



Review

Immunological hurdles of ageing: Indispensable research of the human model

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 January 2011

Accepted 20 January 2011

Available online 21 February 2011

Keywords:

Immunity

Older adults

Infection

Inflammation

Signaling

Vaccination

ABSTRACT

Census reports of many countries indicate continuing trends for the graying of their populations. For the United States alone, persons aged ≥ 65 years are projected to comprise over 20% of the population by the year 2050. In view of the special medical needs of elders, scientific investigation into the biological aspects of ageing is key towards the improvement of geriatric care for the coming decades. This special issue of *Ageing Research Reviews* focuses on advances in research on the immunology of human ageing. Herein are nine articles about the age-related alterations in both the innate and adaptive arms of the immune system, and about continuing hurdles in vaccinology. These articles point to a common theme that the immunological milieu in old age is substantially different from that seen in the young. This suggests that new development and/or innovation of immune-based clinical interventions for the elderly may need to be customized for their age group, rather than the mere adoption of therapies that have been designed for and/or tested for younger persons.

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1. Introduction: pandemic ageing of human populations

Since the latter half of the 20th century, many countries are witnessing the increased graying of their populations (UN-ESA, 2007). Japan currently has the largest proportion of older adults aged ≥ 65 years at $\sim 23\%$ that is projected to rise to $\sim 40\%$ by the year 2050 (Japan Statistics Bureau, 2010). For the United States, the current 12% of the population consisting of older adults is projected to also rise to 20% by the year 2050 (NCHS, 2010). Similarly, older adults comprise 21% of the current population of the European Union, with Sweden and Italy having largest numbers of old people (Grant et al., 2004). The elderly European population is projected to increase by 2050 at par with that of Japan due to phenomenal steady decline in birth rates for Japan and for the European Union member states (Grant et al., 2004; Japan Statistics Bureau, 2010). Demographic shifts towards the increasing numbers of elderly persons are not exclusive to industrialized countries, but it is a global phenomenon (CIA, 2010). Older adults are projected to comprise up to 25% and 15% of the aggregate population of developed and least developed countries, respectively, by 2050 (UN-ESA, 2005). Considering the myriad of age-related physiologic alterations, many of which are

associated with age-related clinical syndromes (Stanziano et al., 2010), and the projected steady rise in the cost of geriatric medical care irrespective of country (Rice and Fineman, 2004; Payne et al., 2007; van Elk et al., 2010), ageing of the world population is a pandemic that present biomedical, socio-economic, and geo-political challenges.

2. Immunity and ageing: indispensability of human-based research

Immunity is a determinant of individual fitness, and the development of a diverse armamentarium of immune defenses is a *modus operandi* of speciation over millennia of evolution (McDade, 2003; McKean et al., 2008; Rosenstiel et al., 2009; Flajnik and Kasahara, 2010). In higher chordates, immune defenses, like other physiological systems, undergo dramatic changes over the lifetime of the individual. Human neonates have very distinct immune physiology from that of adults (Zaghouani et al., 2009), providing rationale for the traditional customization of immune interventions for infants and adolescents (de Brito et al., 2009). It is now clear that the immune system undergoes even more dramatic changes beyond adolescence and sexual maturity. With the increasing numbers of elderly humans, research on the immunology of ageing is paramount more than ever to facilitate efforts for the improvement of the quality of life of elders for the coming decades.

Animal models, principally the various genetic strains of the laboratory mouse, have been advancing knowledge on the

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immunology of ageing as in many areas of scientific investigation. Mouse models will undoubtedly remain to be useful tools in answering basic questions pertaining to the regulation, or dysregulation as might be the case, of immune processes with age.

However, it is important to emphasize that there are fundamental differences in the basic immunology of mice and humans (Mestas and Hughes, 2004). Such differences range from subtle regulatory controls to the stark species-specific contrast. An example of a subtle difference is the case for regulatory T cells for which mice have constitutive FOXP3⁺ and FOXP3-inducible subsets, but the human counterpart consists only of FOXP3-inducible cells (Ziegler, 2006). Examples of clear species-specific differences are the unique human (primate) genes encoding for killer cell immunoglobulin-like receptors (Parham et al., 2010); the unique subset of human marginal zone B cells (Weill et al., 2009); the lack of expression of CD56 on mouse natural killer cells (Hayakawa et al., 2006); and the activating versus inhibitory activity of B7-H3 in mouse and human T cells, respectively (Yi and Chen, 2009). And perhaps the best example of species-specific immunologic differences in the context on chronologic ageing is the case for CD28 that is expressed on T cells throughout the life of mice, but is progressively and irreversibly lost with ageing in humans (Vallejo, 2005). Such specific-differences underscore caution in the interpretation of observations from murine studies as to its applicability to human biology (Rosol et al., 2003; Downey and Cohen, 2009; Shedlock et al., 2009; Bodewes et al., 2010; Boudet, 2010).

