

CORRESPONDENCE

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Effect of Interleukin-1 (IL-1) and IL-2 on Lymphocytes from Patients with Leprosy

TO THE EDITOR:

Leprosy is a disease with a wide clinical, histological, and immunological spectrum. The benign form, tuberculoid leprosy, is characterized by a good response measured *in vitro* by T-cell proliferation assay. In the multibacillary malignant form, lepromatous leprosy, T cells do not proliferate in the presence of specific and crossreacting antigens of *Mycobacterium leprae* (³).

In the development of T-cell-mediated immune responses to an antigen, lymphokines are required in a given sequence, and it has been postulated that the amount of interleukin-2 (IL-2) produced might determine the balance between immunity and unresponsiveness (¹). To test if the lack of *in vitro* responsiveness to *M. leprae* antigens by T cells from lepromatous leprosy (LL) patients is due to a deficit in IL-1 or IL-2 production, the response of lymphocytes from LL patients to *M. leprae* in the presence of exogenously added IL-1 or IL-2 has been studied, but the data reported are contradictory (^{4, 8}).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the role of IL-1 and IL-2 in the *in vitro* T-cell proliferation of a group of leprosy patients characterized clinically and histopathologically.

Isolation of mononuclear cells. Mononuclear cells were isolated from heparinized peripheral blood by flotation over Ficoll-Hypaque gradients (²) and cultivated at a density of 2×10^5 viable cells/0.2 ml in microtiter plates. The cells were cultured in

RPMI 1640 containing 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 µg/ml streptomycin, and 10% heat-inactivated, pooled normal human AB serum.

Antigen. The antigen used was 20 µl purified *M. leprae* $6 \times 10 \times 5$ bac/ml. The antigen was used with or without IL-2 (Lymphocult T; Biosoft) 100 U/ml diluted 1:50 (100 µl) and IL-1 produced by stimulating human macrophage cultures with silica (¹⁰).

For assaying antigen stimulation, the culture plates were incubated for 6 days; 18 hr before harvesting, 1 µCi of ³H-thymidine (specific activity 1 Ci/mmol) was added, and the cells were processed for liquid scintillation.

Patients. The patients were seen in the Instituto de Biomedicina, Caracas, Venezuela. All patients (17 lepromatous, LL) were skin biopsied and classified following the Ridley-Jopling criteria (⁹). Lymphocytes from three Mitsuda-positive contacts were also studied.

Chemotherapy. All patients were receiving treatment with sulfone, rifampin, and clofazimine.

As can be seen in Table 1, the increase in counts per minute (cpm) obtained when lymphocytes were incubated from *M. leprae* antigen with IL-2 was not significantly different from the cpm obtained by incubating lymphocytes with IL-2 alone.

The nonspecific mitogenic effect on the response of lymphocytes incubated with IL-1 was similar to that observed with IL-2 alone, but of lower intensity (Table 2). However, when the cells were cultured in the

TABLE 1. *Effects of adding IL-2 to lymphocyte proliferation to M. leprae antigens.*

Group	IL-2	Antigen	
		None	<i>M. leprae</i>
LL ^a	—	219.5 ± 19.4 ^b	213 ± 41.01
(N = 12)	+	259.8 ± 9.68	237.07 ± 23.9
LL	—	238.7 ± 127.1	265.54 ± 241.3
(N = 5)	+	1183.2 ± 867	1322.06 ± 1051.2
Contacts			
Mitsuda-positive	—	312.7 ± 234.9	1427.16 ± 791
(N = 3)	+	1671.3 ± 212.9	5192.02 ± 1489.4

^a LL patients are divided in two groups on the basis of their lymphocyte response to IL-2 in the absence of antigen.

^b Counts per minute ± standard deviation.

presence of *M. leprae* antigens and IL-1, the cpm were lower than those observed with IL-1 alone, suggesting that IL-1 in the presence of antigen might have a down-regulatory action.

The objective of this study was to evaluate whether IL-1 and IL-2 could restore the *in vitro* immune response of lymphocytes obtained from LL patients. Most (70%) did not show an increase in the incorporation of ³H-thymidine in the presence of IL-2 and *M. leprae*; whereas the rest of the LL patients (30%) did show increased responses (Table 1). However, the observed increases were not statistically significant, since the lymphocytes in the presence of IL-2 without *M. leprae* showed an increase in cpm that accounted practically for the increase observed in the presence of *M. leprae* and IL-2, indicating that the increment in cpm was not specific. Similar results were obtained using IL-1 (Table 2). It is noteworthy that the mitogenic effect of IL-2 with the antigens was greater in Mitsuda-positive contacts.

Kaplan, *et al.*, using recombinant IL-2, postulated the presence of a group of "low responder" patients, whose lymphocytes give a better response to *M. leprae* antigens in the presence of IL-2, and that the addition of exogenous IL-2 to leukocyte cultures does not appear to restore responsiveness to *M. leprae* in cells from nonresponder patients (^{5, 6}). Haregewoin, *et al.* (⁴) have reported that IL-2 can reverse *in vitro* the anergy of LL patients to *M. leprae* antigens. However, these results have not been reproduced (⁸). Our data indicate that the observed increase in cpm after the addition of IL-2 in some patients is due to a nonspecific effect.

These results and those obtained with IL-1 allow us to conclude that in our LL patients anergy is not directly related to a defect in the production of either one of these interleukins.

Mohagheghpour, *et al.* (⁷) have suggested that the problem of LL patients lies in a defect in the expression of the IL-2 receptor. However, our results show a mitogenic ef-

TABLE 2. *Effects of adding IL-1 to lymphocyte proliferation to M. leprae antigens.*

Group	IL-1	Antigen	
		None	<i>M. leprae</i>
LL ^a	—	219.5 ± 19.4 ^b	213 ± 41.01
(N = 12)	+	214.3 ± 77	271.2 ± 143.6
LL	—	238.7 ± 127.1	265.5 ± 241.3
(N = 5)	+	671.4 ± 417	474.7 ± 232.6
Contacts			
Mitsuda-positive	—	312.7 ± 234.9	1427.2 ± 791.0
(N = 3)	+	2101.5 ± 1134	1336.3 ± 95.25

^a LL patients are divided in two groups on the basis of their lymphocyte response to IL-2 in the absence of antigen.

^b Counts per minute ± standard deviation.

fect of IL-2 in lymphocytes from a group of LL patients, demonstrating the presence of receptors for IL-2 in a portion of peripheral blood lymphocytes.

The results obtained in LL patients show that IL-1 and IL-2 cannot restore, *in vitro*, the immune response against *M. leprae* antigens. In a group of the patients, IL-2 had a nonspecific mitogenic effect which is now being evaluated.

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Acknowledgments. We wish to thank Dr. F. Tapia for his helpfulness in the preparation of this manuscript, and Dr. Ulrich for advice and careful review of the same.

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