Pathogenic immunity and protective immunity in chronic hepatitis B

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Abstract

Infection with hepatitis B virus (HBV) is universal in nature and about 2 billion people of the world have been infected by HBV at some point of their life. Among them, about 240-370 million are chronically infected with the HBV. The natural course of HBV infection exhibits considerable variability. On the one hand, the majority of HBV-infected persons control HBV replication and liver damages after initial infection. On the other hand, considerable numbers of HBV-infected patients develop chronic hepatitis B (CHB) and complications like cirrhosis of the liver (LC) and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). The mechanisms underlying these diversities have not been properly explored and accordingly evidence-based therapeutic approaches for chronic HBV infection could not be developed for CHB and their complications. HBV is a non-cytopathic virus with no direct role in liver damage in HBV-infected patients. On the one hand, host immunity of HBV-infected patients has important roles in control of HBV and containment of liver damages. On the other hand, recent evidences have suggested that host immunity is also responsible for ongoing HBV replication and progressive liver damages. Thus, host immunity in HBV infection may be categorized in two broad headings; (1) pathogenic immunity and (2) protective immunity. A comprehensive discussion about the nature of 'pathogenic immunity' and 'protective immunity' during chronic HBV infection and their implications will be provided in this communication.

Key words: Antigen-specific immunocytes; chronic hepatitis B; HBV replication; immune therapy; non-antigen-specific immunocytes; pathogenic immunity; protective immunity, therapeutic immunity

1. Natural course of HBV infection

1.1. Epidemiology of HBV infection

The natural course of HBV infection differs among individuals and is dependent on multiple viral and host factors. Epidemiological data indicate that of the 2 billion HBV-infected individuals worldwide, 80-90% (~1.7 billion at least) exhibit controlled viral replication and no liver damage [1]. On the other hand, 240-370 million HBV-infected individuals experience persistent HBV replication, and ~20% experience liver damage [1,2]. CHB patents are at risk of developing HBV-related complications, including liver cirrhosis (LC) and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), with 0.6-1.2 million individuals dying from these complications each year [3].

1.2. Liver damage by HBV

Approximately 20% of chronic HBV-infected patients experience persistent HBV replication and liver damage. Conversely, ~80% of chronic HBV-infected patients do not exhibit liver damage, despite harboring HBV DNA, hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg), and hepatitis B e antigen (HBeAg) [4,5]. HBV is a non-cytopathic virus, and its direct role on liver damage has not been elucidated in animal models or CHB patients. Although multiple HBV transgenic mouse (HBV TM) lines containing different levels of HBV DNA, HBsAg, and HBeAg have been developed, none experienced liver damage [6-8]. Moreover, the levels of HBV DNA, HBsAg or HBeAg-positivity or HBeAg-negativity do not correlate with the extent of liver damage in CHB patients [9-11].

2. Host immunity during HBV infection

2.1 Dichotomy of host immunity in HBV infection

Since the levels of HBV, or its antigens, do not correlate with liver

damage in CHB patients, most investigations have focused on host factors. Circumstantial and experimental data suggest that the immune responses of HBV-infected hosts cause liver damage. Additionally, host immunity also appears to play a role in controlling viral replication. Thus, host immunity is dichotomous during CHB infection, altering between pathogenic and protective/therapeutic states. Understanding such states — and the control thereof — is crucial for developing therapies against CHB, as well as for preventing HBV-related complications and deaths.

2.2 'Pathogenic Immunity' in Chronic HBV infection

A temporal relationship between host immunity and hepatocyte damage was shown by Ando *et al*. in an HBV TM model of infection [12], in which an accumulation of non-specific mononuclear cell infiltrates was observed

in the damaged liver of HBV TM. Because HBV is non-cytopathic, the molecular pathways leading to hepatocyte death in human HBV infection are not well understood. There is a pressing need to dissect the ways and to develop insights about cellular and molecular mechanisms underlying the facts in which different components of the immune response contribute to liver disease in HBV infection. These insights are essential because they will allow the rational development of immunotherapeutic strategies that enhance viral control while limiting or blocking liver inflammation. Immune-mediated liver damage in patients with HBV infection has conventionally been attributed to cytolytic killing of infected hepatocytes by virus-specific CD8 T cells. However, this assumption has been challenged as investigators demonstrated the presence of activated HBV-specific CD8 T cells at high frequencies in the livers of patients controlling HBV infection without any

evidence of liver inflammation [13]. Instead, the distinguishing feature between patients with or without HBV-related chronic liver disease was the presence of a large, non-antigen–specific lymphocytic infiltrate in the livers of the former group. Maini *et al.* showed that the levels of non-antigen-specific lymphocytes were elevated in the liver of CHB patients experiencing liver damage as well as a significantly higher ratio of non-antigen-specific immunocytes to HBV antigen-specific immunocytes in CHB patients experiencing liver damage and HBV replication [13].

