Synergistic T cell signaling by 41BB and CD28 is optimally achieved by membrane proximal positioning within parallel chimeric antigen receptors

Graphical abstract

Highlights

- Juxta-membrane localization is required for effective CAR-mediated co-stimulation
- To provide dual CD28 and 41BB co-stimulation, two fusion receptors are required
- The resulting parallel CAR configuration promotes functional persistence of T cells
- As a result, parallel CAR T cells mediate enhanced anti-tumor activity

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In brief
Dual co-stimulation by CD28 and 41BB contributes importantly to physiological immune responses, highlighting the desirability of harnessing these pathways to potentiate CAR T cell immunotherapy. Here, Muliaditan et al. show that this is achieved using a parallel CAR format, ensuring that both co-stimulatory domains sit in their natural membrane proximal location.
Synergistic T cell signaling by 41BB and CD28 is optimally achieved by membrane proximal positioning within parallel chimeric antigen receptors

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xcrm.2021.100457

SUMMARY

Second generation (2G) chimeric antigen receptors (CARs) contain a CD28 or 41BB co-stimulatory endodomain and elicit remarkable efficacy in hematological malignancies. Third generation (3G) CARs extend this linear blueprint by fusing both co-stimulatory units in series. However, clinical impact has been muted despite compelling evidence that co-signaling by CD28 and 41BB can powerfully amplify natural immune responses. We postulate that effective dual co-stimulation requires juxta-membrane positioning of endodomain components within separate synthetic receptors. Consequently, we designed parallel (p)CARs in which a 2G (CD28+CD3ζ) CAR is co-expressed with a 41BB-containing chimeric co-stimulatory receptor. We demonstrate that the pCAR platform optimally harnesses synergistic and tumor-dependent co-stimulation to resist T cell exhaustion and senescence, sustaining proliferation, cytokine release, cytokine signaling, and metabolic fitness upon repeated stimulation. When engineered using targeting moieties of diverse composition, affinity, and specificity, pCAR T cells consistently elicit superior anti-tumor activity compared with T cells that express traditional linear CARs.

INTRODUCTION

Chimeric antigen receptors (CARs) are modular synthetic units that re-direct lymphocyte specificity against cell surface targets. Conceived over 30 years ago,1 CAR technology was transformed from academic curiosity into groundbreaking cancer therapy with the demonstration that T cell receptor (TCR) and co-stimulatory signaling could be efficiently delivered via a single CD28+CD3ζ (28ζ) or 41BB+CD3ζ (BBζ) fusion.2,3 When these second generation (2G) CARs were evaluated in human T cells, anti-tumor activity proved markedly superior to first generation (1G) counterparts that provide TCR-like signaling alone.4,5 Infusion of 2G CAR T cells has achieved unprecedented efficacy against refractory B cell and plasma cell malignancy, emphasizing the crucial role of co-stimulation in therapeutic success. However, effectiveness against solid tumors remains inadequate, in large part due to tumor-induced T cell dysfunction.6

Given these considerations, it was logical to test whether potency could be augmented by insertion of an additional co-stimulatory element within a 2G CAR framework.7 Some studies reported increased efficacy of this third generation (3G) CAR approach in non-clinical testing.7–12 However, this has not proven to be uniformly the case. When compared with 2G designs, some 3G CARs elicit borderline superiority,13–15 or even
Figure 1. In vitro comparison of M-CSFR-targeted pCARs and linear CARs
(A) Explanation of nomenclature. M, macrophage colony stimulating factor; 34, interleukin (IL)-34. Parallel CAR (pCAR) names are italicized throughout the text.

(B) Cartoon structures illustrating M-CSFR-specific CARs, pCARs, and controls as follows: (1) an alternative binary configuration in which a 1G CAR (CD3ζ endodomain) was co-expressed with a CCR that contains fused CD28+41BB-signaling domains (1G CAR/dual CCR) and (2) an endodomain truncated pCAR that lacks 28ζ signaling sequences (trunc. CAR in pCAR).

(C) The indicated engineered T cells (1×10⁶) were co-cultivated with T47D FMS cells without cytokine support. Each week, 1×10⁶ T cells were transferred to a new confluent monolayer. Spider plots enumerate T cell number over time (n = 5–20). Since data were not normally distributed, significance was determined using the Kruskal-Wallis test. Comparison with pCAR-M/34 is shown.

(D) Number of re-stimulation cycles in (C) from which T cells were retrieved. Statistical analysis was performed using one-way ANOVA, making comparison with pCAR-M/34 is shown.

(E) “Mid-range” representative single-donor example in which 1×10⁶ M-CSFR re-targeted CAR or pCAR T cells were re-stimulated on T47D FMS tumor monolayers as described in (C) (mean ± SEM, n = 3 technical replicates).

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inferior anti-tumor activity. Ultimately, although CD28 and 41BB deliver amplifying co-stimulation, 3G CAR technology has not achieved meaningful clinical impact.

One potential reconciling factor relates to the location of signaling units in synthetic receptors. Juxta-membrane placement of CD28 is vital for its co-stimulatory function. However, the linear nature of the 3G CAR endodomain requires the positioning of one co-stimulatory module away from the membrane, meaning that access to downstream intermediates could be hindered by geographical or steric constraints. Signals that instruct T cell activation are naturally provided in trans by TCR/CD3 and one or more co-stimulatory receptors. Furthermore, co-expression of a CD28-containing 2G CAR with 41BB TCR/CD3 and one or more co-stimulatory receptors. Further, the ability of such systems to provide synergistic dual co-stimulation remains unproven. Here, we demonstrate that membrane proximity is critical for effective co-stimulation by CD28 and 41BB and present a parallel (p)CAR arrangement that exploits this principle to consistently deliver superior anti-tumor activity.

RESULTS

Design and expression of CARs and pCARs targeted against M-CSFR

Given the disappointing clinical impact of 3G CAR T cells, we hypothesized that a linear fusion of CD28 and 41BB fails to fully harness the potential for synergy between these distinct co-stimulatory receptors. To address this, we engineered a CAR construct in which CD28 and 41BB are expressed in trans within two separate receptors. By this means, each co-stimulatory unit is positioned adjacent to the plasma membrane, mimicking a more natural configuration. This approach was designated “pCAR” and consists of a 2G (CD28+CD3ζ) CAR co-expressed with a CCR. Nomenclature is explained in Figure 1A.

We selected the FMS-encoded macrophage colony stimulating factor receptor (M-CSFR) as a convenient model target to evaluate the pCAR system. M-CSFR is expressed in many cancers and binds two competing ligands with high (M-CSF; Kd of 34 pM) and very high (interleukin-34 [IL-34]; Kd of 1 pM) affinity. A pCAR termed pCAR-M/34 was engineered in which specificity of a 28ζ CAR was achieved using M-CSF, while 41BB CCR specificity was directed by IL-34 (Figure 1B). As controls, M-CSF and IL-34 were individually used to direct the specificity of 2G CARs (containing either CD28 or 41BB) and 3G CARs (CD28+41BB fusion) (Figure 1B). A control 1G CAR/dual CCR combination was also generated to further test the importance of membrane proximity in the delivery of co-stimulation. In this architecture, an M-CSF-directed 1G CAR was paired with a CD28+41BB-containing CCR targeted by IL-34 (Figure 1B). Finally, as a negative control, a signaling-deficient truncated pCAR was constructed (trunc. CAR in pCAR). This consisted of an M-CSF-targeted CAR in which the 28ζ endodomain had been removed and that was co-expressed with an IL-34-targeted 41BB CCR (Figure 1B). Consequently, T cell activation is not expected when this defective pCAR binds to M-CSFR. All of these M-CSFR-targeted fusion receptors were co-expressed with 4xβ, a chimeric cytokine receptor that couples the IL-4 receptor (R) to the transmembrane and endodomain of IL-2/15Rβ. 4xβ allows efficient IL-4-mediated enrichment of transduced cells, while fully preserving anti-tumor activity and type 1 polarity.

