Simian immunodeficiency virus infection and immune responses in the pig-tailed macaque testis

Wendy R. Winnall,*1 Sarah B. Lloyd,* Robert De Rose,* Sheilajen Alcantara,* Thakshila H. Amarasena,* Mark P. Hedger,† Jane E. Girling,‡ and Stephen J. Kent*

*Department of Microbiology and Immunology, The University of Melbourne at the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity, Victoria, Australia; 1Centre for Reproductive Health, Monash Institute of Medical Research-Prince Henry’s Institute of Medical Research, Victoria, Australia; and 2Gynaecology Research Centre, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, The University of Melbourne, Royal Women’s Hospital, Parkville, Victoria, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The testis is a site of immune privilege in rodents, and there is evidence that T cell responses are also suppressed in the primate testis. Local immunosuppression is a potential mechanism for HIV persistence in tissue reservoirs that few studies have examined. The response of the pig-tailed macaque testis to SIVmac239 infection was characterized to test this possibility. Testes were surgically removed during early-chronic (10 wk) and late-chronic (24–30 wk) SIV infection in 4 animals and compared with those from 7 uninfected animals. SIV infection caused only minor disruption to the seminiferous epithelium without marked evidence of inflammation or consistent changes in total intratesticular leukocyte numbers. Infection also led to an increase in the relative proportion of testicular effector memory CD8+ T cell numbers and a corresponding reduction in central memory CD4+ T cells. A decrease in the relative proportion of resident-type CD163+ macrophages and DCs was also observed. SIV-specific CD8+ T cells were detectable in the testis, 10–11 wk after infection by staining with SIV Gag-specific or Tat-specific MHC-I tetramers. However, testicular CD8+ T cells from the infected animals had suppressed cytokine responses to mitogen activation. These results support the possibility that local immunosuppression in the testis may be restricting the ability of T cells to respond to SIV or HIV infection. Local immunosuppression in the testis may be an underexplored mechanism allowing HIV persistence.


Introduction

The persistence of HIV, despite ART, which clears virus from the plasma, is a major obstacle to curing this disease. HIV persists as quiescent, integrated DNA, mostly within memory CD4+ T cells [1]. Productively infected cells can also persist in anatomic sanctuaries, such as the CNS [2]. This is presumed to be a result of poor penetration of antiretroviral drugs into the brain. Another potential mechanism for HIV persistence in such regions is immune privilege [3], defined as the local suppression of immune responses that occurs at specific sites. This possibility, however, is currently underexplored. The testis is a tissue where local immunosuppression occurs [4] and is infected by HIV in humans and SIV in macaques [5, 6]. Herein, we examine the immune responses to SIV infection in the macaque testis.

Despite localized immunosuppression, the testis harbors a considerable population of leukocytes. Testicular leukocytes in the primate consist mostly of central and effector memory CD4+ and CD8+ T cells, as well as resident-type CD163+ testicular macrophages and minor populations of monocytes, DCs, and NK cells [7]. The central memory CD4+ T cells, macrophages, and DCs are all potential targets of HIV. There are 2 anatomic compartments in the testis: the seminiferous tubules, in which spermatogenesis occurs, and the interstitium, between the tubules, where the leukocytes reside. Between these anatomic compartments lies the blood-testis barrier, comprised of tight junctions between the epithelial Sertoli cells that constitute the epithelium of the tubules and Sertoli cell expression of multidrug-resistant proteins, such as permeability glycoprotein, which are thought to restrict the access of drugs to the tubules [8, 9].

Historically, the testis has been thought of as an anatomic sanctuary for HIV as a result of the presence of the blood-testis barrier and the reported persistence of HIV in the semen despite antiretrovirals [10–12]. This proposal, however, has never been formally validated or refuted. It is now recognized from vasectomy studies that the testis contributes little to the virus present in seminal plasma [13] and that the blood-testis barrier does not prevent antiretroviral drugs from accessing the infected leukocytes present in the testis [14, 15]. HIV persistence in the testis during ART has not been definitively investigated. SIV

Abbreviations: APC = allophycocyanin, ART = antiretroviral therapy, DC = dendritic cell, Gag = glycosaminoglycan, HBK = human embryonic kidney, IQR = interquartile range, PAS = periodic acid-Schiff, qRT-PCR = quantitative (real-time) RT-PCR, VL = viral load

