Options for Inactivation, Adjuvant, and Route of Topical Administration of a Killed, Unencapsulated Pneumococcal Whole-Cell Vaccine

Ying-Jie Lu, Puja Yadav, John D. Clements, Sophie Forte, Amit Srivastava, Claudette M. Thompson, Robert Seid, Jee Look, Mark Alderson, Andrea Tate, Jean-François Maisonneuve, George Robertson, Porter W. Anderson, and Richard Malley*

Divisions of Infectious Diseases, Department of Medicine, Children’s Hospital, and Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts; Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Tulane University School of Medicine, New Orleans, Louisiana; Departments of Epidemiology and Immunology and Infectious Diseases, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts; Intercell USA, Gaithersburg, Maryland; and PATH, Seattle, Washington

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We previously reported that ethanol-killed cells of a noncapsulated strain of Streptococcus pneumoniae, given intranasally with cholera toxain as an adjuvant, protect rats against pneumonia and mice against colonization of the nasopharynx and middle ear by capsulated pneumococci of various serotypes. The acceleration of pneumococcal clearance from the nasopharynx in mice is CD4+ T cell-dependent and interleukin 17A (IL-17A) mediated and can be antibody independent. Here, anticipating human studies, we have demonstrated protection with a new vaccine strain expressing a nonhemolytic derivative of pneumolysin and grown in bovine-free culture medium. Killing the cells with chloroform, trichloroethylene, or beta-propiolactone—all used without postinactivation washing—produced more-potent immunogens than ethanol, and retention of soluble components released from the cells contributed to protection. Two sequential intranasal administrations of as little as 1 μg of protein (total of cellular and soluble combined) protected mice against nasopharyngeal challenge with pneumococci. Nontoxic single and double mutants of Escherichia coli heat-labile toxin were effective as mucosal adjuvants. Protection was induced by the sublingual and buccal routes, albeit requiring larger doses than when given intranasally. Protection was likewise induced transdermally with sonicates of the killed-cell preparation. Thus, this whole-cell antigen can be made and administered in a variety of ways to suit the manufacturer and the vaccination program and is potentially a solution to the need for a low-cost vaccine to reduce the burden of childhood pneumococcal disease in low-income countries.

Streptococcus pneumoniae (pneumococcus) imparts a major disease burden among children in low-income countries (27). Capsular polysaccharide conjugate vaccine provides type-specific protection but has the disadvantages of limited serotype coverage, serotype replacement, and high cost of production, storage, and injection (12, 29). Therefore, potentially more economical serotype-independent vaccines based upon species-common protein antigens are being pursued (32). In one such approach, we have studied killed cells of noncapsulated pneumococci, with the intent of maximizing the exposure of species-common subcapsular antigens. This antigen preparation, designated “whole-cell vaccine” (WCV), when formulated with a suitable adjuvant, is intended for mucosal administration to reduce pneumococcal colonization. Killing the cells with 70% (vol/vol) ethanol at 4°C produces a more immunogenic antigen (WCE) than traditional methods of inactivation such as heat, formalin, or UV radiation (21) (unpublished data). Intranasal (i.n.) application had been examined initially, since this route is effective for inducing both systemic and mucosal immunity. Vaccination i.n. with WCE plus cholera toxin (CT) as a mucosal adjuvant prevents fatal serotype 3 pneumonia in rats and reduces nasopharyngeal (NP) and middle ear colonization in mice by strains of serotype 6B or 23F (22, 23). Although the levels of serum antibodies are raised by the i.n. vaccination, protection against colonization is induced in mice in the absence of antibodies by a CD4+ T-cell-dependent, interleukin 17A (IL-17A)-mediated mechanism (20, 24). As few as 10⁷ cells (ca. 10 μg of protein) of WCE, given thrice sequentially, are protective in the colonization model (34). This potency and the potential low cost of manufacture were motivation for a partnership with PATH and Instituto Butantan (São Paulo, Brazil) for further development of the WCV. Previous studies used strain Rx1AL expressing native pneumolysin, a potent cytolytin. Here, anticipating human studies, a derivative of pneumolysin (PdT), with mutations W433F, D385N, and C428G (which render the molecule nonhemolytic and unable to activate complement [5] but maintain its TLR4 agonistic properties [21]), was used. Previously, cells were grown in Todd–Hewitt–yeast broth, which contains beef heart infusion. Here, to avoid any hazard of bovine components, cells grown in a soy-based medium (19) were examined for protection. The challenge of safe handling and disposal of large volumes of ethanol led to the evaluation of three alternative agents of inactivation that are bactericidal at low con-
centration: chloroform, trichloroethylene, and beta-propiolactone. Since chloroform and trichloroethylene are both highly volatile and beta-propiolactone is inactivated by warming, these agents may be removed without postinactivation washing, which permitted convenient examination of soluble components released from the killed cells. Soluble components produced by sonication also were examined.

