Cyclophosphamide Induces Differentiation of Th17 Cells in Cancer Patients

Sophie Viaud, Caroline Flament, Mustapha Zoubir, et al.

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Abstract

Low doses of the alkylating agent cyclophosphamide (CTX) mediate antiangiogenic and immunostimulatory effects, leading to potent tumoricidal activity in association with various immunotherapeutic strategies. Here, we show in rodents and cancer patients that CTX markedly promotes the differentiation of CD4+ T helper 17 (Th17) cells that can be recovered in both blood and tumor beds. However, CTX does not convert regulatory T cells into Th17 cells. Because Th17 are potent inducers of tissue inflammation and autoimmunity, these results suggest impact on the clinical management of various types of malignancies treated with alkylating agents and a potential need to optimize CTX-based immunotherapy in patients. Cancer Res; 71(3); 661–5. ©2011 AACR.

Introduction

Cyclophosphamide (CTX) at 100 to 150 mg/kg dose in mice is known for decades to suppress inhibitory T-cell subsets promoting delayed type hypersensitivity (DTH) responses, IFNγ-mediated antitumor T-cell immunity synergizing with anticancer vaccines, TLR agonists or adoptive T-cell transfer (1, 2). The production of CTX-induced IFNγ might account for the augmented antibody responses and the persistence of memory T cells (3). Interestingly, CTX can also ablate a subset of dendritic cells involved in peripheral tolerance, thereby contributing to enhanced T helper 17 (Th1) responses and antitumor effects (4). Pioneering pilot studies indicated that CTX alone or combined with vaccines could restore natural killer (NK) and T-cell receptor (TCR)-driven effector functions in end-stage cancer patients (5), augment DTH responses (6), decrease the proportions of regulatory T cells (Tregs; ref. 5), and prolong survival of metastatic cancer patients (7).

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Sophie Viaud and Caroline Flament share first authorship. Nathalie Chaput and Laurence Zitvogel share senior authorship.

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Recent preclinical studies indicated a close association between interleukin (IL)-17 produced by tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes (TIL) and tumor destruction (8–10). IL-17A−/− mice exhibited accelerated tumor progression correlating with decreased NK- and tumor-specific T-cell IFNγ release (8) or enhanced establishment of lung metastases in a melanoma model (10). The adoptively transferred, antigen-specific Th17 CD4+ T cells evolved into IFNγ-producing Th1-like lymphocytes capable of eliminating large tumor burdens (9) or behave as helper cells generating potent CTL responses (10).

Given the plasticity of Th17 cells (11) and the unstable phenotype of inducible Tregs (12), we addressed whether CTX could exert significant effects on these in-transit lymphocytes subsets. We found that at a low or lymphodepleting dosage in mice and metronomic in humans, CTX promoted the differentiation of Th17 cells in cancer patients that could be recovered in blood and tumor ascites. Animal models suggested that CTX-induced Th17 differentiation did not result from the conversion of Tregs.

Material and Methods

Mice

C57BL/6 (H-2b) mice were obtained from Harlan Laboratories. Foxp3DTERT mice [DT receptor−enhanced green fluorescent protein (GFP)] under the control of the Foxp3 promoter; ref. (13) were bred in the local animal facility at our institution in pathogen-free conditions. Animals were used between 9 and 14 weeks of age. All animal experiments were carried out in compliance with French and European laws and regulations.

Phase I clinical trial IMAIL-2

This clinical trial evaluated the safety of combination therapy with imatinib and IL-2 (Gleevec and IL-2) after a 3-week...
oral treatment with 50 mg/d of CTX in patients with metastatic or locally advanced solid tumors [trial approved by the Kremlin Bicêtre Hospital Ethics Committee (n° 07-019) and the Agence Française de Sécurité Sanitaire des Produits de Santé (n° A70385-27) in 2007, N° EudraCT: 2007-001699-35. All patients signed an informed consent for this study.