Using this system, high-level cell surface expression of all fusion receptors was achieved (Figure S1).

pCAR-M/34 T cells outperform matched 2G and 3G counterparts in vitro

To test whether parallel placement of CD28 and 41BB co-stimulatory domains in membrane-proximal positions would yield synergistic signaling, we first evaluated the in vitro anti-tumor activity of pCAR-34/M T cells. In cancer, persistent antigen exposure leads to progressive T cell dysfunction, a process that can be modeled using tumor re-stimulation assays.

To compare resistance to tumor-induced dysfunction, we iteratively restimulated CAR and pCAR T cells in the absence of cytokine by culture on T47D FMS or T47D monolayers, which respectively express or lack the M-CSFR target antigen. Each week, T cells were transferred to a new monolayer until they could no longer be retrieved. We made two striking observations in these experiments. First, when compared with a 2G (28ζ or BBζ) or 3G CAR, or the 1G CAR/dual CCR combination, pCAR-M/34 T cells underwent significantly greater FMS-dependent expansion (Figure 1C) over more re-stimulation cycles (pooled data, Figure 1D; representative “mid-range” donor, Figure 1E). Target-dependent cytotoxicity (Figures 1F and S2) and release of both IL-2 (Figure 1G) and interferon γ (IFNγ) (Figure 1H) were also sustained for significantly longer in pCAR-M/34 cultures. Findings were not due to differences in expression of CCR and/or CAR components that comprise these receptor systems (Figure S1). These data demonstrate that pCAR-M/34 mediates increased resistance to T cell dysfunction, when compared with control CAR designs.

(F) Re-stimulation cultures in (C) were evaluated for tumor cell viability at 24 h (mean ± SEM), comparing pCAR-M/34 (n = 10) with 2G-M (CD28) (n = 8), 2G-M (41BB) (n = 7), 3G-M (n = 8), 1G CAR/dual CCR (n = 5), 2G-34 (CD28) (n = 3), 3G-34 (n = 3), or Trunc. CAR in pCAR (n = 9). (G) IL-2 concentration in supernatants of re-stimulation cultures in (C) harvested 24 h after each stimulation (mean ± SEM; n = 5 [1G CAR/dual CCR], 6 [trunc. CAR in pCAR], 2 [2G-M (41BB)], 8 [2G-M (CD28), 3G-M], 10 [pCAR-M/34], and 3 [2G-34 (CD28), 3G-34]). Statistical analysis was performed using two-way ANOVA. (H) IFNγ concentration in supernatants of re-stimulation cultures in (C) harvested 24 h after each stimulation (mean ± SEM; n = 3 [1G CAR/dual CCR], 3 [2G-M (41BB)], 4 [2G-M (CD28), 3G-M]), 4 [pCAR-M/34], and 3 [2G-34 (CD28), 3G-34]). Statistical analysis was performed using two-way ANOVA. **p < 0.001; ***p < 0.0001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.

See Figures S1 and S2 and Table S1 for additional data.
pCAR-34/M provides effective dual co-stimulation through CD28 and 41BB

Next, we characterized the ability of pCAR-M/34 to deliver dual co-stimulation. CD28 co-stimulation manifests with increased cytokine release and proliferation. Delivery of these attributes by pCAR-M/34 is indicated in the functional experiments shown in Figures 1C–1E, 1G, and 1H. To provide further confirmation, NanoString analysis was performed after overnight co-culture of pCAR and CAR T cells (Figure S3A) with T47D or T47D FMS monolayers (data deposited at Gene Expression Omnibus [GEO]: GSE186557). Although we noted donor-to-donor variability, activated pCAR-M/34 T cells displayed enriched gene expression linked to multiple cytokine-signaling pathways (Figures 2A–2C). These findings emphasize that strong CD28-mediated signaling is evident in these pCAR T cells.

41BB co-stimulation promotes nuclear factor κB (NF-κB) activation, which can be conveniently quantified using Jurkat cells in which firefly luciferase (ffLuc) expression is placed under the transcriptional control of the NF-κB promoter. Jurkat reporter cells were engineered to express pCAR-M/34 and 2G or 3G control CARs and then added to T47D or T47D FMS monolayers for 5 h (Figure 2D). 2G-M (41BB) and pCAR-M/34 Jurkat T cells both exhibited significantly heightened basal NF-κB activity, consistent with ligand-independent tonic signaling by the 41BB-containing receptor. When stimulated on T47D FMS monolayers, this signal increased greatly in both cases, demonstrating that strong ligand-dependent 41BB co-stimulation had occurred. By contrast, activation of the 2G-M (CD28) CAR triggered a marginal and non-significant increment in NF-κB activity, consistent with a lack of 41BB signaling. Importantly, a similar profile was seen with the 3G-M CAR, indicative of deficient 41BB co-stimulation. These data show that the pCAR-M/34, unlike the 3G-M CAR, effectively harnesses both CD28 and 41BB co-stimulatory pathways.

Dual co-stimulation by pCAR-M/34 counteracts tumor-induced T cell dysfunction and induces metabolic remodeling

Next, we evaluated the impact of pCAR-M/34 signaling on tumor-induced T cell dysfunction and metabolic fitness. Key underlying mechanisms of T cell dysfunction are exhaustion, senescence, activation-induced cell death (AICD), and accelerated differentiation. Re-stimulated pCAR-M/34 T cells underwent progressive and significantly greater CD8+ T cell expansion (Figure 3A) while maintaining significantly lower anti-human CD279 (PD1) expression on both CD4+ and CD8+ T cell subsets (Figures 3B–3D). Tim3 levels matched those of controls (Figure 3E). These data are consistent with reduced exhaustion of pCAR-M/34 T cells due to improved co-stimulation.

Senescence is also a common feature of intra-tumoral T cells. Expression of the senescence markers CD57 (Figure 3F) and KLRG1 (Figure 3G) were both reduced in re-stimulated pCAR-M/34 T cell cultures. Although CD28 and 41BB co-stimulation can reduce AICD, CAR T cells are particularly...
Figure 3. Re-stimulated pCAR-M/34 T cells downregulate pathways that favor tumor-induced dysfunction and undergo metabolic remodeling

(A–I) The indicated engineered T cells (1 \times 10^6) were iteratively re-stimulated on T47D FMS monolayers without cytokine support. Each week, 1 \times 10^6 T cells were transferred to a new confluent monolayer. Twenty-four hours after the initiation of each stimulation cycle, T cells were analyzed for the following attributes. All statistical analysis was performed by two-way ANOVA with multiple comparisons. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001; ****p < 0.0001, making comparison in each case with pCAR-M/34 T cells.

(A) CD8/CD4 ratio (mean ± SEM, n = 4–12).
(B) %PD1 (all T cells; mean ± SEM, n = 4–22).
(C) %PD1 on CD4^+ T cell subset (mean ± SEM, n = 4).
(D) %PD1 on CD8^+ T cell subset (mean ± SEM, n = 4).
(E) %TIM-3 (mean ± SEM, n = 2–7).
(F) %CD57 (median ± interquartile range; n = 4–16).
(G) %KLRG1 (mean ± SEM, n = 4).
(H) % viability (mean ± SEM, n = 4–10).
(I) %CD69 (mean ± SEM, n = 4).

(K–N) The indicated engineered T cells (1 \times 10^6) were iteratively re-stimulated on T47D FMS monolayers without cytokine support. Prior to each stimulation cycle, cells were stained with CD45RO, CCR7, CD4, and CD8 and assigned as naive (CD45RO^−CCR7^−), central memory (CD45RO^−CCR7^+), effector memory (CD45RO^+CCR7^−), or EMRA (CCR7^−CD45RO^−) within the CD4^+ or CD8^+ subset.

