Johal, N., Arthurs, C., Cuckow, P., Cao, K., Wood, D. N., Ahmed, A., & Fry, C. (2019). Functional, histological and molecular characteristics of human exstrophy detrusor. *Journal of Pediatric Urology*, 15(2), 154.e1-154.e9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpurol.2018.12.004>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):
CC BY-NC-ND

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1016/j.jpurol.2018.12.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpurol.2018.12.004)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Elsevier at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1477513118304753> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

1 **Functional, histological and molecular characteristics of human exstrophy detrusor**

2

3 **N Johal¹, C Arthurs^{2,4}, P Cuckow¹, K Cao^{2,4}, DN Wood³, A Ahmed⁴, CH Fry²**

4 1. Department of Urology, Great Ormond St Hospital for Sick Children, London UK

5 2. School of Physiology, Pharmacology & Neuroscience, University of Bristol, UK

6 3. Department of Urology, University College Hospitals, London, UK

7 4. Centre for Stem Cells and Regenerative Medicine, King's College London, UK

8

9 **Corresponding author**

10 **CH Fry**, School of Physiology, Pharmacology & Neuroscience, University Walk, University of Bristol,

11 Bristol BS8 1TD, UK

12 chris.fry@bristol.ac.uk

13

14

15

16 **Short title:** Pathophysiology of human exstrophy detrusor

17

18 **Extended summary**

19 *Introduction.* Bladder exstrophy is a congenital anomaly involving fetal exposure and protrusion of
20 the open bladder through an incomplete lower abdominal wall. Techniques to surgically correct
21 exstrophy after birth have greatly improved, but it still presents a major challenge to achieving
22 continence and a good quality of life for patients and their families as the pathophysiology of
23 bladder dysfunction is unknown.

24 *Objectives.* A multimodal approach was used to characterise the histological and biomechanical
25 properties of exstrophy detrusor. These were correlated with myocyte responses to agonists and
26 an evaluation of developmental signalling pathways to evaluate the cause of bladder dysfunction in
27 exstrophy.

28 *Study design.* Detrusor muscle specimens were obtained during corrective surgery from four
29 exstrophy groups: neonatal (1-3 days, $n=8$), younger children (7months-5 years, $n=13$) and older
30 children (8-14 years, $n=11$) undergoing secondary procedures and cloacal exstrophy (16 days-9
31 years, $n=9$); control specimens were obtained from children (3 months-9 years, $n=14$) undergoing
32 surgery for other pathologies but with normal bladder function. Five lines of experiments were
33 undertaken: measurement of connective tissue to detrusor muscle ratio, contractile responses to
34 electrical and agonist stimulation; *in vitro* biomechanical stiffness, intracellular Ca^{2+} responses to
35 contractile agonists and immunohistochemistry for proteins (MMP-7, cyclinD1, β -catenin and *c-*
36 *myc*) involved in fibrosis generation. Exstrophy data were compared to those from the control
37 group.

38 *Results.* Exstrophy tissue demonstrated reduced smooth muscle compared to connective tissue,
39 reduced contractile responses and greater mechanical stiffness. However, intracellular Ca^{2+}
40 responses to agonists were maintained. These changes were greatest in neonatal and cloacal
41 exstrophy samples and least in those from older paediatric bladders. Immunolabelled MMP-7, β -
42 catenin and *c-myc* were reduced in exstrophy samples.

43 *Discussion.* These results highlight the reality that newborns with exstrophy have significantly
44 reduced compliance and bladder underactivity, which may persist or return to normal values with
45 surgery and age. The primary cause of underactivity is increased connective tissue in relation to
46 detrusor muscle, however detrusor myocyte function remains normal. Finally, the increase of
47 smooth muscle content in the paediatric bladder group indicates a remodelling response of the
48 bladder to surgical correction and time. Excess gestational fibrosis is associated with changed
49 expression of key proteins in the *Wnt*-signalling pathway, a potential aetiological factor and
50 therapeutic target.

51 *Conclusion.* Results point to connective tissue deposition as the primary pathological process that
52 determines bladder function with normal myocyte function. Future research that reduces
53 connective tissue deposition may lead to improvement in outcomes for these children.

55 **Keywords:** human detrusor, exstrophy, contractile function, intracellular [Ca²⁺], detrusor stiffness

56 **Introduction**

57 Bladder exstrophy is part of the exstrophy-epispadias complex whereby developmental failure of
58 the lower abdominal wall *in utero* leads to a bladder that remains pathologically open and
59 protruding: the prevalence is 3 per 100,000 live births [1]. After neonatal closure, further
60 reconstructive surgery achieves continence, and functional and cosmetically acceptable genitalia.
61 The Kelly procedure [2] is performed at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, but in other
62 specialist centres, single and staged-repair techniques are used. Despite successful reconstruction
63 many patients continue with low-capacity bladders with insufficient contractile function [3,4],
64 although a retrospective review of 13 patients following complete primary repair showed good
65 functional recovery [5].

