

Carbon Monoxide in Plasma Medicine and Agriculture: Just a Foe or a Potential Friend?

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ABSTRACT: Carbon monoxide is infamously known for its toxicity when administrated in high doses. In this article, we review some of the evidence for therapeutic effects of CO used in biology, when CO is delivered in small quantities. It is argued that plasmas in this context are an attractive *in situ* source for the process of alleviating the risks related to CO storage. Moreover, synergic effects of CO with other reactive species produced by plasma may be used in the future for applications such as bacterial infection, wound healing, and cancer treatment.

KEY WORDS: carbon monoxide, plasma medicine, plasma agriculture, plasma sources

I. INTRODUCTION

Non-equilibrium, low-temperature plasmas are weakly ionized gases that have been very successfully developed for use in different fields including microelectronics,¹ lighting,² combustion,³ nanoscience,⁴ and spacecraft propulsion.⁵ In the early 21st century, researchers first reported that plasma could potentially be used for biomedical applications. Stoffels et al.⁶ were likely the first to show the potential of cold near-room-temperature plasmas in medicine by demonstrating their capability to detach mammalian cells without causing necrotic cell destruction.⁶ This study sparked investigations on the potential of plasmas for medical applications, which evolved into a new research field of its own, later termed Plasma Medicine. Related research is now performed for different fields, including cancer treatment, wound healing, blood coagulation, dentistry, cosmetology, sterilization, and decontamination, among others.^{7–15} Many studies have been successful, and the first clinical trials were undertaken in the last few years.^{16–19} Recently, such plasmas have also been studied in regard to their use in the field of agriculture as insecticides, for destruction of bacteria and fungi, and plant-growth enhancement.^{15,20} The success of plasmas has come far as a result of their versatility and capacity to generate large amounts of reactive species at low gas temperature (< 40°C), combined with electric field, photons (infrared [IR], visible, and ultraviolet [UV] light), and charged species. These represent the plasma components schematized in Fig. 1. In the case of direct plasma treatment, the interaction between gas flows and liquids needs to be taken into account as well.

Plasmas (i.e., gas electrical discharges) used in medicine are typically generated using gas mixtures based on He, Ar, O₂, N₂, or simply air. The latter is either synthetic

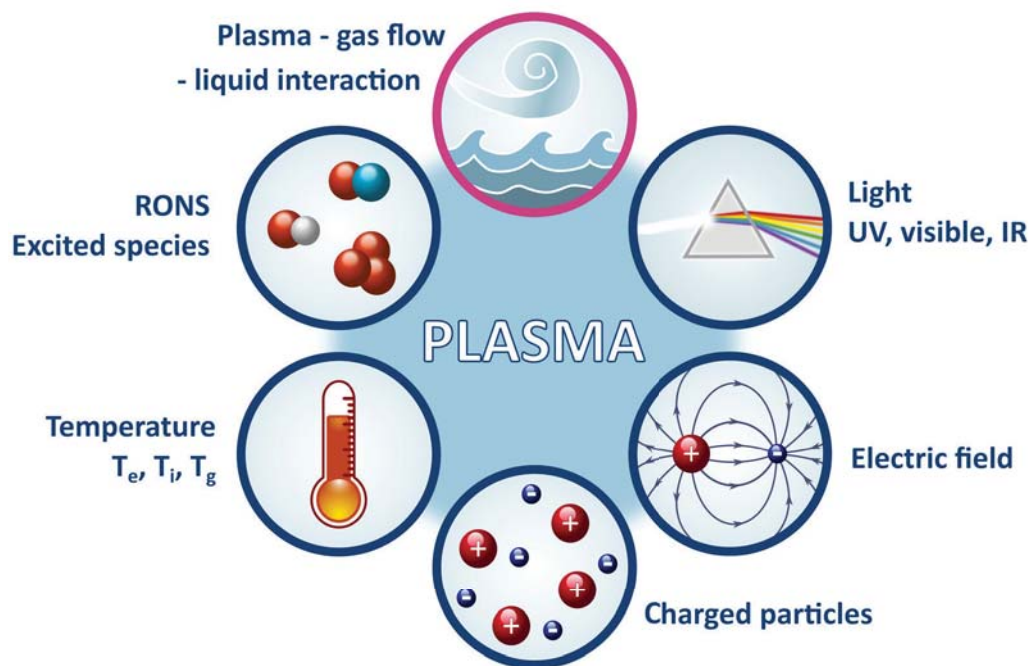


FIG. 1: Illustration of the plasma components and plasma interactions with a (biological) target. The plasma components can be separated into several categories: electric field, temperatures, electrons and ions, photons, and reactive species. Plasma-target interactions consist of gas flow–liquid interactions, dissolution of species in a liquid, and surface (and volume) reactivity. IR, Infrared; RONS, reactive oxygen and nitrogen species; UV, ultraviolet.

(~ 80% N_2 and 20% O_2) or already naturally present (N_2 78.08%, O_2 20.95%, Ar 0.934%, and CO_2 400 parts per million [ppm]) around the plasma and that can mix into the latter via convective processes. The plasma generates a lot of highly reactive neutral species, such as atomic O, N species, or He and Ar metastable states, and also rather stable neutral species such as nitric oxide (NO), NO_2 , and O_3 . Due to the presence of 400 ppm of CO_2 in natural air (as well as the presence of water vapor), the formation of other species such as CN, CO, OH, NH, and H_2O_2 can additionally occur.

Since Claude Bernard's discovery of carbon monoxide (CO) toxicity,²¹ this molecule is mostly considered and known for its adverse effects on the human body and its reactivity with hemoglobin.²² However, Marks et al.,²³ first suggested that CO may in fact have a physiological function as well and that, like NO, CO is an essential signaling molecule in humans.^{24,25} Since then, a multitude of studies have confirmed these hypotheses, and CO has been found in many experiments to have positive effects for the treatment of several diseases.^{26,27} At small doses, CO presents some beneficial effects, such as anti-inflammatory action, antiapoptotic effects, antiproliferative properties, and protective properties for tissues from hypoxia and reperfusion injury.²⁸

Many studies, especially in the fields of CO₂ lasers or energy storage by CO₂ conversion, showed that CO can be easily produced with non-equilibrium plasmas.^{29,30} The aims of this article are to (1) discuss the potential for using plasmas as a CO source for treating various afflictions, both in animals (humans included in that category) and plants; (2) point out that in some cases, CO molecules combined with plasmas will have some beneficial effects in medicine and agriculture, thanks to their possible synergetic effects with other species that are produced by the plasma, such as NO and reactive oxygen and nitrogen species; and (3) advocate for future studies on the development of new CO plasma sources relevant for therapeutic conditions. We also discuss some configurations that may be important for plasma medicine (i.e., direct delivery with other reactive species from the plasma, remote configurations to serve as a [pure] gaseous CO source, and plasma-activated liquids).