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susceptible to this process. In keeping with this, we observed a progressive increase in AICD of re-stimulated CAR T cells. However, this was slightly attenuated in pCAR-M/34 T cells (Figure 3H), accompanied by reduced expression of the CD69 activation marker (Figure 3I).

Co-stimulation also plays a key role in the regulation of T cell differentiation and memory formation. Notably, periodic enrichment of central memory T cells was observed in re-stimulated pCAR-M/34 cultures over prolonged tumor re-stimulation (Figure 3J). This may simulate the three phases seen during T cell immune responses in which antigen-specific cells undergo expansion followed by contraction and memory formation.

Finally, signaling by both CD28 and 41BB facilitates metabolic reprogramming that could promote greater resistance of pCAR-M/34 T cells to tumor-induced dysfunction. In support of this, re-stimulated pCAR-M/34 T cells maintained high levels of the key nutrient transporters, glucose transporter 1 (Glut1) and transferrin receptor CD71 (Figure 3L). These data accord with the importance of activation-induced glucose and iron uptake in T cell proliferation and mitochondrial function, respectively. We and others have shown that T cell exhaustion is accompanied by loss of mitochondrial function. In line with their increased functionality, re-stimulated pCAR-M/34 T cells maintained higher mitochondrial membrane potential (Δψm; Figure 3M) and harbored less depolarized mitochondria (Figure 3N). This phenotype has also been associated with superior T cell survival and function in the tumor microenvironment (TME). Together, these data indicate that dual CD28 and 41BB co-stimulation provided by pCAR-M/34 results in metabolic remodeling and enhanced resistance to tumor-induced T cell dysfunction.

**pCAR-M/34 T cells show superior therapeutic activity against an M-CSFR+ lymphoma xenograft**

We next evaluated in vivo anti-tumor activity of pCAR-M/34 T cells against a challenging Karpas (K)299 anaplastic lymphoma xenograft that undergoes rapid lymphatic dissemination (Figures 4A and 4B) and expresses low levels of the M-CSFR (Figure 4C). Mice with established disease were treated intravenously (i.v.) with pCAR-M/34 T cells (experimental design, Figure 4D), making comparison with 3G CAR T cells in which specificity was conferred by either M-CSF or IL-34. Untransduced (UT) T cells and PBS served as additional controls. While 3G CAR T cells demonstrated no efficacy, 3 of 9 mice that received pCAR-M/34 T cells achieved sustained tumor control, while disease progression was delayed in 2 further mice (Figure 4E), leading to significant prolongation of survival (Figure 4F). These data reinforce the superior in vivo anti-tumor activity of the pCAR-M/34 format compared with linear CAR counterparts that contain identical co-stimulatory units.

**pCAR T cells with dual target specificity achieve superior potency while maintaining targeting precision**

In designing binary systems such as pCAR, it may be desirable to enhance potency while maintaining tumor specificity by directing each receptor component against two non-competing antigens. To ensure safety, effector function should be absolutely dependent on engagement of a tumor-selective CAR target, permitting the inclusion of a less stringently tumor-specific CCR. We tested this by engineering T cells to express a pCAR in which a mucin 1 (MUC1)-specific 2G (28) CAR was paired with a 41BB CCR that binds multiple ErbB dimers. While MUC1 has been ranked as the highest priority cell-surface cancer antigen, CAR T cell targeting of ErbB dimers has demonstrated great potency, but limited tumor specificity.

Previously, we used an human milk fat globulin (HMFG)2 single chain antibody fragment (scFv) to engineer a MUC1-specific 2G CAR, here called 2G-H (CD28) (Figure 5A). To engineer the pCAR, the 2G-H (CD28) CAR was co-expressed with a 41BB-containing CCR that binds eight distinct ErbB homo- and heterodimers (Figure 5A). Target specificity of the CCR was achieved using a promiscuous ErbB ligand termed T1E, which is a chimera derived from transforming growth factor α and epidermal growth factor. The resulting construct was referred to as pCAR-H/T (i.e., HMFG2-targeted CAR and T1E-targeted CCR). To serve as additional controls, the 2G-H (41BB) and 3G-H CARs were designed. We also constructed a truncated pCAR control (trunc. CCR in pCAR) in which the 2G-H (CD28) CAR was co-expressed with a T1E-targeted CCR that lacked the 41BB co-stimulatory endodomain and thus was signaling defective (Figure 5A). Expression of these CARs and pCARs in human T cells is shown in Figure S4A.

To compare function of these constructs, cytotoxicity assays were performed using MDA-MB-468 triple negative breast cancer (TNBC) cells, which naturally express both MUC1 and ErbB dimers. While 2G CAR T cells only exerted strong cytolytic activity at a high effector to target (E:T) ratio, pCAR-H/T T cells achieved significantly enhanced tumor cell killing at low E:T ratios (Figure 5B). Cytotoxic activity of pCAR-H/T T cells also significantly exceeded that of both 2G-H (41BB) and 3G-H T cells (Figure 5C) or the combination of 2G-H (CD28) and 41BB (Figure 5D). When tested in tumor re-stimulation assays, pCAR-H/T T cells maintained cytotoxic activity over significantly more cycles than all controls (Figure 5E). Of particular importance, cytotoxic activity of pCAR-H/T T cells remained strictly MUC1 dependent. This is indicated by lack of cytotoxicity against MUC1-negative MDA-MB-435 human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2) cells that express HER2-containing ErbB dimers that are bound by the T1E peptide (Figure 5F).

Cytokine production by 2G 2G-H (CD28) CAR T cells was poor. By contrast, activated pCAR-H/T T cells produced higher levels of IL-2 and IFNγ (Figure 5G). Notably, the trunc. CCR in

All statistical analysis was performed by two-way ANOVA with multiple comparisons. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001; ****p < 0.0001, making comparison in each case with pCAR-M/34 T cells.

(M) Mitochondrial membrane potential (Δψm; MFI; mean ± SEM, n = 4–14).

(N) %Depolarized mitochondria (%; mean ± SEM, n = 4–7).

(L) %CD71 (mean ± SEM, n = 3–16). Please note that 2G-M (41BB) and 3G-M plots are closely aligned.

(K) Glut1 mean fluorescence intensity (MFI) (mean ± SEM, n = 4–14).
Figure 4. M-CSFR re-targeted pCAR T cells elicit superior anti-lymphoma activity in vivo

(A) To establish a xenograft model of M-CSFR⁺ anaplastic cell lymphoma, severe combined immunodeficiency (SCID) Beige mice were inoculated i.v. with $2 \times 10^6$ red fluorescent protein (RFP)/ffLuc⁺ K299 cells. After 24 days, luciferin was administered prior to culling of mice and major organs analyzed using BLI.

(B) Blood, spleen, and lymph nodes were analyzed for RFP⁺ tumor cells by flow cytometry.

(C) Lymph node tumors were mechanically disaggregated to yield a single-cell suspension, which was stained with aM-CSFR antibody.

(D) To test in vivo anti-tumor activity of M-CSFR re-targeted T cells, SCID Beige mice (n = 9 per group) were inoculated i.v. with $2 \times 10^6$ ffLuc/RFP⁺ K299 cells. On day 5, mice were treated i.v. with $20 \times 10^6$ of the indicated CAR, pCAR, or untransduced (UT) T cells or PBS.

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pCAR control that could also bind MUC1 and ErbB dimers elicited intermediate cytotoxicity (Figure 5B), tumor re-stimulation potential (Figure 5E), and cytokine release (Figure 5F). Since this control lacks a 41BB endodomain, this indicates that the CCR component of pCAR H/T enhances function both through signaling-dependent and -independent mechanisms.

