl of fluorescein-conjugated peanut agglutinin (PNA-FITC, 20 µg/ml in PBS). The samples were incubated at 38 °C in the dark for 10 min, and immediately prior to analysis, 400 µl of TCF was added to each sample. The fluorescence spectra of H-42, PI and PNA-FITC were detected using a 450/50 nm band-pass (BP) filter, a 670 nm long-pass (LP) filter and a 530/30 nm BP filter, respectively. The flow cytometry analyses were performed at room temperature under dimmed light using a BD FACSCanto II flow cytometer (Becton, Dickinson and Company, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA) equipped with three lasers as the excitation sources: blue (488 nm, aircooled, 20 mW solid state), red (633 nm, 17 mW HeNe) and violet (405 nm, 30 mW solidstate). Data were acquired using BD FACSDiva Software (Becton, Dickinson and Company). Non-spermatozoon events were gated out based on their H-42 fluorescence (DNA content), and acquisitions were stopped after 10000 H-42-positive events. Only the results corresponding to viable spermatozoa (intact plasma and acrosomal membranes; PI−/PNA-FITC−) were included in the results.

Experimental design

This study was divided into 2 experiments. Each experiment was replicated 5 times.

In experiment 1, a total of 30 SRFs from 6 dogs (5 per dog) were collected and centrifuged. The resulting samples from each dog were pooled and divided into 4 aliquots, which were frozen by the Uppsala method, as described above, using 2 different cooling rates (control 0.2 C/min or rapid 2.25 C/min) and 2 glycerol addition protocols (fractionated or unfractionated) in a 2 × 2 factorial design. The rapid cooling rate (2.25 C/min) was predetermined via a preliminary study performed in our laboratory, whereas the control (0.2 C/min) cooling rate was estimated based on previously published studies of dog semen cryopreservation [5, 12]. The 2.25 C/min cooling rate was achieved by plunging the tube of extended semen into a 250 ml glass beaker containing 200 ml of water at 4 C (Fig. 1), while a programmable temperature bath (Programmable Model 9612; PolyScience, Niles, IL, USA) was used to perform the control rate of cooling. The temperature of the samples and the water during the cooling procedure was recorded. For addition of the fractionated glycerol, the semen samples were diluted in C-Ext I at 23 C for the cooling step and in F-Ext I at 5 C prior to freezing. For addition of the unfractionated glycerol, the semen samples were diluted in C-Ext II at 23 C for the cooling step and in F-Ext II at 5 C prior to freezing.

Sperm quality in terms of sperm motility and viability were assessed in fresh samples (SRFs after centrifugation at 23 C) and at 30 and 150 min of incubation at 38 C after sperm thawing. A total of 60 frozen-thawed straws (3 straws per each of the 4 treatments and replicate) were analyzed in experiment 1.

In experiment 2, a total of 20 SRFs from 4 dogs (5 per dog) were collected and frozen individually using the same cooling rates described in experiment 1 (control 0.2 C/min and rapid 2.25 C/min) in combination with an unfractionated glycerol protocol. The dogs included in this experiment were selected from those described in experiment 1 based on the best fresh sperm quality parameters. Sperm quality was assessed as described in experiment 1. A total of 30 frozen-thawed straws were analyzed for each male in experiment 2 (3 straw per each of the 2 treatments and replicate).

Statistical analysis

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 19.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). The data were evaluated using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to check the assumption of normality and assessed using an ANOVA with a MIXED procedure. The ANOVA model included the fixed effects of the cooling rates, the glycerol addition protocols and their interactions in experiment 1; the male, the cooling rate and their interaction in experiment 2; and the random effects of replication in each experiment for the different incubation times after thawing. When the ANOVA revealed a significant effect, the values were compared using the Bonferroni test. The values reported are expressed as the least square means (LSM) ± the standard error of the mean (SEM), and statistical significance was considered at P<0.05.
Results

Experiment 1

The mean concentration, volume and total number of spermatozoa in the pool were $670 \pm 97 \times 10^6$ spermatozoa/ml, $5.0 \pm 0.5$ ml and $3370 \pm 297 \times 10^6$ spermatozoa, respectively. The sperm quality parameters in the fresh pooled sperm samples were $87.6 \pm 1.8\%$, $67.6 \pm 2.3\%$ and $89.3 \pm 1.3\%$ for TM, PM and viable spermatozoa, respectively.