Because CO is highly toxic and even lethal at high doses, we start with a review of its toxicity and the mechanisms leading to its adverse effects on human physiology. We then discuss official regulations for the degrees of safe exposure to CO concentrations in the environment, based on medical investigations. In the section Benefits of CO in Medicine and Agriculture, we show that some of the evidence points to a beneficial role of CO in medicine as a signaling molecule, and we highlight some initial clinical trials. We also give a brief discussion of biochemical pathways of CO in cells and tissues, with reference to relevant works/reviews in the field. We conclude by discussing potential CO plasma sources for medicine and some of their benefits and differences compared to “traditional” CO sources.

II. TOXICITY OF THE CO MOLECULE

CO is a tasteless, odorless, and non-irritating gas that is toxic at high concentrations. It originates generally from incomplete combustion of hydrocarbons. Once in the lungs, CO binds to hemoglobin instead of O₂ and forms carboxyhemoglobin (COHb). Because the affinity of human hemoglobin for CO is 210 times greater than that for O₂ (affinity rates depend on the animal; e.g., it is only 50 times greater for mouse hemoglobin), the presence of oxygen in the blood decreases, leading to tissue hypoxia.^{31,32} Due to their high metabolic rates, the brain and heart are the two first organs to show damage resulting from lack of oxygen.³¹ CO is not only dangerous because of its high affinity to hemoglobin, but also because of its slow kinetics for release from hemoglobin.³¹ The CO elimination half-time is ~ 150 min, whereas the recovery time (the point at which a patient feels “back to normal”) can vary from hours to days.³³

The first symptoms that a victim will experience after mild CO exposure (10%–20% COHb) are exhaustion and headache and then dizziness, nausea, and dyspnea. At moderate exposure (30%–40% COHb), signs include visual disturbances, confusion, syncope, and seizure. The victim will finally enter coma leading to death if the COHb rate rises to above 60%. Figure 2 lists CO poisoning symptoms as a function of COHb blood level. One can see that the effects of CO exposure depend very strongly on exposure time as well as CO concentration in the air. Quite interestingly, short CO exposure times to relatively high doses (≤ 1000 ppm) lead to almost no adverse physiological effects because of the time necessary for CO exchange with O₂ in the lungs and fixation by hemoglobin.

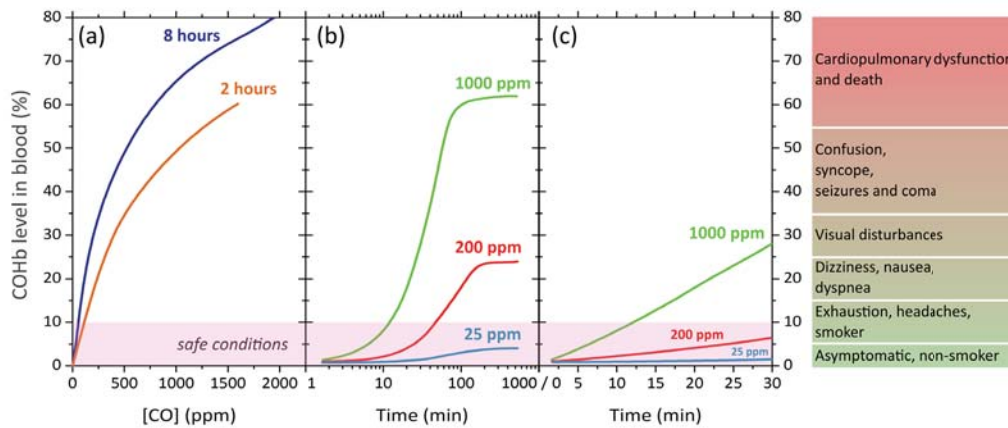


FIG. 2: CO safety. (a) COHb level in blood versus concentration of CO in air after 2 h exposure (orange line) and 8 h exposure (blue line); (b) COHb level in blood versus CO inhalation time for three different CO concentrations: 25 ppm (blue curve), 200 ppm (red curve), and 1000 ppm (green curve); (c) enlargement of (b) for short times. CO poisoning symptoms (right) are listed as a function of COHb percentage. COHb, carboxyhemoglobin; ppm, parts per million. (Adapted from Peterson and Steward, Bruce and Bruce, Omaye, Varon et al., and Raub et al.^{34–39})

Exposure concentration limits in a work environment depend on the country and are listed in Table 1 for long exposure times (> 8 h). The limits are all in the safety range and do not lead to apparent symptoms, meaning that COHb in the blood is < 10%. Those CO limits can be crossed if exposure time is shorter, because the important parameter is not CO concentration, but rather, COHb blood level. One must note that heavy smokers may have as much as 10%–15% COHb in their blood.⁴⁰ The graph in Fig. 2(b) compares COHb blood level for different CO concentrations of 25, 200, and 1000 ppm and shows that 10% COHb is reached at 12 min for 1000 ppm, 50 min for 200 ppm, and never for 25 ppm, because the hemoglobin has time to liberate enough CO before the COHb level reaches 10%.

Mann has pointed out that the exposure limits given by authorities are probably overestimated.²⁴ Mayr et al. showed that inhalation of 500 ppm CO for 1 h did not have any significant effect on vital parameters, whereas the American Environmental Protec-

TABLE 1: CO exposure limits at work for different countries for long term exposure⁴¹

Country	CO (ppm)
France (Circulaire, 1985)	50
United States (ACGIH, 1991)	25
Germany (MAK)	30

Long term exposure: typically defined as a working day period of 8 hours.

MAK = Maximale Arbeitsplatz-Konzentration (in German, meaning “maximum concentration at the workplace”)

ACGIH, Association Advancing Occupational and Environmental Health; ppm, parts per millions.

tion Agency gives 330 ppm as the maximum 60-min exposure and meanwhile greater exposures can possibly result in death.⁴²

CO creation with plasma requires the use of CO₂ as the feed gas. As mentioned above, CO₂ is a tasteless, odorless, and irritating gas that at high concentrations (> 20%) can become lethal. Inhalation of CO₂ increases CO₂ partial pressure in blood and then induces a pH decrease due to acid–base disequilibrium, resulting in some damage to the kidneys, lungs, heart, and central nervous system. CO₂ poisoning symptoms as a function of percentage of CO₂ in air are listed in Fig. 3. The exposure limit at long term, that is, from 8 to 10 h, is fixed at 5000 ppm, whereas the short-term exposure limit depends on the country. Table 2 lists exposure limits as a function of country.

