Modulation of Adipocyte Differentiation by Tumor Necrosis Factor and Transforming Growth Factor Beta

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Abstract. Cultured TA1 adipocytes treated with tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF) lose intracytoplasmic lipid and, over a period of days, come to resemble their predifferentiated progenitors (preadipocytes). To examine the extent to which this phenotypic reversion represents a return to a less differentiated cell, we examined three major characteristics that distinguish preadipocytes from adipocytes: (a) pattern of gene expression; (b) hormonal requirement for accelerated adipogenesis; and (c) pattern of protein synthesis. We found that within hours of TNF addition to adipocytes, mRNAs for genes whose expression is augmented during adipogenesis decreased to predifferentiated levels; in addition, like preadipocytes, TNF-treated adipocytes required exposure to hormones to accelerate adipogenesis. Further, the pattern of protein synthesis seen on polyacrylamide gels reverted to that seen before differentiation. Transforming growth factor-beta (TGF-β) also caused a rapid decrease in expression of adipose genes when added to fully differentiated cells, an effect that was achieved by treatment with either TGF-β1 or TGF-β2. These effects were seen in the absence of a demonstrable proliferative response to either TNF or TGF-β. Thus characteristics that define the "terminally" differentiated state in adipocytes are subject to modulation by environmental influences.

The acquisition of a specialized phenotype, which characterizes the latter stages of differentiation of cells and tissues, is associated with the coordinate expression of new genes and the concomitant loss of expression of genes specific to the less differentiated cell. Although it is generally believed that this process is unidirectional, the differentiated state of a cell can be altered under experimental situations. "Reprogramming" experiments, which can be accomplished, for example, by fusing cells of different lineages in culture (6), presumably reflect the presence of diffusible factors that regulate the state of differentiation. In recent experiments in nonfusing myogenic cell lines, fibroblast growth factor has been shown to reverse muscle-specific gene expression independent of cell proliferation (14). In the experiments described below we consider the possibility that some differentiative events in adipocytes may be, at least in part, reversible and regulated by two products of activated macrophages: tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF)† and transforming growth factor beta (TGF-β).

TNF, initially described as an agent with necrotic effect on tumors (8), has recently been shown to have a wide variety of effects on normal cells as well. For example, TNF has been shown to affect endothelial cells, modifying the endothelial surface to accelerate the transport of phagocytes across the capillary wall (18, 28). In addition, TNF stimulates endothelial cells to produce granulocyte/macrophage colony stimulating factor (7) and augments cellular expression of HLA-A,B antigens (15). TNF inhibits myogenesis in human muscle cells (26) and augments expression of ferritin heavy chain in both human muscle cells and adipocytes (44). TNF also mediates the fever and vascular instability (shock) which accompany endotoxemia (45), and may play an important role in the cachexia of chronic infections and cancer (3, 30, 43). TGF-β also exhibits potent, but generally quite different, effects on a wide variety of cell types. It inhibits the proliferation of epithelial cell lines while stimulating the proliferation of some mesenchymal cells; some of these effects may be achieved through elevated expression of components of the extracellular matrix (25). In addition, TGF-β has profound effects on the expression of specific phenotypes in cells that differentiate: TGF-β promotes chondrogenesis and epithelial cell differentiation while blocking adipogenesis, myogenesis, and hematopoiesis in vitro (42).

Among the best characterized tissue culture models of differentiation are sublines of fibroblasts that, upon growth arrest and appropriate hormonal manipulation, exhibit the characteristics of adipocytes (10, 11, 19, 23, 33). We have recently observed that cachectin, a monokine produced by endotoxin-stimulated macrophages, specifically inhibits the
expression of several differentiation-specific genes whose expression is characteristic of adipocytes (43). By sequence homology (4) and function (27, 43) TNF and cachectin have proven to be the same molecule. In light of the close morphological similarity observed in our earlier experiments between preadipocytes and cachectin-treated adipocytes, we were led to examine whether recombinant TNF might be capable of modulating the differentiated state in these cells. Further, since TGF-β has recently been shown to be a product of activated macrophages (2) and has been reported to inhibit adipocyte differentiation (20, 41), we examined whether TGF-β might also evoke a pattern of gene expression characteristic of the predifferentiated adipocyte.