Next, in vivo anti-tumor activity was compared. Superior anti-tumor activity of pCAR H/T cells was observed in mice with an established MDA-MB-468 xenograft (Figures 5H–5L) or a HER2-overexpressing derivative (Figures S4B–S4D), when compared with 2G (CD28 [Figures 5I, 5K, and S4C]; 41BB [Figure 5L]) or 3G controls (Figure 5L). Once again, T cells that expressed the trunc. CCR in pCAR control achieved intermediate anti-tumor activity, in keeping with signaling-independent activity of the CCR (Figure 5).

The T1E peptide used to target CCR specificity in pCAR-H/T binds to murine ErbB dimers efficiently, meaning that CAR T cells containing T1E can mediate significant and sometimes lethal toxicity in mice. Nonetheless, no clinical evidence of in vivo toxicity was observed in any of these experiments. Together with the stringent dependence of the pH/T pCAR cytolytic activity on MUC1 engagement (Figure 5F), this demonstrates that absolute dependence on the CAR target is indeed maintained in the pCAR arrangement. Importantly, anti-tumor activity is boosted when both CAR and CCR targets are co-engaged. Together, these attributes render pCAR T cells better suited to function in the challenging microenvironment of a solid tumor, given the paucity of truly disease-specific targets that are available.

pCAR T cells mediate enhanced recall responses and durability of in vivo anti-tumor activity

We hypothesized that effective dual CD28 and 4-1BB co-stimulation would also promote the durability of immune attack, given the distinct and potentially complementary kinetics of proliferation and effector function elicited by 28 and 41BB, 2G CAR T cells. To test this, we used a previously described 2G CAR targeted against the pan-ErbB network using the T1E chimeric polypeptide, here referred to as 2G-T (CD28) (Figure 6A). In pre-clinical testing, we found that regional delivery of 2G-T (CD28) cells elicited disease eradication in an HN3 xenograft model of head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC). This model provided an opportunity to compare durability of CAR and pCAR T cell function in the setting of delayed tumor re-challenge. A panErbB-specific pCAR designated pCAR-T/T was engineered by co-expressing a T1E-41BB CCR alongside 2G-T1E CAR (Figure 6A). Equivalent cell surface CAR and CCR co-expression was demonstrated in transduced human T cells by flow cytometry (Figure 6B). T cells engineered to express pCAR-T/T exhibited a trend toward enhanced cytotoxicity (Figure 6C) and cytokine release (Figure 6D), when compared with 2G-T (CD28) CAR T cells. In vivo activity of 2G-T1E and pCAR-T/T T cells was compared in mice with established HN3 HNSCC tumors (experimental plan Figure 6E). Following treatment, bioluminescence imaging (BLI) confirmed that tumor regression occurred in all mice in both active treatment groups, but not in mice that received PBS or UT control T cells (Figure 6F). Tumor-free mice were re-challenged 63 days post CAR T cell infusion with a second injection of HN3 tumor cells. After a transient increase in BLI signal, values reduced to baseline in pCAR-T/T-treated mice. By contrast, tumor burden was re-established in 2G-T (CD28) T cell-treated mice (Figure 6G). These data demonstrate the superior functional persistence and long-term anti-tumor responses/immunity mediated by pCAR T cells in vivo, when compared with a conventional CAR with equivalent target specificity.

DISCUSSION

A major hurdle in cancer immunotherapy is the onset of tumor-induced T cell dysfunction. This is primarily driven by sustained antigen over-exposure within a profoundly immunosuppressive TME, aggravated by an imbalance between co-stimulatory and co-inhibitory receptor signaling. There is considerable evidence that provision of both CD28 and 41BB co-stimulation...
Figure 5. Co-targeting of MUC1 and ErbB dimers using pCAR T cells

(A) Cartoon structure of MUC1-specific CARs in addition to a pCAR and truncated pCAR control that co-target MUC1 and ErbB dimers.

(B) T cells were engineered to express pCAR-T/H or controls and co-cultured at the indicated E:T ratio with MDA-MB-468 tumor cells, without exogenous cytokine. Target viability was assessed after 72 h (mean ± SEM, n = 6). Statistical analysis shown in this figure was performed by two-way ANOVA with multiple comparisons and compares individual CARs across all E:T ratios. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001; ****p < 0.0001.

(C) Cytotoxicity assays making comparison with the indicated controls, performed as described in (B) (mean ± SEM, n = 10). Significance compares the indicated CAR to pCAR-H/T.

(D) Cytotoxicity assays making comparison with the indicated controls, performed as described in (B). Data shown are mean ± SEM, of n = 5 (2G-H (CD28)), 6 (pCAR-H/T and 2G-H (CD28) + 41BB), or 2 (UT) donors. Significance compares the indicated CAR to pCAR-H/T.

(E) T cells were re-stimulated twice per week by co-culture with MDA-MB-468 tumor cells (E:T ratio 1). Data show the mean ± SEM of the number of re-stimulation cycles in which T cells could be retrieved. Significance compares the indicated CAR to pCAR-H/T.

(F) pCAR or UT T cells were co-cultivated for 48 h with ffLuc/RFP + MDA-MB-435 HER2 tumor cells (MUC1−) or a derivative that overexpresses MUC1 (MUC1+). Residual tumor viability was determined by luciferase assay (E:T ratio 1; mean ± SEM, n = 2).

(G) Supernatant was collected from cultures shown in (B) (E:T ratio 0.5) after 24 h and analyzed for the indicated cytokines (mean ± SEM, n = 6). Differences are not statistically significant.

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can synergistically enhance T cell immune responses, potentially offering a solution to this important obstacle. Although these receptors activate overlapping signaling pathways, strength and kinetics of response differ markedly. While CD28-containing CARs elicit faster and larger scale signaling flux, 41BB favors a less intense but longer lasting response.

We hypothesized that co-expression of separate chimeric receptors in which both CD28 and 41BB were positioned next to the plasma membrane would provide dual tumor antigen-dependent co-stimulation, thereby mitigating tumor-induced CAR T cell dysfunction. To test this, we developed a single vector-encoded pCAR platform in which a 2G [28] CAR is co-expressed with a 41BB-containing CCR. Delivery of CD28 co-stimulation by the pCAR system results in cytokine release and proliferation, while provision of 41BB co-stimulation was confirmed by antigen-dependent NF-κB activation. Using repetitive stimulation assays to model tumor-induced exhaustion, we found that pCAR T cells with specificity for a single or multiple targets consistently outperformed other dual co-stimulatory systems or 2G CARs that contain either 41BB or CD28 alone. Attenuated tumor-induced dysfunction of pCAR T cells was indicated by enhanced proliferation, cytokine release, and cytolytic function—accompanied by lowered expression of markers of exhaustion and senescence. Flexibility of the system was demonstrated using pCARs that contained a range of targeting moieties (i.e., peptides, cytokine derivatives, and scFvs). While targeting of the same epitope was effective, antigen downregulation could favor immune escape. Nonetheless, we also showed that pCARs can be successfully directed against two or more antigens, with potentiation of activity when both CAR and CCR targets are present. Importantly from a safety perspective, activation of pCAR T cells remained strictly dependent on CAR target engagement. Superior functional persistence of pCAR T cells was indicated by their greater ability to reject tumor re-challenge. The durable nature of anti-tumor immunity mediated by pCAR T cells is a highly attractive attribute for clinical translation.

Optimal T cell responses not only require TCR engagement (signal 1) and co-stimulation (signal 2), but also cytokine support (signal 3). When compared with controls, pCAR T cells demonstrated enhanced and more sustained IL-2 release over repetitive tumor re-stimulation, accompanied by increased gene expression related to JAK-STAT signaling. Maintained ability to release IL-2 is associated with more effective CD8+ T cell immune responses in infectious disease models and the prevention of T cell tolerance within immunosuppressive environments. Autocrine IL-2 and JAK-STAT signaling supports T cell proliferation and effector function, while also promoting memory formation, attributes that have enhanced the functionality of CAR T cells.

