Dramatic Increase in the Numbers of Functionally Mature Dendritic Cells in Flt3 Ligand-treated Mice: Multiple Dendritic Cell Subpopulations Identified

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Summary

Dendritic cells (DC) are the most efficient APC for T cells. The clinical use of DC as vectors for anti-tumor and infectious disease immunotherapy has been limited by their trace levels and accessibility in normal tissue and terminal state of differentiation. In the present study, daily injection of human Flt3 ligand (Flt3L) into mice results in a dramatic numerical increase in cells co-expressing the characteristic DC markers—class II MHC, CD11c, DEC205, and CD86. In contrast, in mice treated with either GM-CSF, GM-CSF plus IL-4, c-kit ligand (c-kitL), or G-CSF, class II+ CD11c+ cells were not significantly increased. Five distinct DC subpopulations were identified in the spleen of Flt3L-treated mice using CD8α and CD11b expression. These cells exhibited veiled and dendritic processes and were as efficient as rare, mature DC isolated from the spleens of untreated mice at presenting allo-Ag or soluble Ag to T cells, or in priming an Ag-specific T cell response in vivo. Dramatic numerical increases in DC were detected in the bone marrow, gastro-intestinal lymphoid tissue (GALT), liver, lymph nodes, lung, peripheral blood, peritoneal cavity, spleen, and thymus. These results suggest that Flt3L could be used to expand the numbers of functionally mature DC in vivo for use in clinical immunotherapy.

Dendritic cells (DC) are rare bone marrow-derived cells that are predominantly found in the T cell-dependent areas of lymphoid tissue, as well as other tissues of the body (1). These cells express high levels of class I and class II MHC proteins, CD11c (2), the mannose receptor-like protein DEC205 (3, 4), and adhesion and costimulatory molecules (1). A substantial proportion of DC also express CD8α as a homodimer (5). DC specialize in processing and presenting foreign and self Ag to induce immunity (1) or tolerance (6, 7).

The lineage derivation of DC remains controversial, but there is growing evidence that DC can be subdivided into myeloid-derived (8-17) and lymphoid-derived populations (17-19). The myeloid relationship of DC is based mainly upon in vitro experimentation. In vitro, DC can be generated from bone marrow or cord blood progenitors as well as PBMC using GM-CSF but not M-CSF or G-CSF (9-11). Other growth factors that can enhance the GM-CSF-dependent in vitro generation of DC are TNF-α (12-16), IL-4 (13, 14), and c-kitL (15, 16). These studies show that in the presence of GM-CSF, DC can be generated either directly from a myeloid-committed precursor (that also gives rise to monocytes and granulocytes) (11), or from a myelomonocytic intermediate that gives rise to monocytes (15-17). Alternatively, PBMC cultured with GM-CSF and IL-4 can transiently differentiate into DC-like cells (13, 14). DC can also arise from the most immature T cell precursors or bone marrow progenitors, which can also generate NK and B cells but not cells of the myeloid lineage (17-19). Interestingly, GM-CSF does not appear to be necessary for DC generation from lymphoid-committed precursors (19, 19a). In addition, although DC can be generated in vitro using GM-CSF, the increased level of GM-CSF in GM-CSF transgenic mice does not increase the number of DC in lymphoid tissue suggesting that other growth factors are important for DC generation in vivo (20).

By virtue of their highly developed Ag-presenting capacity, the use of DC as cellular vectors for anti-tumor and infectious disease vaccines or as inducers of transplantation tolerance is a promising immunotherapy strategy (21, 22, reviewed in reference 23). However, the clinical feasibility...
of using DC as immunotherapy vectors is hampered because only limited DC numbers can be generated in vitro from bone marrow progenitors or PBMC, and only one lineage of DC (myeloid-derived) is generated due to the use of GM-CSF (8, 9, 11-17, 21, 22). While studying the growth factor requirements for DC generation in vivo, we examined the effects of administering a recently identified hematopoietic growth factor, Flt3L (24). Flt3L has been shown to stimulate the proliferation of hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells (reviewed in reference 25, 26). Furthermore, in vivo administration of Flt3L has been shown to dramatically increase the numbers of hematopoietic progenitors in the bone marrow, peripheral blood and spleen, resulting in enhanced myelopoiesis and B lymphopoiesis (27, 28). We now report that the in vivo administration of Flt3L has a profound effect upon the generation of functionally mature DC in multiple organs in mice. Both lymphoid- and myeloid-derived DC populations have been identified in the spleens of these mice. Furthermore, the in vivo administration of either GM-CSF, or GM-CSF and IL-4, or c-kitL, or G-CSF did not significantly increase the numbers of spleen DC, suggesting a distinct effect of Flt3L on in vivo DC generation.

