Natural killer (NK) cells are phenotypically defined as lymphocytes expressing the antigens CD56 and mostly CD16 (FcγRIII), but lacking CD3. A small CD3−CD16−CD56+ NK cell subset has been described in normal individuals representing less than 2% of peripheral blood lymphocytes. We analyzed here 70 patients for their reconstitution of the immune system following autologous or allogeneic bone marrow transplantation. In 35% of these patients, two different NK cell subsets, namely CD56dim and CD56bright, cells, were observed. The mean duration of these two subsets after transplant was 4 months. Sixty-five percent of the patients exhibited an increased number of NK cells, but only the typical CD16+CD56dim population. The CD56bright subpopulation represented a particular CD3−CD16−NK subset, with posttransplant frequencies up to 70% of all NK cells and 40% of peripheral blood lymphocytes, respectively. In contrast to normal CD56dim NK cells, CD56bright cells coexpressed the activation antigens p75 𝛽-chain of interleukin-2 receptor (IL-2R) CD2R, and CD26, but were negative for CD16. NK and antibody-dependent cellular cytotoxicity activity of CD56bright cells was low compared with CD56dim NK cells. But using IL-2 and interferon-γ, their cytotoxicity could be enhanced even more than in CD56dim lymphocytes. These different subsets may reflect distinct activation or differentiation steps of NK cells during reconstitution of the immune system. Their differential response to IL-2 may be of functional importance for posttransplant cytokine therapy.
Phenotypic analysis. Phenotypic analysis was performed either by indirect immunofluorescence with fluorescein-conjugated goat antimouse Ig (IgG, Behringwerke, Marburg, Germany) or by direct immunofluorescence in two-color analysis using biotinylated antibodies. The staining procedure has been described in detail previously.16 Briefly, 1 to 3 x 10^5 cells/well were incubated with murine MoAbs at an optimal dilution for 30 minutes. Nonspecific binding was eliminated by mixing the samples directly labeled antibodies. The staining procedure has been described in detail previously.16

Cell lines. Several continuously growing cell lines were used. Cytotoxicity assays were performed using the erythroleukemic K562 line as a standard NK target. The murine lymphoma cell line L1210 was used as target in ADCC assays.

Cytotoxicity assays. All cytotoxicity assays were performed in triplicates at various effector to target (E/T) ratios using V-bottom microtiter plates with 5 x 10^3 51Cr-labeled target cells per well as previously described in detail.18 The medium for the cytotoxicity assays was RPMI 1640 supplemented with 5% fetal calf serum (FCS) and 1% penicillin-streptomycin. Specific cytotoxicity was measured after 4 hours of incubation at 37°C by determining the 51Cr release. Spontaneous release was determined by incubating target cells without effector cells. Maximal release was obtained by lysing target cells with the detergent NP40.

Activation of NK cell subsets. NK subsets were activated for cytotoxicity assays. For this purpose, enriched NK cell subsets were cultured after magnetic bead depletion for 24 hours in RPMI 1640 supplemented with 10% pooled human serum, 1% penicillin-streptomycin, and 1% sodium pyruvate in the presence of 500 U/mL recombinant interleukin-2 (rIL-2; Cetus, Emeryville, CA) or 200 U/mL interferon γ (INFγ; Biogen, Cambridge, MA) as described previously.19 Control cells were cultured without cytokines.

RESULTS

CD56<sub>+</sub>dim and CD56<sub>+</sub>bright NK cells after BMT. Phenotypic analysis of PBL after BMT showed an additional second NK cell population in about 35% of the patients. With an increase of NK cells, a CD56<sub>+</sub>dim and a CD56<sub>+</sub>bright subset were observed (Fig 1). The phenomenon was equally distributed among autologous (7 of 20 [35%]) and allogeneic (18 of 50 [36%]) transplants, and female and male patients, respectively (Table 1). In the allogeneic transplant patients, the reconstituted NK cells were shown to be of donor origin. There was no obvious association of the appearance of this additional NK subset with any feature,
NK CELLS AFTER BONE MARROW TRANSPLANTATION

Fig 1. (Top) A normal control exhibiting normal NK cells after staining with CD56 or CD16 MoAb. Post-BMT patients have a CD56^dim and CD56^bright NK cell population. The time course of CD56 and CD16 expression during 9 months after BMT in one representative patient is illustrated in the lower panel. For each sample, 10,000 cells were analyzed using a FACScan. Indirect immunofluorescence was performed as described in Materials and Methods.

including underlying disease, graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), viral infections, and course of reconstitution.

The CD56^bright cells could be observed for a mean period of 17 weeks in each patient (Fig 1 and Table 1). The initial small proportion of CD56^bright NK cells increased to a maximum of about 20% to 70% of all NK cells. This increase is also reflected in the absolute number of NK cells (Table 1). Finally, the CD56^bright NK cell subset disappeared.

Phenotypic characteristics of the two distinct NK cell subgroups. Using two-color immunofluorescence, both NK cell subsets were characterized in more detail. Three main populations of CD56^+ cells could be distinguished by comparison of the three panels in Fig 2 (A through C). The classical NK cell phenotype in the first subset was characterized as CD2^+ CD3^- CD16^+ CD56^dim. The second NK cell subset was clearly different from the typical NK phenotype. These cells were CD2^- CD3^- CD16^- CD56^bright. A low proportion of CD56^+dim cells coexpressing CD3 was not further studied because they were T cells by definition (Fig 2).