Co-stimulation by CD28 and 41BB have each been implicated in the maintenance of T cell metabolic fitness. Exhausted T cells manifest decreased glucose uptake and defective mitochondrial function. However, effective dual co-stimulation using the pCAR system resulted in greater upregulation of markers implicated in nutrient uptake, accompanied by superior retention of functional mitochondria.

The consistently superior performance of pCAR T cells highlights a general principle for effective CAR design, namely the importance of juxta-membrane positioning for co-stimulatory signaling. While this has long been established for CD28, we demonstrate here that 41BB has a similar requirement for optimal function. This provides a rationale for the segregation of distinct co-stimulatory modules within separate synthetic receptors. In keeping with this, we found that the anti-tumor activity of 3G CAR T cells did not exceed that of 2G counterparts, nor did 3G receptors in which 41BB was placed distally elicit the same intensity of NF-κB activation as 2G (BBs) CARs. A similar explanation is likely to underlie the ability of pCAR T cells to outperform a configuration in which a 1G CAR was co-expressed with a dual CD28+41BB CCR.

Another important property of the pCAR system relates to a signaling-independent potentiating effect of the CCR. This is illustrated by comparison of a MUC1-specific 2G CAR and a control pCAR in which the same MUC1-specific CAR was paired with an endodomain-deficient panErbB-specific CCR. Despite the signaling defective nature of the CCR, these control pCAR T cells achieved greater anti-tumor activity than 2G counterparts. Since the large MUC1 ectodomain sterically hinders T cell engagement, this increment in function likely reflects a “docking effect” of the CCR to favor closer T cell target cell interaction, either alone (e.g., truncated CCR) or in combination with the additional provision of 41BB signaling (intact CCR). This phenomenon may also account for the previously reported functional rescue of a sub-optimal 1G CAR by a co-expressed dual CD28+41BB CCR. Nonetheless, our data highlight the compromised quality of co-stimulation delivered by a fused CD28 and 41BB endodomain, either within a 3G CAR or a dual CCR. Instead, our findings support the design of chimeric receptor systems in which co-stimulatory units are aligned laterally rather than vertically, thereby achieving membrane proximity.

We also explored the role of affinity in the design of pCARs. Clinical translation of the pCAR approach would be challenging if precise affinity tuning was necessary for every antigen or
antigen pair. A panel of αvβ6-specific pCARs was constructed in which CAR affinity exceeded that of the CCR for the same epitope, or vice versa. Across a range of high picomolar to nanomolar $K_d$ values, all pCARs behaved in a broadly similar fashion. While this should be confirmed for other antigen(s), these data suggest that the pCAR framework provides flexibility with respect to relative affinity of the CAR and CCR.

While the pCAR platform affords a number of functional advantages over traditional linear CAR fusions, further optimization of the system warrants consideration. Here, we used ribosomal skip peptides to achieve stoichiometric co-expression of both CAR and CCR. However, modification of the ratio of expression of these pCAR constituents could further enhance anti-tumor activity.

Figure 6. pCAR T cells demonstrate sustained functional persistence in vivo
(A) Cartoon structure of panErbB-specific 2G CAR (2G-T (CD28)) and pCAR (pCAR-T/T).
(B) Expression of panErbB-specific pCARs in human T cells was determined by flow cytometry using antibodies directed against embedded epitope tags within the CAR and CCR component (representative of n = 3 replicates).
(C) T cells were engineered to express pCAR-T/T or 2G-T (CD28) control and were cultured at the indicated E:T ratio with BxPC3 or HN3 tumor cells, without cytokine support. Tumor cell viability was assessed after 72 h (mean ± SEM, n = 7), making comparison with UT T cells.
(D) Supernatant was collected after 24 h (1:1 E:T ratio) and analyzed for the indicated cytokines (mean ± SEM, n = 7 [BxPC3 IFNγ], 11 [BxPC3 IL2], 9 [HN3 IFNγ], or 10 [HN3 IL2]). Statistical analysis was performed using a paired t test.
(E) NSG mice were inoculated i.p. with 1 x 10⁶ RFP/ffLuc⁺ HN3 tumor cells. After 12 days, 5 x 10⁶ T cells that express the indicated CAR or pCAR were injected i.p., making comparison with UT T cells and PBS.
(F) Tumor burden was monitored following treatment as described in (E) using BLI (mean ± SEM, n = 5 mice per group). Day of T cell injection is indicated by the arrow.
(G) Tumor-free mice were re-challenged by i.p. injection of 1 x 10⁶ RFP/ffLuc⁺ HN3 tumor cells on day 63 post initial tumor inoculation (arrowed). Tumor burden was monitored thereafter using BLI (mean ± SEM, n = 5 mice per group). Statistical analysis was performed using a Mann-Whitney test. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001; ****p < 0.0001.
It should be noted that CARs and pCARs targeted against M-CSFR were co-expressed with 4\(\alpha\)\(\beta\), an IL-4-responsive chimeric cytokine receptor.\(^{27}\) However, we feel that this is unlikely to have influenced our results since it was a consistent variable in all M-CSFR-targeted T cell populations and was not used in the other models presented here in which superiority of pCAR function was also shown. T cells that express 4\(\alpha\)\(\beta\) have potent in vivo anti-tumor activity that is comparable to that seen with CAR alone.\(^{42,43}\)

In summary, we describe a CAR technology that effectively delivers integrated co-stimulation by CD28 and 41BB, provided that co-stimulatory modules are located in their natural membrane-associated position. Our data suggest that pCAR signaling promotes differentiation into long-lived memory
T cells in vivo, allowing enhanced persistence, function, and long-term protection of the recipient. Together, these data support the development of pCAR-based immunotherapy for tumor types that have proven resistant to therapeutic intervention.

**Limitations of this study**

*In vivo* studies did not contain a uniform panel of control CARs owing to the very large number of constructs generated in this study. Another limitation pertains to the lack of *in vivo* testing of pCARs with altered affinity. Finally, our article only describes the exemplification of pCARs that contain CD28 and 41BB. Future investigation of other combinations of co-stimulatory modules and mutated derivatives is warranted.

**STAR★METHODS**

Detailed methods are provided in the online version of this paper and include the following:

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**SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION**

Supplemental information can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xcrm.2021.100457.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We thank M. van Schalkwyk and A. Adami for critical review of the manuscript and scientific colleagues for provision of materials. This work was supported by Leucid Bio; Cancer Research UK (CRUK) grant number A21623; the British Lung Foundation; the Experimental Cancer Medicine Centre at King’s College London; the King’s Health Partners/King’s College London Cancer Research UK Centre; Kings Health Partners MRC Confidence in Concepts; a Joint Research Committee Kings Medical Research Fund PhD studentship; a Wellcome Trust PhD studentship grant number 108874/B/15/Z; the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centre, based at Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust and King’s College London; a CRUK-KHP fast-track seed award; and a MRC-DTP PhD studentship. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR, or the Department of Health.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Conceptualization, J.M.; experimental work, T.M., L.H., L.M.W., B.D., D.Y.A., F.K., M.G., N.B., A.A., J.S., K.R.F., P.A., D.L.-Y., C.M.H., R.B., P.G., D.M.D., and A.S.; bioinformatic analysis, T.M., K.G., J.O., and A.G.; methodology and data analysis, all authors; writing – original draft, J.M., A.S., and T.M.; writing – review & editing, all authors.

**DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

J.M. is CSO, scientific founder, and shareholder of Leucid Bio, T.M., F.K., M.G., and A.A. are employees of Leucid Bio, L.H. and B.D. undertook PhD studentships funded by Leucid Bio, L.M.W., D.M.D., C.H., and D.L.-Y. have acted as consultants for Leucid Bio, and D.M.D. is currently an employee of Leucid Bio. J.M., D.Y.A., L.M.W., B.D., T.M., F.K., L.H., and M.G. are co-inventors on patent filings in relation to pCAR technology. B.D. and D.Y.A. are shareholders of Autolus Therapeutics. D.Y.A. is an employee of Autolus Therapeutics. The other authors declare no competing interests.