**Materials and Methods**

*Mice and Cytokine Treatment Protocols.* Female C57BL/6 mice (4-8 wk of age) were obtained from the Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME) and kept in a specific pathogen-free facility. Mice (4-5 per group) were injected once daily (subcutaneously at the nape of the neck) with either mouse serum albumin (MSA) (1 µg) or with MSA plus human Chinese hamster ovary cell (CHO)-derived Flt3L (10 µg) for three consecutive days. Additional treatment groups included daily subcutaneous injections for 4 d with either MSA alone (1 µg) or with MSA plus Flt3L, or human G-CSF (10 µg; Immunex, Seattle, WA), or c-kit ligand (10 µg; Immunex), or combinations of Flt3L and G-CSF or GM-CSF (10 µg each, respectively), or murG-CSF and murIL-4 (10 µg each, respectively; Immunex).

*Cell Preparations and Flow Cytometric Isolation.* Flow cytometric analysis of various organs from cytokine-treated mice was performed on a FACS™ Plus (Beckton Dickinson, San Jose, CA). Briefly, single cell suspensions from liver, inguinal and axillary LN, Peyer's patches (PP), spleen, and thymus were prepared by disrupting the organs between frosted glass slides and depleting RBC with NH4Cl. PBMC were isolated after centrifugation of peripheral blood over a discontinuous density gradient using Lympholyte M (Cedarlane, Ontario, Canada). Bone marrow cells (BM) were isolated from femurs and tibias by flushing the bones with PBS. Cells from the peritoneal cavity were obtained by peritoneal washings with PBS. Cells from the various organs were then incubated with directly conjugated antibodies as indicated (PharMingen, San Diego, CA; NLEL1-25 was a kind gift from Dr. G. Kraal, Free University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands) for 30 min at 4°C together with 50 µg/ml of anti-FcRHI mAb (2.4G2) to block Fc-receptors, and the cells were then analyzed with propidium iodide (1 µg/ml) to exclude dead and dying cells. Cytospins of sorted cells were prepared by spinning (500 rpm) 5 × 10^6 cells onto slides followed by staining with Wright-Giemsa according to the manufacturers instructions (Fisher Diagnostics, Pittsburgh, PA).

*Isolation of DC from Flt3L-treated and Control Mice.* Single cell suspensions of spleens were prepared from mice treated for either 9 or 11 d with Flt3L. Spleen cells were depleted of RBC and incubated with mAb to Thy-1, B220, NK1.1, and the erythroid Ag TER119 for 30 min at 4°C. The cells were incubated at 37°C for 30 min in serum-free RPMI-1640 medium containing 10% rabbit complement (Pel Freez Biologicals, Rogers, AR). The cells were then washed and residual mAb-coated cells were removed using anti-immunoglobulin (lg)-coated magnetic beads (Dynabeads; Dynal, Oslo, Norway). The enriched cells were then incubated with anti-CD11c, anti-CD11b, and anti-CD8a. The various cell populations were then sorted. Control DC were isolated as described (5). Briefly, C57BL/6 spleen fragments were digested with collagenase and DNase for 25 min at room temperature, then treated with EDTA for 5 min. Light density cells were selected by centrifugation in Metrizamide medium (Nyggaard Diagnostics, Oslo, Norway; 1.068 g/cm³, pH 7.2, 4°C). These cells were incubated with mAb against CD3, CD4, Thyl, IL-2Rα, B220, Gr-1, CD11b, F4/80 Ag, FcRII, and TER119 followed by removal of non DC using anti-lg-coated magnetic beads. The enriched cells (~70% DC) were stained with anti-class II and anti-CD11c and class II^+ CD11c^+ DC were sorted.