1. Correspondence: The University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC, 3010, Australia. E-mail: swinnall@unimelb.edu.au
DNA, however, has been shown to persist in the macaque testis after 26 wk of combined ART, at higher levels than the CNS, kidney, liver, heart, and bladder but at lower levels than the lymphoid tissue [16]. Regardless of whether the testis is an anatomic sanctuary for HIV, this study addresses the potential for a region of immunosuppression to inhibit responses to the virus. HIV infection of the human testis is poorly characterized during acute and early infection. Testicular pathology is best described by use of autopsy samples from patients who died of AIDS. Dalton and Harcourt-Webster [17] observed interstitial fibrosis and an arrest of spermatogenesis in testes from such autopsies. Pudney and Anderson [18] reported azospermia, hyalinization of seminiferous tubule boundaries, and significant infiltration of lymphocytes, particularly CD4+ T cells, into the interstitium. SIV infection of macaque testes has been studied in pig-tailed [6] and cynomolgus macaques [5]. SIV infects testicular T cells, macrophages, and possibly DCs, leading to a viral burden of ~100 copies/20 μg testis tissue [6]. SIV infected the testes of cynomolgus macaques during the acute phase, persisted through later phases, and correlated with blood viremia [5].

The testis is known to be a region of immune privilege in rodents, where innate and acquired immune responses are suppressed [4]. Testicular immunosuppression is proposed to protect the immunogenic germ cells from acquired immune responses, as well as minimize inflammation in the testis that could impact spermatogenesis and fertility. Immunosuppression in the rodent testis is thought to be mediated by local factors, such as IL-10 [19], TGF-β [20], IL-12p35 [21], immunosuppressive lysoglycerophosphocholines [22], and other immunosuppressive factors produced by the Sertoli cells [23, 24]. Testicular immunosuppression is best characterized in rodents, where bacterial and viral infections have been studied. Innate immune responses in LPS-treated rats were considerably attenuated in the bacterial and viral infections have been studied. Innate immune responses in LPS-treated rats were considerably attenuated in the bacterial and viral infections have been studied. Innate immune responses in LPS-treated rats were considerably attenuated in the bacterial and viral infections have been studied. Innate immune responses in LPS-treated rats were considerably attenuated in the bacterial and viral infections have been studied.

**Materials and methods**

**Reagents and antibodies**

The antibodies used in this study have been detailed previously [7], with the exception of anti-CD25 PE-Cy7, clone M-A251, used at 1:20 (557741; BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA, USA), and anti-CD16 APC-Cy7, clone 3GB, used at 1:40 (210090; Igct, now Sony Biotechnology, Champaign, IL, USA), as well as anti-CD45, used for immunohistochemistry, clone 2B11-PDT/26, used at 1:500 (M0701; Dako, Glostrup, Denmark). All antibodies were mouse monoclonals raised against human antigens, with the exception of mouse anti-nonhuman primate CD45. PE-labeled tetrameric complexes of MHC1 protein MHC1-m4, folded around SIV peptides (either KP9 from gag or KSA10 or KVA10 from tat), as described previously [27], were made in-house and kindly provided by Professor Andrew Brooks, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

**Virus production in vitro**

Confluent HEK293T cells were transfected with the SIV-producing pKP55-SIVmac239 plasmid [28] with the use of FuGENE (Promega, Madison, WI, USA), according to the manufacturer’s instructions. After 48 h, media containing virus were recovered from the culture, and contaminating cells were removed by centrifugation. Media (100 μl) were added to 100 μl fresh RPMI/10% FCS containing 1 × 10^6 CEM-NKR-CCR5 cells and incubated for 48 h at 37°C. CEM-NKR-CCR5 cells were washed extensively after 48 h to remove the original virus and then cultured for a further 5 days. To confirm SIV infection, qRT-PCR of SIV gag showed an exponential increase in virus production up to at least 7 days (data not shown), as described previously [29].

**Infection of animals and tissue sampling**

Eleven healthy, young-adult, male pig-tailed macaques (*Macaca nemestrina*) were housed in the Australian Animal Health Laboratory (Geelong, VIC, Australia). Animals were sexually mature, with ages ranging from 4 yr and 2 mo to 6 yr and 2 mo. All animals expressed the *Macaev1* allele, which presents SIV Gag epitopes KP9, KSA10, and KVA10, as determined by MHC typing [30]. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation Animal Health Animal Ethics Committees approved all studies.

