



Molecular Determinants of Target Cell Recognition by Human $\gamma\delta$ T Cells

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The unique capabilities of gamma-delta ($\gamma\delta$) T cells to recognize cells under stressed conditions, particularly infected or transformed cells, and killing them or regulating the immune response against them, paved the way to the development of promising therapeutic strategies for cancer and infectious diseases. From a mechanistic standpoint, numerous studies have unveiled a remarkable flexibility of $\gamma\delta$ T cells in employing their T cell receptor and/or NK cell receptors for target cell recognition, even if the relevant ligands often remain uncertain. Here, we review the accumulated knowledge on the diverse mechanisms of target cell recognition by $\gamma\delta$ T cells, focusing on human $\gamma\delta$ T cells, to provide an integrated perspective of their therapeutic potential in cancer and infectious diseases.

Keywords: gamma-delta T cell, T cell receptor, NK cell receptor, NKG2D, tumor immunology

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INTRODUCTION

More than three decades after the discovery of gamma-delta ($\gamma\delta$) T cells (1), the research community is still missing a compelling picture about their mechanisms of activation and target cell recognition. Despite the relatively small abundance of $\gamma\delta$ T cells in the human blood, it is clear that this lymphocyte population plays an important role at the interface between the innate and the adaptive immune systems. These cells share T cell receptor (TCR) rearrangements and memory functions (2) with their $\alpha\beta$ T cell counterparts, but differ in their response kinetics and mechanisms of target cell recognition. Thus, $\gamma\delta$ T cell activation is typically independent of antigen presentation by major histocompatibility complex (MHC) molecules. Furthermore, $\gamma\delta$ T cells bear a plethora of NK cell receptors (NKR) on their surface, which allow for very fast responses against infected or transformed cells (3), thus contributing to a first line of defense that precedes antigen-specific $\alpha\beta$ T-cell responses (4).

Unlike $\alpha\beta$ T cells, there is little evidence of thymic negative selection of self-reactive $\gamma\delta$ T cells. $V\gamma9V\delta2$ T cells, which constitute the major (60–95%) $\gamma\delta$ T cell subtype in humans, seemingly expand in the periphery in response to microbial or stress-induced phosphorylated antigens (2) while displaying preferential $V\gamma9$ -JP TCR rearrangements (5). Other human $\gamma\delta$ T cell subsets, namely $V\delta1^+$ and $V\delta3^+$ T cells that are highly reactive to cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection (6), display TCR repertoires biased toward sequences recognizing CMV-infected cells (7). But while $V\gamma9V\delta2$ TCR recognition has been well characterized and discussed (5, 8), it remains less clear how other $\gamma\delta$ T cell subsets are activated to participate in lymphoid stress surveillance (9).

The purpose of this review is to discuss the current knowledge on target cell recognition by human $\gamma\delta$ T cells (Table 1), emphasizing the role of the TCR as well as NKRs and their ligands, in the context of cancer and infectious diseases.

TUMOR CELL RECOGNITION

Early research on the molecular mechanisms of $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition in the 1990s led to the realization of its unusual independence of peptide processing and MHC-restricted presentation, in marked contrast with $\alpha\beta$ T lymphocytes (42–44). One of the first lines of evidence came from non-peptidic

TABLE 1 | Tumor- or infected cell-associated ligands recognized by gamma-delta ($\gamma\delta$) T cells.