66 Characteristic of bladder exstrophy [6,7] is increased bladder wall collagen and denervation [8].
67 Increased collagen results from transformation of several cell types, particularly fibroblasts and
68 epithelia, into myofibroblasts [9]; as well as reduced matrix metalloproteinase (MMP) expression
69 and enhanced expression of tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinases (TIMP) [10]. These processes are
70 controlled by transforming growth factor- β (TGF- β) and augmented by release of *Wnt*-ligand
71 proteins to promote myofibroblast differentiation [11], mediated by transcription factors such as β -
72 catenin, *c-myc* and cyclin-D1. Massive parallel sequencing identified coding changes in 50% of
73 exstrophy patients in 19 different *Wnt* genes [12]. However, functional characterisation to support
74 histological and genetic changes is sparse. In this study, we measured contractile and biomechanical
75 properties of detrusor smooth muscle from human exstrophy bladders and characterised changes
76 to the *Wnt*-signalling pathway to identify potential pathways that may be therapeutic targets to
77 reverse associated fibrosis. We tested the hypothesis that more connective tissue at the expense
78 of smooth muscle in the exstrophy bladder is associated with reduced contractile performance and
79 greater biomechanical stiffness, and if the former was associated with functional denervation and

80 smooth muscle failure. We carried out experiments *in vitro* with isolated detrusor samples to
81 measure: smooth muscle and connective tissue content; active force generation; passive stiffness
82 and intracellular Ca^{2+} responses to contractile agonists. We also performed preliminary
83 observations regarding the molecular basis of increased connective tissue deposition by measuring
84 any changes to the *Wnt*-signalling pathway.

85

86 **Methods**

87 *Tissue samples, ethics and preparations.* Bladder biopsy samples came from five patient groups. A
88 control group ($n=14$; 10 male (M), 4 female (F); 3 months-9 years) with normal bladder function
89 undergoing open bladder surgery (ureteric reimplantation, urachal cyst excision, localised tumour
90 excision). Four exstrophy groups: i) neonatal exstrophy at time of primary bladder closure ($n=8$; 6M,
91 2F; age 1-3 days); ii) cloacal exstrophy ($n=9$; 3M, 6F; 16 days-9 years); iii) young children receiving
92 secondary procedures ($n=13$; 8M, 5F; 7months-5 years): a Kelly soft tissue reconstruction ($n=10$),
93 redo bladder neck repair with augmentation ($n=1$), bladder neck closure with augmentation ($n=1$)
94 and bladder and abdominal wall closure for covered variant exstrophy ($n=1$); iv) older children
95 receiving secondary procedures ($n=11$; 8M, 3F; 8-14 years) by Kelly repair ($n=3$), bladder neck repair
96 with augmentation ($n=6$) or bladder neck closure ($n=2$).

97 All samples were from the lateral wall of the bladder dome, with no evidence of adjacent metaplasia
98 in the one case of tumour excision. After ethical approval, the study was accepted by the R&D
99 department, Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, UK. Parents or guardians were given an
100 information sheet and consent obtained at least 24 hours later. Samples were carried in Ca^{2+} -free
101 solution, within 1-2 hours, to the laboratory for immediate use. Serosa and mucosa were removed
102 by blunt dissection, and detrusor strips (1 mm diam; 4-5 mm length) dissected.

103 *Solutions.* Functional experiments (36°C) in Tyrode's solution (mM): NaCl, 118; NaHCO_3 , 24; KCl,
104 4.0; MgCl_2 , 1.0; NaH_2PO_4 , 0.4; CaCl_2 , 1.8; glucose, 6.1; Na pyruvate, 5.0; pH 7.4, 5% CO_2 , 95% O_2 .
105 Ca^{2+} -free solution was (mM): NaCl, 132; KCl, 4.0; NaH_2PO_4 , 0.4; glucose, 6.1; Na pyruvate, 5.0;
106 HEPES, 10.0, pH 7.4 with 1M NaOH. High-K Tyrode's contained 80 mM KCl, with no osmolality
107 correction. Drugs were diluted from aqueous stocks. Cell isolation used Ca^{2+} -free solution plus
108 (mg/ml): Worthington Type-II collagenase, 20; hyaluronidase-IS, 0.5; hyaluronidase-III, 0.5;
109 antitrypsin-IIS, 0.9; bovine albumin, 5.0 [13]. All chemicals were from Sigma UK.

110 *Active tension recording.* Muscle strips were tied in a horizontal superfusion trough between an
111 isometric force transducer and a fixed hook. Nerve-mediated contractions were elicited by electrical
112 field stimulation (3-s trains, width 0.1ms, frequency 1-40Hz); abolished by 1 μ M tetrodotoxin.
113 Contractions generated by direct muscle stimulation were elicited by the muscarinic agonist
114 carbachol (0.1-30 μ M) or the purinergic agonist α,β -methylene ATP (ABMA, 10 μ M). The peak
115 increase from baseline tension was recorded and normalised to cross-section area, a .