The possible side effects of enterotoxins as adjuvants (25) and other problems with intranasal vaccination prompted the consideration of genetically detoxified enterotoxin derivatives and of the buccal and sublingual routes of administration. Transdermal immunization was also examined with sonicated antigen preparations. These varied immunization procedures were surveyed for protection against colonization, evident as acceleration of nasopharyngeal clearance after intranasal challenge with a strain of serotype 6B (20). The results indicate that the cells can be inactivated by several agents to generate a potent whole-cell antigen that could be given in a variety of ways to accommodate preferences of a particular vaccination program.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Materials. Cholera toxin (CT) was from List Biological Laboratories (Campbell, CA). Mutated derivatives of Escherichia coli heat-labile toxin LT—mLT (R192G) and dMLT (R192G/L211A)—were obtained as described previously (9). LT, cotton gauze patches, and sandpaper for transcutaneous immunization were provided by InterCell USA, Gaithersburg, MD.

Generation of vaccine strain RM200 (Rx1E PdT ΔlytA). Strain Rx1E, in which the pneumolysin gene was replaced by a detoxified mutant PdT, was provided to us by James Paton (University of Adelaide, Australia). The entire lytA genomic coding region was replaced by the Janus cassette marked with kanamycin resistance gene pslR, using the strategy described earlier (31, 33). Briefly, three PCR amplification products were created: (i) a 1-kb fragment upstream of the genomic region of lytA amplified with primers LAD1 (CAAGGTATCCATCA TTC) and LAD2 (CAGCGGACACGATAGGACAGTGC; Apal site underlined), (ii) a 800-bp fragment downstream of lytA amplified with primers LAD3 (TITGGGCCCCTTGCCACGACTTGAGG; Apal site underlined) and LAD4 (CTTTGCTTCTCAGAATCTAGG); and (iii) the Janus cassette amplified with primers DAM351 (with Apal site) and DAM406 (with BamHI site) (31). The amplification products were digested at the sites introduced by PCR using the cognate restriction enzymes, gel purified, and then ligated over-
in the target site (31). An integrant that displayed the correct pattern was grown and assayed for IL-17A production after stimulation with WCA.

Antigen preparations. Four different killed-cell preparations, in which inactivation was achieved with ethanol, chloroform, trichloroethylene, or beta-propiolactone (WCE, WCC, WCT, or WCB, respectively), have been used in this report. Generally, strain RM200 was grown to an A600 of 10, at which the viable count was approximately 6 × 10^9 CFU/ml. Further steps were performed at 4°C.

The cells were collected by centrifugation and washed twice with lactated Ring-



RESULTS

Characterization and killing of strain RM200 to make WC antigens. In strain Rx1E, to improve yield by reducing autolysis, the entire lytA genomic coding region was replaced by the Janus cassette marked with kanamycin resistance gene pslR.

An integrant that displayed the correct pattern was grown and assayed for IL-17A production after stimulation with WCA.

The possible side effects of enterotoxins as adjuvants (25) and other problems with intranasal vaccination prompted the consideration of genetically detoxified enterotoxin derivatives and of the buccal and sublingual routes of administration. Transdermal immunization was also examined with sonicated antigen preparations. These varied immunization procedures were surveyed for protection against colonization, evident as acceleration of nasopharyngeal clearance after intranasal challenge with a strain of serotype 6B (20). The results indicate that the cells can be inactivated by several agents to generate a potent whole-cell antigen that could be given in a variety of ways to accommodate preferences of a particular vaccination program.
of proteins, which ordinarily would be lost in the preparation of WCE, was shown to have been solubilized (not illustrated). Figure 1B shows that a number of soluble proteins were likewise present in WCB. For vaccination experiments, killed-RM200 preparations, which were routinely lyophilized in single-use aliquots with sucrose as a stabilizer, were rehydrated just prior to the test.

