Intensity of class I antigen expression on human tumour cell lines and its relevance to the efficiency of non-MHC-restricted killing

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Summary  A modified tetrazolium reduction assay (MTT) was used to assess the relation between HLA class I antigen expression on tumour cells and their susceptibility as a target for non-MHC restricted LAK/NK cytotoxicity using interleukin-2 activated peripheral blood mononuclear cells (MNC) from normal individuals. At 20/1 effector/target ratio this ranged from no killing to 77%. The efficiency of killing was dependent on duration of effector cell culture with IL-2, peaking at day 10 and declining thereafter. This killing could be enhanced by addition of other cytokines including interferons alpha, beta and gamma.

Study of a panel of 15 tumour cell lines using a single effector showed that there was no statistically significant inverse correlation (using Spearman rank test) between the degree of tumour class I expression and LAK/NK killing at 20/1 (r = 0.23, P = 0.39) and 10/1 (r = 0.30, P = 0.27) and at 5/1 E/T ratio r = 0.47, P = 0.08) respectively. Lack of inverse correlation between these two parameters came from study of one bladder tumour line (FEN), whose absent class I antigens had been corrected by transfection with β2 microglobulin gene. At high E/T ratio (20/1) there was an increase in the susceptibility of target cells to lysis (36% parent cell, 45% transfected cell), whilst at lower E/T ratios (1/1) there was significantly more killing of the non-transfected cells (10% vs 31%). The addition of anti-class I antibody W6/32 increased killing by 18% but this was non-specific as the same increase occurred with a class II antibody.

These data suggest that overall there was not an inverse correlation between class I expression and LAK/NK killing at high E/T ratios, whilst at low (5/1 or lower) E/T ratios this correlation nearly reached statistical significance suggesting that the conflicting literature reports may be due to a threshold levels of effector cells above which the masking effects of MHC antigens disappears.

There is increasing recognition that abnormalities in Major Histocompatibility Complex (MHC) antigens may be a factor for tumour escape from immunosurveillance (for review see Oliver & Nouri, 1992). Reports suggesting that correction of these defects in tumour cells either by cytokine gene transfection (Gansbacher et al., 1990) or MHC gene transfection (Hui et al., 1984) induced immunity in recipients that enables them to reject parental untransfected tumour cells, offer real hope that genetic engineering could provide a cost effective approach to treatment of cancer.

Critical to the hypothesis of primacy of T cell immunity in resistance to cancer is the occurrence of specific MHC restricted anti-tumour cytolytic T lymphocytes (CTL). Though these can be demonstrated in a minority of melano-mas with apparently normal class I expression but over expression of non-functioning class II (Alexander et al., 1989) and the occasional other tumour under certain conditions (Lee et al., 1978; Belledgeun et al., 1988), most adult solid tumour patients only show lymphokine activated killer (LAK) and natural killer (NK) cytotoxicity (Itoh et al., 1988; Nouri et al., 1991) possibly a reflection of their degree of aberrant class I expression.

NK activity was first described by Kiessling et al. (1975). Because some tumour cells, such as Daudi were consistently resistant to NK cytotoxicity, it was the discovery that IL-2 activated lymphocytes were cytotoxic for Daudi that led to the definition of LAK cells (Grimm et al., 1982). It is now thought that LAK represents an activated form of NK cytotoxicity (Lange et al., 1991) and are involved in protection against experimental animal tumours (Mule et al., 1984) and in leukaemia in man (Archimbaud et al., 1991).

There has been considerable controversy over the influence of class I antigen on LAK/NK killing. Some authors (Karre et al., 1986; Lobo & Spencer 1989; Mazziarz et al., 1990) have demonstrated an inverse correlation, while others (Pena et al., 1989) failed to confirm these observations.

To clarify these conflicting views LAK/NK activity of cells from normal individuals activated with IL-2 against a series of cell lines with varying degrees of class I antigens was investigated together with a study of the effect of correcting HLA class I defect on class I negative tumour line by gene transfection.