Four animals were infected with SIVmac239 by i.v. injection of 2.5 × 10^7–1 × 10^8-free virus (as measured by qRT-PCR of SIV gag), produced by HEK293T cells, together with 3 × 10^6 CEM-NKR-CCR5 cells infected with SIVmac239, in a total volume of 500 μl RPMI/10% FCS. A unilateral orchidectomy was performed under ketamine sedation (1 mg/kg i.m.) and with appropriate follow-up analgesia at 10–11 wk after SIV infection. The 2nd testis was removed at autopsy (24–30 wk after SIV infection). Blood samples were taken regularly (1–4 weekly) until autopsy. Infection of animals was confirmed by qRT-PCR of SIV gag in plasma samples, as described previously [29]. Animals were euthanized with pentobarbitone (0.5 ml/kg i.v.) while under ketamine sedation.

**Tissue fixing, processing, and staining**

After removal of the testis capsule, ~5 mm^3 pieces of testis were fixed in Bouin’s fixative for 4 h, followed by 2, 10 min washes in 90% ethanol, followed by 2, 10 min washes in PBS. Based on initial results, formalin fixation was undertaken to enable CD45 immunohistochemistry to be performed. Testis tissue samples from 1 uninfected and 3 infected animals were fixed in formalin for 4 h, followed by 2 washes in PBS. Fixed samples were processed (2 h of 70% ethanol, 1 h of 90% ethanol, 2 h of 100% ethanol, 2 h of new 100% ethanol, 1 h of 100% ethanol, 2 × 2 h xylene, 2 h paraffin, 2 × 1 h paraffin, and then 30 min paraffin) by use of a Tissue-Tek VIP6 (Sakura, Torrance, CA, USA), followed by sectioning at 5 μm onto SuperFrost Plus slides. Bouin’s fixed sections were de-waxed and then stained with PAS or Mannon’s trichrome stain. For PAS staining, slides were incubated in 1% periodic acid for 5 min, Schiff’s reagent (Australian Biostain, Traralgon, VIC, Australia) for 10 min, counterstained in Mayer’s hematoxylin for 5 min, and then 30 s in Scott’s tap water. For Mannon’s trichrome, slides were incubated in Bouin’s
fixative for 60 min, washed in water 10 min, 1% Weigert’s iron hematoxylin for 2 min, 1% Ponceau/1% acid fuchsin in 1% acetic acid for 5 min, 1% phosphomolybdic acid for 3 min, 2% light green in 1% acetic acid for 5 min, and then finally, acetic acid for 1 min. All slides were dehydrated and mounted by use of diestyrene, a plasticizer, and xylene (D.P.X.). Slides were scanned by use of an Aperio system (Leica Biosystems, Nussloch, Germany).

**Immunohistochemistry**

Immunohistochemistry for CD45 on formalin-fixed sections was performed similar to previous studies [31]. In brief, after decapsulation, tubules were chopped by use of a scalpel blade and then incubated at 37 °C with collagenase and DNase for 1 h. Tubule fragments were allowed to settle, followed by recovery of interstitial cells in the media above the tubules. PBMCs were isolated as described previously [7]. PBMCs and testicular interstitial cells were frozen for long-term storage in liquid nitrogen and thawed, as described previously [7].

**Phenotypic analysis of testicular and blood leukocytes**

Whole blood (100 μl) or testicular interstitial cells in PBS/0.5% BSA/2 mM EDTA (5 × 10^6 cells) were incubated with 0.2 μl LIVE/DEAD Aqua (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) for 30 min and then with antibody cocktails for 20 min. Testicular cells were washed in PBS/0.5% BSA/2 mM and fixed in stabilizing fixative (BD Biosciences). Blood samples were incubated in FACs lysing solution (BD Biosciences) for 10 min, followed by 2 washes in PBS/0.5% BSA/2 mM EDTA and fixing with stabilizing fixative. Staining for CD4 T cells, together with the number of leukocytes present in whole blood were mixed with anti-CD28 and anti-CD49d at 1 μg/ml each, brefeldin A (10 μg/ml), and stimulated with PBS (controls) or a mix of PMA (2 μg/ml; Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA), PHA (15 μg/ml; Sigma-Aldrich), and Staphylococcus Enterotoxin-B (1 μg/ml; Sigma-Aldrich). Cells were incubated at 37 °C for 6 h, followed by staining at 4 °C overnight. LIVE-DEAD Aqua (0.5 μl) was added for 30 min, followed by anti-CD3 APC-Cy7, CD4 AF700, CD8 PerCP, and CD45 V450 for 20 min. Testicular cells were fixed by incubation in 1% formaldehyde/PBS. Blood was treated with FACs lysing solution for 10 min, followed by washing in PBS/0.5% BSA/2 mM EDTA. All cells were permeabilized by use of FACs permeabilizing solution (BD Biosciences) for 10 min, washed in PBS/0.5% BSA/2 mM EDTA, and then incubated with anti-IFN-γ APC and TNF-PE-Cy7 for 60 min. Cells were washed and then fixed in stabilizing fixative. All incubations were performed at room temperature in the dark after mixing by gentle vortex. Analysis by flow cytometry was performed as described above.