Protection against colonization and priming for IL-17A responses in vitro by variously prepared RM200 given intranasally. Whole-cell preparations killed by C, T, or B were compared with WCE, each given i.n. twice with CT adjuvant, for acceleration of clearance of an intranasal challenge with a pneumococcal strain of serotype 6B. Figure 2A shows that WCE was protective (i.e., significantly reduced number of CFU recovered from the nasopharynx) at doses of 10^6 and 10^7 per immunization but not at 10^6, while WCC was protective at 10^6 as well (dosage expressed as number of CFU before killing). WCC, like WCE, primed for IL-17A expression by T cells in vitro: 1 week prior to challenge, the IL-17A expression of individual WCC-immunized mice was negatively correlated with the CFU recovered postchallenge (Fig. 2B; Spearman ρ = −0.54, P = 0.0007). In a separate experiment, WCE was protective at 10^6 but not significantly at 10^7, while WCT was significantly protective at both 10^6 and 10^7. Thus, WCC and WCT appeared about 10-fold more potent than WCE. WCB was likewise highly protective (Fig. 2C) and active in IL-17A priming (data not shown).

However, since WCE consisted of cells washed to remove ethanol while the WCC, WCT, and WCB preparations contained released soluble components, including proteins, the supernatants after centrifugation were tested for protection. Figure 2D shows that the supernatant of WCC was as protective as or more so than the WCE cellular vaccine (dosage of both adjusted to represent what would be obtained from a prekilling dose of 10^6 cells). Similar results were found with the supernatants of WCT and WCB (not shown). Thus, apparently the retention of soluble components in WCC, WCT, and WCB contributes to their potency. The 10^6 dosage of WCC, WCT, or WCB corresponds to about 1.7 μg dry weight or 1 μg of total protein.

Protection by an ultrasonically solubilized preparation. Extending the observation of protection by soluble components, a sample of WCC was sonicated to disrupt the cells, and this lysate was compared to the corresponding dosage of WCC. Figure 2E shows that the lysate was comparably protective, and Fig. 2F shows it to have comparably primed for IL-17A responses by blood cells in vitro, a correlate of protection in the colonization model (20).

Protection by WC antigen given intranasally with a nontoxic enterotoxin derivative. Neither CT nor LT is suitable for human use, which prompted the evaluation of nontoxic mutants of LT. A singly mutated derivative of Escherichia coli heat-labile toxin (mLT, R192G) was compared to CT. Figure 3 shows that, compared to saline, the adjuvants given alone gave a suggestion (albeit not statistically significant) of accelerated pneumococcal clearance, an expected result in this model where vaccination and challenge are by the same route. When given with 10^6 of WCE, however, mLT—like CT—promoted protection.
Administration by the buccal and sublingual routes. The studies described above were performed prior to the publication of a recent report, which raised concern over the safety of detoxified mutants of LT when given by the intranasal route and pointed to a possible association between their use and the development of Bell’s palsy (16, 25). Thus, alternative routes were explored using WCC and a doubly mutated LT (dmLT, R192G/L211A) as an adjuvant. Dose-dependent protection was found with both routes of administration (Fig. 4A) but required about 10-fold more WCC than intranasal immunization and even at the higher doses resulted in fewer mice with no detectable CFU. Consistent with the protection, priming for IL-17A responses in vitro was observed (Fig. 4B).

Transcutaneous immunization (TCI) with ultrasonically produced fragments of WCC. The transcutaneous immunization route was tested by application of cotton gauze patches containing antigen and LT adjuvant to the dorsal skin lightly abraded to disrupt the stratum corneum as done previously for other vaccine preparations (38). Experience with other systems commended reduction of particle size, so fragments with mean diameters of 100 nm (WCC100) and 20 nm (WCC20) were tested. WCC100 and WCC20 were similarly protective when...
applied with LT, in comparison with LT or with WCC100 applied alone. Consistent with the protection, priming for IL-17A responses in vitro greatly exceeded levels associated with protection by i.n. immunization (Fig. 5B) (20).