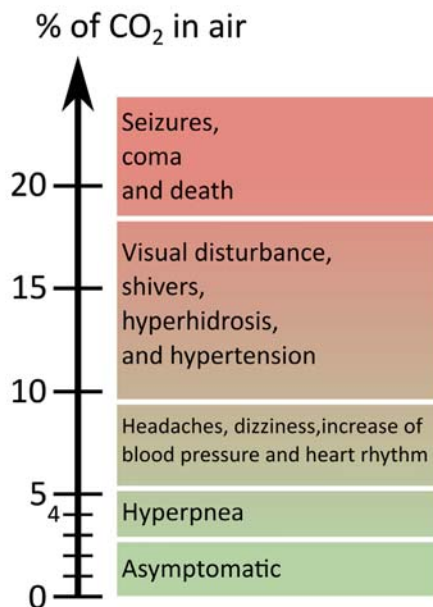


FIG. 3: CO₂ poisoning symptoms listed as a function of percentage of CO₂ in air, based on the Base de Données Fiches Toxicologiques⁴³

TABLE 2: CO₂ exposure limits in the work environment for different countries^{43,44}

Country	Work day exposure limit (ppm)	Short-term exposure limit (ppm/min)
United States (ACGIH, 1991)	5000	30,000/15
Germany (MAK)	5000	10,000/60
Sweden	5000	10,000/15
United Kingdom	5000	15,000/10

ACGIH, Association Advancing Occupational and Environmental Health; ppm, parts per millions.

III. BENEFITS OF CO IN MEDICINE AND AGRICULTURE

A. Roles of CO *In Vivo*

The major source of CO in mammals is the oxidation of heme (which is the name for the complexed ferrous ion Fe^{2+} with porphyrin) by the heme oxygenase (HO) enzyme. HO catalyzes the oxidation of heme to CO, Fe^{2+} , and biliverdin (bile pigment), accounting for ~ 86% of the CO produced in humans. The remaining 14% comes from a mixture of sources, including photo-oxidation, lipid peroxidation, xenobiotics, and bacteria.²⁵

CO preferentially binds with heme- or transition metal-containing proteins.⁴⁵ In addition to its well-known interactions with hemoglobin, targets of CO can include cytochrome oxidase, nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate oxidase, NO synthase, and mitochondrial complexes.²⁵ CO is known to activate guanylyl cyclase but is about 80 times less effective than NO and leads to the formation of guanosine 3,5-monophosphate (cGMP), a secondary messenger that affects, for instance, ionic transport⁴⁶ and is involved in vasodilation. CO appears to modulate the activation state of mitogen-activated protein kinases, which are critical for cellular signal transduction in response to stress and inflammation.⁴⁷ CO also seems to be involved in down-regulation of extracellular signal-regulated kinases 1 and 2 and in c-Jun amino-terminal kinase pathways. It is important to note, however, that although the crystal structures of these proteins are still unknown, but they would not contain any metallic ion center. Considering the lack of reactivity of CO with amino acids, the mechanisms of interaction of CO with those proteins at the molecular level thus remain unclear if the absence of a metal complex is confirmed.²⁵

Many potential functions of CO have been observed *in vivo*.²⁴ The following are a few illustrative and significant examples.

1. *Anti-Inflammatory*

CO inhibits the activation of monocytes, macrophages, and leukocytes *in vitro* and *in vivo* and suppresses the ability of T cells to proliferate.⁴⁵ Chronically inflamed tissue is characterized by the infiltration of mononuclear immune cells, including monocytes and macrophages, that continuously generate inflammatory mediators such as NO. CO has been shown to inhibit NO production in macrophages and reduce inflammation.²⁵

2. *Vasodilator*

CO has been found to have important effects on vascular function. Released by vascular cells, CO regulates blood flow via inhibition of vasomotor tone (i.e., the tension in smooth muscle inside the walls of blood vessels, particularly in arteries) by way of molecular signaling with vascular smooth-muscle cells.⁴⁸

3. *Antiapoptotic*

CO reduces apoptosis in renal tubular cells infected by bacterial toxins,⁴⁹ probably via inactivation of existing inducible NO synthase (iNOS) (overexpression of iNOS leads

to cytotoxic effects) via interaction with its heme iron moiety.⁵⁰ CO is also antiapoptotic for endothelial cells, hepatocytes, and cardiomyocytes and preventing in this way cell and tissue injury.^{51–53}

4. Antiproliferative

CO has been shown to block cell proliferation of a number of cell types including cancer cells, T cells, and vascular smooth-muscle cells.⁴⁰

5. Hypoxia

CO can reduce side effects of hypoxia (the deprivation of adequate oxygen supply at the tissue level). Clark showed that cardiac cells pretreated with a CO-releasing molecule (CO-RM) became more resistant to the damage caused by hypoxia reoxygenation and oxidative stress.⁵⁴

6. Inhibitor of Human Platelet Aggregation

Platelet aggregation is inhibited in the presence of CO gas point.⁵⁵ Slow release of CO was found to be the most efficient and CO can thus be used as an anti-thrombotic drug.⁵⁶

These specific actions at the level of tissues and organs allow the use of designing strategies for CO in treating various diseases or for circumventing side effects due to medical treatments. In the following section, a review of some of these applications shows the variety of actions that this simple gaseous molecule can have at tissue and organ levels.

B. Application of CO in Medicine

Several review articles have focused on potential applications of CO for various models of diseases. For a more extensive overview, we refer, for instance, to Mann,²⁴ Motterlini and Otterbein,⁵⁷ and Ling et al.⁵⁸ Various studies on the application of CO in animal models with positive results include the following cases.

1. Suppression of Organ Graft Rejection

CO as a gas (into saturated solutions) can be used as a protective adjuvant that may be added into preservation solutions before transplantation.⁵⁹ CO additionally protects against ischemia/reperfusion injury associated with transplantation.⁶⁰

2. Cardiopulmonary Bypass Surgery

Inhaled CO provides pulmonary anti-inflammatory and anti-apoptotic effects and prevents acute lung injury and acute respiratory distress syndrome during cardiopulmonary bypass surgery.⁶¹

3. Pulmonary Hypertension

CO exposure can reverse established hypertension, resulting in near-normal pressures and heart weights. In addition, CO induces a remodulation of the vascular system.⁶²

4. Bacterial Infection

Sepsis-induced death associated with *Enterococcus faecalis* was reversed by overexpression of HO-1; inflammatory response (i.e., the number of circulating inflammatory cells) was not reduced, but bacterial clearance was enhanced via an increase in phagocytosis and antimicrobial response.⁶³ A CO-RM was also observed to exert bactericidal activity on *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*.⁶⁴ Interestingly, Motterlini and Oetterbein noted that CO has no direct apparent effect on bacteria survival, but it would only enhance the killing of bacteria via macrophages.⁵⁷

5. Wound Healing

The literature shows that HO-1 and CO exogenous application accelerated wound healing in mice due in part to their anti-inflammatory properties. In addition, an increase in vascularization was seen.^{65,66}

6. Pancreatic Cancer

CO was found *in vitro* to have antiproliferative effects on human pancreatic cancer cells.⁶⁷

The examples listed above are only a few selected cases wherein significant improvements after treatment with CO were observed. Other cases include cases of hemorrhagic shock, rheumatoid arthritis, acute liver failure, postoperative ileus, chronic colitis, and asthma.⁵⁷ Most studies showing benefits in the cases listed above were performed with either exogenous CO gas or CO-RMs in mouse or rat models and in pigs. Following successful preclinical tests, the next phase is testing humans *in vivo*, and several clinical trials are in fact now being performed, with some already in phase II or even phase III.^{24,58} Bathoorn et al., for instance, observed anti-inflammatory effects of CO on patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.⁶⁸ In conclusion, the results discussed here indicate that CO carries much potential as a therapeutic molecule, and its future in clinical treatments is already very promising. However, the role of its mode of delivery still needs further study.