**Statistical analyses**

Descriptive statistics are quoted in the text as median and IQR or range, where the group has 3 or less data points. Statistical tests were not performed for these data as a result of the low sample size of the infected group (n = 3 or 4) and the mix of paired and unpaired data in each graph. The ability to undertake statistical analysis were complicated further by the presence of a treated animal that rapidly controlled the virus after infection.

**RESULTS**

SIV infection disrupts macaque seminiferous tubules

Testes were recovered from 4 pig-tailed macaques infected with SIVmac259 at 2 time-points: early chronic (10–11 wk) and late chronic (24–30 wk). Each animal had a peak of plasma VL within 2 wk of SIV infection (Table 1, and data not shown). One animal (Number 5878) controlled the virus, with very low plasma VL in log10 copies of SIV gag/ml plasma. The absolute number of CD45+/CD5+CD4+ cells/μm^2 whole blood. Number of CD45+ cells/μm^2, as detected by immunohistochemistry (see Fig. 2). NA, Not applicable, as there was no VL in uninfected animals. ND, Not done. Minimum detection level in this assay: 3.2 copies/ml.

**Table 1. VL, blood CD4 counts, and CD45⁺ counts in the testes of uninfected and SIV-infected, pig-tailed macaques**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Time-point</th>
<th>log VL</th>
<th>CD4 count</th>
<th>CD45⁺ cells</th>
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<tr>
<td>1024</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26300</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26783</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3099</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3752</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Week 11</td>
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<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Week 30</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*VL in log10 copies of SIV gag/ml plasma. The absolute number of CD45⁺CD5⁺CD4⁺ cells/μm² whole blood. Number of CD45⁺ cells/μm², as detected by immunohistochemistry. See Fig. 2. NA, Not applicable, as there was no VL in uninfected animals. ND, Not done. Minimum detection level in this assay: 3.2 copies/ml.
VL at wk 10 and no detectable VL at 27 wk. Infected animals exhibited a drop in absolute CD4+ T cell numbers in the blood, which was less apparent in the animal that controlled the virus (Table 1). Testes from 7 uninfected pig-tailed macaques were used for comparison, as well as matched blood samples taken at the same time-points from uninfected and SIV-infected macaques.

SIV infection caused only minor disruptions to the seminiferous epithelium, even after 24–30 wk of infection (Fig. 1 and Table 1). In the infected animals, there were many regions where spermatogenesis looked normal, similar to the uninfected testes (Fig. 1A and B). However, discrete regions could be found where seminiferous tubules appeared abnormal, with disordered spermatogenesis, increased cellular vacuolation, reduction in epithelial thickness and cellularity, and the volume of the tubule lumen (Fig. 1B and D). Conspicuously, there was no obvious progression of this damage between 10 and 11 wk and 24 and 30 wk. Affected tubule profiles were also seen in the SIV-controlling animal, despite very low or no SIV plasma VL at the time. No tubules with this specific phenotype could be found in any of the testis sections from uninfected animals. Damage to tissues through chronic inflammation can result in fibrosis, detected in the testis after damage as a result of vasectomy or cryptorchidism (undescended testes) [33, 34]. To detect fibrosis, collagen fibers were stained by use of Masson’s trichrome in the testes of SIV-infected and uninfected animals (Fig. 1E–H). Each tubule was girt by collagen fibers, and lobes of tubules were separated by thicker regions of collagen fibers. There was no marked increase in collagen in the SIV-infected testes around damaged tubules themselves or even in areas where several damaged tubules occurred (Fig. 1G and H).

