Lymphoepithelioid Lymphoma (Lennert’s Lymphoma) Is a Monoclonal Proliferation of Helper/Inducer T Cells

By A.C. Feller, G.H. Griesser, T.W. Mak, and K. Lennert

Lymphoepithelioid lymphoma (Lennert’s lymphoma) was first described as a special variant of Hodgkin’s disease. This lesion is characterized by a high percentage of epithelioid and T cells and rarely contains the classical Hodgkin’s/Reed-Sternberg cells. Cytogenetic abnormalities indicate that Lennert’s lymphoma is of T cell origin. In the present study, immunohistochemical investigation of four cases of Lennert’s lymphoma revealed two major cell populations of T cells that predominantly express the helper-inducer phenotype and Ki-M6+ and Ki-M8+ positive macrophages and epithelioid cells. Double-staining experiments for the detection of cell surface antigens and the proliferation-associated antigen Ki67 showed that only the CD4-positive cells (helper-inducer T cells) were proliferating. Examination of the DNA of these Lennert’s lymphoma samples also indicated that monoclonal rearrangement of the T cell receptor β-chain genes has occurred, whereas the immunoglobulin heavy- and κ-chain genes remained in germline configuration. Our results strongly suggest that Lennert’s lymphoma is a CD4-positive T cell lymphoma.

RESULTS

Four biopsy specimens taken at the onset of the patients’ disease, which present identical histologic pictures characteristic of LEL, are described in Fig 1. The biopsy sample from patient 4 (4b) showed a low number of epithelioid cells and a high percentage of large, basophilic cells, which were determined by light microscopy to be atypical T cells (Fig 2).

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Supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, SPP “Molekulare und klassische Tumorkytogenetik,” the Medical Research Council, and the National Cancer Institute of Canada.

Submitted Jan 6, 1986; accepted April 21, 1986.

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0006-4971/86/6803-001I$03.00/0

VOL 68, NO 3 (SEPTEMBER), 1986; PP 663–667
Table 1. Monoclonal Antibodies Used in This Study With Their Specificity and Source of Reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monoclonal Antibody</th>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
<th>Source/Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leu-4</td>
<td>CD3</td>
<td>All T cells</td>
<td>BD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyt-3</td>
<td>CD2</td>
<td>Sheep erythrocyte receptor</td>
<td>New England Nuclear, Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leu-1</td>
<td>CD5</td>
<td>T cells, some B cells</td>
<td>BD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leu-3a</td>
<td>CD4</td>
<td>Helper/inducer T cells</td>
<td>BD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leu-2a</td>
<td>CD8</td>
<td>Suppressor/cytotoxic T cells</td>
<td>BD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To15</td>
<td>CD22</td>
<td>All B cells</td>
<td>Stein et al\textsuperscript{10}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ki67</td>
<td></td>
<td>Proliferating cells</td>
<td>Gerdes et al\textsuperscript{16}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviation: BD, Becton Dickinson.

Immunohistochemistry. Immunohistochemically investigated biopsy specimens 1 to 4a were phenotypically identical (Table 2). More than 90% of the T cells expressed the T cell antigens CD3, CD5, and CD2, and the majority of lymphoid cells (>80%) expressed CD4, whereas three of the four samples were composed of less than 10% CD8-positive cells (case 3 contained 20% CD8-positive lymphocytes). All samples contained a high percentage of Ki-M1+, Ki-M6+, and Ki-M8+ epithelioid cells. B cells (CD22+), which were diffusely distributed or found only in small clusters, made up about 5% of all lymphoid cells. The number of proliferating cells (Ki67+) ranged from 10% to 30% in the early biopsy specimens (1 to 4a), but in the last biopsy sample (4b) an elevated rate of proliferation that was as high as 60%. Lymphoid cells that were still expressing CD3 and CD2 did not express the CD5 or CD4 antigen of helper/inducer T cells. Double-labeling experiments with Ki67, which labels proliferating cells, and monoclonal antibodies recognizing cell surface antigens clearly showed that proliferating cells expressed T cell antigens CD3, CD5, and CD2 (Fig 3A). As shown in Table 3, less than 3% of CD8-positive lymphocytes in each biopsy sample were positive for Ki67 (Fig 3B), whereas a high proportion of lymphoid cells (30% to 70%) expressed Ki67 and the CD4 antigen simultaneously. Epithelioid cells Ki-M1+, Ki-M6+, or Ki-M8+ were Ki67-negative. The same B cells reacted with anti-IgM or the pan-B cell antibody.

Determination of somatic rearrangement. DNA from these biopsy specimens was examined for rearrangement of the T cell receptor β-chain (TcRβ) and immunoglobulin heavy-chain (IgH) genes. DNA samples were digested with each of the restriction enzymes EcoRI, HindIII, and BamHI and analyzed by Southern gel analysis. The TcRβ genes had undergone rearrangement in all five DNA samples. Following digestion with EcoRI, rearranged bands were detected in samples 2 (patient 1), 3 (patient 2), 4b (patient 4), and 5 (patient 3) at 8.2 kb, 9.4 kb, 10.3 kb, and 8.0 kb, respectively (Fig 4). Except for sample 4 (patient 4), the germline bands at 10.5 kb and 3.7 kb were detected either as a result of the presence of nonlymphoid cells in the lymph node biopsy specimen or of rearrangement of only one allele in the clonal cell population.