2.3 Natural killer (NK) cells and pathogenic immunity by non-antigen-specific immunocytes

The proportion of NK cells to total immunocytes is normally high in healthy liver; however, the biological significance of this phenomenon is unknown. Moreover, the number of NK cells in the liver of CHB patients is further elevated,

which results in liver damage [14]. Dunn *et al.* investigated the mechanisms underlying NK-induced liver damage in CHB patients [15] and found that the majority of NK cells infiltrating damaged liver were activated. Additionally, the concentration of activated NK cells was significantly higher among CHB patients with high ALT levels compared with patients with low ALT levels. Based on those data, the authors suggested that non-antigen-specific immunocytes play an important role in liver damage in CHB patients [15]. This hypothesis has since been supported by additional investigations [16-18], and it seems likely that non-antigen-specific immunocytes induce pathogenic immunity in CHB patients.

2.4 Migration of non-antigen-specific immunocytes in the liver of CHB patients

Compared with healthy control patients, CHB patients exhibit elevated

NK cell numbers in liver [15]; however, little is known regarding the underlying mechanisms of migration and localization. A role for cytokines in such mechanisms has been highlighted, since HBV-infected liver secretes interferon (IFN)-gamma-induced chemokines, including CXCL9 and CXCL10, which may influence the recruitment of antigen-non-specific immunocytes [19-21]. The recruitment of such non-antigen-specific immunocytes can cause chronic inflammation that may induce liver damage and chronic hepatitis [15,19-21].

2.5 Potential mechanisms of NK cell-mediated damage of hepatocytes in CHB, including tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (TRAIL)-mediated killing of hepatocytes by activated NK cells:

TNF-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (TRAIL) is a primary ligand involved in the NK-mediated destruction of hepatocytes. NK cells from control

subjects express low levels of TRAIL [22]; however, expression is upregulated in NK cells from CHB patients [15]. The receptor for TRAIL is also upregulated on the surface of hepatocytes in CHB patients [23]; thus, NK cells expressing TRAIL may induce apoptosis of liver cells expressing the ligand [15]. In addition to a TRAIL-dependent mechanism of apoptosis, the Fas pathway has also been implicated in causing lysis of hepatocytes by NK cells in CHB patients [15,18].

2.6 The role of cytokines in liver damage

Multiple cytokines are involved in the pathogenesis of CHB, including interleukin (IL)-8, IFN-alpha, and IL-1beta, the expression of which is elevated in CHB patients, compared with healthy controls [23]. The expression levels of IL-6, TNF-alpha, transforming growth factor (TGF)-beta, hepatocyte growth factor, and epidermal growth factor are also elevated in CHB patients

[24,25]. Moreover, IL-22 has been shown to increase the pro-inflammatory activity of TNF-alpha.

2.7 Pathogenic immunity in CHB and progression to complications

Persistent inflammation in CHB patients activates hepatic stellate cells, myofibroblasts, and fibroblasts, which initiate collagen, laminin, fibronectin, and proteoglycan production and deposition, leading to liver fibrosis. The activation of these cells is regulated by proinflammatory cytokines such as TGF-β, IL-6, TNF-α, and CCL-21, among other stimuli [27]. Thus, LC is caused by the collective dysregulation of liver regeneration processes [28].