C. Applications of CO in Agriculture

The toxicity of CO atmosphere on seed germination was studied in 1904 by Richards and MacDougal.⁶⁹ For 90% or more of CO atmosphere, these researchers observed a complete inhibition of seed growth or moderate germination followed by death.

With an atmosphere of ~ 70% of CO, germination of seeds occurred, but consequent growth and development were restricted. For pregerminated seeds, the authors found an overall inhibition of seed development. Still, in the case of wheat, they reported a comparable length of seedling compared to the control experiment in air, but with limited secondary root development. Below the circle of adventitious roots ordinarily developed in corn seedlings, a considerable number of supernumerary secondary roots arose without order.

Despite the earlier overall negative effects of CO on plants, its role at low doses and more particularly in saturated solutions has been more recently investigated. Several studies indicate that CO is involved in several physiological processes and is generated as a signaling molecule in response to abiotic and oxidative stresses. Abiotic stress includes excessive salinity, heavy metals, drought, and UV radiation (see He and He⁷⁰ and Jin et al.⁷¹ and references therein).

Liu et al. showed that exogenous CO aqueous solution can alleviate salt-induced inhibition of rice seed germination.⁷² Ling et al.⁷³ showed similarly that CO aqueous solution mitigates salt-induced inhibition of wheat root growth and suppresses programmed cell death by inhibiting superoxide anion overproduction. Siegel et al.⁷⁴ were the first to report that CO can promote seed germination. CO has been also found to induce an increase in lateral root formation in several types of seeds.⁷⁵⁻⁷⁹ The direct role of CO was confirmed by Guo et al.,⁸⁰ who observed delayed root hair development for the tomato HO-1 mutant *yg-2*, which is defective in CO generation. Cao et al.⁷⁶ additionally showed that for rapeseed, CO is directly involved in the endogenous production of NO by adding specific scavengers for the CO molecule and an inhibitor of the NO synthase when measuring NO. They concluded that CO-induced lateral root development in rapeseed seedlings is NO dependent and that CO intervenes as a trigger for NO endogenous production.

Yannarelli et al.⁸¹ showed an increase of HO-1 expression in soybean plants following exposure to UV-B radiation. They related HO-1 expression as a response to the formation of reactive oxygen species to protect the cell against oxidative damage. Xie et al.⁸² studied the *Arabidopsis* HY1 mutant (deficient in HO-1) and found UV-C hypersensitivity and down-regulation of antioxidant defenses. Another example of the role of CO in plants is the observation that CO can alleviate cadmium-induced stress in *Medicago sativa* seedlings by activating glutathione metabolism.⁸³ Similarly, the administration of a CO solution rescued mercury (Hg)-induced lipid peroxidation and root growth inhibition in alfalfa.⁸⁴

Many more studies on the potential effects of CO have been reported in the literature, and we do not list them all here (more detail may be found in Jin et al.,⁷¹ for instance). The examples cited above give only a flavor of the surprisingly wide range of applications for which CO was tested with apparent positive results. However, the biochemical pathways of CO in plants appear to be (much) less understood than the process in animals; the same holds true for the NO molecule.⁸⁵ However, although only phenomenological and in an early stage, the current understanding of CO biochemistry in plants highlights CO as a molecule having similar roles as those in animals and with similar importance.⁸⁶

IV. CO SOURCES

A. Current Production and Delivery Modes of CO in Medicine

Nowadays, the two main systems of delivering CO in medicine are through inhalation and CO-RMs. Inhalation of a small amount of CO has already proven its efficiency and has been used in clinical applications.^{28,87} However, this technique is difficult because of the lack of control for CO local delivery and its toxicity at high concentrations, both of which depend on the patient.⁸⁸ Delivery is not local and thus affects the entire human body because of CO fixation on hemoglobin and transport in the blood. To overcome those issues, CO-RMs are being developed to target specific tissues and organs. This technique can liberate CO locally and avoid inducing elevation in CO absorption by hemoglobin. In principle, there would be no risk of CO poisoning with this technique. However, despite their promising features, CO-RMs are far from being used in clinical application and must be scrutinized. Indeed, the safety and toxicity of these molecules and their by-products are still not fully understood.⁸⁷⁻⁸⁹

Other existing techniques that are currently being developed and/or investigated include hemoglobin-based CO carriers, CO-saturated red blood cells, and liquid solution presaturated with CO injection.⁸⁹ However all such techniques suffer from the unknown adverse or synergic effects of the transport/delivery process, their by-products, and elevated CO absorption by hemoglobin. As mentioned by Foresti et al., clinicians do not yet know whether these techniques will ever be used as therapeutic strategic approaches.⁸⁷ Because of that, some authors in fact believe that the future still lies in CO gaseous administration. For such a purpose, only one device, called the Covox Delivery System (DS), has been approved for hospital use.⁵⁷ The Covox DS ensures that the delivery of CO, with a rate measured in milligrams per hour, is maintained on a breath-by-breath basis. Finally, in botany, we note that in addition to using compressed CO gas bottles (that are not easily transported in hospitals for obvious safety reasons), CO is usually produced via a chemical route. For instance, Cao et al.⁷⁶ prepared CO gas by heating formic acid (HCOOH) with concentrated sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄). The aqueous CO solution was obtained by bubbling the CO gas for at least 15 min to saturate the solution. The use of concentrated acids and highly irritating species such as formic acid will not likely be very welcomed into a hospital environment. This leads us to the conclusion that room still exists for new technologies for local gaseous CO production and delivery to specific organs/parts.

B. Plasmas as CO Sources

As mentioned previously, the two main drawbacks of current CO delivery methods are the increase in COHb level and/or the uncertainties on the toxicity of the molecules used.^{24,89} The pharmacodynamics and pharmacokinetics of gaseous CO are well known, but for CO-RMs this is not the case.⁴⁵ To the best of our knowledge, one patented device has been approved for use in a hospital setting.⁵⁷ Thus, the development of new devices

would be helpful for delivery of CO alone or with other species relevant for medicinal therapy. In this section, we present some plasma devices as potential CO sources (based on atmospheric pressure plasma sources with a CO₂ admixture) that may offer alternative, flexible solutions (e.g., for external application on wounds, for instance). In addition, because of the intrinsic properties of plasmas, synergic effects can be expected in addition to the sole delivery of the CO molecule to the target (see the Conclusion, below).