In one case, two biopsy specimens were obtained from one patient. Sample 1 (patient 4, biopsy a) contained the DNA from the first biopsy specimen; sample 4 (patient 4, biopsy b) represented DNA from the second lymphoma biopsy 2 years later. The rearrangement pattern in these two samples was different. No rearrangement could be seen in sample 1 following DNA digestion with EcoRI, whereas in sample 4, a deletion of the 10.5-kb germline band and a faint rearranged band at 10.3 kb were seen, indicating that, in addition to the
Table 2. Immunophenotypic Characteristics of Infiltrating Cells in Lymph Nodes With Lennert’s Lymphoma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specimen</th>
<th>CD19</th>
<th>CD3</th>
<th>CD2</th>
<th>CD5</th>
<th>CD4</th>
<th>CD8</th>
<th>CD4/CD8</th>
<th>Ki67</th>
<th>Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10:1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10:1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4:1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10:1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>&gt;90</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Specimens 4a and 4b are from two sequential biopsies performed on the same patient in a 2-year interval. Counts are given in percentages.

original rearrangement on one of the alleles, a deletion of Cα, took place in the other (Fig 4). This was supported by the finding of Cα rearrangement in sample 4 as well as in sample 1 when HindIII was used as the restriction enzyme. Figure 5 shows rearranged bands for sample 1 (patient 4, biopsy a) at 6.9 kb (lane 1) and for sample 4 (patient 4, biopsy b) at 6.5 kb and 4.5 kb (lane 2). No immunoglobulin heavy-chain gene rearrangement could be observed in any of the samples (data not shown).

DISCUSSION

Immunohistochemistry has provided a number of tools for the assignment of cells to the B or T cell lineage. With most malignant non-Hodgkin’s lymphomas, if one has a clonal expansion of a monomorphous lymph node infiltrate, these
tools can be used to characterize and phenotype the neoplastic cell clone. In malignant lymphomas such as Hodgkin's disease, which are composed of a mixture of different cell types, it is difficult or even impossible to recognize selectively the neoplastic cell clone and to determine from which lineage it was derived. One such disease is the special variant of Hodgkin's disease lymphoma described by Lennert and later by Lennert and Mestdagh as epithelioid cellular lymphogranulomatosis, later distinguished from Hodgkin's disease and designated lymphoepithelioid cell lymphoma. Recent results indicate that in addition to the high percentage of epithelioid cells there are large numbers of T cells present in this disease; the true nature of this disease is still unclear, however, because it remains to be seen whether the T cells compose a clonal neoplastic cell population or whether they only are cells that interact with the neoplastic cells.

Histologic and immunohistochemical results show two characteristic cell types in LEL: T cells with the helper-inducer phenotype and epithelioid cells expressing histiocyte antigens. The progression of LEL in patient 4 is remarkable. The first biopsy specimen showed features of LEL, histologically and phenotypically, and the second biopsy specimen, taken 2 years after the onset of the disease, showed features of a high-grade malignant peripheral T cell lymphoma, indicating a shift from a low-grade malignant lymphoma (LEL) to a high-grade malignant lymphoma, a phenomenon known from B cell malignancies. Using a monoclonal antibody that recognized an antigen expressed in all proliferating cells from the late G1 phase to the S phase (Ki67), we tried to define the dominant cell type of the proliferating cells. Double-labeling experiments show that mainly the CD4-positive helper/inducer T cells were proliferating because they were strongly Ki67-positive and the CD8+ lymphocytes and epithelioid cells were Ki67-negative. If, as in other malignancies, the proliferating cells represent the neoplastic cell clone, these results leave little doubt as to the T cell nature of Lennert's lymphoma and indicate that the neoplastic cells are phenotypically helper/inducer T cells.

The claim is further substantiated by the detection of clonal gene rearrangement of the \( \beta \)-chain of the T cell antigen receptor in each biopsy specimen, whereas the immunoglobulin heavy chain genes remained in germline configuration. The intensity of the rearranged bands observed with the TCR\( _{\beta} \) probe was similar to that in cases of peripheral T cell lymphomas. In contrast to this observation, a mixture of cells from Hodgkin's disease with a large number of epithelioid cells showed only faint rearranged bands resulting from a low percentage (about 5%) of monoclonal proliferating T cells, thus favoring the view that LEL is a T cell lymphoma and not a Hodgkin's disease variant.

In one of the patients, a second lymphoma biopsy was performed 2 years after the first one. Hybridization of the DNA from this second biopsy specimen with the TCR\( _{\beta} \) probe demonstrated a rearrangement pattern that probably involves three alleles and is completely different from that of the first biopsy specimen. By analogy to B cell lymphomas, a diagnosis of a biclonal T cell lymphoma is in order because upon comparison with the first and the second biopsy samples, the size differences in TCR\( _{\beta} \)-containing fragments indicate that during the development of the lymphoma other subclones have displaced the original clone. This observation is consistent with the proposal of a multistep pathogenesis as described in acute lymphoblastic leukemias by Fialkow.

In accordance with these findings are the results of cytogenetic studies that have shown numerous chromosomal abnormalities, especially those involving chromosome 3, which is characteristic of T cell lymphomas. The characteristically high levels of epithelioid cells in this lesion raise the possibility that the neoplastic CD4-positive clones are functional and produce cytokines to attract these cells.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank N. Caccia for comments on the manuscript.
LENNERT’S LYMPHOMA IS A T CELL LYMPHOMA

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