*Preparation and Purification of Allogeneic and Ag-specific CD4^+ T Cells.* CD4^+ T cells (90-95% pure) were isolated from the LN of 4-8-wk-old DBA/2 (H-2b allogeneic) mice or from the inguinal draining LN of 8-wk-old C57BL/6 (H-2b syngeneic) mice 7 d after immunization with keyhole limpet hemocyanin (KLH) (50 µg; Pierce Chem. Co., Rockford, IL) in adjuvant (Ribi Immunocore Inc., Hamilton, MT; MDP™+ TDM + CWS emulsion). Lymph node cells were incubated with anti-CD8a, anti-class II (H-2b or H-2d) and anti-B220, and Ab-coated cells depleted with anti-lg-coated magnetic beads. Depleted LN cells were composed of at least 95% CD4^+ T cells as determined by FACS® analysis.

*Mixed Lymphocyte Reaction (MLR) and KLH-specific Presentation Assays.* The MLR and KLH presentation assays were performed in 96-well round-bottom culture plates. Allogeneic or KLH-specific CD4^+ T cells (1 × 10^5) were incubated with varying numbers of the indicated sorted spleen cell populations from Flt3L- treated mice or control DC in 0.2 ml modified DMEM medium containing 10% FCS and 10^{-4}M 2-ME (culture medium) in humidified 10% CO_2 in-air for 5 d. The cultures were pulsed with 0.5 µCi [H]-thymidine for 5 h and the cells were harvested onto glass fiber sheets for counting on a gas-phase ß counter. The background counts for either T cells or DC cultured alone or KLH-specific T cells cultured with KLH were <100 cpm, <100 cpm, and <800 cpm, respectively.

*Priming of T Cells In Vivo with Ag Pulsed DC.* To detect in vivo Ag presenting capacity, class II^+ CD11c^+ spleen cells from Flt3L- treated mice (Flt3L DC) and control DC were cultured for 18 h in culture medium with or without 5 µg/ml KLH. The cells were then washed three times and 1 × 10^5 cells were injected (in a volume of 0.02 ml PBS) into the foot pads of mice. Cells cultured in medium alone (KLC) were injected into the contralateral foot pads as negative controls. Saline-only injected mice were also included as controls. After 7 d, the popliteal LN draining the foot pads were harvested, disrupted into a single cell suspension, and the LN cells were incubated with anti-CD8a, anti-class II (IA^b) and anti-B220, and the Ab-coated cells were then depleted with lg-coated magnetic beads. CD4^+ T cells were incubated (1 × 10^6 T cells) with freshly isolated control DC (1 × 10^6) in the
presence or absence of KLH (20 μg/ml) in 0.2 ml cultures for 5 d. The cultures were pulsed with 0.5 μCi [3H]thymidine for 5 h.

Results

Flt3L Treatment of Mice Resulted in a Significant Increase of Cells Co-expressing Class II MHC, CD11c, DEC205, and CD8α in Multiple Organs. DC are very rare in dissociated spleen cell suspensions. The majority of DC require enzymatic digestion for release from the splenic stroma, but even then they are an infrequent component of the suspension (29). However, we found that unlike spleen cell suspensions from MSA-treated control mice, mice treated daily for 9 d with subcutaneous injections of human Flt3L (derived from CHO cells) resulted in 20% of spleen cells co-expressing class II MHC and the DC markers CD11c and DEC205, and 15% of spleen cells co-expressing class II MHC and CD8α (Fig. 1 A). Further phenotypic analysis revealed that MHC class II+ CD11c+ cells were CD3−, B220−, Gr-1−, NK1.1−, Ter119−, CD80−, but CD86+ (Fig. 1 B). These cells could be separated into three populations on the basis of CD11b expression (CD11b−, CD11b shine and CD11b brigh−) (Fig. 1 B). Flt3L-treated mice show a 2–3-fold increase in spleen and lymph node cellularity (26, 27). The absolute number of MHC class II+ CD11c+ cells was increased by 17-fold in the spleen, 4-fold in the LN and 6-fold in the peripheral blood (PB) by day 9 (Fig. 1 C). MHC class II+ CD11c+ cells were detected as early as day 5 in the spleen and by day 7 in LN and PB (Fig. 1 C).