1. Geometries and Delivery Modes

Plasmas have been studied for biological and medical application for almost two decades. This ionized gas has demonstrated its ability to generate a multitude of components (such as reactive species, electric field, light, and charged particles [see Fig. 1]) that can interact with living tissue. But as far as we know, plasmas have not yet specifically been used as a CO source for biomedical applications, although for several decades it has been well known that plasma can produce CO molecules. Many studies have been performed on plasma, especially for the fields of CO₂ lasers and energy storage.^{29,30} Those studies reveal that, depending on the plasma source, the amount of CO can be controlled and tuned to a very broad range, from less than 1 ppm to several 10s of percent.

Figure 4 presents a schematic of some plasma discharge reactors that could be used as CO sources. They are classified into two categories: direct and indirect plasma sources.^{90,91} A reactor is called a “direct plasma source,” if the plasma components

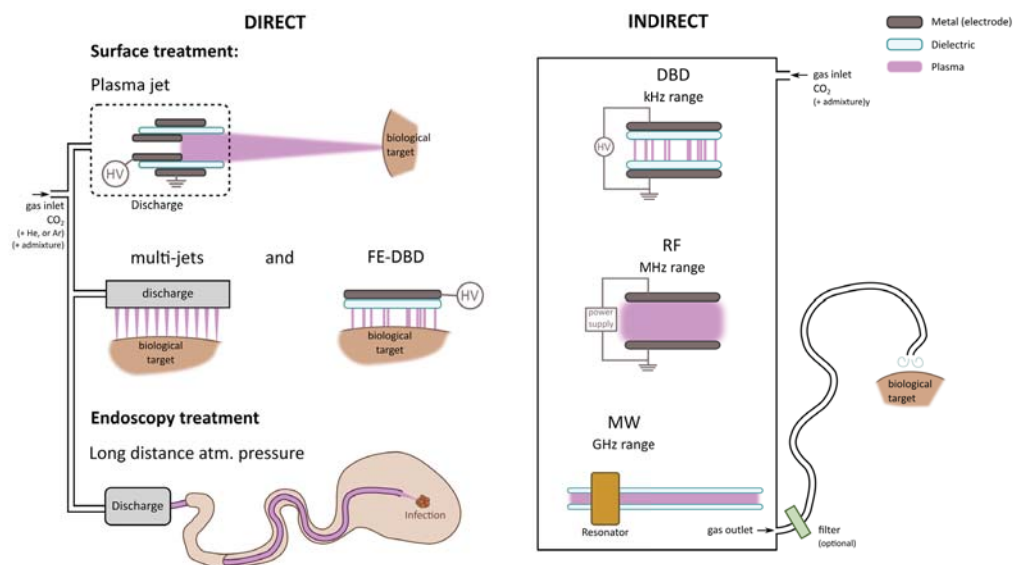


FIG. 4: Scheme of different potential plasma sources as CO sources. atm, atmospheric; DBD, dielectric barrier discharge; FE-DBD, floating electrode–dielectric barrier discharge; HV, high voltage; RF, radio frequency; MW, microwave.

(light, electric field, charged particles and reactive species [Fig. 1]) can interact with the biological target. A synergistic effect can occur with the combination of those components (discussed more in detail in the Conclusion, below). In contrast, if reactive species are the only plasma components able to interact with the target, the source is indirect. A third configuration is a hybrid source, wherein the plasma is not in direct contact with the target, but components other than reactive species, such as charged particles and light, can interact with the target. This configuration is not discussed here, but details may be found in the review of Isbary et al.⁹¹

Direct plasma source treatments can be classified into two types: at the surface or via endoscopy. Surface treatment allows treating external tissues or targeted organs after surgical protocol provides the access, whereas endoscopy treatment reaches some organs without (invasive) surgery. For instance, floating electrode–dielectric barrier discharge (FE-DBD) provides nonthermal plasma and is generated in air.⁹² Naturally, 400 ppm of CO₂ is present in air and can potentially be converted into CO, and even if conversion is complete, the concentration of CO does not exceed 400 ppm. As the treatment time range is typically from seconds to several minutes, COHb levels will not exceed 10%, meaning that conditions are safe.

Plasma jets are devices that deliver a non-thermal plasma outside the confinement of electrodes. The plasma propagates in the surrounding air and can reach very long distances (up to 10 cm).^{93,94} Contrary to FE-DBD, the feed gas is generally a noble gas such as helium or argon. Because the plasma propagates in air, it can convert a small part of the CO₂ present into CO. The amount of CO produced can be easily increased and controlled by adding a small percentage of CO₂ through the discharge. The plasma diameter is very small, from some hundreds of micrometers to a few millimeters, and allows tissues to be treated locally. The geometry of the plasma jet represented in Fig. 4 is a coaxial DBD,^{93,95} but this is only one example among numerous existing configurations.⁹⁶

If wider treatment surfaces are required, one can use a multi-jet. This device generates several plasma jets that form a pattern. The latter pattern can be modified according to the application to form, for instance, a line, matrix, or circle.^{97–100} In addition, other plasma devices may be used, such as the atmospheric pressure plasma radio frequency (RF) torch in a “shower-head” configuration that can operate in argon with small admixtures of molecular gases in the < 1% range.^{101,102}

To avoid surgery for a patient, an endoscopic method may be used. Some devices, generally based on the plasma jet configuration, can propagate the plasma in a capillary tube for several meters.^{103,104} These devices are fed with noble gas and in the body can result in He or Ar gas accumulation and then to an arc formation (because of the low potential threshold for electrical breakdown). Winter et al. showed recently that CO₂ or air shielding avoids this effect.¹⁰⁴ Even if gas shielding is not required for plasma jets in an open environment, it is worth noting that gas shielding offers an additional tool for controlling plasma chemistry (in addition to adding gases directly through the plasma). In any case, CO₂ gas shielding locally increases the amount of CO, and its biological relevance should be studied in the future.

Unlike direct plasma sources, any kind of (non)equilibrium plasma can be used as an indirect source as long as the reactive species are the only plasma components that interact with the target. The gas temperature in the enclosures does not need to be at room temperature, because temperature will cool down during transport to the target via the gas flow. CO is produced by plasma in its conversion of the CO₂ gas initially injected through the reactor. CO, which reacts very slowly with other species in the atmosphere,¹⁰⁵ is essentially chemically inert in water due to the large activation energy needed for the water–gas shift reaction at room temperature.¹⁰⁶ Because CO is a stable molecule, it can be transported for long distances to a biological target. A direct correlation between fluxes from the plasma and doses delivered to the tissues can then, in principle, be made in a straightforward fashion, independently of the exact production mode.