**Materials and Methods**

**Cell Culture and Hormonal Treatment**

TAI cells (10), an adipogenic cell line derived from 5-azacytidine treatment of 10T1/2 C18 cells (33), were grown in Eagle's basal medium (Gibco Laboratories, Grand Island, NY), supplemented with 10% FBS (Gemini Bio-products, Inc., Calabasas, CA) heat inactivated for 30 min at 56°C. In certain experiments FBS was replaced with defined supplemented calf serum (HyClone Laboratories, Logan, UT). Cells were maintained at 37°C in a humidified incubator in 5% CO2. Cultures were fed every 3 d. The day at which cells reach confluence is referred to as day 0. Differentiation was accelerated either by the addition of media supplemented with 10% FBS (unfractionated, TGF-β1, and TGF-β2), purified from porcine platelets, were purchased from R & D Systems, Inc. (Minneapolis, MN).

**RNA Isolation**

Total RNA was prepared from adipocyte cultures as described by Chirgwin et al. (13). Cells were washed with PBS and lysed by the addition of a solution of 4 M guanidinium thiocyanate, 25 mM sodium citrate, 0.2% Na-lysolecithin, and 0.2 mM B-mercaptoethanol applied directly to the culture dishes. The cell lysate was layered on 5.7 M cesium chloride and centrifuged at 80,000 g for 19-24 h. The RNA pellet was resuspended in 10 mM Tris pH 7.0, and heated for 15 min at 56°C. Samples were subjected to electrophoresis in a 1.0% agarose formaldehyde gel and transferred to nitrocellulose either directly or after alkali treatment. For dot blots, serial twofold dilutions of 3 µg of total RNA were applied to nitrocellulose in a dot blot apparatus (Bethesda Research Laboratories, Gaithersburg, MD). Before application to nitrocellulose, RNA samples were incubated at 56°C for 15 min.

**RNA Analysis**

For Northern analysis, 10 µg of total RNA was brought to a final concentration of 2.2 M formaldehyde, 30% formamide, 10 mM sodium phosphate, pH 7.0, and heated for 15 min at 56°C. Samples were subjected to electrophoresis in a 10% agarose formaldehyde gel and transferred to nitrocellulose either directly or after alkali treatment. For dot blots, serial twofold dilutions of 3 µg of total RNA were applied to nitrocellulose in a dot blot apparatus (Bethesda Research Laboratories, Gaithersburg, MD). Before application to nitrocellulose, RNA samples were incubated at 56°C for 15 min.

**Transcription Assays**

Assays were performed using the method described by Vannice et al. (46), as modified by Knight et al. (23) and Torti et al. (43) for adipose cells. Cultured cells were chilled to 4°C, media aspirated, and cells washed with PBS. Hypotonic buffer (20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 4 mM MgCl₂, 6 mM CaCl₂, 0.5 mM DTT; 1.5 ml) was added to plates. After 5 min, 1 ml of lysis buffer (0.6 M sucrose, 0.2% [wt/vol] NP-40, 0.5 mM DTT) was added, and cells were scraped from the tissue-culture dishes. After homogenization, nuclei were pelleted at 500 g, washed once in reassembly buffer (0.25 M sucrose, 10 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 10 mM MgCl₂, 1 mM EDTA) centrifuged, then resuspended in 50 mM Hepes, pH 8.0, 90 mM NaCl, 5 mM MgCl₂, 0.5 mM MnCl₂, 2 mM DTT, 0.1 mM EDTA, 0.4 mM each of ATP, CTP, UTP, and GTP, 10% glycerol, and 10 µg/ml BSA. Nuclei were incubated with alpha_2^32P-UTP (5,200 Ci/mmole), [35S]methionine (Bethesda Research Laboratories) was then added per milliliter tissue culture media for 1 h. Total cellular proteins were isolated and subjected to electrophoresis under denaturing conditions in 10% polyacrylamide gels.

**Protein Analysis**

Day 3 TAI adipocytes (differentiated with 1.25 × 10⁻⁴ M indomethacin) were incubated for 4 h in methionine-deficient basal Eagle's medium without serum. 100 µCi [³²S]methionine (Bethesda Research Laboratories) was then added per milliliter tissue culture media for 40 min at 25°C with gentle shacking.