Five Distinct Populations of DC Can Be Identified in the Spleens of Flt3L-treated Mice. To further define the cells expressing markers characteristic of DC, spleens from Flt3L-treated mice were depleted of T cells, B cells, NK cells and cells of the erythroid lineage by incubating the spleen cells with mAb directed against Thy1.2, B220, NK1.1, and Ter119, followed by depletion of mAb-coated cells with rabbit complement and two rounds of immunomagnetic bead depletion. Lymphocyte-depleted spleen cells from Flt3L-treated mice were then examined for the expression of CD11b and CD11c (Fig. 2 A). Five distinct populations were identified. As shown in Fig. 2 B, the majority of cells within population A (CD11b shine CD11c−) were MHC class II− and granulocyte marker Gr-1+. Population B (CD11b shine CD11c shi Carrie heterogeneous for both class II and Gr-1. The majority of cells within population C (CD11b shine CD11c−) were MHC class II+ and Gr-1− (with 20% of cells expressing low levels of Gr-1). Unlike populations A or B, cells within populations D (CD11b all CD11c+) and E (CD11b− CD11c+), as well as DC freshly isolated from the spleens of untreated mice (control DC) were MHC class II+ and Gr-1−. Furthermore, populations A, B, and C were composed exclusively of CD8α cells, whereas populations D and E as well as control DC could be separated into CD8α− and CD8α+ populations (Fig. 2 B).

Wright-Giemsa staining of cytospins indicated that cells within population A were highly enriched for immature granulocytes or myeloid cells (Fig. 2 C). This is consistent with the expression of high levels of Gr-1 and CD11b and the lower levels of class II MHC. Population B was composed largely of immature myeloblasts. The blast-like morphology and heterogeneous levels of class II MHC and Gr-1 suggest that population B represents a population undergo-
Figure 2. Detection and function of multiple spleen cell populations in mice after 11 d of treatment with Flt3L. (A) The distribution of CD11c and CD11b on depleted spleen cells from Flt3L-treated mice showing the gates used for analysis of class II MHC, Gr-1 and CD8α expression (shown in B) and for cell sorting. (C) Identification of spleen cell populations in Flt3L-treated mice with dendritic morphology. Cytospins were prepared for the various cell populations by spinning $5 \times 10^4$ cells onto slides (500 rpm) followed by staining with Wright-Giemsa.

Spleen DC from Flt3L-treated Mice Are Functional APC. The various spleen populations from Flt3L-treated mice were examined for their in vitro capacity to stimulate the proliferation of allo-reactive T cells in an MLR. Spleen cells from Flt3L-treated mice were depleted of mature lymphocytes, and populations A, B, C, D, and E were isolated by flow cytometry on the basis of CD11c and CD11b expression, indicating differentiation. Population C consisted of a mixture of immature myeloblasts (similar to those found within population B) and more mature myeloid cells with dendritic and veiled processes. Populations D and E that were either low or negative for CD11b and bright for CD11c were highly enriched for cells with veiled and dendritic processes that were indistinguishable from control DC (Fig. 2 C).
pression. When the various spleen populations from Flt3L-treated mice were compared with the rare freshly isolated control DC in an MLR, it was found that cells from populations C, D, and E were as efficient as control DC at stimulating the proliferation of allogeneic DBA/2-derived T cells (Fig. 3, upper panels). In contrast, cells from populations A and B were 30-fold less efficient as APC compared with control DC (Fig. 3, upper panels). Similarly, cells from populations C, D, and E, but not populations A and B, were as efficient as control DC at stimulating the proliferation of syngeneic KLH-specific T cells in a KLH presentation assay (Fig. 3, lower panels). This indicates that populations C, D, and E are not only composed of cells that appear morphologically like DC and express cell surface Ag characteristic of DC, but are also as efficient as control DC at stimulating alloreactive T cells and processing and presenting soluble Ag to Ag-specific T cells. Since populations D and E, which are either dull or negative for CD11b expression, can be further separated using CDSot expression, a total of five DC subpopulations can be detected in the spleens of Flt3L-treated mice.