116 *Biomechanical experiments.* Muscle strips were tied between the force transducer and the central
117 pole of a rotary solenoid. Application of a step voltage to the solenoid rotated it to stretch the
118 muscle by up to 1 mm (20% resting length, L , i.e. $\Delta L/L=0.2$) for 50 s before returning to the original
119 length. Stretches were in triplicate at 5-min intervals and average values used. Upon stretch
120 tension, T , increased followed by partial relaxation (magnitude T_2 , time constant τ), to a new steady-
121 state value, T_1 (figure 3A). The elastic modulus, E , was calculated from $E=T_1/(a*\Delta L/L)$; units
122 megapascal, MPa=1N.mm⁻²). Tension (and hence elastic modulus) immediately after a stretch was
123 greater, the component dissipated by viscoelastic relaxation was calculated by $E_2=T_2/(a*\Delta L/L)$.

124 *Measurement of intracellular Ca^{2+} , $[Ca^{2+}]_i$.* Small (1 mm³) biopsy pieces were gently triturated for
125 up to 20 min in 1ml of cell isolation solution, gently centrifuged, the supernatant decanted and
126 replaced with Tyrode's solution. The Ca^{2+} fluorochrome Fura-2 (5 μ M) was added for 20-30 minutes.
127 Myocytes were identified by a spindle-shaped appearance and samples fixed in 4% formalin solution
128 and labelled for smooth-muscle myosin for confirmation. A drop of cell suspension was placed in a
129 heated (36°C) superfusion chamber and $[Ca^{2+}]_i$ measured by alternate (32 Hz) excitation at 340 and
130 380 nm; fluorescent light was collected between 410 and 510 nm. The magnitude of the
131 fluorescence ratio measured at 340 and 380nm excitation, $R_{340/380}$, was a function of $[Ca^{2+}]_i$. The
132 system was calibrated as described previously [13].

133 *Histology.* Portions of the biopsy were placed in 10 % formaldehyde and stored at 4°C. Samples
134 were dehydrated in alcohol, then xylene and paraffin. Sections (5 µm) on TESPA-coated glass slides
135 were stained with Elastin van Gieson (collagen, red; elastin, black; muscle yellow/orange). The
136 proportion of muscle to connective tissue (collagen and elastin) was measured using colour filters
137 on Image-J. Three separate regions (50x50 µm) per section were measured, distant from mucosa or
138 any obvious areas absent of tissue, and the average recorded.

139 *Multi-channel immunofluorescence labelling and quantitative image intensity analyses.* Antibodies
140 for MMP7 (Abcam), cyclin-D1 (Santa Cruz), β-catenin and *c-myc* (Novacastra/Leica) were optimised
141 for concentration, pH-dependence and antigen retrieval. A Bond maX™ automated system (Leica
142 BioSystems) was used for labelling [14], the researcher was blind to the antibodies used. Antibodies
143 were incubated simultaneously on each section and labelled with secondary fluorescent antibodies;
144 Cy3 (514/565 nm), Cy5 (633/671 nm), FITC (488/517 nm), Cy3.5 (561/617 nm) respectively, as well
145 as the nuclear counter-stain DAPI (405/429 nm). Each section was imaged with a TCS SP8 confocal
146 system (Leica) at 20x (dry objective) and 40x (1.3 NA, oil objective) with a 6x digital zoom and a z-
147 step of 0.17µm. High magnification (x63) images were taken from three, randomly selected, areas
148 of each section and analysed using Huygens professional image deconvolution software (Scientific
149 Volume Imaging, Hilversum, NL) [14] using a macro compiled to measure individual intensities.

150 *Data presentation and analysis.* Data are mean±SEM, *N*; *n*=number of biopsies/preparations.
151 Immunofluorescence data are medians [25,75% interquartiles] as sets were not normally
152 distributed. Significances between multiple data sets used parametric or non-parametric ANOVA,
153 followed by appropriate *post hoc* tests; the null hypothesis was rejected at **p*<0.05, ***p*<0.01,
154 ****p*<0.001. Dose-response or force-frequency curves were fitted to: $T = (T_{\max} \cdot x_m) / (x_m + k_m)$; where
155 $T_{\max}$ is the maximum response at high stimulation frequency (*f*) or agonist concentration (*S*); *x* is the
156 different values of *f* or *S*; k_m is the value of *x* required to achieve $T_{\max}/2$; *m* is a constant. A Spearman

157 correlation coefficient, r , tested associations between two variables, for subsequent estimation of
158 a p -value.

159

160 Results

161 *Histology measurements.* Figure 1A shows sample sections of detrusor from control and young
162 paediatric exstrophy patients, the latter shows mucosa on the left edge which was avoided for
163 analysis. The ratio of smooth muscle to connective tissue (SM/CT) was measured for all five groups.
164 In all exstrophy cohorts, except the older paediatric cohort, the SM/CT ratio was significantly lower
165 compared to the normal cohort (Table 1). Moreover, there was a progressive and significant decline
166 of the ratio from the control and older paediatric exstrophy groups, through to younger paediatric
167 exstrophy, neonatal and cloacal exstrophy groups (figure 1B).