The mean percentages of the TM, PM and viable spermatozoa evaluated at 30 and 150 min after thawing are shown in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. Within the same glycerol addition protocol, use of the rapid or control cooling rate prior to freezing did not significantly affect the percentages of TM, PM and viable spermatozoa at either 30 or 150 min after thawing. The glycerol addition protocol significantly affected the values of the TM, PM and viable spermatozoa at 30 min and the viable spermatozoa at 150 min of incubation after thawing in samples frozen using the control cooling rate. The interaction of the cooling rate and the glycerol addition protocol was not significant.

The quality of movement parameters was not significantly influenced by the cooling rates or by the glycerol addition protocol at any post-thawing evaluation time. The average values of the different experimental groups for VCL, VSL, LIN and ALH ranged from 133.4 to 138.9 µm/sec, from 88.9 to 95.0 µm/sec, from 63.9 to 67.5% and from 4.1 to 4.3 µm for 30 min and from 138.5 to 142.0 µm/sec, from 82.2 to 86.5 µm/sec, from 60.0 to 62.0% and from 4.7 to 4.9 µm for 150 min, respectively.

Experiment 2

The mean sperm concentration, volume and total number of spermatozoa of the different males ranged from 350 to 1200 × 10^6 spermatozoa/ml, from 1.0–3.5 ml and 450 to 1320 × 10^6 spermatozoa, respectively. The individual mean values for sperm quality in the fresh semen ranged from 87 to 92.8%, from 60 to 72% and from 84.5 to 95.1% for TM, PM and viable spermatozoa, respectively.

The individual values for TM, PM and sperm viability in the frozen samples evaluated at 30 and 150 min after thawing are shown in Tables 4 and 5, respectively. There were significant differences among the males (P<0.01) for TM, PM and viable spermatozoa, respectively. The individual values for TM, PM and sperm viability in the frozen samples evaluated at 30 and 150 min after thawing are shown in Tables 4 and 5, respectively. There were significant differences among the males (P<0.01) for TM, PM and viable spermatozoa, respectively. The individual values for TM, PM and sperm viability in the frozen samples evaluated at 30 and 150 min after thawing are shown in Tables 4 and 5, respectively. There were significant differences among the males (P<0.01) for TM, PM and viable spermatozoa, respectively. The individual values for TM, PM and sperm viability in the frozen samples evaluated at 30 and 150 min after thawing are shown in Tables 4 and 5, respectively. There were significant differences among the males (P<0.01) for TM, PM and viable spermatozoa, respectively.
influenced by the cooling rate at either 30 or 150 min. There were significant differences among the males \( (P<0.05) \), and the interaction of the male and the cooling rate was not significant. Values in the different males for VCL, VSL, LIN and ALH ranged from 146.3 to 161.4 µm/sec, from 88.9 to 101.5 µm/sec, from 56.1 to 66.2% and from 4.9 to 5.9 µm for 30 min and from 115 to 155.4 µm/sec, from 67.2 to 86.3 µm/sec, from 54 to 61.1% and from 4.8 to 5.8 µm for 150 min, respectively.

### Discussion

To optimize the canine semen cryopreservation protocol by reducing the time necessary for this procedure, we evaluated the effect of a rapid cooling rate protocol on the quality of frozen-thawed spermatozoa. To the best of our knowledge, the present work provides the first evidence that dog spermatozoa are capable of surviving rapid cooling rates (2.25 C/min) before freezing with the Uppsala method. While in the traditional Uppsala protocol, semen reaches 5 C in approximately 90 min, this rapid cooling protocol would support a considerable reduction in the time required for the process of freezing dog spermatozoa, as it allows an interval of approximately 8 min between 23 and 5 C.