Received: May 30, 2020
 Revised: September 14, 2021
 Accepted: November 5, 2021
 Published: December 21, 2021

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## KEY RESOURCES TABLE

| REAGENT or RESOURCE | SOURCE | IDENTIFIER |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
|                      |        |            |
| **Antibodies**       |        |            |
| Anti-c-Myc (9e10) hybridoma supernatant | ECACC (hybridoma) | N/A |
| Anti-Flag tag - PE (L5) | BioLegend | Cat# 637310, RRID:AB_2563148 |
| Anti-goat Ig FITC-conjugated (rabbit polyclonal) | DAKO (Agilent) | Cat# F0250 |
| Anti-GLUT1 - Alexa Fluor 647 (EPR391S) | Abcam | Cat# ab195020, RRID:AB_2783877 |
| Anti-human CD3 - APC/Cy7 | BioLegend | Cat# 344818, RRID:AB_10645474 |
| Anti-human CD8 - PE-Cy7 (SK1) | BioLegend | Cat# 344711, RRID:AB_2044007 |
| Anti-human CD4 - PE/Cy7 (RPA-T4) | BioLegend | Cat# 300512, RRID:AB_310480 |
| Anti-human CD45RA - V450 (HI100) | BD Biosciences | Cat# 560362, RRID:AB_1645575 |
| Anti-human CD45RO - PerCP/Cy5.5 (UCHL1) | BioLegend | Cat# 304221, RRID:AB_1575041 |
| Anti-human CD57 - APC (QA17A04) | BioLegend | Cat# 393305, RRID:AB_2734459 |
| Anti-human CD69 - BV605 (FN50) | BioLegend | Cat# 310938; RRID:AB_2562306 |
| Anti-human CD71 - PerCP Cy5.5 | BioLegend | Cat# 334114; RRID:AB_2563175 |
| Anti-human CD98 - PE-Vio770 | Miltenyi Biotec | Cat# 130-105-710, RRID:AB_2659686 |
| Anti-human CD115 - CSF1R (3-4A4) | Santa-Cruz | Cat# sc-02, RRID:AB_627624 |
| Anti-human CD124 - PE (hiIL4R-M57) | BD Biosciences | Cat# 552178, RRID:AB_394355 |
| Anti-human CD197 (CCR7) - APC (G043H7) | BioLegend | Cat# 353213, RRID:AB_353213 |
| Anti-human CD247 (CD3z) - 1D4 | BD Biosciences | Cat# 556366, RRID:AB_396389 |
| Anti-human CD279 (PD1) - APC/Cy7 (EH12.2H7) | BioLegend | Cat# 329921, RRID:AB_10900982 |
| Anti-human CD279 (PD1) - PE/Dazzle 594 (EH12.2H7) | BioLegend | Cat# 329939, RRID:AB_2563658 |
| Anti-human CD366 (Tim-3) - APC | Biolegend | Cat# 345011, RRID:AB_2561717 |
| Anti-human CSF1 (goat polyclonal) | Sigma-Aldrich | Cat# M9182, RRID:AB_260717 |
| Anti-human CSF1 (monoclonal) | BioLegend | Cat# 699203, RRID:AB_27515880 |
| Anti-human EGF (10825) | R&D Systems | Cat# MAB236 |
| Anti-human EGF - biotin (polyclonal) | R&D Systems | Cat# BAF236 |
| Anti-human KLRG1 PE-Vio 615 | Miltenyi Biotec | Cat# 130-120-427, RRID:AB_2784407 |
| Anti-human IgG Fc - APC (HP6017) | BioLegend | Cat# 409305, RRID:AB_11150590 |
| Anti-human IL-34 - biotin (E033BB) | BioLegend | Cat# 361402, RRID:AB_2563035 |
| Anti-human IL-34 (1D12) | Abcam | Cat# ab101443, RRID:AB_10711208 |
| Anti-mouse IgG - APC (goat polyclonal) | BioLegend | Cat# 405308, RRID:AB_315011 |
| Anti-mouse IgG - PE (goat polyclonal) | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# M30004-4, RRID:AB_2536618 |
| Anti-rat IgG - FITC (goat polyclonal) | BioLegend | Cat# 405404, RRID:AB_315015 |
| Anti-rat IgG - PE (goat polyclonal) | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# A10545, RRID:AB_1500703 |
| Anti-rat IgG - APC (Poly4054; goat polyclonal) | BioLegend | Cat# 405407, RRID:AB_315018 |

| **Isotype control antibodies** | ThermoFisher Scientific | N/A |

| **Chemicals, peptides, and recombinant proteins** | ThermoFisher Scientific | N/A |

| Brefeldin A solution | BioLegend | Cat# 420601 |
| CellTrace™ CFSE Cell Proliferation Kit | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# C34554 |
| D-luciferin | R&D Systems (Biotechne) | Cat# 122799 |
| DAPI staining solution | Miltenyi Biotec | Cat# 130-111-570 |
| Dynabeads™ human T-activator CD3/CD28 | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# 11132D |
| EGF Fc chimera | R&D Systems (Biotechne) | Cat# 344-ER |

(Continued on next page)
| REAGENT or RESOURCE | SOURCE | IDENTIFIER |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| ErbB2/HER2 Fc chimera | R&D Systems (Biotecne) | Cat# 1129-ER |
| GeneJuice transfection reagent | Merck Chemicals Ltd | Cat# 70967-4 |
| Live/Dead Fixable dead cell stain, blue | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# L23105 |
| MTT (3-(4,5-Dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyl-2H-tetrazolium bromide) | Apollo Scientific | Cat# BID2165 |
| MUC1 60-mer - biotin (VTSAPDTRPAPGSTAPPAHG)₃ | NeoMPS; Wilkie et al., 2008 | PMID: 18354214 |
| Phusion® High-Fidelity PCR Master Mix with HF Buffer | New England BioLabs | Cat# M0531 |
| Phytohemagglutinin-L | Sigma-Aldrich | Cat# 11249738001 |
| Recombinant human IL-2 | Peprotech EC | Cat# 200-02 |
| Recombinant human IL-4 | Peprotech EC | Cat# 200-04 |
| RetroNectin | Takara | Cat# 60690 |
| Streptavidin APC | BioLegend | Cat# 405207 |
| Streptavidin PE | BioLegend | Cat# 405204 |
| Streptavidin PE/Cy5 | BioLegend | Cat# 405205 |
| Tetramethylrhodamine, ethyl ester | ThermoFisher | Cat# T669 |

**Critical commercial assays**

| Assay | Source | IDENTIFIER |
|-------|--------|------------|
| IFN-γ ELISA kit | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# 88-7316-76, RRID:AB_2575072 |
| IL-2 ELISA kit | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# 88-7025-76, RRID:AB_2574956 |
| IL-34 Duoset ELISA kit | R&D Systems (Biotecne) | Cat# DY5265B |
| M-CSF Duoset ELISA kit | R&D Systems (Biotecne) | Cat# DY216 |
| nCounter Sprint Cartridge SPRINT-CAR-1.0 | NanoString Technologies Inc | Cat# 100078 |
| One-Step™ Luciferase Assay System | BPS Bioscience | Cat# 60690-1 |
| PlasmoTest™ | InvivoGen | Cat# rep-pt1 |
| RNeasy® Mini Kit | QIAGEN | Cat# 74104 |
| Qubit™ RNaseq BR Assay Kit | ThermoFisher Scientific | Cat# Q10210 |
| XT_HS_CAR-T Panel_OSO XT-CSO-HCART1-12 (CAR-T Characterization Panel) | NanoString Technologies Inc | Cat# 115000343 |
| XT_HS_CAR-T Panel | This manuscript | N/A |