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Abbreviation: ECOG, Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group.
\(^a\)Approved by the Kremlin Bicètre Hospital Ethics Committee (n° 07-019) and the Agence Française de Sécurité Sanitaire des Produits de Santé (n° A70385-27) in 2007. Informed consent was obtained from each patient. Patients’ baseline characteristics are summarized in Table 1. During this trial, serial blood sampling was carried out for immunomonitoring, but we focused here on pre-versus post-CTX therapy. PBMCs were isolated on a Ficoll gradient and frozen in liquid nitrogen until analysis for phenotyping and functions.

Reagents

Cyclophosphamide (Endoxan; Baxter) was provided by Institut de Cancérologie Gustave Roussy. Anti-mouse monoclonal antibodies (mAb) were purchased from BD Pharmingen and eBioscience. LIVE/DEAD fixable violet stain fluorescence for viability staining was purchased from Invitrogen/Molecular Probes. Anti-human mAbs were purchased from BD Pharmingen and Beckman Coulter. All cells were analyzed on a Cyan flow cytometer (Beckman Coulter) with FloJo (Tree Star) software.

Cytokine assays

CD4\(^+\) and CD8\(α^+\) T cells were indirectly magnetically sorted (Miltenyi Biotec) from spleens. A total of 2 \(\times\) 10\(^5\) cells per well were incubated in MaxiSorp plates (Nunc) precoated with anti-CD3\(α\) mAb (0.5 \(μg\)/well; eBioscience) and/or anti-CD28 mAb (2 \(μg\)/mL; BD Pharmingen) and/or rIL-1\(β\) and rIL-23 (10 ng/mL; R&D Systems). The supernatants were assayed at 48 hours by ELISA for mouse IL-17A (eBioscience) or IFN\(γ\) (BD OptEIA). CD4\(^+\)CD25\(^-\)Foxp3\(^{-}\)Foxp3\(^{FP}^\) T cells and CD4\(^+\)Foxp3\(^{FP}^\) T cells were isolated from 2 or 3 pooled spleens from Foxp3\(^{DTR}\) mice by MoFlo- or BD FACS Vantage-mediated sorting. Human bulk peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMC) were cultured at 1 \(\times\) 10\(^5\) CD3\(^+\) T cells per well in U-bottom 96-well plates with 1 \(\times\) 10\(^4\) anti-CD3/anti-CD28-coated microbeads (Invitrogen/Dynal) and 10 IU of rIL-2/mL (Prolifera), CD4\(^+\) and CD8\(^+\) T cells were isolated by MoFlo-mediated sorting from PBMCs or ascites fluids and incubated at a ratio of 10 cells for 1 anti-CD3/anti-CD28 microbead (with 10 IU of rIL-2/mL). The supernatants were assayed at day 3 by ELISA for human IL-17 (R&D Systems) or IFN\(γ\) (BD OptEIA).

Results and Discussion

At 100 mg/kg, CTX blocked the growth kinetics of subcutaneous B16F10 (not shown) in a T-cell–dependent manner (1,2). We examined more closely the phenotype of T cells during CTX therapy. A single injection of 100 mg/kg of CTX resulted, by 7 days, in a 50% reduction in the spleen cellularity, including B, CD4\(^+\) T, and CD8\(^+\) T cells (Fig. 1A), but no significant modulations of the proportions of the CD4\(^+\), CD8\(^+\), and γ\(δ\) T-cell subsets (not shown). Seven days post-CTX therapy, the TCR-driven cytokine release was markedly increased in melanoma-bearing mice (Fig. 1B) in spleens (but not in draining lymph nodes, not shown). While IFN\(γ\) production was increased both in CD4\(^+\) and CD8\(^+\) T cells by CTX (Supplementary Fig. 2), CTX-driven IL-17 release increased specifically in CD4\(^+\) T cells (Fig. 1C). In similar conditions, CTX did not significantly induce IL-17 production by CD8\(^+\) (Fig. 1C). Interestingly, both low (10 mg/kg causing only a slight decrease in the B-cell count) and high (200 mg/kg causing profound lymphopenia) dosings of CTX were associated with such a Th17 pattern (Fig. 1D). Importantly, CTX also induced Th17 cells in naive (tumor-free) mice, suggesting that this drug does promote the conversion of naive CD4\(^+\) into IL-17–polarized CD4\(^+\) T cells (Supplementary Fig. 1). Recent studies showed that regulatory Foxp3-expressing CD4\(^+\) T cells (Tregs) could secrete IL-17 (14–17). Taking advantage of the Foxp3\(^{DTR}\) mouse model, we clearly showed that Tregs failed to differentiate into IL-17–producing cells whereas conventional T cells (Foxp3 negative) did after CTX treatment (Fig. 2). Therefore, the major source of IL-17 at day 7 postinjection of CTX in spleens is the CD4\(^+\) T-cell pool.