DISCUSSION

Pneumococcal capsular polysaccharide-protein conjugate vaccine has been effective against systemic disease in infancy for the included serotypes and has provided some herd immunity (13, 17, 36). However, the complexity of manufacture, relative high cost of production, and increasing serotype replacement disease (12) have led to efforts to develop a serotype-independent and more economical vaccine. These include purified protein antigens (4, 7, 10, 11) and vectored protein antigens (1, 15, 18, 26, 37), as well as the noncapsulated WCV studied here (20, 22, 23).

Carriage always precedes pneumococcal disease (3), so the vaccine-induced enhanced clearance of carriage (20) may be protective against pneumonia and invasive disease. Our aim is to reduce the duration and intensity, not necessarily to eliminate carriage. In mice, WCV does not block colonization, but rather accelerates clearance from the nasopharynx (6, 20, 22–24).

Previously the WC antigen was made from cells expressing the cytolytic protein pneumolysin, which was hypothesized to contribute to immunogenicity due to its TLR4 agonist activity (21, 30). Here, anticipating possible side effects from this toxin, vaccine strain RM200 was constructed, which expresses a triply mutated nonlytic variant PdT (5) that nonetheless retains TLR4 activity (21). Previously the cells were grown in Todd-Hewitt–yeast medium (often used for pneumococcus), but to eliminate the possibility of prion disease from bovine components, a soy-based medium developed at Instituto Butantan (19) was used, and RM200 grown in the soy medium proved protective.

When studies of WCV began, among a number of traditional killing agents tried, 70% (vol/vol) ethanol gave the most protective preparations. However, because handling and disposal of large volumes of ethanol may be problematic in industrial settings, alternative methods of inactivation of the WCV were sought here: chloroform and trichloroethylene, which are bactericidal in low concentration, are easily separated by lyophilization, and have some record of pharmaceutical use, and the DNA-altering compound beta-propiolactone, which is readily decomposed into innocuous components and is used in the preparation of rabies vaccines (28). These three agents can be removed without a postkilling wash procedure, which would simplify the manufacturing process. WC antigen preparations killed with these agents without washing (WCC, WCT, and WCB, respectively) were tried and found to be more protective than ethanol-killed cells, which conventionally were washed to remove the ethanol. This result led to the realization that all four killing agents, as used here, solubilize about 15% of the total protein from the cells and that this complex mixture of proteins (and possibly nonprotein components) is protective per se in the mouse colonization model; their retention possibly contributes to the potency of the WCC, WCT, and WCB preparations. Chloroform and trichloroethylene generated equally immunogenic preparations with similar, complex bands of released proteins and thus probably act alike in damaging the bacterial membrane; they both are discussed here because they are viewed differently within the pharmaceutical industry. Practically, any of these killing agents could be used, with the choice being determined by the manufactur-

FIG. 5. Immunogenicity by the transcutaneous route of ultrasonically produced fragments of WCC. Fragments with a mean diameter of 100 or 20 nm in dosage equivalent to $10^8$ cells were applied, along with 1 μg of LT adjuvant where indicated, in cotton gauze patches onto dorsal skin gently abraded to remove the stratum corneum. The patch was left in place for 18 h. This immunization was given thrice with a 2-week interval. Blood samples were taken 10 days after the third immunization for assays of IL-17A, and pneumococcal challenge was done 6 days later. (A) Clearance of serotype 6B colonization. (B) Priming for IL-17A responses to WC antigen by blood cells in vitro. For other details, see the legend to Fig. 2.
Study of intranasally applied WCV in mouse models revealed original WCC preparation, a result which is reminiscent of preparation was as protective and evocative of IL-17A as the cursory test of cells completely disrupted by sonication; this er's preference. This activity of soluble components prompted VOL. 17, 2010 KILLED, UNENCAPSULATED PNEUMOCOCCAL WHOLE-CELL VACCINE the immunoresponsive tissues of Waldeyer's ring with less ac-
mucosal approaches other than the intranasal route, while intranasal vaccination should be studied without the use of enterotoxin-related adjuvants.

Another drawback of intranasal vaccination in infancy is that in subjects presenting with copious nasal mucus—frequent in some clinical settings—effective contact of the vaccine with the mucosa would be compromised. Therefore, alternative mucosal routes were tested: application to the buccal mucosa along the lower molars (frequently used for live polio vacci-
nation model and priming for IL-17A responses. Either route to pneumococcal infection. Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.

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