Materials and methods

Interferons, monoclonal antibodies, plasmids and cell lines etc

Interferon α, β and γ were obtained from Wellcome, ASTA Pharma (Bioferon) and Biogen respectively. Monoclonal antibodies (Mabs) were W6/32 (Brodsky et al., 1979, detects all β2m-associated HLA-A,B,C antigens) and L243 (HB55, Lampson & Levy 1980, detects class II antigens). The pβ2m-13 plasmid contains β2m gene and was kindly donated by Dr E.J. Baas (Dept Cellular Biochemistry, The Netherlands Cancer Institute) and marker gene pSV2neo by Dr G. Reynolds, Cancer Immunology Laboratory, ICRF, Oxford). Cell lines Fen, Ha and Lan were in-house established lines from tumour biopsies of patients with transitional cell carcinoma, teratoma and seminoma respectively. For cell lines J82, Wil, RT4, Scaber, RT112, Tera I, Tera II, EP2012, 5637, SKV14 and lines see reference (Nouri et al., 1992a), for MCF7 from Human cell culture Bank (Mason Research inst. Rockville, MD, USA), T47D from ECACC (catalogue No. 85102201) and A431 from ATCC (CRL1555). Optimum and Lipofectin for transfection were purchased from Gibco (Cat No. 041-01985H) and BRL (Cat No. 8292 SA) respectively.

Preparation of MNCs and development of IL-2-activated cells or TILs

The MNCs from normal individuals were separated using density gradient technique (Lymphoprep, Nycomed, Pharma), as described previously (Nouri et al., 1991). The interface cells were aspirated washed and stimulated with IL-2 (100 U/ml-1· Biogen) for 72–96 h (unless otherwise stated) at 37°C. These activated cells, which are known to have both LAK and NK activities, were washed and resuspended at the required density to be used as effector cells (E).
Tumour infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs) were isolated from tumour biopsies as described previously (Nouri et al., 1991). Briefly, suspension of single cells prepared from tumours were prepared immediately after operation and after washes the cells were activated with IL-2 (100 u ml⁻¹) and cultured. The TILs from successful cases were fed every 2 to 3 days by adjusting the cell number to $0.5 \times 10^6$ ml⁻¹ in RPMI plus 10% Foetal Calf Serum (FCS, Gibco) and IL-2 (100 u ml⁻¹).

Binding assay

Tumour cells i.e. target (1 $\times 10^6$/well) were treated with interferons (IFN) α (1,000 u ml⁻¹), β (2,000 u ml⁻¹) or IFN γ (100 μg ml⁻¹) for 48 h (conditions which have previously been found to be optimum for maximum class I and II antigen induction, (Nouri et al., 1992b), in flat-bottomed microtitre plates and appropriate concentration of specific monoclonal antibodies containing 0.02% sodium azide (50 μl/well, in three replicates) were added and incubated for 45 mins at room temperature (RT). After three washes, 50 μl of diluted (in RPMI plus 10% FCS and 0.02% azide) iodinated rabbit anti-mouse antibody (50,000 cpm/well, Amershams) was added and incubation continued for a further 45 min. Following three washes, the cells were lysed with 100 μl/well of 2% (v/v) triton × 100 in water and the degree of radioactivity in the supernatants was measured using a gamma counter.

Cytotoxicity using MTT reduction assay

The use of MTT reduction assay for assessment of cytotoxicity has previously been reported (Hussain et al., 1992). This was carried out using the modified MTT (3-[4,5-Dimethyl- thiazol-2-yl]-2,5 diphenyl tetrazolium bromide) assay described by Mosmann (1983). Exponentially growing cells were treated with trypsin (0.05%) + EDTA (0.02%) for 5 min. washed resuspended in RPMI containing 10% FCS and plated at $10^5$/well in flat-bottomed microtitre plates (Nunc). Effector cells i.e. IL-2-activated MNCs were added to give effector/target (E/T) ratios of 5:1, 10:1 or 20:1 and were incubated for 4 h at 37°C. After incubation, plates were washed with fresh medium plus 2% FCS and the remaining cells were loaded with 10 μl/well of 5 mg ml⁻¹ MTT plus 100 μl/well of medium and incubated for 3 h at 37°C. After the incubation medium was removed and 100 μl of acidified (0.04 M HCl) isopropanol was added, and the cells were incubated for 30 min at RT followed by the reading of the plate by an ELISA reader with 570 nm filter.

