To the editor:

Human NK cells can control CMV infection in the absence of T cells

A 3-month-old girl, the first child of consanguineous parents with a family history of unexplained febrile episodes including a death from infection of the eldest brother of the father at 8 months of age, was admitted to our hospital for gastroenteritis. She had a mild leukocytosis (27.4 x 10^9/L) that was due mainly to an increased number of lymphocytes. After oral rehydration, the child recovered rapidly, and she was discharged after the fever had disappeared. We subsequently learned from the laboratory data that the clinical symptoms had been caused by cytomegalovirus (CMV). In addition, we found that the lymphocyte subsets causing the leukocytosis were extremely unbalanced; 90% were CD56dim natural killer (NK) cells, 10% were B cells, while T cells were virtually absent (0.07 x 10^9/L). Genetic analysis showed early stop codons in the patient’s genes encoding the α-chain of the interleukin-7 (IL-7) receptor, a defect known to be associated with this particular T- B- SCID-phenotype.1,2

The correlation between viral load, number of NK cells, and cytokine serum-levels during the follow up was very suggestive of a causal relation (Figure 1A-C). The extremely high number of NK cells (23.8 x 10^9/L) present at the peak of viremia (4.1 x 10^4 copies CMV-DNA/mL of serum) remained elevated for approximately 2 weeks. At that moment, NK cell-derived cytokines granulocyte macrophage–colony stimulating factor (GM-CSF) and interferon-γ (IFN-γ) and the ensuing IFN-γ inducible protein-10 were at very high levels (Figure 1B,C). The viral load, already reduced by one log, decreased further to 150 copies/mL at 4 to 5 weeks and could not be detected anymore after the 6th week. By then, the number of NK cells had dropped to 2 x 10^9/L and the cytokines had returned to normal levels (Figure 1B,C, grey bars).

The phenotype of the NK cells expanded at the peak of infection had several interesting features (Figure 1D). Half the population expressed the low-affinity Fcy-receptor type 3 (CD16) only at low density, a phenomenon characteristic of activated CD56^dim NK cells.4 All cells expressed CD94 of which most was dimerized with NKG2C. NK cells expressing activating CD94-NKG2C receptors, which are rare (< 1%) in CMV^- individuals,5 may be triggered directly by CMV-infected fibroblasts.6 Furthermore, the killer cell immunoglobulin-like receptors (KIR) repertoire appeared to be biased as more than 80% of NK cells were stained by a monoclonal antibody specific for KIR2DL2/2DS2/2DL3, while the other KIR, all present in the patient’s genome, were expressed by less than 10% of NK cells (not shown).

To what extent NK cells contribute to human antiviral responses is unknown. Patients with diminished NK-cell functions may suffer from severe viral infections.7-10 but this may also be due to lack of guidance of the adaptive immune system by NK cell-derived cytokines. Here, we report a T- B^- NK^- SCID patient who recovered from CMV disease without antiviral therapy after a significant expansion of IFN-γ-producing CD16^-CD94^-NKG2C^- NK cells had occurred. To our knowledge, this case provides the first direct evidence that human NK cells can effectively control CMV infection in the absence of T cells.

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To the editor:

Heparan sulfate proteoglycans, Fc receptors, and DC suppression

In their recent article in Blood,1 You et al hypothesized on the mechanism by which decay receptor 3 (DcR3), a member of the tumor necrosis factor receptor family (TNF-R), could promote tumor growth in patients with cancer. They reported that DcR3 induces apoptosis of dendritic cells (DCs) by binding to their heparan sulfate proteoglycans (HSPG). They argued that the ensuing immune suppression would explain why high levels of DcR3 are associated with reduced survival in cancer patients. This effect of DcR3 was shown by using a recombinant form of DcR3 fused to the Fc portion of human IgG1 (DcR3-Fc). However, it is known that the Ig moiety of fusion proteins bind Fc receptors (FcR).2 Because DCs express high-affinity FcR that can produce a strong signal into cells,3 the results from You et al do not establish that, without this Ig-FcR interaction, the binding of DcR3 to HSPG is sufficient to induce DC apoptosis. As a consequence, it is not known whether the native form of DcR3 can be held responsible for reduced survival of cancer patients by inducing apoptosis in DCs or, alternatively, by its decoy activity on proapoptotic molecules such as Fas ligand.5

Using another member of the TNF-R family, the transmembrane activator, calcium modulator, and cyclophilin ligand interactor (TACI)–Fc, we observed a similar inhibition of DC generation from peripheral blood monocytes (Figure 1A top) as reported by You et al with DcR3-Fc.1,6 It is noteworthy that TACI, like DcR3, has an HSPG-binding domain.7 By contrast, B-cell maturation antigen (BCMA)–Fc that binds the same ligands as TACI-Fc but has no HSPG binding domain8 and control IgG1 did not affect DC generation. Such inhibition of DC generation was also observed with a member of the TNF family, a proliferation-inducing ligand (APRIL) also bearing an HSPG binding domain8 fused to the same Fc of IgG1 (Fc-APRIL; Figure 1A bottom). A mutant of the latter molecule without its HSPG binding domain, Fc-APRILH98,8 or the wild-type molecule oligomerized by a non-Ig motey, the collagen domain of adiponectin, ACRP-APRIL,9 failed to inhibit DC generation in spite of binding to DC very efficiently (Figure 1B). Hence, binding to HSPG is essential, but an additional interaction with FcR is prerequisite to affect DCs.

The finding that simultaneous cross-linking of FcR and HSPG and/or bridging FcR and HSPG eliminates DCs and may cause immune suppression is of great interest. Indeed, any protein carrying an HSPG-binding domain fused to a Fc portion of IgG may achieve immunosuppression. Such immunosuppression is likely to constitute an advantage in the ongoing clinical trial with TACI-Fc in autoimmune disorders.10

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