3. Protective Immunity in Chronic HBV Infection

3.1. Nature of protective immunity

An increase in HBV antigen-specific immunocytes has been observed in the liver of patients with CHB who experience limited HBV replication and reduced liver damage [12,13]. Studies have provided evidence of a therapeutic role for HBV antigen-specific immunocytes [33-36] in CHB patients that may stem from the elevated levels of hepatitis B core antigen (HBcAg)-specific and HBsAg-specific cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTL). Also, antigen-specific immunity may induce suppression of HBV replication by non-cytotoxic mechanisms. However, the cellular mechanisms related to liver protection by antigen-specific immunocytes need to be elucidated in CHB patients. It is of importance to establish whether HBV-specific CD8 cells can control virus replication through the secretion of cytokines alone or whether direct lysis of infected cells is also involved. The sparsely scattered pattern of CD8[+] cells within the liver parenchyma of patients with low level viral replication suggests that secreted cytokines may be playing a major role in antiviral control. The recent demonstration of the efficacy of IFN-γ in

activating a pathway of intracellular virus inactivation in the hepatocytes reinforces this interpretation [37]. However, some degree of direct hepatocyte lysis caused by HBV-specific CD8 cells may exist, which is not detectable by serum liver enzyme measurement.

4. Proof of concept:

4.1 Protective Immunity by HBV antigen-specific immune modulators

Although high levels of antigen-specific immunocytes have been detected in the liver of CHB patients who experience controlled HBV replication and reduced liver damage, direct causation for this correlation is lacking. Several investigators have assessed the safety and therapeutic potential of HBV antigen-specific immune modulation in CHB patients, and Pol *et al.* (1994) revealed that administration of HBsAg was safe and effective at reducing the concentration of HBV DNA and liver damage [38]. Subsequent clinical trials

also showed that immunity induced by HBV antigen-specific immune modulators was safe and effective in CHB patients [39-51].

In addition to HBsAgs, a combination of HBsAg and anti-HBs was administered to Chinese CHB patients by Wen and colleagues [40-42]. A combination of antiviral drugs and therapeutic vaccines have also been used to induce antigen-specific immunity in CHB patients and were found to limit HBV replication and control liver damage [43-47]. An HBcAg epitope-based vaccine has also been deemed safe and effective in CHB patients [48,49], and recently, a phase I/II clinical trial using an antigen-specific immune modulator containing HBsAg and HBcAg has begun. The HBsAg/HBcAg-based vaccine is safe in CHB patients in whom it reduced HBV DNA in 50% of individuals. Normalization of ALT was also observed in all vaccine recipients [50]. A phase-III clinical trial of the nasally and

subcutaneously administered HBsAg/ HBcAg-based vaccine has revealed comparable therapeutic efficacy to that of pegylated IFN [Registered; ClinicalTrials.gov; NCT01374308] [51].

5. Compilation

Elucidation of the dichotomous nature of immunity in CHB is increasing, and a temporal relationship between the pathogenic effects of non-antigen-specific immunity and the protective effects of HBV antigen-specific immunity has also been observed. Inducible HBV antigen-specific immunity has not been shown to have adverse effects in CHB patients and is non-pathogenic; however, long-term assessments of such patients - with a particular focus on autoimmune phenomena - have not been performed.

Although inducible non-antigen-specific immunity seems to be pathogenic in nature, NUCs and IFN have also shown protective and therapeutic effects in limited numbers of CHB patients [52-55].

These observations raise several important questions regarding the immunity of CHB patients, including those surrounding the nature of immunocytes conferring pathogenic and protective immunity, the conversion of non-antigen-specific to antigen-specific immunity, the differences between antigen-specific and pathogenic immunity, and the role of the hepatic microenvironment that supports different types of immunity.

The definition of CTL as it pertains to CHB patients should also be reviewed. CTLs are used to identify a population of cells that kill their target cells; however, HBcAg-specific and HBsAg-specific CTLs do not kill hepatocytes, but rather play a protective role in containing liver damage and HBV replication. Although the mechanisms underlying these activities are unknown, antigen-specific CTLs may produce cytokines that influence viral replication in a non-cytopathic manner. It is possible that the observed effects are due to a

combination of traditional CTLs with cytotoxic properties and CD8 T+ cells with protective properties.

The important cellular and molecular events regarding pathogenic and protective immunity in CHB patients cannot be investigated in humans due to ethical and scientific limitations. Thus, HBV TM models are used for such studies; however, mice do not experience liver damage. Therefore, the development of other animal models, including Tupai and Woodchuck, for such studies is required. Finally, pathogenic and protective immunities may not be mutually exclusive events, as one type may convert to the other based on the hepatic microenvironment or other HBV-related factors.

Acknowledgement

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