It has been reported that the spermatozoa of several species require a long period of cooling before freezing to develop maximal resistance to the effects of freezing \cite{21} and to reduce the well-known “cold shock” process \cite{8}. In dogs, there is a shortage of studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.</th>
<th>Individual mean percentages of total motility, progressive motility and viability at 30 min after thawing in frozen-thawed semen samples frozen using different cooling rates and an unfractionated glycerol addition protocol (experiment 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Cooling rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are the LSM ± SEM of five replicates per male. * Different letters within the same column indicate significant differences \( (P<0.05) \) among the males.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.</th>
<th>Individual mean percentages of total motility, progressive motility and viability at 150 min after thawing in frozen-thawed semen samples frozen using different cooling rates and a non-fractionated glycerol addition protocol (experiment 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Cooling rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Control</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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regarding the periods used for cooling to 5°C [22, 23]. To minimize the cold shock process, the majority of the protocols for dog semen cryopreservation include long cooling periods from 23°C to 5°C. The most frequently employed period is from 60 to 120 min, corresponding to approximate mean cooling rates within the range of 0.15–0.3°C/min [5, 13–16, 24]. Our results clearly demonstrated that the use of rapid cooling at a rate of 2.25°C/min prior to freezing provides the same post-thaw sperm quality, in terms of motility and viability, as the values obtained with the use of a control rate of 0.2°C/min. The results for the sperm quality after thawing, in terms of the motility and viability in all of the experimental groups were relatively high, adequate for artificial insemination and comparable with those reported recently in other studies performed in frozen-thawed canine semen using the Uppsala method [25–27]. In addition, we did not observe differences among the groups in the quality of the movement parameters VCL, LIN and ALH, which have been described as indicators of a hyperactivated motility pattern and a pre-capacitation status [28]. Therefore, we suggest that use of the rapid cooling rate did not induce a hyperactivation sperm motility pattern after thawing in comparison with the control cooling rate. Regardless of the experimental group, there was a decrease in sperm quality as a result of incubation after thawing at 38°C, which was especially evident in the percentages of total and progressive motility. Our results are in agreement with those described by other authors [9] and indicate that frozen semen should be used as quickly as possible after thawing.

The positive results obtained using the rapid cooling rate prior to freezing in this study are in agreement with other reports on other species of mammals, such as the boar and red deer [17, 18], showing that dog spermatozoa might be particularly resistant to cold shock during the cooling (to 5°C) process. This resistance of sperm cells to thermal stress may be attributed to the constituents of the plasmatic membrane of canine spermatozoa, which has a low ratio of polyunsaturated to saturated phospholipid fatty acids [7, 22]. Moreover, it should also be considered that the egg yolk included in the extenders for sperm cryopreservation is responsible for membrane stabilization during the cool-down period [17, 29, 30], reducing the damage that results from the cold shock process. The results of the present study suggested that the presence of 20% egg yolk in the sperm’s surrounding media is also adequate when a rapid cooling rate prior to freezing is used.

Our results regarding the glycerol addition protocol suggest that a protocol for addition of fractionated or unfractionated glycerol is adequate when canine semen is frozen by the Uppsala method using a rapid cooling rate of 2.25°C/min. Based in our attempt to optimize the procedure as much as possible, we believe that a protocol for addition of unfractionated glycerol at 5°C may be more practical because it is only necessary to prepare an extender containing glycerol. This is because it is only necessary to prepare an extender containing glycerol. In other species, such as the boar and red deer [17, 18], the glycerol addition procedure does not affect the feasibility of a rapid protocol.

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In clinical practice, the ejaculates from different males are cryopreserved individually, and differences in freezability have been reported among individual dogs [30–32]. With this in mind and in an effort to adapt the rapid cryopreservation procedure for a practical application in dog breeding, a second experiment was performed. Based on the results of the first experiment, the feasibility of use of a rapid cooling rate in different males was evaluated in combination with an unfractionated glycerol addition protocol. In this regard, our results suggest that the rapid protocol is also adequate for individual applications because the different dogs evaluated in this study did not exhibit different responses to the rapid cooling rate of 2.25°C/min prior to freezing. Regardless of the cooling rate used, all of the dogs included in our study showed adequate percentages of sperm motility and viability in the frozen-thawed semen to be used for AI.

As expected and regardless of the cooling rate used, significant differences among individuals in sperm cryosurvival were found in sperm motility and viability at 30 min after thawing. However, these differences in sperm motility were not observed after 150 min of incubation at 38°C. In some dogs, a difference in thermoresistance and a higher decline in sperm motility around the time of incubation after thawing were observed, most likely due to the variations in the metabolic exhaustion of the spermatozoa. One explanation for this fact may be related to the finding that dog ejaculates, as in other species, maintain a constant structure of different motile sperm subpopulations during cold storage [33], after freezing and after thawing [15, 34]. These subpopulations, which are not distributed uniformly among male dogs [35], include spermatozoa that differ in their physiological states, functional integrity and quality of sperm kinematics [34].

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that dog spermatozoa could be cryopreserved using a rapid cooling rate of 2.25°C/min prior to freezing in combination with the Uppsala method, obtaining values of sperm quality comparable with those obtained by using a control cooling rate. Thus, use of this rapid cooling rate allows a considerable reduction in the time spent on the procedure. Moreover, the glycerol addition procedure does not affect the feasibility of a rapid protocol.

Acknowledgments

This study was supported by the University of Murcia (R-549/2009) and the Seneca Foundation of Murcia (GERM04543/07).

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