Testicular leukocyte numbers after SIV infection

Immunohistochemistry for CD45 confirmed that leukocytes were present in the testes of uninfected and SIV-infected animals (Fig. 2). Leukocytes were only found in the interstitial region and never inside tubules (Fig. 2A–D). Staining on only 1 uninfected animal could be performed; this animal had 18.5 CD45+ leukocytes/mm² testis section (Table 1). This limitation means that we cannot estimate the normal range of CD45+ cells/mm² testis section. The infected animals had CD45+ cells ranging from 7.1 to 19.1 cells/mm² testis section (Table 1). With this limited data set, we have not observed an obvious reduction in CD45+ cell number. These data are consistent with the absence of inflammatory leukocytic infiltrates in the testis sections of the infected animals.

Testicular T cell phenotype changes with SIV infection

SIV infection of pig-tailed macaques is known to result in a gradual loss of CD4+ T cells in the peripheral blood, but a more dramatic, early loss of CD4+ T cells in lymphatic tissues [35]. The fate of CD4+ T cells from within testicular interstitial cells has not been reported previously. We found that SIV infection led to a dramatic reduction in the relative proportion of CD4+ T cells from the testis within 10–11 wk of infection (Fig. 3A and B). CD4+ T cells fell from a median of 40.7% (IQR 12.5%) of recovered CD3+ cells in uninfected animals to 5.2% (IQR 20.5%) during early chronic infection and 9.6% (IQR 28.7%) during late chronic infection. CD4+ T cells were also reduced slightly in the blood of infected animals. The SIV-controlling animal was not as severely affected as the others (Fig. 3B, triangles). Accordingly, the proportion of recovered testicular CD3+ T cells that was CD8+ increased considerably with SIV infection (Fig. 3A and C). CD8+ T cells increased from a median of 40.3% (IQR 16.5%) of leukocytes in uninfected animals to 75.8% (IQR 15.1%) during early chronic infection and 76.7% (IQR 15.1%) during late chronic SIV infection.

Figure 1. Histology of uninfected and SIV-infected macaque testes. Bouin’sfixed testes were sectioned and stained with PAS (A–D) or Masson’s trichrome (E–H). PAS-stained sections show seminiferous epithelium morphology of uninfected (A and C) and SIV-infected animals at wk 10 (B and D). (B) A region is shown (in the square) in which abnormal tubules are observed, showing disordered spermatogenesis and reduced tubule and lumen diameter. (C) ES, Elongated spermatids; RS, round spermatids; PS, pachytyene spermatocytes; L, lumen. Bars represent 300 μm (A and B) and 60 μm (C and D). (D) An example of a tubule with disordered spermatogenesis and cellular vacuolization. Green staining in Masson’s trichrome-stained sections shows collagen fibers in testes from uninfected (E and G) and SIV-infected animals (wk 10; F and H). Bars represent 200 μm (E and F) and 60 μm (G and H).
SIV infection changes the macrophage, granulocyte, NK, and DC populations of the macaque testis

Given the marked changes observed in T cell subsets within the testes, we asked whether other leukocyte subsets were also perturbed, reflective of a broader immune dysregulation in the SIV-infected macaque testes. The proportion of recovered CD45+ cells in the uninfected testis that were CD3−CD20+ B cells was a median of 0.364% (IQR 0.18%), which was very low compared with matched blood samples (median 15.5%, IQR 2.8%). As B cells do not enter the testis under normal conditions, these cells presumably represent cells present within the blood vessels of the testis. The proportion of testicular B cells among leukocytes remained low with infection, with a median of 0.4% (IQR 0.6%) at the 10–11 wk time-point and 0.9% (IQR 0.5%) during late chronic infection. Very low B cell numbers in the testis samples indicate that blood contamination of the testicular interstitial cell populations is minimal.

The proportion of recovered leukocytes that expressed the “resident” macrophage marker CD163 decreased in the testis, from a median of 43.5% (IQR 17.1%) in uninfected animals to 24.8% (IQR 14.8%) by 10–11 wks of infection and 15.2% (IQR 12.6%) by 24–30 wks of infection (Fig. 4A and B). The SIV-controlling animal (Fig. 4, triangles) was not as severely affected as the other animals at the chronic time-point. The proportion of recovered leukocytes negative for CD3 and CD163 was ~25% and was not affected by SIV infection. Curiously, CD163 surface expression was found in the blood of 1 animal at the latest time-point (Fig. 4C). DCs were a very small proportion of testicular leukocytes, with a median of 0.7% (IQR 1.2%) of recovered leukocytes in the uninfected testis. During early chronic infection, this fell to a median of 0.1% (range 0.06–0.45%) and rose to a median 0.3% (IQR 0.07%) by late chronic infection. In contrast, the proportion of DCs in the blood did not undergo any notable change with infection.