Transfection

Transfection was carried out using Lipofectin technique as described previously (Bourcraut et al., 1991). Briefly, $0.5 \times 10^6$ of exponentially growing adherent cells (in 25 cm² flask) were washed with sterile phosphate buffered saline (PBS) followed by addition of 5 ml of Optimem. Cells were incubated for 4 h at 37°C. This was followed by the addition of genomic DNA containing 2 μg ml⁻¹ of β2-m gene and 2 μg ml⁻¹ of marker gene i.e. pSV2neo, which were added to 50 μl of PBS and 2.5 ml of Optimem in a bijoue tube. The content of this tube was added very gently to a second bijoue tube containing 150 μl of Lipofectin and 2.5 ml of Optimem. This mixture was then added to the culture flask previously treated with the Optimem.

Cells were incubated overnight at 37°C after replacing the medium with fresh RPMI containing 10% FCS and the incubation continued for a further 10 h. The supernatant was then replaced by fresh medium containing Geneticin (500 μg ml⁻¹ Sigma) the concentration found to be sufficient to kill 100% of untransfected cells during the first weeks of culture). After 2 weeks of culture the surviving cells were cloned and positive clones were selected using W6/32 as a marker in peroxidase staining technique.

Results

Time course

The time course of LAK/NK killing against tumour targets was investigated, a representative of which is shown in Figure 1. At 20:1 and 10:1 E/T ratios after 10 days of culture there was a significant decrease in the level of cytotoxicity with time suggesting the inverse relationship between the degree of LAK/NK killing and duration of effector cell culture.

Investigation of correlation between the levels of class I antigen expression and LAK/NK killing

In order to establish whether the intensity of class I antigen expression on tumour targets affects their susceptibility to LAK/NK killing, parallel binding and killing experiments were carried out on 14 cell lines. As can be seen from Table I, there was a varying degree of class I antigen expression on tumour targets ranging from complete negative (cpm below 100 like Tera I and Fen) to highly positive line SKV14.

![Figure 1](image_url)  
Figure 1 Time course of cytotoxic activity of IL-2-activated LAK/NK of an individual against Fen cell line.
Table I LAK/NK activity of IL-2-activated MNCs on cell lines expressing different intensity of class I antigens

| Lines | Class I | LAK/NK killing E/T ratios |
|-------|---------|---------------------------|
|       | 20/1    | 10/1 | 5/1 |
| J82   | 2,064 ± 407 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| SKV14 | 1,627 ± 288 | 11 | 17 | -2 |
| Wil   | 1,208 ± 67 | 14 | 2 | ND |
| MCF7  | 1,186 ± 77 | 28 | 22 | 16 |
| A431  | 1,121 ± 110 | 15 | -2 | 7 |
| 5637  | 1,118 ± 110 | -1 | 1 | -2 |
| T47D  | 1,105 ± 77 | 59 | 43 | 31 |
| RT112 | 1,026 ± 57 | -9 | 1 | -16 |
| Scaber| 920 ± 109 | 0 | -1 | 20 |
| Lan   | 749 ± 76 | 2 | 7 | 16 |
| Ep2102| 706 ± 54 | 36 | 35 | 33 |
| RT4   | 566 ± 61 | -20 | -17 | 10 |
| Tera II| 207 ± 26 | 34 | 28 | 18 |
| Fen   | 86 ± 12 | 77 | 62 | 52 |
| Tera I| 70 ± 21 | 26 | 20 | 11 |

Results are expressed in mean ± s.d. (c.p.m.) of three replicates for class I antigens and in percent specific for LAK/NK. r and P denote Spearman correlation value and significance level between the class I antigens and the degree of killing. ND denotes not done.

(1,627 ± 288 cpm). The LAK/NK activity varied from target to target and when assessed using the Spearman-Rank correlation coefficient, there was no statistically significant correlation between the class I antigen and efficiency of killing at 20/1 and 10/1 and 5/1 E/T ratios (Table I). However, significant killing of tumour lines expressing lower class I antigens was observed when LAK/NK cells were tested against different targets at lower E/T ratios (Table II). Correlation with class II antigens after IFNγ (100 u ml⁻¹) stimulation of the target cells was less informative (Table III) and even after splitting the cells into higher and lower inducer there was no significant correlation with LAK/NK killing.