Indirect sources can be classified based on the frequency of the applied voltage: DBD (single shots to several kilohertz), RF discharge (some megahertz), and microwave discharge (some gigahertz). The feed gas can be pure CO₂ or CO₂ with some admixture. Noble gases dilute the amount of CO produced, whereas molecular gases including oxygen and nitrogen allow for the production of other species, such as NO or O₃, that will additionally affect a biological target.^{8,107} According to the reactor, gas mixture, and plasma parameters, the concentration of CO can be tuned from some parts per million to 10s of percents. For instance, a small DBD in pure CO₂ that generates only one or two filaments produces some hundreds ppm of CO,^{108–110} and the conversion rate with a microwave plasma can rise to > 60%.^{111,112}

As explained in a previous subsection, CO-saturated solutions are among the current methods used for CO delivery in medicine.^{113,114} One drawback of this method, however, is the use of a CO tank, which can be dangerous in a medical environment if a leak should occur. Plasmas may be used as a local, inline CO source instead of being used with a CO tank. An indirect plasma source in pure CO₂ can provide a very large amount of CO (> 60%).¹¹² In the afterglow of the plasma, CO can be separated from the other species present in the gas phase using membranes or reactive absorption processes.^{115–117} The gas is then bubbled into a liquid, or the plasma can be generated directly in contact with the solution, as shown in Fig. 5. Such a system would be safer than using compressed CO gas bottles or high-temperature processes.

The combination of CO-saturated solution with plasma-activated water (PAW) may be beneficial for medical or plant treatments as well. For instance, CO may reduce an inflammatory response, whereas PAW would disinfect the tissue thanks to its antibacterial properties.^{118,119} PAW is produced by the interaction of a plasma source with a liquid. Its low pH and the presence of NO₂⁻ and H₂O₂ are usually invoked to explain its bactericidal effect.¹¹⁸ Figure 5 presents an example of such a system, wherein a discharge is in contact with the water surface,¹¹⁸ but it exists among other configurations.¹²⁰ Generally, water is treated by the plasma, but other types of liquid, such as phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) solution, can also be activated by the plasma.¹¹⁹

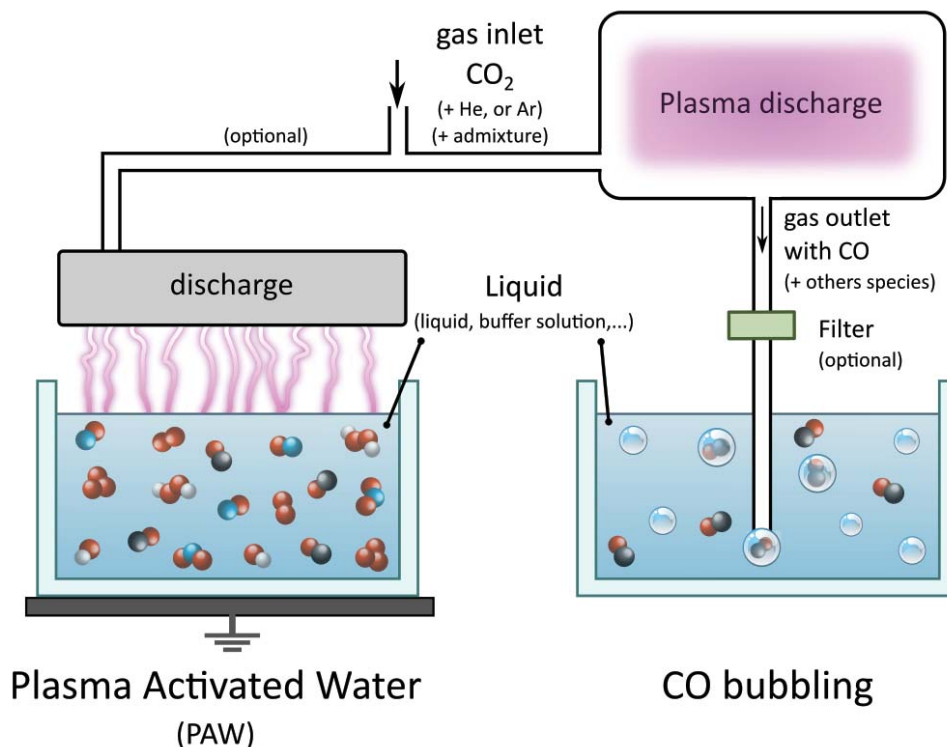


FIG. 5: Scheme of plasma-activated water and CO bubbling

We have briefly discussed several plasma reactors that can generate CO (and other species) in various configurations. This non-exhaustive list demonstrates their flexibility, and it is important to mention that almost all of these devices are already being investigated for specific applications in plasma medicine. It is hoped that using these plasmas with CO for *in vitro* or *in vivo* experiments will then require only minimal changes.

2. Plasma Diagnostics

Measuring CO can be challenging, especially when performing local non-invasive measurements on plasmas at atmospheric pressure. Such plasmas are generally non-homogenous and have a filamentary structure that render them difficult to diagnose *in situ*. Moreover, plasma dimensions can be very small, ranging from some hundreds of micrometers (the typical diameter of a filament) to centimeters, and they are influenced by the presence of any metal or dielectric surfaces that are within close range. However, the CO molecule has the advantage of stability at atmospheric pressure and room temperature and can therefore be easily measured *ex situ*. Listed in Table 3 are different types of diagnostics and their characteristics. Below, we discuss these techniques in some more detail.

TABLE 3: Characteristics of various diagnostic techniques for CO density measurements

Techniques	<i>In situ</i>	Absolute density	Sensitivity	Time resolution
FTIR	No	Yes	Medium	s to min
Laser absorption	Difficult	Yes	High	100 ns to ms
MS	No	Yes	Low	s to min
TALIF	Yes	Complicated	High	ns to min
GC	No	Yes	High	min
Solid sensors	No	Yes	High	s to min

FTIR, Fourier-transform infrared (spectroscopy); GC, gas chromatograph; MS, mass spectrometry; TALIF, two-photon absorption laser-induced fluorescence.

a. Residual Gas Analyzers

For plasma diagnostics, residual gas analyzers can be subdivided into mass spectrometers and gas chromatographs (GCs), based on their separation techniques. These devices usually operate on the principle that a small fraction of gas that is sampled from the volume is then sent to an analyzer. The chemical composition of reactive plasmas can be investigated by mass spectrometry using a capillary sampling orifice^{121–123} or a differentially, double-pumped micro-orifice in a molecular beam configuration.¹²⁴ Both can determine densities of stable species, but the latter can sample additional radicals. In the case of CO, which has 28 atomic mass units of molecular mass, its detection is complicated by the fact that N₂, which is naturally present in air, has the same mass. The shape of the cross sections for electron impact ionization can in theory discriminate among different species having the same mass by measuring the ionic signal for several electron energies and then distinguishing the parent ion from dissociative ionization processes.¹²⁵ CO has an ionization potential of 14 eV, whereas N₂ has an appearance ionization potential of 15.6 eV.¹²⁶ In principle then, these two species can be differentiated. However, the targeted densities of CO to be measured (< 1000 ppm) for any practical application in plasma medicine makes its signal discrimination from noise highly difficult. Thus, this technique appears to be unsuitable.¹²⁷