Activation antigens on CD56^dim and CD56^bright NK cells. When testing different activation antigens on NK cells, they were preferentially expressed by CD56^bright cells. They were CD26^+ CD2R^+ HLA-DR^+ p75^+ (β-chain of IL-2 receptor [IL-2R]) (Fig 3). In contrast, the α-chain of the IL-2R (CD25) could not be detected on either of these subsets at any time. In regard to other lymphocyte antigens, similarities in both NK cell populations were observed. CD8 antigen expression could be detected in both NK cell subsets with varying percentages. The T- and NK-cell-
associated antigen CD2 was equally distributed in both NK cell subsets.

In Fig 4, the cell surface antigen expression of four different patients is summarized. The differences in expression of activation antigens become particularly apparent.

Cytosmears showed both NK subtypes to be large granular lymphocytes (LGL), confirming the additional NK subgroup as NK cells also by morphologic criteria with typical cytoplasmatic granules (data not shown).

**CD56^{bright} NK cells exhibit low cytotoxicity.** Freshly isolated PBMC and CD56^{dim} and CD56^{bright} cells were tested for their NK and ADCC activity. Cytotoxicity of unseparated lymphocytes against K562 and ADCC against antibody-treated L1210 showed in all patients normal values. But both NK cell types were functionally distinct when examined in detail using CD56^{dim} and CD56^{bright} cells after FACS sorting or magnetic bead enrichment. Freshly FACS-purified CD56^{dim} cells exhibited high NK killing and ADCC activity. It is evident that NK and ADCC killing of CD56^{bright} cells is significantly lower than that of CD56^{dim} NK cells (Fig 5A). On the other hand, after IL-2 or IFNγ activation, the relative increase of cytotoxicity in these CD56^{bright} cells is higher compared with the CD56^{dim} cells (Fig 5B and C).

**DISCUSSION**

For a number of years the CD56 or NKH-1 molecule has been shown to represent the most suitable surface antigen to identify PB NK cells. However, the functional nature of this antigen on NK cells is still a matter of discussion. Recently, two groups described a NK cell subset characterized by a high expression of CD56 antigen. They have observed these NK cells in normal donors representing only less than 2% of all PBL. We characterize here the CD16^- CD56^{bright} NK cell subset in comparison to normal CD16^+ CD56^{dim} NK cells during reconstitution after BMT (Figs 1 and 2). The reconstitution phase after BMT, cancer treatment using the rIL-2,22 finally, T-deficient CD56^- NK cells. Each bar displays the mean of four experiments. Lines indicate standard deviations.

**Fig 4.** Coexpression of cell surface antigens on CD56^{dim} (A) and CD56^{bright} (B) NK cells. Each bar displays the mean of four experiments. Lines indicate standard deviations.
cells (up to 70% to 90%) can be observed. This high proportion of NK cells usually goes along with the presence of this particular CD56<sup>+</sup> NK subset. Therefore, these disease entities provide models for studying activation and differentiation of human NK cells in vivo.

Our phenotypic data show a much higher activation status of CD56<sup>+</sup> compared with CD56<sup>-<mover>-d</mover></sup> dim cells (Figs 3 and 4). The CD16<sup>-</sup> CD56<sup>+</sup> NK cells all coexpress the p75<sup>-<mover>-b</mover></sup> chain of the IL-2R, but do not express the high-affinity IL-2R. This finding is consistent with in vivo IL-2-activated NK cells in tumor patients. In earlier studies it has been shown that the p75 expression on these CD56<sup>+</sup> NK cells is responsible for IL-2-dependent induction of proliferation and in vitro activation of cytotoxicity. Therefore, it must be concluded that chronic exposure to IL-2 in vivo may be responsible for the lack of the CD25 IL-2R. In addition, the CD26 activation antigen is expressed on all CD56<sup>+</sup> NK cells, but after in vitro activation using IL-2 and IFNγ, cytotoxicity enhancement can be observed for both NK subsets, relatively stronger for the CD56<sup>+</sup> NK cells. Interestingly, the finding of two different CD56<sup>+</sup> cell subsets is a transient one (Fig 1). During reconstitution it can be detected during a mean period of about 4 months. At this point, it can only be speculated that most likely the early reconstitution of the lymphoid system in the presence of high cytokine concentrations, in particular IL-2, might enhance this CD56<sup>+</sup> NK subset. The lack of CD16 expression and diminished NK cell activity suggest the hypothesis that the CD56<sup>+</sup> NK cells represent an early NK progenitor cell subset that might differentiate into mature NK cells. Alternatively, the CD16<sup>-</sup> CD56<sup>+</sup> NK cells might be the result of a maximal in vivo activation of NK cells after BMT. This activation may induce an increased CD56 and p75 antigen expression, and at the same time a loss of FcγRIII or CD16 antigen.

Therefore, further in vitro activation and molecular studies will have to clarify the functional role of the two NK cell subsets expressing different CD56 antigen density. This knowledge may be particularly important when using IL-2 treatment for patients after BMT.

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