**Deposited data**

| Type | Source | IDENTIFIER |
|------|--------|------------|
| NanoString gene expression data | This paper | GEO: GSE186557 |

**Experimental models: Cell lines**

| Model | Source | IDENTIFIER |
|-------|--------|------------|
| 293VEC-RD114™ | Dr Manuel Caruso, Centre de recherche du CHU de Québec, Canada | https://www.biovecpharma.com/products.php?id=19 |
| K299 (Karpas-299) | Dr Stephan Mathas, Max-Delbrück-Center for Molecular Medicine, Germany | DSMZ Cat# ACC-31, RRID:CVCL_1324 |
| MDA-MB-468 | Breast Cancer Now Research Unit, King’s College London | NCI-DTP Cat# MDA-MB-468, RRID:CVCL_0419 |
| MDA-MB-435 | Breast Cancer Biology Group, King’s College London | NCI-DTP Cat# MDA-MB-435, RRID:CVCL_0417 |
| MDA-MB-435 MUC1+ HER2+ | This lab; Wilkie et al., 2008 | N/A |
| NF-κB luciferase reporter Jurkat | BPS Bioscience (distributed by Tebu-Bio) | Cat# 60651 |
| PG13 | European Collection of Cell Cultures (ECACC) | ATCC Cat# CRL-10685, RRID:CVCL_8933 |
| T47D | Breast Cancer Now Research Unit, King’s College London | NCI-DTP Cat# T-47D, RRID:CVCL_0553 |
| T47D FMS | This manuscript | N/A |

(Continued on next page)
### Oligonucleotides

| Primers for PIPE cloning | See Table S1 | N/A |
|--------------------------|--------------|-----|

### Recombinant DNA

| 2G-M (CD28) | This manuscript | N/A |
|------------|----------------|-----|
| 2G-M (41BB) | This manuscript | N/A |
| 3G-M | This manuscript | N/A |
| Trunc.-M | This manuscript | N/A |
| 2G-34 (CD28) | This manuscript | N/A |
| 3G-34 | This manuscript | N/A |
| Trunc.-34 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-M/34 | This manuscript | N/A |
| Trunc. CAR in pCAR | This manuscript | N/A |
| 1G CAR/ Dual CCR | This manuscript | N/A |
| 2G-H (CD28) | This manuscript; Wilkie et al., 2008 [13] | PMID: 18354214 |
| 2G-H (41BB) | This manuscript | N/A |
| 3G-H | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-H/T | This manuscript | N/A |
| 2G-T (CD28) (previously referred to as T1E28z) | This manuscript; Davies et al., 2012 [42] | PMID: 22354215 |
| pCAR-T/T | This manuscript | N/A |
| A-2 (previously referred to as A20-28z) | This manuscript; Whilding et al., 2017 [56] | PMID: 28129120 |
| pCAR-20/20 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-20/17 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-20/15 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-17/20 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-17/17 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-17/15 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-15/20 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-15/17 | This manuscript | N/A |
| pCAR-15/15 | This manuscript | N/A |
| c-fms (CSF1R gene) | This manuscript; Lo et al., 2008 [16] | PMID: 17950877 |
| HER2 | This manuscript; Wilkie et al., 2012 [24] | PMID: 22526592 |
| RFP/ffLuc | This manuscript; Lamprecht et al., 2010 [17] | PMID: 20436485 |
| Human CSF-1 isoform 3 | Gift of Dr. Kirsten Koths, Chiron Corporation | Uniprot P09603-3 |
| T1E peptide | This manuscript; Davies et al., 2012 [42] | PMID: 22354215 |
| ICR12 | This manuscript; Wilkie et al., 2012 [24] | PMID: 22526592 |
| FMC63 scFv | Kochenderfer et al., 2009 [55] | GenBank: HM852952.1 |
| 4aβ | Wilkie et al., 2010 [17] | PMID: 20562098 |
| RD114 | Gift of Prof. M. Collins, University College London | N/A |
| pEQ-Pam3 | Gift of Dr. M. Pulé, University College London | N/A |

### Software and algorithms

| CellQuest Pro | BD Biosciences | N/A |
| FACSDiva | BD Biosciences | N/A |
| FlowJo | FlowJo, LCC, BD Biosciences | N/A |
RESOURCE AVAILABILITY

Lead contact
Further information and requests for resources and reagents should be directed to and will be fulfilled by the Lead Contact, John Maher (john.maher@kcl.ac.uk).

Materials availability
Reagents generated in this study will be made available on request, but we may require a payment and/or a completed Materials Transfer Agreement if there is potential for commercial application.

Data and code availability
NanoString data were deposited at NIH Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) and are publicly available as of the date of publication. There was no new code developed as part of this study. Any additional information required to re-analyze the data reported in this work paper is available from the Lead Contact upon request.

EXPERIMENTAL MODEL AND SUBJECT DETAILS

Mice
SCID Beige and Nod SCID γcnull (NSG) mice were housed in Biological Services Units at King’s College London.

Cell lines and Tissue Culture
Cell lines and their origin are listed in the Key resources table. Tumor cell lines were grown in R10 or D10 medium, respectively comprising RPMI or DMEM supplemented with 10% FBS and GlutaMax. PG13 and 293VEC-RD114 cells retroviral packaging cells were maintained in D10. Cells were maintained at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO2. Cell lines were validated by STR typing and were routinely monitored for mycoplasma contamination. Where indicated, cell lines were engineered to express RFP/ffLuc, human FMS (M-CSFR gene), HER2, or MUC1/HER2.

Human Study Oversight
Blood samples were obtained from healthy male and female volunteers aged between 18-65 years old with approval of a National Health Service Research Ethics Committee (reference 09/H0804/92 and 18/WS/0047).

METHOD DETAILS

Retroviral Constructs
The 2G-M (CD28) and Trunc.-M constructs were generated by fusion of a human CD8α leader to codons 33-189 of human M-CSF isoform 3 (Uniprot P09603-3) by overlap extension PCR using primers listed in Table S1. The resultant NcoI/NotI flanked fragment was inserted into plasmids dubbed SFG T1E28z or SFG T1NA in place of the existing NcoI/NotI fragment. M-CSFR-targeting pCAR-M, 3G-M, 2G-34, Trunc.-34 and 3G-34 constructs were constructed using the Polymerase Incomplete Primer Extension (PIPE) cloning method using primers listed in Table S1. The IL-34 sequence (isoform 1) encoded codons 1-242. The 2G-H (CD28) and 2G-A (CD28) CARs and T1E peptide have been previously described. The 2G-T (CD28) CAR was generated by mutagenesis of the previously described T1E-28z CAR, replacing the MYPPPY motif in the CD28 extracellular domain with an EQKLISEEDL epitope tag (Mr Gene, Regensburg, Germany). All other CARs and pCARs were constructed by gene synthesis and cloning (Genscript, Hong Kong, China and Leiden, the Netherlands) using human codon optimized sequences and ligation of digested DNA.
fragments as appropriate. In all cases, the CD28 sequence incorporated codons 114-220 or, where truncated (Trunc.) to inactivate signaling, codons 114-182. In all cases, the CD8α spacer and transmembrane sequence incorporated codons 137-208 while the 41BB endodomain sequence encoded for codons 214-255. All M-CSF-targeted CARs and pCARs were co-expressed in human T cells with 4×β, a chimeric cytokine receptor that provides a selective IL2/15 signal upon binding of IL4.27 Stoichiometric co-expression of two or three transgenes was achieved using one or more intervening furin cleavage sites (RRKR) followed by a [serine-glycine]2 linker and either a Thosea Asigna 2A (T2A) or Porsine Teschovirus (P2A) ribosomal skip peptide (codon wobbled where necessary). To visualize tumors in vivo, ffLuc was co-expressed with RFP as described.28 The SFG encoded M-CSFR56 and HER224 constructs were previously described.