Correlation of missing class I antigen and its effects on efficiency of LAK/NK killing

If the intensity of class I antigen expression is an important factor for LAK/NK killing, the introduction of missing class I antigens into a class I negative tumour target ought to decrease their susceptibility to LAK/NK killing. In our previous study we have demonstrated that bladder cell line Fen lacks β2 microglobulin (Nouri et al., 1992b). After transfection with the missing β2m gene and selection with Geneticin, positive and negative cell clones were expanded and tested for susceptibility to LAK/NK killing. As can be seen from Table IV the level of binding for class I antigens before and after transfection were 132 ± 20 and 2,000 ± 48 cpm respectively. At higher E/T ratios (20/1) the restoration of class I antigens did not have a significant protective effects on LAK/NK killing (36% vs 45% respectively). However, at low E/T ratio 1/1 the restoration of class I expression was associated with less killing.

Effects of cytokines on target cells

Cytokines like interferons are known to upregulate MHC antigens. Experiment was set up to investigate the changes in the susceptibility of class I negative tumour target Fen after 48 h of IFNγ stimulation. As can be seen from Figure 2, there was a significant increase in the susceptibility of the cells in response to IFNs. The percent increase in the killing for E/T ratios of 20/1 and 10/1 for IFNα, β and γ treated cells were 30, 47, 44 and 6, 20 and 18 respectively indicating that all three IFNs increase susceptibility of target cells to killing. In addition, it was also found that the effector cell treatment with these IFNs increased their killing potential (Figure 3). This resulted in an increase of up to 20% over and above that with IL-2 alone and this may be a factor for their therapeutic efficacy of these cytokines.

In a separate experiment, in which the target cells were pretreated with IFNγ 48 h prior to testing, mononuclear antibodies against class I (W6/32) and class II (HB55) were added to investigate their influence of the LAK/NK killing.

Table II Percent cytotoxic killing of LAK/NK of different individuals against a number of tumour targets

| Target | Effector | E/T ratios |
|--------|----------|------------|
|        | 20/1     | 10/1 | 5/1 |
| Fen    | 1        | 34 | 10 | 0 |
| (a)    | 2        | 56 | 46 | 40 |
| (b)    | 3        | 79 | 81 | 68 |
| (c)    | 4        | 16 | 12 | 14 |
| Tera I | 6        | 64 | 48 | 38 |
| (a)    | 1        | 30 | 34 | 23 |
| (b)    | 2        | 83 | 71 | 60 |
| (c)    | 3        | 60 | 52 | 45 |
| J82    | 4        | 10 | 8  | 6  |
| (a)    | 5        | 60 | 20 | 10 |
| (b)    | 3        | 30 | 15 | 13 |
| (c)    | 4        | 30 | 12 | 10 |
| RT112  | 1        | 32 | 8  | nd |
| (a)    | 2        | 3  | 2  | 6  |
| (b)    | 3        | 12 | 7  | 16 |
| (c)    | 4        | 4  | 2  | 4  |

Results are expressed in mean ± s.d. nd denoted not done, a = class negative lines (c.p.m. <100), b = intermediate class I expressor (207 c.p.m.) and c = high class I expressor (206 and 1,026 c.p.m.).

Table III Correlation between efficiency of LAK/NK killing and inducibility of MHC antigen induction in response to IFNy

| Lines | IFNy Class II | LAK/NK killing E/T ratios |
|-------|---------------|---------------------------|
|       | 20/1 | 5/1 |
| T47D  | 1,575 ± 174 | 59 | 31 |
| SKV14 | 1,484 ± 183 | 11 | -2 |
| Fen   | 1,337 ± 34  | 77 | 52 |
| Wil   | 1,227 ± 118 | 14 | 1  |
| J82   | 1,020 ± 112 | 2  | 1  |
| MCF7  | 960 ± 114   | 28 | 16 |
| Tera I| 677 ± 90    | 26 | 11 |
| Scaber| 619 ± 24    | 1  | -20|
| RT112 | 261 ± 28    | -9 | -16|
| RT4   | 212 ± 92    | -20| 10 |
| Ep2102| 130 ± 32    | 36 | 33 |
| Tera II| 93 ± 26 | 34 | 18 |
| Lan   | 89 ± 22     | 6  | 6  |

Results are expressed as mean ± s.d. (c.p.m.) of three replicates. ND, r and P denote, not done, Spearman correlation values and level of significance respectively.