The experimental setting is also significantly different between murine and human studies. Murine studies are generally conducted within the confines of a sanitized environment, and oftentimes involve the use of highly contrived genetic strains such as transgenics or knockouts. In contrast, the host and the environment in human studies are largely unmodified allowing assessment of “experiments of nature” that truly affect individual health and survival (Casanova and Abel, 2004). Ageing in the human immune system is such an experiment of nature. The nine articles in this special issue of *Ageing Research Reviews* discuss the results of observational immunology that may provide insights into stronger rationale for future translation efforts into the improvement of immune protection of the elderly.

3. Alterations of innate immune function with ageing

Two articles discuss the impact of age on the innate immune system. The first is by Shaw et al. (2011) delving on age-related properties of Toll-like receptors (TLR), the most primitive of the innate defenses. They report that while not all TLR function is adversely affected by age, there is insufficiency of signaling of particular TLRs that appears to be associated with dysregulation of protein trafficking rather than simple block of transcription or translation. Dysregulation of TLR trafficking is consistent with an emerging theme about progressive perturbation of the quality control of protein homeostasis as cells naturally undergo senescence, or more acutely within the context of pathologic states (Buchberger et al., 2010).

The second paper is by Agrawal and Gupta (2011) synthesizing research about age-related changes in dendritic cell (DC) function. Notably, they report diversity of human DC phenotypes, some of which have no obvious counterparts in the mouse. Depending on type of DC, functional deficits of DC function appear to be related to either the loss of DC numbers and/or signaling of particular receptors such as DCs express. Considering that DCs serve as bridge between innate and adaptive immunity, ascertaining types and lineages of DC subsets remains a fundamental undertaking towards to the prospects of cell-based immunotherapy (Crozat et al., 2010). In the context of ageing, a key question is whether there is (are) particular DC subset(s) that could be harnessed to

enhance its innate protective function and/or its capacity to prime cell-mediated immunity.

4. Age-related alteration in adaptive immunity

The paper by Frasca et al. (2011) examines the B cell compartment. They report about the increasing trend for the accumulation of functionally exhausted, switched-memory B cells with age. But more importantly, they also report that the proportion of naïve B cells increases with age. This phenomenon is not due to new B cell lymphoiesis, but to alteration in the immunoglobulin (Ig) class switching machinery. It appears that this pool of aged naïve B cells is much increased among centenarians (Colonna-Romano et al., 2010). An intriguing question then is whether there is yet an undiscovered role of naïve B cells that might perhaps be beneficial in extreme old age.

In the T cell compartment, age-related functional alterations are highlighted by the insufficiency of signaling. The paper by Larbi et al. (2011) synthesizes research on aged T cell signaling. They discuss primary signaling deficits of the T cell receptor (TCR)-CD3 complex, changes in costimulatory signals exemplified by the loss of CD28, altered cytokine signaling, and the impact of increased number of inhibitory receptors. The importance of these signaling studies is underscored by the impetus of translational efforts into intervening against age-related clinical syndromes (D'Antona and Nisoli, 2010; McCubrey et al., 2010).

Two papers discuss age-related changes in the T cell repertoire. The first is by Brunner et al. (2011) summarizing repertoire changes within the context of persistent viral infections. Consistent with the notion of experiment in nature, they report that persistent viruses such as cytomegalovirus (CMV) impose natural pressure towards the accumulation of CMV-specific T cells throughout life. But due to persistent activation, many such antigen-specific T cells have pronounced functional defects and so they may not provide protection against CMV re-infection or re-activation. An important research footnote by the authors is the apparent difference in the pattern of CMV infection between Europe and US elderly populations. Europeans get infected with CMV more slowly and progressively with age, such that CMV seropositivity in old age has been associated with poor health outcomes among elderly Europeans (Wikby et al., 2005). In contrast, there is more widespread CMV seroprevalence within the US population due to CMV exposure at an early age (Bate et al., 2010). Hence, it will be of interest to examine whether CMV serology significantly impacts health outcomes of US elders. A curious notion is whether there might be a protective anti-CMV memory response among US seniors.

The second paper on T cell repertoire changes is by Vallejo et al. (2011). They summarize studies reporting the unusual increased expression of natural killer (NK) receptors on T cells with advancing age. They postulate that such NK-like T cells may be a compensatory mechanism for the phenomenal age-related contraction of TCR repertoire diversity and for the corresponding functional deficits of classical NK cells. It will therefore be of interest to examine the nature and the extent to which NK-like T cells contribute to protective immunity in old people, particularly in centenarians who appear to have a unique immune physiology (Sansoni et al., 2008). A challenge of course is to decipher whether and how a single, or multiple, NK-related receptors elicit T cell-driven protective responses either in a TCR-dependent or TCR-independent manner.

5. Challenges of vaccinology, and the importance of population-based studies

Considering the myriad changes in immune function with ageing, it is perhaps unsurprising that optimizing vaccine responses in

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