| Ligand | Receptor | $\gamma\delta$ subset | Infection/cancer | Reference |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| CD1 proteins + endogenous or exogenous lipids | T cell receptor (TCR) | Duodenal | Infection | (10, 11) |
| BTN3A1 + phosphoantigens | TCR | V γ 9V δ 2 | Infection | (5) |
| Endothelial protein C receptor | TCR | V γ 4V δ 5 | Both | (12) |
| Annexin A2 | TCR | V γ 8V δ 3 | Both | (13) |
| Heat shock protein 60 | TCR | | Both | (14–17) |
| F1-ATPase | TCR | | Cancer | (18) |
| SEA and SEE | TCR | | Infection | (19) |
| OXYS | TCR | | Infection | (20) |
| DXS2 | TCR | | Infection | (21) |
| Glycoprotein I | TCR | | Infection | (21) |
| MSH2 | TCR | | Both | (14, 22) |
| | NKG2D | | | (22) |
| HLA-E | NKG2C | | Infection | (23) |
| HA | Sialic acid receptor | | Infection | (24) |
| CD48 | 2B4 | | Cancer | (25–27) |
| MICA/MICB | TCR | V δ 1 | Both | (28–30) |
| | NKG2D | | | (29–32) |
| MICA | NKG2D | V γ 9V δ 2 | Cancer | (33) |
| UL16 binding protein (ULBP1) | NKG2D | V γ 9V δ 2 | Cancer | (34) |
| ULBP2 | NKG2D | V δ 1 | Cancer | (35, 36) |
| ULBP3 | NKG2D | V δ 1 | Cancer | (35–37) |
| ULBP4 | TCR and NKG2D | V δ 2 | Cancer | (38) |
| ? | NKp30 | V δ 1 | Both | (39, 40) |
| PVR/Nectin-2 | DNAX accessory molecule 1 | V γ 9V δ 2 | Cancer | (41) |

"?" means undescribed/unknown in the referenced studies.

prenyl pyrophosphates ["phosphoantigens" (PAg)] recognized by V γ 9V δ 2 TCRs (45, 46). Initially, bacteria and parasites were shown to produce strong PAg agonists for V γ 9V δ 2 TCRs (47), but later it became clear that these could also be activated by weaker agonists, such as isopentenyl pyrophosphate (IPP) and dimethylallyl pyrophosphate, that are natural intermediates of the mevalonate pathway of isoprenoid and steroid synthesis in eukaryotic cells (48). Importantly, the dysregulation of the mevalonate pathway in some tumor cells allows for the accumulation of these (weaker) PAg, thus promoting V γ 9V δ 2 TCR-mediated recognition (49). Furthermore, treatment with zoledronate or pamidronate (which are approved drugs) was shown to be very effective at inducing the accumulation of intracellular PAg like IPP, and thus potentiate TCR-dependent V γ 9V δ 2 T cell cytotoxicity against tumor cell targets, including cancer stem cells (50).

A key recent breakthrough was the discovery of butyrophilin-related proteins, especially BTN3A1, as major molecular determinants of V γ 9V δ 2TCR-mediated recognition of PAg, even if the underlying mechanism has gathered some controversy. A model supporting extracellular PAg presentation to the V γ 9V δ 2 T cell (in a MHC-like manner) was first proposed, with biophysical and structural data in support (51). However, following reports demonstrated that PAg interact directly with the intracellular B30.2 domain of BTN3A1 through a positively charged surface pocket; and that charge reversal of pocket residues abrogates PAg binding and V γ 9V δ 2 T cell activation, with no detectable association with the extracellular domain of BTN3A1 (13, 52, 53). More recently, it has been shown that changes in the juxtamembrane domain of BTN3A1, which is located close to the start of the B30.2 domain, induced marked alterations in V γ 9V δ 2 T cell reactivity, thus highlighting the importance of the intracellular domain for the correct V γ 9V δ 2 T cell function and activation (54). Because of its

location between the intracellular and the extracellular domains, the B30.2 domain seems critical in translating the pAg-induced conformational change of BTN3A1 from the inside to the outside of the target cells (55, 56).

Besides sensing PAg, $\gamma\delta$ T cells seemingly recognize transformed cells through proteins that are expressed at the cell surface in a stress-induced manner. Some examples are typically endogenous proteins, such heat shock protein 60 (14–17) or FI-ATPase (18), that can be ectopically expressed on the cell membrane upon transformation and recognized by V γ 9V δ 2 TCRs to promote tumor cell lysis. More recently, endothelial protein C receptor (EPCR), which acts on the coagulation cascade, was shown to be exposed on the cell surface during transformation and recognized by a non-V δ 2 (V γ 4V δ 5) TCR (12). Similarly, Annexin A2, expressed on tumor cells in response to increasing quantities of reactive oxygen species, engaged directly with a V γ 8V δ 3 TCR (13). The identification of these rather different ligands highlights the complexity of tumor cell recognition *via* $\gamma\delta$ TCRs. This notwithstanding, it is clear that $\gamma\delta$ T cells also rely on "NK-like" mechanisms for tumor cell recognition, using receptors such as 2B4 and NKG2D, originally thought to be specific to NK cells.