168 *Contractile responses to nerve-mediated and agonist-induced activation.* The frequency-
169 dependence of nerve-mediated contractions from normal and exstrophy bladders was used to
170 determine: maximum tension at high frequencies, $T_{\max, n-m}$, and $f_{1/2}$, the frequency that generates
171 $T_{\max, n-m}/2$ (figure 2A). $T_{\max, n-m}$ was reduced in both paediatric, neonatal and cloacal exstrophy
172 groups compared to control; $f_{1/2}$ values were similar in all groups (Table 1). Atropine-resistance, the
173 percentage residual tension after 1 μ M atropine, was present in all groups (Table 1, not determined
174 in cloacal exstrophy); percentage values were highly variable, with no significant differences
175 between the cohorts, but in all the data were significantly different from zero.

176 Dose-response curves to the muscarinic agonist, carbachol showed that the maximum response
177 ($T_{\max, carb}$) was lower in all four exstrophy groups. However, carbachol potency was greater in both
178 paediatric and the neonatal exstrophy groups, as seen by larger pEC_{50} values (Table 1), statistical
179 analyses were not performed for agonist data from the cloacal exstrophy group, due to the small
180 sample number. A similar pattern was observed in the magnitude of responses to a single
181 concentration (10 μ M) of ABMA. Finally, the ratio of the maximum responses to nerve-mediated
182 stimulation and carbachol ($T_{\max, n-m}/T_{\max, carb}$) was calculated: a smaller ratio is interpreted as reduced
183 functional innervation; values were similar in all five groups (Table 1). The relationships between

184 maximum response to nerve-mediated stimulation (closed circles) or carbachol (open circles) as a
185 function of the SM/CT ratio are shown in figure 2B; contraction magnitude diminished as smooth
186 muscle content decreased.

187 *Passive biomechanical properties.* The transient and steady-state passive tensile properties of
188 detrusor muscle strips were measured during a 50s stretch by 20% of the resting length ($\Delta L/L=0.2$).
189 Three variables were measured: steady-state tension (T_1 , N.mm⁻²); magnitude of viscoelastic
190 relaxation (T_2 , N.mm⁻²) and the time constant of viscoelastic relaxation (τ , s; figure 3A, Table 2).
191 Three stretches, five minutes apart, were applied; T_1 and T_2 values were significantly greater during
192 the second and third stretches and similar in value to each other; values of τ were similar for all
193 three stretches. Average values from the second and third stretches for each variable are quoted.
194 Measurements from detrusor samples of control, paediatric exstrophy and neonatal exstrophy
195 bladders were made. Data from the older and young paediatric exstrophy groups were combined
196 due to the relatively small number of biopsy samples tested. No data were available for cloacal
197 exstrophy bladders as the biopsy samples were too small.

198 The value of elastic modulus, E , a steady-state measure of tissue stiffness, was calculated from T_1
199 values (see Methods). Values of T_1 , for the control, paediatric and neonatal exstrophy groups are
200 shown in figure 3B. Exstrophy data were significantly greater than compared to the normal group.
201 T_2 values were smaller than T_1 in all samples, but a similar trend was measured as for T_1 in the
202 three groups: values of τ were similar in all groups. The relationship between the elastic modulus, E
203 and SM/CT ratio (figure 3C) for these groups shows that stiffness increased as the proportion of
204 connective tissue also increased, note the CT/SM ratio is inverted compared to figure 2B.

205 *Intracellular Ca^{2+} regulation.* It is unclear from the contractile data if reduction of contractile
206 function from exstrophy patients was in part due to reduced contractile function of individual

207 myocytes, as well as reduced smooth muscle content. Altered detrusor function was tested by
208 measuring the change of intracellular calcium ($[Ca^{2+}]_i$), in isolated myocytes from normal and
209 exstrophy bladders in response to contractile agonists. $[Ca^{2+}]_i$ was measured in myocytes from
210 cloacal exstrophy bladders, but the small number of cells precluded statistical comparison, but data
211 are shown for comparison. Data from the two paediatric exstrophy groups have been combined as
212 myocytes were isolated from a total of only seven samples ($n=3$, 4 from young and older paediatric
213 exstrophy groups). The resting $[Ca^{2+}]_i$ was similar in myocytes from the remaining groups (Table 2).
214 The changes of $[Ca^{2+}]_i$, $\Delta[Ca^{2+}]_i$, in response to four contractile interventions were recorded:
215 carbachol for muscarinic receptor activation; ABMA for purinergic receptor activation; 80 mM
216 extracellular KCl to depolarise the cell and activate Ca^{2+} channels; caffeine to release Ca^{2+} from
217 intracellular stores. With cells from control bladder samples the rise of $[Ca^{2+}]_i$, $\Delta[Ca^{2+}]_i$, was not
218 significantly different for all interventions. Moreover, $\Delta[Ca^{2+}]_i$ for each intervention was similar in
219 myocytes from paediatric and neonatal exstrophy bladders (Table 2).