**Hybridization Conditions**

Prehybridizations and hybridizations were performed at 42°C with 50% formamide, 5× SSPE (1× SSPE = 0.18 M NaCl, 10 mM sodium phosphate, pH 7.7, 1 mM EDTA, 2× Denhardt's reagent, (X = 0.02% each of Ficoll, polyvinylpyrrolidone, and BSA), 200 µg/ml denatured Herring sperm DNA. Prehybridizations were performed for 2-25 h, hybridizations for 48 h. cDNA clones were nick translated (34) or labeled by the random primer method (16), and 1-5 × 10⁶ cpm of denatured ³²P-labeled cDNA was added for each milliliter of hybridization mix. Filters were washed in 2× SSPE, 0.1% SDS at room temperature, followed by two 30-min washes at 50°C. When hybridization to more than one cDNA was carried out, filters were washed between hybridizations in boiling 0.1% SDS/0.1% SSPE until no residual radioactivity remained. Autoradiography was carried out at ~70°C using XAR-5 film (Eastman Kodak Co., Rochester, NY) with one intensifying screen. Autoradiographs were analyzed using a scanning densitometer (Schleicher & Schuell, Inc., Keene, NH) attached to a reporting integrator (Hewlett-Packard Co., Palo Alto, CA).

**cDNA Clones**

cDNA clones of genes whose expression was enhanced in TA1 adipocytes, isolated from a library of TAI adipocytes by differential screening (10), were used to assess the effects of TNF and TGF-β on adipocyte gene expression. In addition, a cDNA clone for glyceraldehyde dehydrogenase (GPD) derived from 3T3 L1 cells was provided by Dr. Bruce Spiegelman. β-actin was obtained from Dr. Larry Kedes and pyruvate kinase from Dr. Keith Webster.

**Results**

**Effect of Recombinant TNF in Adipocytes and Preadipocytes**

As seen in Fig. 1, 5 d of exposure to recombinant TNF reverts lipid-laden TAI cells to preadipocyte morphology with concomitant loss of lipid droplets. Preceding this reversal in differentiated morphology of TAI adipocytes with
Figure 2. TNF inhibits type I and type II adipose gene expression in adipocytes. Adipocytes (day 3) were incubated with (+) or without (−) TNF at 10 ng/ml for 24 h. After cell lysis, RNA was isolated. 10 μg RNA from each sample was fractionated by electrophoresis on formaldehyde gels and transferred to nitrocellulose filters. Nick-translated cDNA clones of type I (47, GPD) and type II (20, 27) adipose-inducible genes (see text) were used to probe these filters (43). β-actin mRNA is unchanged under these experimental conditions (data not shown).

Figure 3. TNF inhibits type I and type II adipose gene expression in preadipocytes. TA1 cells were grown in Eagle’s basal medium supplemented with 10% heat inactivated FBS. 10−8 M dexamethasone and 1.25 × 10−4 M indomethacin were present from day 0 to day 3. More than 90% of the control cells developed a typical adipocyte morphology under these conditions. TNF at 10 ng/ml was added to preadipocytes 2 d before they reached confluence and maintained in the medium until harvest. Total RNA was isolated and 10 μg of each sample used to prepare Northern blots. Blots were probed with nick-translated cDNAs corresponding to adipose-inducible clones 1, 28, 27, and GPD. Lanes A contain RNA from control preadipocytes; lanes B from control adipocytes harvested at day 3; and lanes C from TA1 cells treated with TNF from day 2 to day 3.
Figure 4. TNF inhibits clone 28 gene expression at a transcriptional level. 32P-labeled RNA synthesized in isolated nuclei (see Materials and Methods) was hybridized to 3 μg immobilized cDNA of clone 28 (28), β-actin (A), or a pEMBL plasmid control (E). Results are shown for nuclei obtained from cells before differentiation (PC), at day 3 when TNF was added 2 d before differentiation (TNF-PC), in adipocytes (CONTROL), and when TNF was added to already differentiated (day 3) adipocytes for 24 h (24).

Previously shown that crude cachectin preparations added to preadipocytes prevented transcriptional activation of adipose genes (43), but were unable to show with these preparations transcriptional inhibition of activated genes after the addition of TNF to already differentiated adipocytes. Yet any argument for a major alteration of TNF-treated adipocytes towards a less differentiated state requires a demonstration that the adipose genes return to a predifferentiated transcriptional state. To address this question, we measured the in vitro elongation of mRNA initiated in vivo (nuclear “run-on” assay [46]) to determine whether the reduction in mRNA levels seen in Fig. 3 reflects decreased transcription of adipose genes. The results, shown in Fig. 4, demonstrate that the reduction in mRNA levels after addition of TNF to differentiated adipocytes correlates with the transcriptional inactivation of these adipose-inducible genes (data shown is for clone 28, a type I gene).