GCs are routinely used in medicine for measuring the quantity of CO in blood (see Sundin and Larsson,¹²⁸ for instance). In the gas phase, various GCs can detect CO with high sensitivity.¹²⁹ The downside of GCs is usually their very slow response time (several minutes). In the category of residual gas analyzers, we may also add solid-state gas sensors that also detect CO remotely. They have limited, but usually low, detection ranges and can give absolute densities following proper calibration procedures for given temperature ranges.¹³⁰ Their response time is slow as well.

b. Absorption Spectroscopy

IR light can interact with the CO molecule and therefore be measured by means of an absorption method that is based on the Beer–Lambert law.^{131–133} Fourier-transform IR

(FTIR) absorption spectroscopy and laser absorption, both based on this law, use, respectively, a broadband light and a laser as light source. FTIR absorption yields broad absorption spectra with low sensitivity,¹³² whereas laser absorption can measure a very small amount of CO (< 1 ppm) on a very narrow spectral range. A quantum cascade laser is generally used instead of its ancestor, the lead salt laser,¹³¹ and a temporal resolution down to 100 ns is, in principle, feasible.

Usually, it is hardly possible to use these methods *in situ* to measure CO density due to the small dimensions and the nonhomogeneity of atmospheric pressure plasmas. For low CO concentrations, a multipass cell is needed to allow increases in absorption length and method sensitivity. The diagnostic can then be remote and deliver similar results to those of gas analyzers.

c. Two-Photon Absorption Laser-Induced Fluorescence

Two-photon absorption laser-induced fluorescence (TALIF) of the CO molecule in the $B^1\Sigma^+$ state was first demonstrated by Loge et al.¹³⁴ and has since been developed to detect CO.¹³⁵ In atmospheric pressure gases, sub-ppm detection levels were reported by Aldén et al.¹³⁶ Planar laser-induced fluorescence, first developed by Haumann et al., allows two-dimensional CO density distribution mapping.¹³⁷ At high pressure, collisional quenching (mainly by CO₂ and O₂, but also by CO itself) limits the detection of CO when using nanosecond pulsed lasers,¹³⁸ and picosecond lasers are necessary at atmospheric pressure.¹³⁹ Femtosecond lasers have been recently developed in the field of TALIF diagnostics, allowing faster measurements and alleviating laser disturbance including photolytic effects.¹⁴⁰ The determination of the effective collisional quenching rate (which depends on the species present in the gas phase and on the gas temperature) makes this technique relatively difficult to use for quantitative measurements *in situ* in the plasma phase. However, both spatial and temporal resolution are excellent.

In summary, several diagnostic methods are available to measure CO concentration at various ranges, allowing control of the amount of CO produced by the plasma. Table 3 summarizes and sorts these methods as a function of their advantages and disadvantages. Local absolute-density measurements in the plasma (i.e., mapping) is complicated to achieve, due to the filamentary structure. But because the dimension of the plasma is much smaller than the dimensions of the biological target, local absolute density in plasma may not be an important criterion but nevertheless can still be obtained using TALIF. The parameter of primary biological relevance is the total amount of CO produced by the plasma. Depending on conditions, the amount can be measured with the techniques listed previously. It is important to note that those measurements are hardly feasible during treatment of an animal, because the techniques are very sensitive and must be performed in motionless conditions. However, the plasma can be calibrated ahead of time by measuring CO concentration in conditions with a similar setup, during

which every component is stabilized. On a final note, it is worth noting that despite the fact that CO is a species that is naturally present in air, no easy, straightforward method for its detection is available, and dedicated measurements are required. Considering that plasma jets or discharges in air affect the CO/CO₂ ratio at the tissue level, it will be interesting to characterize the existing sources and correlate their biological impact with other reactive species such as H₂O₂ or NO.

V. POTENTIAL SYNERGIC EFFECTS OF CO AND PLASMAS: DISCUSSION

Usual CO-based treatments now occur via inhalation of gaseous[†] CO that is then fixed in large quantities as COHb. Quite interestingly, it has been reported that CO can mediate HO-1 induction in hepatoma cells.^{45,141} Local delivery of controlled CO amounts (see Section IV.A. Plasmas as CO Sources) has the potential to activate locally the CO signaling pathways and avoid using large amounts of CO that will impact the whole organism.

Reviewing some of the clinical investigations of the CO molecule as a therapeutic species reveals its high potential. Because plasmas have proven effects in treating some afflictions, it is very likely that beneficial effects of adding CO₂ to the plasma discharge (and so producing CO) will also be observed. However, considering the large number of species that a plasma produces, we must caution that any new positive results due to the addition of CO₂ (and consequently the production of CO) shall not be by default associated with a therapeutic effect of CO. Adding an extra molecule to the discharge can lead to strong modulation of all reactive species present in the plasma and its afterglow.

HO-1 is also often referred as heat shock protein (i.e., a protein that is produced in response to a thermal stress of the tissue).¹⁴² Because cold atmospheric pressure plasmas can sometimes be a moderate source of heat, it can be expected that heat and exogenous CO (both delivered by the plasma) may induce cumulative effects in cellular response. Plasmas would then offer the possibility of limiting the effects of excessive exposure to gaseous CO and accelerating CO induction of transcription processes at lower exogenous doses of CO.[‡]

The potential benefits of plasmas have been recently studied in cases of seed germination and growth in plants.²⁰ Some positive results have been observed, but UV radiation (from the plasma) may also eliminate some/most of the beneficial effects.⁸² The observation that in most cases exposure to CO can mimic the protective effects of HO-1^{47,143} suggests that HO-1 acts in a protective manner via the generation of CO. In that respect, the observation that the up-regulation of HO-1 procures protection against UV radiation indicates that CO could have a direct protective role.⁸¹

[†]A promising field is also the administration of CO-RMs, but molecular carriers continue to be tested for potential pathological effects. The amounts of CO delivered to target tissues are complex to predict because of the relatively limited knowledge about equilibrium dissociation constants of the complexes *in vivo*.