220 *Quantitative image intensity analysis.* Multichannel immunofluorescence labelling of a normal and
221 paediatric exstrophy samples (figure 4A, parts a, c), along with higher power regions (parts b, d)
222 presented as deconvoluted images, were used for quantitative analysis. Data from nine normal
223 bladder samples and seven exstrophy (five paediatric and two neonatal exstrophy) are shown
224 (figure 4B). The intensity measurements of the different immunolabels demonstrated a reduction
225 of MMP-7 signal ($p=0.045$), and more significant reductions of β -catenin ($p=0.0037$) and *c-myc*
226 ($p<0.001$) in the exstrophy samples; there was no change to cyclin-D1 labelling.

227 Discussion

228 *Exstrophy and detrusor function.* Reduction of the SM/CT ratio in human exstrophy detrusor
229 correlates with similar previous findings [7,8]. The reduced ratio was greatest in neonates with
230 bladder and cloacal exstrophy, with evidence of recovery in older children of the two paediatric
231 exstrophy groups. Recovery of smooth muscle relates either to the closure procedure and/or ageing
232 itself. As the SM/CT ratio reduced, the greater was reduced contractile function, whether elicited
233 by smooth muscle agonists or electrical stimulation of embedded motor nerves. The ratio of force
234 generated either by nerve-mediated stimulation or carbachol exposure was similar in normal and
235 exstrophy cohorts, suggesting detrusor muscle motor innervation itself was not affected by
236 exstrophy. Moreover, there is no detriment to intracellular signalling pathways that regulate
237 intracellular $[Ca^{2+}]$ between the normal and exstrophy groups, as tested by receptor agonists, cell
238 depolarisation (high-K) or intracellular Ca^{2+} release (caffeine). These data confirm previous
239 observations of exstrophy myocytes responding to carbachol and high-K solutions [15], although the
240 reduced basal $[Ca^{2+}]$ in their exstrophy myocytes was not observed here. Thus, in combination with
241 the histological differences in SM/CT content, replacement of smooth muscle with connective tissue
242 is the most likely reason for reduced active force development. Maintained myocyte function with
243 exstrophy is also indicated by similar motility and proliferation in response to growth factors [16].

244 Another consequence of the increased connective tissue content in exstrophy bladder samples was
245 greater passive stiffness; the SM/CT ratio showed an inverse relationship to passive stiffness. We
246 did not determine the collagen subtype, which is a major component of connective tissue. However,
247 previous work with adult bladder samples has shown that excessive collagen deposition and poorly
248 compliant bladders is associated with a shift from type-I to type-III collagen [17]. The *in vitro* change
249 to a stiffer, less contractile phenotype is consistent with some clinical studies [18]. Moreover,
250 attempts to improve bladder contractile performance with inotropic agents would be less successful

251 as residual muscle properties are unaltered. Increased connective tissue, associated with reduced
252 metalloproteinase expression and increased expression of tissue inhibitors of metalloproteinases
253 (TIMP) is associated with adult bladder outlet obstruction [19,20], or even raised intravesicular
254 pressures [21]. This suggests decreased expression of enzymes that degrade collagen may
255 contribute to a similar situation in bladder exstrophy. Treatment of post-radiation fibrotic bladders
256 with relaxin reduced connective tissue deposition and recovered cystometric function [22] and this
257 may offer a similar treatment option with bladder exstrophy.

258 *Pathways influencing connective tissue deposition.* The *Wnt* pathway, with intracellular Ca^{2+} and
259 transcription factor co-activators as signal transducers, are key in tissue and organ development
260 [23-25]. In particular, *Wnt*-signalling pathways are important in the terminal differentiation of
261 fibroblasts, smooth muscle cells and epithelial cells to collagen-secreting myofibroblasts. There is
262 little work concerned with human neonatal bladder disorders, but genome expression and genome-
263 wide expression studies have implicated changes to *Wnt* signalling pathways in exstrophy [26,27].
264 Quantitative image intensity analysis showed reduced labelling for β -catenin and c-myc, with
265 reduction of the matrix-metalloproteinase, MMP-7. However, expression of cyclin-D1, another
266 target of β -catenin transcription was not significantly altered in exstrophy samples. Little is known
267 about the particular *Wnt*-proteins that regulate normal human bladder development and
268 generation of fibrosis, but down-regulation of Wnt11 is associated with fibrosis in patients with
269 bladder pain syndrome [28]. Overall, downregulation of a *Wnt*-related pathway in a congenital
270 bladder anomaly is a novel observation [29] and may result in increased differentiation into
271 fibroblasts rather than a smooth muscle lineage. Future work targetting molecular signalling
272 pathways such as *Wnt* and TGF- β , which likely underpin this developmental disease, has the
273 potential to develop prognostic and therapeutic targets.