To further elucidate whether metronomic dosage of the alkylating agent CTX may also convert CD4\(^+\) T cells into Th17 producers in humans, we analyzed the secretory pattern of T lymphocytes prior to and after a 21-day therapy with 50 mg/d of oral CTX in a cohort of 21 advanced cancer patients (Table 1). This metronomic dosage in cancer patients promoted a drop in B-cell counts (but no significant decrease in T-cell absolute numbers; Fig. 3A). All except 2 patients
Splenocytes were collected 7 days post-CTX therapy in tumor-bearing mice and stimulated with plastic-bound anti-CD3 and soluble anti-CD28 with or without IL-23. Cytometric analyses were gated on live cells by using anti-CD3, anti-CD4, anti-CD8, and anti-CD19 mAbs. B, CTX-driven cytokine production in mice. Splenocytes were collected 7 days post-CTX therapy in tumor-bearing mice and stimulated with plastic-bound anti-CD3 and soluble anti-CD28 mAbs. C, IL-17 is mainly produced by CD4^+ T cells during CTX therapy. Id. as in B, after indirect magnetic sorting of CD3^+ CD4^+ or CD3^+ CD8^+ T cells, lymphocytes were stimulated with plastic-bound anti-CD3 and/or soluble anti-CD28 or IL-23 + IL-1β. The experiments from C were carried out on independent or pooled spleens (4 or 5 plots). D, CTX dose effect. Id. as in B, but using increasing dosages of intraperitoneal CTX. Experiments were carried out on 3–7 independent mice spleens. B–D, IL-17 and/or IFNγ secretion levels in 48-hour supernatants monitored using commercial ELISA kits. Graphs from A and B depict the data of 2 or 3 pooled experiments and each plot corresponds to 1 mouse. Statistical analyses using the Mann–Whitney test indicated significant differences at 95% CI. Means and SEM are shown. *, P < 0.05; **, P < 0.01; and ***, P < 0.001.

Figure 2. CTX does not induce the differentiation of Tregs into Th17. Tregs (CD4^+ CD25^+ Foxp3GFP^+) and Tconv cells (CD4^+ Foxp3GFP^-) were sorted from the spleens of tumor-bearing mice 7 days post-CTX therapy and stimulated with plastic-bound anti-CD3 alone or in combination with soluble anti-CD28 with or without IL-23 + IL-1β. A representative experiment of 2 is shown. The IL-17 secretion levels in 48 hours supernatants were monitored by ELISA. nd, not determined.