Ag-pulsed Spleen DC from Flt3L-treated Mice Are Efficient at Priming an Ag-specific Immune Response In Vivo. DC have been previously shown to initiate an Ag-specific immune response when pulsed with soluble Ag ex vivo and then injected into mice (30). We compared the capacity of class II⁺ CD11c⁺ spleen DC generated from Flt3L-treated mice (Flt3L DC) with control DC to generate a T cell–specific immune response in vivo after exposure to soluble KLH ex vivo. Both Flt3L-DC and control DC were cultured in vitro with or without soluble KLH for 18 h. These cells were then washed and 1 × 10⁶ KLH-pulsed DC were injected into the foot pads of naive mice. DC cultured in medium alone were injected into the contralateral footpads as Ag-specificity controls. After 7 d, the popliteal LN draining the footpads were harvested and CD4⁺ T cells were purified and restimulated in vitro with soluble KLH presented by freshly isolated control DC. KLH-pulsed Flt3L-DC were as efficient as KLH-pulsed control DC at generating KLH-specific T cells in the draining LN of mice.
(Fig. 4). KLH-specific T cells were not significantly detected in the contralateral LN draining the foot pads injected with either Flt3L-DC or with control DC cultured in medium alone (Fig. 4).

**Flt3L Treatment Generates Large Numbers of DC in Multiple Tissues and Organs in Mice.** We next examined whether the proportion of CD11c+ or DEC205+ cells was increased in other lymphoid and non-lymphoid tissues. The relative number of CD11c+ CD11b- and CD11c+ CD11b+ cells was significantly increased in the bone marrow (15- and 27-fold, respectively), liver (9- and 4-fold, respectively), PP (12- and 4-fold, respectively), and thymus (3-fold for CD11c+ CD11b- cells only) (Fig. 5 A). Because of the high level of CD11c expression by activated lung and peritoneal macrophages in normal and MSA-treated mice (data not shown), expression of DEC205 became a more definitive DC marker in these tissues. The relative number of DEC205+ CD11b- and DEC205+ CD11b+ cells was elevated by 8- and 15-fold, respectively, in the lung and 29- and 2-fold, respectively, in the peritoneal cavity (Fig. 5 B). Furthermore, a 2-fold increase in cellularity was observed in these tissues (data not shown). A 2-3-fold increase in nucleated cell number was observed in bone marrow, liver, PP, lung lavage, and peritoneal washings of Flt3L-treated mice (data not shown). Both MSA and Flt3L-treated mice displayed a 2-3-fold reduction in thymic cellularity which could be attributed to stress-induced hypoplasia as a result of daily manipulations of these mice.

**Flt3L but Not GM-CSF, GM-CSF Plus IL-4, c-kitL, or G-CSF Can Generate Large Numbers of DC When Administered In Vivo.** In vitro, DC can be generated from bone marrow progenitors or PBMC using GM-CSF (but not M-CSF or G-CSF) (1, 17). Furthermore, several studies have shown that IL-4, TNF-α and c-kitL can enhance the GM-CSF-dependent in vitro generation of DC (8-17). To determine the importance of GM-CSF upon DC generation in vivo, we compared the capacities of Flt3L or GM-CSF (as well as a non-DC generating cytokine, G-CSF) upon the generation of DC in the spleen. Class II+ CD11c+ cells were rare in the spleens of mice treated for 11 consecutive days with either MSA alone, or with GM-CSF or G-CSF (Fig. 6 A). However, treatment of mice with Flt3L alone or Flt3L plus GM-CSF or G-CSF significantly increased the relative numbers of class II+ CD11c+ cells in the spleen (Fig. 6 A). Although all the single growth factor treatments or Flt3L-containing growth factor combinations resulted in an increase in total spleen cellularity over 11 d, only mice treated with Flt3L or Flt3L-containing combinations showed a 20- to 30-fold increase in class II+ CD11c+ spleen cells (Fig. 6 B). Interestingly, the addition of either GM-CSF or G-CSF to Flt3L treatment increased the total number of class II+ CD11c+ cells only a further 1.2- and 1.3-fold, respectively, indicating that for in