274 *Limitations.* Sample availability was limited by the rarity of these conditions and complexity of
275 surgical procedures and statistical analyses were not always possible, especially with the cloacal
276 exstrophy group. It would have been preferable to perform histological, biomechanical and
277 functional studies on each preparation, but in most cases this was not possible. All samples were
278 given an anonymising study code, but researchers were unblinded for functional experiments, as
279 they also retrieved samples. However, histology and immunohistochemistry experiments were
280 undertaken later with researchers now blinded; the code and diagnosis was revealed only after data
281 collection.

282 **Conclusion**

283 This study highlights the critical importance of raised connective tissue content in bladder
284 exstrophy. Exstrophy management has dramatically improved and surgery now provides continence
285 and urethral voiding for many. However, some still fail to achieve continence and the development
286 of therapies is important. Reduced detrusor contractile function with exstrophy is highly correlated
287 with the SM/CT ratio, alongside normal myocyte function. We suggest a molecular explanation for
288 increased CT in terms of reduced *Wnt*-pathway function.

289 **Funding**

290

291 This work was supported by a research scholarship to Mr Navroop Johal by the Royal College of
292 Surgeons of England and the Children's Research Fund, Liverpool.

293

294 **References**

295 [1] Jayachandran D, Bythell M, Platt MW, et al. Register based study of bladder exstrophy-
296 epispadias complex: prevalence, associated anomalies, prenatal diagnosis and survival. J Urol 2011;
297 186: 2056-2060.

298 [2] Kelly JH. Vesical exstrophy: repair using radical mobilisation of soft tissues. *Pediatr Surg Int*
299 1995; 10: 298–304

300 [3] Woodhouse CR, Redgrave NG. Late failure of the reconstructed exstrophy bladder. *BJU Int*
301 1996; 77: 590–592.

302 [4] Cuckow P, Desai D, Ryan K. Physiological reconstruction of the lower urinary tract in bladder
303 exstrophy - 10 years' experience with the Kelly operation. *J Urol* 2010; 183: e210.

304 [5] Borer JG, Starkosha R, Bauer SB, et al. Combined cystometrography and electromyography of
305 the external urethral sphincter following complete primary repair of bladder exstrophy. *J Urol* 2014;
306 191: 1547-1552.

307 [6] Lee BR, Perlman EJ, Partin AW, et al. Evaluation of smooth muscle and collagen subtypes in
308 normal newborns and those with bladder exstrophy. *J Urol* 1996; 156: 2034-2036.

309 [7] Slaughenhaupt BL, Mathews RI, Peppas DS, et al. A large animal model of bladder exstrophy:
310 observations of bladder smooth muscle and collagen content. *J Urol* 1999; 162: 2119-2122.

311 [8] Mathews R, Wills M, Perlman E, et al. Neural innervation of the newborn exstrophic bladder:
312 an immunohistochemical study. *J Urol* 1999; 162: 506-508.

313 [9] Kendall RT, Feghali-Bostwick CA. Fibroblasts in fibrosis: novel roles and mediators. *Front*
314 *Pharmacol* 2014; 5: 1-13.

315 [10] Yang L, Liu R, Wang X, et al. Imbalance between matrix metalloproteinase-1 (MMP-1) and
316 tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinase-1 (TIMP-1) contributes to bladder compliance changes in
317 rabbits with partial bladder outlet obstruction (PBOO). *BJU Int.* 2013; 112: E391-397.

318 [11] Xu L, Cui WH, Zhou WC, et al. Activation of Wnt/ β -catenin signalling is required for TGF-
319 β /Smad2/3 signalling during myofibroblast proliferation. *J Cell Mol Med* 2017; 21: 1545-1554.

320 [12] Körberg IB, Hofmeister W, Markljung, E et al. Wnt3 involvement in human bladder exstrophy
321 and cloaca development in zebrafish. *Hum Mol Gen* 2015; 24: 5069-5078.

322 [13] Sui G, Fry CH, Malone-Lee J, et al. Aberrant Ca²⁺ oscillations in smooth muscle cells from
323 overactive human bladders. *Cell Calcium* 2009; 45: 456-464.

324 [14] Arya M, Thrassivoulou C, Henrique R, et al. Targets of wnt/ β -catenin transcription in penile
325 carcinoma. *PloS one* 2015; 10: p.e0124395.

326 [15] Suson KD, Stec AA, Shimosa LA, Gearhart JP. Initial characterization of exstrophy bladder
327 smooth muscle cells in culture. *J Urol* 2012; 188: 1521-1527.

328 [16] Suson KD, Stec AA, Gearhart JP, Shimosa LA. Transforming growth factor- β 1 mediates
329 migration

330 [17] Imamura M, Kanematsu A, Yamamoto S, et al. Basic fibroblast growth factor modulates
331 proliferation and collagen expression in urinary bladder smooth muscle cells. *Am J Physiol Renal*
332 *Physiol* 2007; 293: F1007-1017.

333 [18] Puri A, Mishra K, Sikdar S, et al. Vesical preservation in patients with late bladder exstrophy
334 referral: histological insights into functional outcome. *J Urol* 2014; 192: 1208-1214.