Effect of TGF-β on Adipocytes and Preadipocytes

We next compared the effects of TNF on adipocyte gene expression and on adipocyte morphology with another agent known to inhibit adipocyte differentiation, TGF-β. TGF-β has been previously reported to inhibit differentiation when added to 3T3-L1 preadipocytes during the early stages of hormonal exposure which triggers differentiation (20). Treatment during the latter stages of this period had no effect on either development of adipocyte morphology or appearance of GPDH activity. In our experiments, we added TGF-β to actively proliferating TA1 preadipocytes and maintained it in the medium continuously until control cells had achieved maximal levels of adipocyte gene expression. In confirmation of previous experiments (20, 41), we found that this treatment prevented the appearance of lipid droplets and expression of adipose genes (not shown). We also added TGF-β to fully differentiated adipocytes and measured its effects on morphology and gene expression. Unexpectedly, we found that TGF-β could exert an effect on TA1 adipocytes as well as preadipocytes, resulting in the slow disappearance of lipid-laden cells from the population over the course of several days. We examined whether this morphological change was accompanied by changes in gene expression by treating adipocytes with TGF-β or TNF and analyzing expression of clone 28 after 4, 24, and 48 h. Fig. 5 demonstrates that TGF-β reduces expression of this gene as rapidly and effectively as TNF, with a decrement in expression evident as early as 4 h after treatment. Expression of the adipose gene clone 1 was also reduced by exposure to TGF-β, although the control gene pyruvate kinase was unaffected (not shown). These effects were achieved in the absence of any proliferative response to TGF-β (not shown).

These experiments were performed with TGF-β purified from porcine platelets, a preparation now known to contain multiple forms of TGF-β, including TGF-β1 and TGF-β2 (12). Although TGF-β1 and TGF-β2 have generally been found to exert similar effects, there are examples of biologi-
crease in clone 28 expression after comparable exposure to differentiated adipocytes causes an equivalent reduction in expression to purified preparations of TGF-β1 and TGF-β2. TGF-β2, we measured the dose response of clone 28 expression. Adipocytes in either serum (data not shown); and (b) differentiation

treatment. However, the replacement of FBS with calf serum largely blocks this effect, yielding only a 2.5-3.0-fold decrease in clone 28 expression after comparable exposure to either TGF-β1 or TGF-β2 (Table I). This occurs although (a) TGF-β blocks differentiation when added to preadipocytes in either serum (data not shown); and (b) differentiation only transient exposure to the hormone or drug is required to accelerate differentiation. We first reversed the differentiated phenotype with TNF and obtained a population of cells, like those in Fig. 1, indistinguishable at a morphologic level from preadipocytes. We then asked whether the kinetics of reinduction of adipocyte-inducible mRNAs followed a pattern of drug-exposed or drug-naive cells. The results with indomethacin (Fig. 7) and dexamethasone (not shown) indicated that TAI cells which were once fully differentiated revert, upon TNF treatment, to a state indistinguishable from the preadipocyte, in that drug or hormonal treatment is again required to accelerate reexpression of adipocyte-inducible genes.

**Protein Synthetic Pattern in TNF-treated Adipocytes**

TNF causes differentiated adipocytes to acquire many of the features of gene expression and hormonal sensitivity that characterize the preadipocyte. To approach the question of whether TNF-treated adipocytes can be distinguished from preadipocytes in another way, we sought to identify and characterize the TNF responsiveness of gene products that are specific to the preadipocyte. We therefore analyzed the newly synthesized proteins of preadipocytes, adipocytes, and adipocytes treated with TNF by labeling with [35S]methionine. As seen in Fig. 8, at least two high molecular mass proteins that are actively synthesized in preadipocytes were not observed in differentiated adipocytes. On treatment with increasing concentrations of TNF, these 180- and 220-kD proteins reappear. Moreover, reexpression of the 180-kD protein occurred within several hours of exposure to TNF (not shown). This experiment also demonstrates a number of other proteins whose synthesis is reduced but not abolished on differentiation; these also return to predifferentiated levels on TNF treatment. The converse phenomenon was also seen: in these gels, proteins can be identified whose expression increased upon differentiation and returned to the predifferentiated level after TNF treatment.