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**Figure 5.** Detection of DC in multiple tissues and organs in Flt3L-treated mice but not MSA-treated controls. (A) The distribution of CD11c and CD11b on cells from bone marrow, liver, PP, and thymus in MSA- and Flt3L-treated mice. (B) The distribution of DEC205 and CD11b on cells from lung and peritoneal cavity in MSA- and Flt3L-treated mice.
In vivo administration Flt3L (but not GM-CSF or G-CSF) is the principle growth factor in the generation of class II+ CD11c+ cells. In addition, cessation of growth factor treatment at day 11 resulted in a reduction in the total number of class II+ CD11c+ cells by day 17, indicating that the generation of these cells was transient (Fig. 6B). Comparison of additional growth factors in vivo such as c-kit-L (10 µg/mouse/d) or GM-CSF plus IL-4 (10 µg of each/mouse/d) on the development of class II+ CD11c+ spleen cells is presented in Fig. 6C. Although GM-CSF plus IL-4 are potent in vitro stimulators of DC development from bone marrow progenitors, this cytokine combination resulted in only a 3-fold increase in the relative numbers of class II+ CD11c+ spleen cells (Fig. 6C). Interestingly, GM-CSF plus IL-4-treatment of mice did increase the total spleen cellularity by 2-3-fold (comparable to that seen in Flt3L-treated mice) suggesting that cells of other lineages were preferentially expanded in these mice (data not shown).

Furthermore, although administration of c-kit-L resulted in a 3-fold increase in CFU-GM in the spleen (data not shown) and a 1.5-fold increase in total spleen cellularity (data not shown), there was no significant increase in the relative numbers of class II+ CD11c+ cells in the spleen (Fig. 6C). These results indicate that Flt3L is the most potent growth factor for the generation of large numbers of DC in vivo.

Discussion

Our data indicate that in vivo administration of Flt3L results in a dramatic numerical increase of DC in multiple tissues in mice. These DC are as efficient at stimulating the proliferation of Ag-specific T cells in vitro or at inducing an Ag-specific T cell response in vivo as the rare DC isolated from the spleens of untreated mice. Elevated numbers of DC are detected in both lymphoid- and non-lymphoid tissue in Flt3L-treated mice, including the bone marrow, GALT, liver, lymph nodes, lung, peripheral blood, peritoneal cavity, spleen, and thymus. Of particular interest is the elevated numbers of DC in the GALT, lung, and peripheral blood which are sites amenable to vaccine delivery in clinical immunotherapy regimens.

At least three phenotypically distinct DC subpopulations have been identified on the basis of CD11b and CD11c expression (populations C, D, and E) and these appear to be functionally similar in the Ag-mediated T cell proliferation assays. Populations D and E, which are either dull or negative for CD11b expression, can be further separated using CD80 expression (a total of five DC subpopulations). This surface phenotype (CD11c+CD80+CD11b−CD80−) is similar to that of the putative lymphoid-derived DC populations (5, 18). Although the generation of these DC from a lymphoid precursor has only been established for thymic DC, a similar CD80+ population is found in spleen and LN (5, 31). A subclass of DC have recently been identified that co-express CD80 and high levels of FasL and kill activated Fas expressing CD4+ T cells in vitro (32). FasL-expressing DC may be involved in the regulation, rather
indicating that there is a generalized expansion of DC as assessed by flow cytometry and mature DC populations. We report here that neither GM-CSF and IL-4 nor c-kitL is necessary for DC generation from lymphoid-committed DC precursors (19; Saunders, D., K. Lucas, J. Ismaili, L. Wu, E. Maraskovsky, D. Dunn, and K. Shortman, manuscript in preparation). Several studies have shown that GM-CSF is necessary for the in vitro generation of DC from bone marrow or cord blood progenitors, or from PBMC (reviewed in reference 17) and that this can be further enhanced by the addition of IL-4 or c-kitL. However, although GM-CSF appears to be necessary in vitro, overexpression of GM-CSF in GM-CSF transgenic mice does not increase the number of DC in lymphoid tissue, suggesting that other growth factors are important for DC generation in vivo (20). Interestingly, GM-CSF does not appear to be necessary for DC generation from lymphoid-committed precursors (19; Saunders, D., K. Lucas, J. Ismaili, L. Wu, E. Maraskovsky, D. Dunn, and K. Shortman, manuscript in preparation). We report here that neither GM-CSF and IL-4 nor c-kitL are as potent at stimulating the development of functionally mature DC in vivo as Flt3L. Furthermore, the multiple subpopulations of DC identified here and their apparent relationship to either the lymphoid or myeloid developmental pathways suggests that, unlike GM-CSF, Flt3L enhances the development of both lymphoid- and myeloid-derived DC populations.