The first indication of an NK-like recognition mechanism was unveiled upon the ability of stimulated murine $\gamma\delta$ T cells to recognize CD48 (25, 26), a well-known 2B4 ligand, suggested to work as an accessory molecule that strengthens effector–target interactions (27). Surprisingly, only the 2B4⁺ $\gamma\delta$ T cells were able to develop non-MHC-restricted cytotoxicity against lymphoma cells (57, 58). Although 2B4 is also expressed on activated human $\gamma\delta$ T cells, its relevance is still unclear as 2B4 engagement failed to promote proliferation or cytokine production (59).

Much more consensual is the role of NKG2D, which is widely expressed not only in NK cells but also in most $\gamma\delta$ and some $\alpha\beta$

T cells (31, 60, 61). In human $\gamma\delta$ T cells, both $V\delta 1^+$ and $V\delta 2^+$ subsets, NKG2D was shown to be responsible for recognition of tumor cells expressing MHC class I chain-related (MIC) A/B (28, 29, 31–33, 62) or UL16 binding protein (ULBP) 1/2/3/4 (34–38, 50, 63) ligands. In fact, human carcinoma samples from lung, breast, kidney, ovary, and prostate cancers expressing MICA or MICB presented higher levels of infiltrating $V\delta 1^+$ T cells, which in turn were able to target and kill autologous and heterologous tumor cells (25, 59). Our group's work revealed that ULBP1 was particularly important for leukemia and lymphoma cell recognition by PAg-activated $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cells (34). Notwithstanding, one should note the relevance of a synergistic TCR engagement for an efficient cytotoxic response (37, 38). In fact, some works suggested that MIC or ULBP recognition by $\gamma\delta$ T cells is not only restricted to NKG2D but also involves the $\gamma\delta$ TCR (26, 31). A similar recognition pattern was also observed against human MutS homolog 2 (hMSH2) ectopically expressed in epithelial tumor cell lines. Both TCR $\gamma\delta$ and NKG2D were able to interact with hMSH2 and contribute to $V\delta 2^+$ $\gamma\delta$ T cell-mediated cytotoxicity and interferon γ (IFN- γ) production (14, 22).

Besides 2B4 and NKG2D, DNAX accessory molecule 1 (DNAM-1) was also shown to be widely expressed in $V\delta 1^+$, $V\delta 2^+$, and $V\delta 1^-V\delta 2^-$ $\gamma\delta$ T cell subsets (64); and masking DNAM-1 on $\gamma\delta$ T cells significantly inhibited tumor cell killing (64, 65). DNAM-1-dependent $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition was reported for hepatocellular carcinoma (41), acute (65) and chronic (64) myeloid leukemia, and multiple myeloma (66) cell lines. More specifically, $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cells were shown to use DNAM-1 to interact with Nectin-2 and PVR that are widely expressed in the tumor cell targets (41, 65). Curiously, PVR engagement potentiated $\gamma\delta$ T cell cytotoxicity, whereas Nectin-2 blocking did not affect it (41). Tumor targets that expressed both DNAM-1 and NKG2D ligands were able to engage both receptors on $\gamma\delta$ T cells, having a synergistic effect on their cytolytic activity (41, 64, 66). Moreover, therapeutic strategies that enhanced the expression of NKG2D or DNAM-1 ligands, such as MICA/B and ULBP1/2, or Nectin-2 and PVR, respectively, potentiated $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition of colon cancer, glioblastoma, multiple myeloma, and lymphoma cells (67–70).