[‡]However, there appears to be conflicting evidence and/or interpretation about the direct induction of HO-1 protein transcription by heat shock.^{144,145}

NO has been very much discussed in the field of plasma medicine for its role in various processes such as wound healing and cancer therapy.¹⁴⁶ Similarly to CO, NO increases activation of guanylyl cyclase (one of the main receptors for NO itself, as a signaling molecule)¹⁴⁷ to produce cGMP, acts as a neurotransmitter in the brain, decreases vascular tone, and inhibits platelet aggregation.¹⁴⁸ However, it is not expected that CO and NO are redundant messenger molecules. Durante and Schafer⁴⁸ point out that important differences in the specific inducers and regulators of the enzymes lead to their production, and they have different reactivity with biomolecules such as hemoproteins. The lack of CO reactivity when compared to NO has in fact been proposed to be an advantage in stress conditions, where NO bioavailability is compromised, but CO can still exert its signaling properties.²⁵ NO has also been determined to be a regulator of HO-1 gene expression in vascular smooth-muscle cells.¹⁴⁹ However, CO can also act as a regulator of the effects of NO at the cellular level. For instance, Kostoglou-Athanassiou et al. reported that endotoxin stimulates both NO and CO generation, but the two gases have counter-regulatory effects on the activation of endocrine glands.¹⁵⁰ In some conditions, CO can also bind and activate NO synthase to stimulate NO production.¹⁵¹ Ingi et al. showed that cerebellar granules produce significant amounts of CO in culture. In this system, NO acts as the major regulator of cGMP production, whereas endogenous CO apparently down-regulates the response to NO.¹⁵²

More generally, chronically inflamed tissue is characterized by the infiltration of immune cells including macrophages that continuously generate inflammatory mediators such as NO. CO has been shown to inhibit NO production in macrophages and reduce inflammation.²⁵ NO exerts multiple modulating effects on inflammation and has a key role in the regulation of immune responses. However, large amounts of NO, usually produced endogenously by iNOS, can be toxic and proinflammatory.¹⁵³ Thom et al.¹⁵⁴ reported that CO stimulates the release of NO and the production of the strong oxidant peroxynitrite (e.g., in blood platelets and vascular cells). Piantadosi remarked that NO is the most reactive physiological gas and it may be converted to the toxic NO₂ molecule at high concentrations.²² Additionally, both NO and CO interact with the Fe²⁺ of hemoglobin, with an association rate constant in favor of NO compared to CO. However, the dissociation rate of CO bound to hemoglobin is much slower. Piantadosi concluded that CO will likely influence the bioactivity of newly synthesized NO in response to physiological stimulation or pathological events.²² Motterlini and Otterbein⁵⁷ argued that both molecules are closely related and necessary for the expression/production of one another. Actually, it was proposed that the activation of HO-1 may defend against NO-mediated toxicity by negatively modulating iNOS expression or activity. CO released in the process of heme catabolism can inactivate existing iNOS by interacting with its iron moiety.^{49,155}

From the discussion throughout this article, it may appear that NO is usually a molecule (that is currently widely studied in plasma medicine) with often the same effects as those tentatively attributed to CO. However, one should note that during treatment, a limit of 80 ppm of exogenous gaseous NO is followed in clinical therapies.¹⁵⁶ Plasma

jets typically produce NO densities in the range of 1–100 ppm.^{133,157–159} Graves¹⁴⁴ also notes also that creams used for wound healing usually use NO-releasing species, but discussions about their use cite the fact that they can cause skin irritation/inflammation. Due to its overall complete chemical inertness (which only forms complexes with transition metals, the latter being weak, nonchemical bounds in a reversible manner), CO clearly shows the potential to be a substitute (of exogenous NO) and/or complementary molecule in the plasma cocktail delivered to solutions, cells, and tissues. Adding CO to the mix is expected to offer extra cell protection and enhance positive cellular responses to the plasma.

High concentrations of CO increase intracellular hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) production[§] in the brain, accompanied by increases in hydroxyl radical ($\cdot OH$) production. This consequently affects the redox balance of glutathione in mitochondria.¹⁶⁰ High doses of exogenous CO produced by plasmas may then trigger $\cdot OH$ and H_2O_2 production inside cells in addition to delivering them at their surface. Adding CO to the cocktail of reactive molecules may then help achieve similar effects at the cellular level, maintain reduced oxidation levels of the membrane, and increase survival.

Finally, we note that plasmas with CO_2 admixture also produce significant amounts of other species including O atoms, O_3 , and 1O_2 molecules that are also active in medicine. Adding CO_2 to the gas discharge is an additional way to tune the flux of those species to the target and provide an alternative to the O_2 admixture into the plasma jet (e.g., and provide less oxidizing conditions).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

From this review of the literature, it appears that the CO molecule has a surprisingly large range of therapeutic actions including anti-inflammatory, antihypoxia, and antiapoptotic effects; vasodilation; and inhibition of platelet aggregation. In plants, CO promotes cell germination and lateral root formation and is involved in protective mechanisms against UV radiation and abiotic stresses due to metals, salinity, or drought. Importantly, the ranges wherein therapeutic effects can be observed are below levels of either short- or long-term toxicity.

There may be a significant but yet unexplored opportunity for CO_2 plasma discharges that have been previously analyzed to come to a fundamental understanding of the dissociation process of the CO_2 molecule into CO to be reused in the field of plasma medicine. In this article, we reviewed several studies that show the beneficial effects of CO at low doses (both in medicine and agriculture), with some discussion on the molecular pathways involved with CO. In that respect, CO's interplay with the NO molecule appears to be critical. This may produce general implications on the use of NO generating plasma sources in medicine. Fundamental understanding of CO's effects on tissues may not directly increase from trial results using plasmas because of

[§]Note that NO also triggers H_2O_2 production.¹⁴⁴

their high intrinsic complexity. However, it appears that sufficient evidence and a good understanding exist already in the literature about CO pharmacology. These previous studies will help clarify any new effect that may be observed using (well-characterized) plasmas with and without CO production. It is even tempting to consider that CO may already be responsible for some of the effects observed in plasma medicine because of the natural CO₂ presence in the atmosphere. It will be interesting to experimentally measure CO densities in the effluent of plasma jets to verify its presence. To the best of our knowledge, such measurements have not been reported in the literature yet for any plasma source used in biomedical applications. We provided a review of potential (plasma) diagnostic techniques that could be used for that purpose and included their respective advantages and disadvantages.

An overview of the recent literature on CO and NO molecules shows them to be strongly related both in their effects and their mutual regulation of endogenous expression. In that respect, the addition of exogenous CO may be particularly beneficial for counterbalancing the potential irritation/inflammatory effects of exogenous NO produced by the plasma. In the case of (chronic) wounds, CO-based plasmas may be of particular use in combining sterilization and anti-inflammatory effects.

Following this overview of the related literature, we make a compelling case for the importance of the CO molecule in the treatment of various afflictions and for process stimulation. Potential applications both in medicine agriculture were underlined. We believe that CO₂ plasmas should be tested for use in plasma medicine and agriculture in the future. The fact that the CO molecule has positive biological effects was discovered less than 20 years ago; thus, potential biomedical CO use is still in its infancy compared to other pharmacological active species. However, this relatively recent discovery does not diminish its potential, but instead opens a window of opportunity for plasmas with CO₂ admixture. The possibility of synergic effects of the CO molecule with other components of plasma such as charged and neutral species, UV radiation, or heat are very exciting.

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