Exhibited a 2- to 10-fold increase in IL-17 production by T lymphocytes after TCR cross-linking, as measured by ELISA (Fig. 3B, left). Although the proportions of both CD4^+ and CD8^+ T cells producing IFNγ tend to increase following CTX (not shown), the amount of IFNγ produced by TCR-driven lymphocytes did not significantly augment with CTX after 72 hours of stimulation (Fig. 3B, right). Cell sorting allowing positive separation of various T-cell subsets, followed by TCR cross-linking, led to the identification of CD4^+ T cells as the major source of IL-17 (Fig. 3C, left). In contrast, CTX did not significantly modulate IFNγ secretion by CD4^+ T cells after 72 hours of stimulation (Fig. 3C, right). Interestingly, the pool of CD4^+ T cells failed to coproduce IFNγ (not shown). Here, we report a case of FIGO IIIc ovarian cancer presenting with ascites and treated with metronomic CTX together with anti-VEGF antibodies for 2 months. The comparative analysis of TCR-driven IL-17 secretion by ascites fluid–derived CD4^+ T cells revealed that CTX significantly enhanced IL-17 at days 16 and 54 and IFNγ production at day 54 by these TILs, thus also induced Th1 cells at tumor site in patients. Interestingly, the increase of IL-17 was accompanied by a transient decrease in IL-6 secretion (Fig. 3D) known to favor tumor proliferation and survival (18).
Altogether, these data indicate that CTX can directly or indirectly increase the pool of Th17 cells in cancer-bearing hosts. It remains to be established whether mafosfamide, the active pharmacologic compound derived from the pro-drug CTX, could directly promote the proliferation of pre-polarized RORγT+ CD4+ T cells or act indirectly by favoring mechanisms involved in Th17 differentiation. Both the tumor microenvironment dominated by STAT3 signaling and inflammatory cytokines (such as TGF-β1, IL-6, and IL-23) and the TRAIL-mediated tumor cell death triggered by CTX (1) could induce Nlrp3 activation in inflammatory phagocytes leading to IL-1β release (19), hence contributing to the Th17 polarization of tumor-specific CD4+ TILs. In subcutaneous established B16F10, the IL-17/IL-17R

Figure 3. CTX induced IL-17 production by CD4+ T cells in cancer patients. A, B-cell counts selectively decrease during metronomic dosing of CTX in patients. Stainings by flow cytometry of PBMCs, using antibodies specific for each subsets of T cells and whole B cells. The absolute numbers of individual subsets per mm3 are depicted for 18 patients over time. B, levels of IL-17A production by PBMCs pre- and post-oral CTX therapy. PBMCs were stimulated with anti-CD3/anti-CD28 mAbs-coated microbeads for 3 days. The supernatants were monitored for hIL-17 production by ELISA (left). Each dot corresponds to 1 patient over time. A Wilcoxon matched-pairs test statistical analysis was carried out on 17 patients. Right, IFNγ production during the same incubation period measured in ELISA. C, CD4+ T cells are the major source of IL-17A post-CTX therapy. Id. as in B, but a MoFlo-sorting of PBMCs after thawing allowed the separation of CD4+ or CD8+ T cells that could be subjected to TCR-driven stimulation separately. The data from 7 patient samples are shown with the means and SEM indicated on the graphs. Paired Student’s t test at 95% CI was used to compare cytokine secretion before and after CTX treatment in CD4+ and CD8+ T cells. D, TCR-driven IL-17, IL-6, and IFNγ secretion from TILs in a case report. A FIGO IIIc ovarian cancer-bearing patient was treated with metronomic CTX (50 mg/d) and Avastin (7.5 mg/kg at day 15 and every 21 days) until disease progression. At days 0, 16, and 54 of ascites fluid collection, CD3+CD4+ cells contained in the ascites fluid were isolated by MoFlo-sorting after a Ficoll step and restimulated with anti-CD3/anti-CD28–coated microbeads and 10 IU of rIL-2/mL for 3 days. Cytokine release was monitored in EIA after incubation. This experiment was carried out twice with similar results. *, statistical significance at P < 0.05; **, P < 0.01; ***, P < 0.001; and ns, non significant.
pathway did not antagonize the CTX-mediated tumoricidal activity (data not shown). However, further studies will be needed to validate that CTX-driven Th17 producers play a beneficial or a deleterious role in tumor immunosurveillance, as suggested by previous reports (8, 9, 20). In such a case, CTX might be considered as a drug modulating the tumor microenvironment (decreasing Treg suppressors while favoring Th17 inflammatory cells and Th1 cells) without exerting a major, direct tumoricidal activity (18).

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

References


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