From a therapeutic perspective, $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition of tumor cells may also rely on the induced expression of natural cytotoxicity receptors (NCRs) that recognize a distinct set of tumor-associated ligands, such as B7-H6 or BAT3 (71). Thus, our group has shown that NKp30 and NKp44 can be reproducibly induced *in vitro* in $V\delta 1^+$ (but not $V\delta 2^+$) $\gamma\delta$ T cells (39). A very mild expression of NKp44 on expanded $\gamma\delta$ T cells had been reported before (72); and shown to contribute $\gamma\delta$ T cell cytotoxicity against myeloma cells (61). In our studies, we observed not only a robust expression of NKp44 but also NKp30, in $V\delta 1^+$ T cells activated with TCR agonists and IL-15 (or IL-2); and both receptors enhanced $\gamma\delta$ T cytotoxicity against tumor target cells (39, 73). Among the various known ligands for NCRs, it is still unclear which are most relevant for NCR $^+$ $V\delta 1^+$ T cell recognition of tumor cells. While the NKp30 ligand, B7-H6, is an obvious candidate (74), a very recent report identified an unanticipated ligand for NKp44 in the form of platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF)-DD (75), known for its capacity to promote of tumor cell proliferation, epithelial-mesenchymal transition, and angiogenesis. PDGF-DD ligation

to NKp44 enhanced IFN- γ and TNF- α secretion (by NK cells), which in turn induced tumor cell growth arrest (75). Additional investigation will be needed to elucidate the relative importance of NCR, NKG2D, DNAM-1, or TCR ligands in tumor cell recognition by $\gamma\delta$ T cells, aiming to maximize their potential in cancer immunotherapy.

INFECTED CELL RECOGNITION

Multiple lines of evidence since the late 1980s have shown that $\gamma\delta$ T cells display strong activities against bacteria, including *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (76–81); parasites, such as *Plasmodium falciparum* (82–86); and viruses (87, 88), most notably CMV (89–91).

$V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cells can be specifically and potently activated by PAgS like (E)-4-hydroxy-3-methyl-but-2-enyl pyrophosphate, an intermediate of the 2-C-methyl-D-erythritol 4-phosphate pathway employed by eubacteria and apicomplexan protozoa but not by eukaryotes (48, 92, 93). This likely underlies the striking expansions of $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cells in individuals infected with *M. tuberculosis* (76–81) or *P. falciparum* (83). Besides PAgS, several other molecules of microbial origin have been proposed as $\gamma\delta$ T cell antigens accounting for the specific recognition of infected cells. These candidates include the bacterial superantigens SEA (and to a lesser extent SEE) (19); OXYS and DXS2, two mycobacterial proteins found to activate $\gamma\delta$ T cells from BCG-infected human subjects but not from healthy donors (20, 21); and HSV-1 glycoprotein I, specifically recognized by a $V\gamma 1.2V\delta 8$ TCR independently from antigen processing and MHC presentation (20, 21).

Subsequent reports demonstrated that $\gamma\delta$ T cells also recognize stress antigens of cellular origin, either in antibody-like or antigen-presentation-like fashion. $\gamma\delta$ T cells can indeed directly recognize stress proteins like hMSH2, a nuclear protein ectopically expressed on the cell surface of different epithelial tumor cells and induced by EBV transformation (22); and Annexin A2 whose expression was induced by CMV infection and recognized specifically by a $V\gamma 8V\delta 3$ T cell clone (13). On the other hand, $\gamma\delta$ T cells can recognize nonpolymorphic MHC-like (class Ib) proteins presenting lipids, such as CD1 proteins, in a similar way to other unconventional T cells like NKT or MAIT cells (11, 94–96). In particular, a subpopulation of $V\delta 1^+$ T cells has been clearly shown to bind CD1d loaded with the self-lipid sulfatide (97) but any concrete link to the recognition of infected (or transformed) cells remains to be established. Of note, another CD1-like protein, EPCR, was shown to bind directly (independently of lipid cargo) the TCR of a $V\gamma 4V\delta 5$ T cell clone (expanded from a CMV $^+$ individual), thus allowing it to recognize endothelial cells infected with CMV (12).