335 [19] Peters CA, Freeman MR, Fernandez CA, et al. Dysregulated proteolytic balance as the basis of
336 excess extracellular matrix in fibrotic disease. *Am J Physiol* 1997; 272: R1960-1965.

337 [20] Yang L, Liu R, Wang X, et al. Imbalance between matrix metalloproteinase-1 (MMP-1) and
338 tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinase-1 (TIMP-1) contributes to bladder compliance changes in
339 rabbits with partial bladder outlet obstruction (PBOO). *BJU Int* 2013; 112: e391-397.

340 [21] Backhaus BO, Kaefer M, Haberstroh KM, et al. Alterations in the molecular determinants of
341 bladder compliance at hydrostatic pressures less than 40 cm H₂O. *J Urol* 2002; 168: 2600-2604.

342 [22] Ikeda Y, Zabbarova IV, Birder LA et al. Relaxin-2 therapy reverses radiation-induced fibrosis
343 and restores bladder function in mice. *Neurourol Urodyn* 2018 May 28. doi: 10.1002/nau.23721

344 [23] Semenov MV, Habas R, Macdonald BT, et al. SnapShot: noncanonical Wnt signaling pathways.
345 *Cell* 2007; 131: 1378.e1-1378.e2

- 346 [24] Sugimura R, Li L. Noncanonical Wnt signaling in vertebrate development, stem cells, and
347 diseases. *Birth Defects Res C Embryo Today* 2010; 90: 243-256.
- 348 [25] Thrasivoulou C, Millar M, Ahmed A. Activation of intracellular calcium by multiple Wnt ligands
349 and translocation of β -catenin into the nucleus: a convergent model of Wnt/ Ca^{2+} and Wnt/ β -catenin
350 pathways. *J Biol Chem* 2013; 288: 35651-35659.
- 351 [26] Qi L, Chen K, Hur DJ et al. Genome-wide expression profiling of urinary bladder implicates
352 desmosomal and cytoskeletal dysregulation in the bladder exstrophy-epispadias complex. *Int J Mol*
353 *Med*; 27: 755-765.
- 354 [27] Draaken M, Knapp M, Pennimpede T et al. Genome-wide association study and meta-analysis
355 identify ISL1 as genome-wide significant susceptibility gene for bladder exstrophy. *Plos Genetics*
356 2015; 11(3): e1005024.
- 357 [28] Choi D, Han JY, Shin JH, et al. Downregulation of WNT11 is associated with bladder tissue
358 fibrosis in patients with interstitial cystitis/bladder pain syndrome without Hunner lesion. *Sci Rep*
359 2018; 8: 9782.
- 360 [29] Halt K, Vainio S. Coordination of kidney organogenesis by Wnt signalling. *Pediatr Nephrol*
361 2014; 29: 737-744.

362 **Figure legends**

363 **Figure 1. Smooth muscle and connective tissue in normal and exstrophy bladders.** A: van Gieson
364 stain of detrusor samples from normal (upper) and paediatric exstrophy (lower) bladders: orange
365 smooth muscle; red connective tissue. B: The smooth muscle:connective tissue (SM/CT) ratio of the
366 detrusor layer from normal, and the four exstrophy cohorts, *** $p<0.001$

367 **Figure 2. Active contractile properties of detrusor from normal and exstrophy bladders.** A: Force-
368 frequency curves of nerve-mediated contractions from control and young and old paediatric (paed),
369 neonatal (neo) and cloacal (cloa) exstrophy bladders. Estimation of $T_{\max,n-m}$ and $f_{1/2}$ values are
370 shown for the control bladder curve. B. The association between the SM/CT ratio and either the
371 $T_{\max}$ for nerve-mediated contractions ($T_{\max,n-m}$, open circles) or for maximum carbachol contractions
372 ($T_{\max,carb}$, closed circles).

373 **Figure 3. Biomechanical characteristics of detrusor from normal and exstrophy bladders.** A:
374 Tracing of isometric force for a stretch of 1 mm for 50 s, resting muscle length 5 mm. B: values of
375 elastic modulus, E , for samples from normal, paediatric exstrophy and neonatal exstrophy bladders.
376 *** $p<0.001$ vs normal, ### $p<0.001$ paediatric vs neonatal exstrophy. C: the association between
377 the CT/SM ratio and elastic modulus, E , for samples from control, paediatric exstrophy and neonatal
378 exstrophy bladders. Note logarithmic axes in parts B and C.

379 **Figure 4. Quantitative analysis of *wnt*-related proteins.** A: Representative images (x63) of normal
380 (left) and paediatric exstrophy (right) detrusor. Images a and c: composite overlay of four
381 fluorophores: Cy3 (yellow) for MMP-7; Cy5 (purple) for cyclin-D1; FITC (green) for β -catenin; Cy3.5
382 (red) for *c-myc*; DAPI nuclear label (blue). Images b,d: higher magnification regions sections to show
383 more clearly individual colour labels B: Quantitative analysis of expression of the four epitopes
384 carried out on grey constructs of images filtered for the four fluorochromes. Median data [25,75%
385 interquartiles], * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$, (N=9;7: control; exstrophy).