Table IV LAK/NK killing on Fen cell line before and after gene transfection

| E/T ratios | Non-transfected | Transfected |
|------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 20/1       | 36              | 45          |
| 10/1       | 45              | 51          |
| 5/1        | 41              | 52          |
| 2.5/1      | 26              | 48          |
| 1/1        | 31              | 10          |

Results of class I antigen binding and LAK/NK killing activity are expressed in mean ± s.d. of three replicates (in c.p.m.) and percent killing respectively.
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Figure 2 Increased susceptibility of Fen cell line by Interferon
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Discussion
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Table V Effect of monoclonal antibody addition on the efficiency of
LAK/NK
killing

| E/T ratios | NT | γ | γ + HB55 | γ + W6/32 |
|-----------|----|---|----------|-----------|
| A         | 10/1 | 54 | 62 | 63 | 72 |
|           | 5/1  | 47 | 50 | 56 | 63 |
| B         | 20/1 | 23 | 25 | 19 | 33 |
|           | 10/1 | 15 | 12 | 8  | 9  |

Results are expressed in % specific killing. Effector cells from two
individuals (A and B) were mixed with target cells pre-treated with
IFN γ for 48 h. Antibodies W6/32 (anti-class I) and HB55 (anti-class
II) were added in 100 µl at the beginning of 4 h killing period.

Figure 3 Enhancement of cytotoxic activity of IL-2-activated
cells
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Our findings support the views of Pena et al. (1989) who demonstrated that the efficiency of LAK/NK killing was independent of MHC class I antigen expression, and those by Aosi et al. (1991) who demonstrated that restoration of MHC class I antigens by addition of exogenous immunogenic peptides did not affect the efficiency of NK killing on target cells expressing both heavy and light chains of class I antigens in the absence of W6/32 antibody.

A possible explanation for these conflicting results, which might also explain why our data at low E/T ratio did show an inverse correlation between HLA class I level and LAK/NK cytotoxicity (Table I) was reported by Storkus et al. (1991). They demonstrated that transfection of some polymorphic class I genes such as HLA-A3, HLA-B7 and HLA-B27 into a class I negative tumour cell line had a protective effect on NK lysis but whilst other such as HLA-A2 did not, suggesting that conformational structure of different polymorphic class I antigens may influence the efficiency of its blocking effect on NK killing.

Our working hypothesis in explaining the contradictory reports is that the over-riding factor for controlling the non-MHC restricted LAK/NK killing is a receptor/target interaction independent of the mechanism regulating class I expression. However under circumstances when receptor expression is low, certain class I molecules as demonstrated by Storkus et al. (1991) would have conformational masking effect, hence becoming the limiting factor for the killing. On the other hand when receptors are in excess LAK/NK lysis occurs whatever the level of class I expression.

As yet the clinical relevance of these cells is unclear and their role in resistance to cancer is still controversial. While there was some suggestion that they were clinically significant from the studies of Rosenberg et al. (1989) whose clinical trial in melanoma demonstrated that IL-2 plus LAK/NK was more effective than IL-2 alone in terms of durable complete remission, his results in renal cell cancer were not significant and overview of pooled results in renal cell cancer failed to demonstrate any advantage of combination therapy over the results from IL-2 alone (Oliver & Nouri, 1992).

To better clarify our uncertainty about the role of LAK/NK in vivo, more work including specific blocking and augmentation experiments in vitro and in vivo are needed to identify the target recognition molecules and receptor mechanism involved.

This work was supported in part by The Imperial Cancer Research Fund and the Oncology Unit of The Royal London Hospital. We are grateful to clinical colleagues in The Urology Department, particularly Mr B. Jenkins and Mr A. Paris for providing clinical materials.

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