**Hormonal Triggering of Adipose Gene Expression in TNF-treated Adipocytes**

There are at least two ways to interpret the effects of TNF and TGF-β on mature adipocytes. These agents may selectively inhibit the expression of a subset of genes, some of which we have the ability to measure, without affecting the differentiated state per se. Alternatively, they may interfere with the regulatory processes that commit TAI cells to differentiate and thereby cause them to return to the predifferentiated state. We have taken advantage of the capability of glucocorticoid hormones such as dexamethasone (11) and the drug indomethacin (23) to precociously trigger the differentiation of TAI preadipocytes in an effort to address this issue. Using dexamethasone and indomethacin, induction of adipose-inducible mRNAs occurs earlier but, in general, not to a greater extent than in control cultures (11, 23). In addition, it appears that the effect is a triggering phenomenon, since only transient exposure to the hormone or drug is required to accelerate differentiation. We first reversed the differentiated phenotype with TNF and obtained a population of cells, like those in Fig. 1, indistinguishable at a morphologic level from preadipocytes. We then asked whether the kinetics of reinduction of adipocyte-inducible mRNAs followed a pattern of drug-exposed or drug-naive cells. The results with indomethacin (Fig. 7) and dexamethasone (not shown) indicated that TAI cells which were once fully differentiated revert, upon TNF treatment, to a state indistinguishable from the preadipocyte, in that drug or hormonal treatment is again required to accelerate reexpression of adipocyte-inducible genes.
Figure 7. Acceleration of differentiation in TNF-treated adipocytes requires reexposure to indomethacin. Adipocytes were treated with TNF for 48 h at which time >90% of adipocyte-inducible RNA had disappeared. TNF was removed (time 0) and cells refed with or without 1.25 × 10^{-4} M indomethacin. RNA was prepared from cells harvested at intervals from 12 h to 6 d. Northern blots were prepared using 10 μg RNA and probed with nick-translated clone 1. The kinetics of message accumulation for clone 1 in predifferentiated TA1 cells in both the presence and absence of indomethacin is virtually identical to the kinetics (above) for TNF-treated adipocytes (data not shown).

Discussion

From the RNA analyses and within the resolution of one-dimensional protein gels, it appears that the overall pattern of gene expression in TNF-treated adipocytes is strikingly similar to that of the TA1 preadipocyte. Thus, by the criteria which have been traditionally used to define differentiation in these cultures, the preadipocyte and TNF-treated adipocyte cannot be distinguished. Yet are these cells truly dedifferentiated?

It appears that TNF is not simply acting as a lipolytic agent on these cells. For example, among the large number of new proteins that characterize the differentiated adipocyte are certain enzymes which have been used to define the differentiated phenotype. The appearance of these enzymes is independent of lipid accumulation in the adipocyte, since they are expressed in differentiated cells in which lipid accumulation is inhibited. One such enzyme is GPD, which is fully expressed in adipocytes differentiated in biotin-deficient media, conditions that completely prevent intracytoplasmic lipid accumulation (24). Such enzymes can serve as markers to distinguish between catabolic states where lipid accumulation might be suppressed from a predifferentiated precursor, the preadipocyte. As seen in Fig. 2, the mRNA for GPD was completely inhibited by TNF, strongly suggesting that TNF treatment does not simply prevent morphologic evidence of differentiation, but inhibits those early steps in gene transcription that characterize the differentiated state.

However, although changes in gene expression engendered by TNF appear different from those seen in an adipocyte exposed to lipolytic stimuli, it is unlikely that the TNF-treated (or TGF-β-treated) adipocyte is identical in every respect to a preadipocyte. We have recently observed that the expression of ferritin heavy chain is stimulated by TNF to levels exceeding those found in the preadipocyte (44); thus there exists at least one gene that can distinguish control preadipocytes from TNF-treated adipocytes. In addition, adipocytes acquire characteristics specific to the cytokine with which they were treated; for example, TGF-β, like TNF, inhibits differentiation when added to preadipocyte cultures (20) and causes decreases in lipid accumulation and reduction in expression of adipose-inducible genes (Fig. 5), but does not induce expression of ferritin heavy chain (F. Torti, unpublished observations). As more markers of TNF- and TGF-β-treated cells are characterized, further distinctions among the preadipocyte, TNF-, and TGF-β-treated adipocyte will likely become evident.