386 Figure 1

A

B

387
388

A

B

394 Figure 4

395
396

Table 1. Smooth muscle (SM): connective tissue (CT) ratios and contractile characteristics in detrusor muscle from normal and exstrophy bladders. The paediatric exstrophy data is shown as two sets; from older and younger children (see Methods). Mean data $\pm$ SEM (*N* biopsy samples). **p*<0.05; ***p*<0.01; ****p*<0.001 vs normal.

	Normal	Older Paediatric exstrophy	Young Paediatric exstrophy	Neonatal exstrophy	Cloacal exstrophy
<i>Histology</i>					
SM/CT ratio	3.03 $\pm$ 0.56 (11)	2.56 $\pm$ 0.26 (6)	0.42 $\pm$ 0.19 (10)***	0.19 $\pm$ 0.042 (5)***	0.086 $\pm$ 0.018 ()***
<i>Contractile data</i>					
$T_{\max, n-m}$, mN.mm ⁻²	6.80 $\pm$ 0.86 (10)	2.93 $\pm$ 0.75 (6)*	1.19 $\pm$ 0.60 (11)**	0.93 $\pm$ 0.25 (5)***	0.24 $\pm$ 0.12 (7)***
$f_{1/2}$, Hz	13.2 $\pm$ 2.1 (10)	14.2 $\pm$ 3.6 (6)	19.4 $\pm$ 3.5 (11)	17.2 $\pm$ 3.9 (5)	15.6 $\pm$ 1.0 (7)
Atropine resist	60.0 $\pm$ 28.3 (7)	51.2 $\pm$ 14.1 (6)	26.1 $\pm$ 8.7 (7)	26.7 $\pm$ 17.5 (5)	ND
$T_{\max, carb}$ mN.mm ⁻²	30.8 $\pm$ 6.68 (10)	11.0 $\pm$ 1.01 (6) **	5.98 $\pm$ 2.40 (10)***	5.41 $\pm$ 1.63 (5)***	4.25, 1.06 (2)
Carb pEC ₅₀	5.51 $\pm$ 0.04 (10)	6.28 $\pm$ 0.12 (6)**	5.99 $\pm$ 0.12 (10)**	5.75 $\pm$ 0.64 [(5)*	5.67, 5.70 (2)
T_{ABMA} , mN.mm ⁻²	11.2 $\pm$ 2.68 (7)	2.02 $\pm$ 0.54 (6)***	1.69 $\pm$ 0.50 (11)***	0.94 $\pm$ 0.22 (5)***	0.05 $\pm$ 0.01 (3)
$T_{\max, n-m}/T_{\max, carb}$	0.44 $\pm$ 0.11 (10)	0.24 $\pm$ 0.04 (6)	0.34 $\pm$ 0.10 (10)	0.20 $\pm$ 0.08 (5)	ND

Table 2. Biomechanics and intracellular $[Ca^{2+}]$ data in detrusor muscle from normal and exstrophy bladders. The paediatric exstrophy data are shown as one data set. Mean data $\pm$ SEM (n preparations from N biopsy samples). * $p < 0.05$. E , elastic modulus is used as a measure of detrusor stiffness. E_2 is the viscoelastic component of instantaneous stiffness – see Methods for details.

	Normal	Paediatric exstrophy	Neonatal exstrophy	Cloacal exstrophy
<i>Biomechanics data</i>				
E , MPa (elastic modulus)	20.0 $\pm$ 6.20 (9)	86.5 $\pm$ 28.1 (6)*	259 $\pm$ 61.5 (4)*	
E_2 , MPa	6.75 $\pm$ 3.60 (9)	20.2 $\pm$ 6.60 (6)*	96.0 $\pm$ 62.1 (4)*	
τ , seconds	9.6 $\pm$ 1.4 (9)	10.8 $\pm$ 0.6 (6)	10.4 $\pm$ 0.5 (4)	
<i>Intracell $[Ca^{2+}]$ data</i>				
Resting $[Ca^{2+}]_i$, nM	75 $\pm$ 16 (9)	111 $\pm$ 23 (7)	116 $\pm$ 20 (4)	83 $\pm$ 9 (3)
$\Delta[Ca^{2+}]_i$ carb, nM	416 $\pm$ 100 (9)	432 $\pm$ 128 (7)	413 $\pm$ 125 (4)	70 $\pm$ 12 (3)
$\Delta[Ca^{2+}]_i$ ABMA, nM	361 $\pm$ 101 (9)	561 $\pm$ 150 (7)	401 $\pm$ 65 (4)	118 $\pm$ 52 (3)
$\Delta[Ca^{2+}]_i$ KCl, nM	322 $\pm$ 94 (9)	419 $\pm$ 109 (7)	337 $\pm$ 123 (4)	106 $\pm$ 37 (3)
$\Delta[Ca^{2+}]_i$ caff, nM	401 $\pm$ 120 (4)	469 $\pm$ 102 (6)	394 $\pm$ 119 (4)	91,171 (2)