In addition to the TCR, $\gamma\delta$ T cells can also use NKG2D to recognize cells infected with various viruses and intracellular bacteria (32, 98–102). More specifically, the stress-inducible molecule, MICA, was induced on the surface of dendritic and epithelial cells by *M. tuberculosis* infection *in vitro* and *in vivo*; and its binding to NKG2D, substantially enhanced the TCR-dependent $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cell response to PAgS (28). Furthermore, in the case of *Brucella*, ULBP1 was the main NKG2D ligand upregulated on infected macrophages, and its engagement promoted $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cell cytotoxicity and cytokine production, which contributed to the inhibition of bacterium development (100).

A few other receptors have implicated in $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition of infected cells. Thus, another NKR, NKG2C, constitutively expressed on $V\delta 1^+$ T cells, induced a cytolytic response against HIV-infected $CD4^+$ T cells expressing its ligand, HLA-E (23). On the other hand, we found that NKp30 can also play an important role in HIV-1 infection upon its induced expression in $V\delta 1^+$ T cells; NKp30 ligation triggered the production of CCL3, CCL4, and CCL5 chemokines that suppressed the replication of a CCR5 tropic strain of HIV-1 (40). Finally, in the case of avian influenza (H5N1), $\gamma\delta$ T cells were reported to use sialic acid receptors for the recognition of viral hemagglutinin (24). To understand how different microorganisms may elicit distinct pathways of $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition of pathogen-associated or stress-induced antigens remains a challenge for future research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In contrast with the well-established paradigm of MHC-restricted recognition of peptides by conventional $\alpha\beta$ T cells, or even MHC class Ib-dependent recognition of lipids by unconventional $\alpha\beta$ T cells, the molecular mechanisms of target cell recognition by $\gamma\delta$ T cells remain poorly understood. A notable exception is the BTN3A1-mediated sensing of PAgS by $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cells, which underlies their responses to tumors and infections like TB or malaria. For most other $\gamma\delta$ T cell subsets, however, TCR specificities are either unknown, not generalizable or of unclear physiological relevance. Therefore, the identification of relevant, non- $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ TCR ligands remains a major challenge in the $\gamma\delta$ T cell field.

On the other hand, while NKRs are also clearly involved in $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition of tumor or infected cells, we still lack appropriate understanding how the multiple signals derived from all the expressed NKRs are integrated, also with those coming from the TCR itself. This likely depends on the relative expression levels of the various putative NKR and TCR ligands in each target cell, which adds significant complexity to the process of $\gamma\delta$ T cell recognition.

The broad spectrum of MHC-unrestricted recognition of infected or transformed cells by $\gamma\delta$ T makes them attractive candidates for adoptive cell therapy (ACT). All clinical trials

have thus far concentrated on $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cells, probably due to their relative abundance in the peripheral blood and especially the availability of FDA-approved drugs, such as zoledronate and pamidronate, that allow their activation and expansion *in vivo* (103). $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ ACT has shown promising pre-clinical results against TB (104) and has already been tested in various cancer clinical trials [reviewed in Ref. (105)] that documented its safety and some (albeit still sub-optimal) efficacy (106–108). This could be maybe explained by $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cell susceptibility to exhaustion and activation-induced cell death (AICD). Nonetheless, improvements in $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ ACT protocols may still increase their efficacy, as indicated by some studies with exogenous provision of IL-2, importantly without the need for lymphodepleting preconditioning (109, 110). As for $V\delta 1^+$ $\gamma\delta$ T cells, they are less susceptible to AICD and exhaustion when compared to $V\gamma 9V\delta 2$ T cells (111). However, no clinical trial has yet focused on this $\gamma\delta$ T cell subset, mostly due to the lack of clinical-grade protocols allowing their successful expansion. Importantly, we have recently developed a clinical-grade process to effectively expand $V\delta 1^+$ T cells while also inducing NCR (and augmenting NKG2D) expression; and established the proof-of-concept in leukemia xenograft models (73). We further anticipate NCR⁺ $V\delta 1^+$ ACT to be a promising therapeutic strategy also for solid tumors and chronic viral infections.

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AS, BL, and BS-S conceived and wrote the manuscript. AS and BL contributed equally to the manuscript.

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