The ability of TGF-β to reduce expression of adipose genes in differentiated adipocytes has not been previously described. Ignatz and Massague (20) showed that 3T3L1 preadipocytes could be inhibited from differentiating into adipocytes by TGF-β. However, TGF-β added during the last 16 h of hormonal induction failed to prevent differentiation. They therefore proposed that fully committed adipocytes become refractory to TGF-β, although they do not lose TGF-β receptors. In our experiments, TA1 adipocytes exposed to TGF-β for prolonged periods of time (6 d) gradually evidenced a loss of lipid. The reduction in adipose gene expression was even more rapid, occurring in several hours in the presence of either TGF-β₁ or TGF-β₂. The difference between our results and those obtained in 3T3L1 cells (20) may reflect differences in the cell lines used, or be related to the serum dependence of the TGF-β effect.

We found the degree of decrease in gene expression mediated by TGF-β to be affected by serum components. This is perhaps not surprising in view of the highly interactive na-
ture of TGF-β. For example, TGF-β synergizes with EGF in promoting anchorage-independent growth of NRK cells (1), and in the presence of PDGF, can stimulate colony formation in myc-transfected fibroblasts (35). Maximal inhibition of adipose gene expression in adipocytes may therefore require the synergistic assistance of an additional serum factor(s), which may be variably represented in different sera. Alternatively, factor(s) present in some sera may inhibit the action of TGF-β on fully differentiated adipocytes. Possible candidates include a TGF-β binding protein secreted by activated macrophages and capable of preventing binding of TGF-β to its receptor (2); or growth factors, which have been shown to be capable of reversing some effects of TGF-β (e.g., its mitogenic action on osteoblasts, which can be reversed by EGF, PDGF, and TNF (9)). Although the response of preadipocytes to TGF-β appeared less dependent on serum factors than that of adipocytes, this may simply reflect an altered dose responsiveness to serum components in these two cell types. Alternatively, since TGF-β effects can be altered and even reversed depending on the state of differentiation of the target cell (37, 38), it is possible that TGF-β-dependent inhibition of differentiation is mechanistically independent from its ability to inhibit adipose gene expression in adipocytes. Clarification of these issues will require the use of defined growth factors in combination with TGF-β; these experiments are currently in progress. Nevertheless, although the mechanism of action of TGF-β on adipose genes may be more complex or more sensitive to environmental influences than that of TNF, it is clear that TGF-β, like TNF, can affect the expression of adipose genes in fully differentiated adipocytes.

The ability of TNF and TGF-β to alter the state of adipocyte differentiation and gene expression may have physiological relevance. There is, for example, marked involution of adipocytes in mammary tissue during lactation (39), perhaps reflecting a reduced need for storing lipids and an increased requirement for lipid production in milk. The uncontrolled metabolic wasting associated with cachexia of cancer or chronic infections is associated with a progressive loss of adipocytes to produce granulocyte/macrophage colony-stimulating factor and other growth regulators. (2) This process may be mediated by TNF, which has been shown to inhibit adipose gene expression in adipocytes (9). The ability to rapidly and coordinately inhibit the expression of several adipose-inducible genes, TNF appears to revert differentiated TA1 cells to a state characteristic of preadipocytes. TGF-β also is capable of affecting the expression of differentiated functions in adipocytes, although its mechanism of action may be more complex. Elucidation of the mechanisms by which TNF and TGF-β exert their effects may provide insight into the events required for triggering the so-called "terminal," but largely reversible, differentiation of this cell line.

We are grateful to M. Navre for discussions and suggestions which brought to our attention the role of serum in the effects of TGF-β on adipocytes. We thank B. Dieckman for technical assistance. We thank P. Gunning and L. Kedes for the β-actin cDNA clone, B. Spiegelman for the GPD cDNA clone, and L. Lin and A. Creasey (Cetus Corp.) for recombinant tumor necrosis factor. K. Benight and K. Chewey helped to prepare the manuscript.

Supported by grants from The American Institute of Cancer Research and the Veterans Administration. F. M. Torti is the recipient of a Clinical Investigator Award from the Veterans Administration.

Received for publication 12 September 1988 and in revised form 19 November 1988.

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