**Transduction and Expansion of Human T Cells**

Viral vector was prepared as described using PG13 cell lines, 293VEC-RD114 cells or by triple transfection of 293T cells. In brief, 1.65×10⁶ low passage 293T cells in 11mL IMDM + 10% FBS were evenly distributed in a 10cm plate. After 8-24h, GeneJuice (30µL) was added to 470µL IMDM (no serum) and mixed gently. After incubation for 5 min at room temperature, 3.125µg RD114 plasmid, 4.6875µg pEQ-Pam3 plasmid and 4.6875µg SFG vector of interest were added to the GeneJuice/medium mixture, mixed gently and incubated for 15 min at room temperature. The transfection mixture was dropwise to the plate and gently swirled to ensure even distribution. After incubation for 48h at 37°C, 5% CO₂ medium was removed for snap freezing using an ethanol dry ice bath and replaced.

**Flow Cytometry Analysis**

All cell staining reactions were performed on ice. For intracellular antigen detection, cells were stained with a fixable live/dead dye before being stained for surface proteins for 30 min on ice. Intracellular staining was performed by fixation with 0.01% formaldehyde followed by permeabilization using PBS + 0.5% BSA + 0.1% saponin. Cells were subsequently stained for intracellular proteins for 30 min at 4°C. All gates were set using isotype control antibodies or fluorescence minus one controls. Where necessary, a viability stain was included and non-specific binding of the antibodies was limited by using an appropriate Fc blocking reagent prior to the staining steps. Flow cytometry was performed using a FACSCalibur cytometer with CellQuest Pro software or BD LSRRFortessa cytometer with BD FACSDiva software and data was analyzed using FlowJo, LLC.

**Enzyme-linked Immunosorbent Assay**

Supernatants collected from co-culture of tumor cells with CAR T cells were analyzed using a human IFNγ or human IL2 enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) as described by the manufacturers. In pooled re-stimulation assays, cytokine production was set to zero in each cycle after T cell cultures failed.

**Cytotoxicity Assays**

Tumor cells were incubated with T cells at specified effector to target (E:T) ratios. In the case of adherent targets, residual tumor cell viability was quantified using an MTT assay. After removal of the supernatant and residual T cells, MTT was added at 500 µg/mL in D10 medium for 40 min at 37°C and 5% CO₂. Formazan crystals were resuspended in DMSO and absorbance was measured at 560 nm. Alternatively, tumor cell viability was monitored by luciferase assays. D-luciferin was added at 150 mg/mL immediately prior to luminescence reading. In each case, tumor cell viability was calculated as follows: (absorbance or luminescence of tumor cells cultured with T cells/absorbance or luminescence of untreated monolayer alone) x 100%. In pooled re-stimulation assays, tumor viability was set to 100% in each cycle after T cell cultures failed.

**Tumor Re-stimulation Assays**

Transduced T cells were co-cultured with tumor cell lines in the absence of exogenous cytokine support. In the case of M-CSFR-targeted T cells, 1 x 10⁶ T cells were cultured on a confluent tumor monolayer (24 well plate). In other cases, CAR T cells were added to tumor cells at numbers specified in individual experiments. Once or twice per week, T cells were recovered and re-stimulated on new tumor cells. Supernatant was harvested after 24h for cytokine analysis while tumor cell viability was determined after 24h or 72h by MTT or luciferase assay. If T cells could not be re-stimulated, tumor viability was set to 100% and cytokine production was set to zero.

**NFkB Reporter Assay**

Jurkat cells that express an NFkB reporter were engineered to express the indicated CARs by retroviral transduction. 0.2 x 10⁶ cells were incubated on confluent T47D FMS monolayers in 100 µL D10 medium in a 96-well plate for 5h, after which 100 µL One-Step Luciferase Agent was added. The plate was gently rocked for 20 min at room temperature, protected from light, to allow full cell lysis, after which luminescence was measured.
Mitochondrial Membrane Potential

T cells were incubated for 30 min at 37°C with 100 nM Tetramethylrhodamine, ethyl ester (TMRE) in RPMI, after which they were washed with RPMI twice before being incubated with antibodies for cell surface staining without fixation.

RNA Analysis

M-CSFR-targeting CAR T cells were labeled using the CellTrace™ CFSE Cell Proliferation Kit according to the manufacturer’s protocol using a final concentration of 10 mM CFSE. Labeled cells (1 × 10⁶ cells) were stimulated on a confluent T47D or T47D FMS monolayer (24 well plate). After 24h, live (DAPI-), CFSE⁺ T cells were flow sorted on a BD FACSAria™ II Cell Sorter with BD FACSDiva Software and whole cell lysates were produced by syringe homogenization of 0.5-2.6 × 10⁶ cells in 350 μL Buffer RLT. RNA was isolated using the RNeasy® Mini Kit according to the manufacturer’s protocol. RNA purity was determined using a NanoDrop Spectrophotometer and RNA quantity was determined using a Qubit Fluorometer and Qubit RNA BR Assay Kit. All samples had a total RNA concentration greater than 23ng/μL and were, therefore, included in the analysis. Eighty ng RNA was used for gene expression analysis using the CAR-T Characterization Panel and NanoString nCounter® Sprint Profiler following the manufacturer’s instructions.

In vivo Xenograft Studies

All in vivo experimentation adhered to UK Home Office guidelines, as specified in project license number 70/7794 or P23115EBF and was approved by the King’s College London animal welfare and ethical review body (AWERB). Mice were purchased from Charles River Laboratories and were 6-10 weeks old when used for experiments. Female mice were used for all breast cancer studies, and male mice for all other xenograft studies. Mice were allocated to experimental groups based on similar average tumor burden prior to treatment.

Where indicated, tumor cells were transduced with SFG ffLuc/RFP and were purified by flow sorting prior to engraftment in vivo. Intraperitoneal tumor models were established by inoculation of MDA-MB-468, HER2-engineered MDA-MB-468 or HN3 cells (1 × 10⁶ cells each). K299 tumor cells were injected i.v. at 2 × 10⁶ cells.

Engineered T cells were administered i.p. (MDA-MB-468, HN3) or i.v. (K299) as specified in individual experiments. Bioluminescence imaging was performed using an IVIS Spectrum Imaging platform (PerkinElmer) with Living Image software. To monitor tumor status, mice were injected i.p. with D-luciferin (150 mg/kg) and imaged under isoflurane anesthesia after 20 min. In all experiments, animals were inspected daily and weighed weekly.

Gene Expression Analysis

For RNA expression analysis, raw data (RCC files) were received from NanoString and used directly as input for the open source R package, NanoStringNorm for background correction and between-sample normalization. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed using ClustVis. Unit variance scaling was applied to rows and singular value decomposition with imputation was used to calculate principal components. Prediction ellipses were such that with probability 0.95, a new observation from the same group would fall inside the ellipse. Gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) was performed on canonical pathways curated gene sets from the Broad Molecular Signature Database (https://www.broadinstitute.org/gsea-msigdb/) using the gene_set permutation type.

QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Statistical Analysis

All data are derived from biological replicates involving independent donors unless otherwise indicated. For analysis of multiple groups, statistical analysis was performed using one-way or two-way ANOVA test (depending on the number of independent variables) followed by Tukey’s multiple comparisons test. For non-parametrically distributed data, a Kruskal Wallis test was performed. Survival data were analyzed using a Log rank (Mantel-Cox) test. When only 2 groups were compared, a Student’s t test or Mann-Whitney test was performed, depending on normality of the data. All statistical analyses were performed using GraphPad Prism version 9.1.