It is unlikely that Flt3L treatment simply results in the mobilization of existing mature DC from other sites into the lymphoid tissue. First, Flt3 receptor is not detected on mature DC as assessed by flow cytometry and mature DC do not proliferate when cultured in Flt3L alone (data not shown). Second, elevated numbers of DC have been detected in multiple organs and tissues in Flt3L-treated mice, indicating that there is a generalized expansion of DC throughout these mice. Finally, Brasel et al. have recently shown that in vivo administration of Flt3L dramatically increases the numbers of hematopoietic progenitors in the BM, peripheral blood and spleen, resulting in increased hematopoiesis and B lymphopoiesis (27, 28). These potent effects on hematopoiesis, as well as our observations on DC generation, suggest that in vivo administration of Flt3L facilitates the terminal development of a primitive, Flt3L-sensitive, rapidly expanding progenitor population into functionally mature DC. This hypothesis is further supported by studies showing that Flt3L can increase the absolute numbers of mature DC generated from cultured CD34+ human bone marrow progenitors (33, 34). In addition, the early detection of DC in the secondary lymphoid organs of mice after Flt3L treatment may indicate that a more mature precursor population (such as a CFU-DC) (16) is also induced to differentiate into DC when exposed to Flt3L (or Flt3L-inducible signals) in vivo. We are currently investigating whether such committed precursor cells are responsive to Flt3L in vitro.

The use of DC as cellular vectors for tumor immunotherapy is a promising strategy (21), reviewed in reference 23). However, the fact that only limited numbers of DC can be generated in vitro from bone marrow progenitors or PBMC, and that only the myeloid-derived type of DC expand in GM-CSF containing cultures (11–17), may limit the utility of this clinical regimen. By expanding the number of functionally mature lymphoid and myeloid-derived DC in Flt3L-treated mice, we can not only assess whether these mice have a more robust or sensitized immune response to antigenic challenge, but also which DC lineage is most efficient at inducing effective tumor-specific immunity. In this regard, results from preliminary studies indicate that Flt3L-treated mice respond more efficiently to a tumor challenge in vivo. This appears to be associated with the induction of a T cell-mediated anti-tumor response which can mediate the rejection of even established tumors (Lynch, D.H., A. Andreasen, E. Maraskovsky, R.E. Miller, and J.C.L. Schuh, manuscript submitted for publication). Similar results have been obtained with Flt3L gene-transduced breast cancer cells that mediate the rejection of subsequently transplanted, untransduced breast cancer cells (35). These findings suggest that increasing the numbers of antigen presenting cells in vivo can enhance the generation of Ag-specific immunity.

It is not clear, however, that Flt3L-treatment will have the same effects with all antigens. The development of Ag-specific immunity is a multifaceted phenomenon. The nature of the Ag, the route of administration and the types and functional characteristics of the DC found at that site could all affect the magnitude and qualitative nature of the immune response generated. Therefore, a significant effort to identify the most efficient and appropriate methods to elicit Ag-specific immunity with various types of Ag will be required to assess the feasibility of using Flt3L-induced DC in various forms of cellular immunotherapy. With this in mind, we are currently examining the capacity of Flt3L-treated mice to more efficiently elicit immunity to soluble Ag in the absence of chemical adjuvants.

In conclusion, the results in the present study indicate that Flt3L is a potent inducer of DC when administered in

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vivo and may be an important growth factor for both the in vitro and in vivo generation of large numbers of functionally mature DC. The feasibility of using DC as cellular adjuvants must now be tested in depth. Furthermore, the identification of different DC subpopulations may ultimately lead to the identification of differing functions (e.g., stimulatory versus regulatory and control of T cell cytokine production). The identification of functionally distinct DC subpopulations should in turn lead to their more focused and effective use in immunotherapy.

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