The granulocyte population of the testis was detected by gating on CD3− cells with high side-scatter (Fig. 4D). Very few granulocytes were present in uninfected testes (median 3.4%, IQR 2.1% of testicular leukocytes). As granulocytes do not enter the testis under normal conditions, these cells presumably represent granulocytes present within the blood vessels of the testis. Infection had no effect on this population during the early chronic phase (median 4.7%, IQR 3.2%) but led to a small increase in the proportion of granulocytes among recovered testicular leukocytes at the late chronic stage (median 8.1%, IQR 15.47%). NK cells in the testes were detected as CD159+ (NK2C) among the CD3−CD163− population. The proportion of NK cells among testicular leukocytes in uninfected testes was a median of 5.3% (IQR 9.9%) compared with blood (median 12.2%, IQR 10.4%). Testis NK cell levels increased with infection, with a median of 18.3% (range 15.7–18.4%) at the early time-point and 13.6% (IQR 8.9%) during late chronic infection, with similar changes seen in the blood.

SIV-specific CD8+ T cells in the testis during early SIV infection

SIV-specific T cell responses may assist in the local control of SIV infection but have not been studied previously in the
Figure 3. T Cell phenotypes in the testes and blood. Flow cytometry was used to determine the proportion of CD3+ leukocytes that was CD4+ T cells or CD8+ T cells. Cells were gated for live, single, CD45+, and CD3+ before the plots shown. (A) Examples of CD4 and CD8 staining for uninfected, 10–11 wk and 24–30 wk infection time-points for testicular leukocytes. Proportion of CD4+CD3+ cells from blood or testicular interstitial cell preparations that were CD4+ T cells (B) or CD8+ T cells (C) is shown for all animals. (D) Examples of gating on CD4+ T cells (left 2 rows) or CD8+ T cells (right 2 rows) for memory populations by use of CD28 and CD95 expression, as described previously [36]. Cells that were CD28-CD95+ were gated as naive, CD28+/CD95+ as central memory, and CD28-CD95- as effector memory (D). CD4+ T cell memory populations in the testis (E) and blood (F) and CD8+ T cell memory populations in the testis (G) and blood (H) are shown for all animals. (E) It should be noted that some data points had relatively low cell numbers as a result of the low numbers of CD4 T cells present in the testes of infected animals. Horizontal lines on the graphs denote median values. Triangles on graphs denote the SIV-controlling animal.

testes. All animals in this study expressed the Mane-A1*084 MHC-I allele, which presents a known SIV Gag epitope (KP9) and two Tat epitopes (KSA10 and KVA10) [30]. SIV-specific cells were detected in the testis by use of a labeled tetramer of the SIV peptide and this MHC-I.

Figure 5 shows detection of SIV-specific CD8+ T cells in the testes and blood of infected animals, i.e cells that have TCRs that bind the SIV peptide/MHC-I tetramer. SIV-specific cells that bound the SIV peptides KP9 and KSA10 were present in the testis during early chronic infection, with numbers reduced by late chronic infection, whereas KVA10-specific CD8+ T cells were not detectable. The proportion of CD8+ cells that was SIV specific for these peptides in the testis was...
similar, and in some cases, higher than in the blood at the same time-points (Fig. 5B and C). These results show that CD8+ T cells are found in the infected testis at similar levels to the blood, peaking 10–11 wks after infection.

CD8+ T cell cytokine responses

Our previous study in macaques demonstrated that significantly less testicular T cells produced cytokines after mitogen stimulation than did blood T cells [7]. An intracellular cytokine-staining assay was used in the present study to detect IFN-γ and TNF production by T cells in uninfected and SIV-infected animals after mitogen stimulation (Fig. 6). The proportion of CD4+ T cells (median 1.9%, IQR 6.1%) and CD8+ T cells (median 5.8%, IQR 4.4%) producing cytokines (IFN-γ, TNF, or both) after stimulation in SIV-uninfected testes was distinctly lower in the testis than the blood (13.0%, IQR 9.8% for CD4+ T cells and 13.5%, IQR 3.1% for CD8+ T cells; Fig. 6A–C). SIV infection reduced the proportion of CD4+ T cells responding to stimulation in the blood, and levels remained low in the tests (Fig. 6B). In the blood and testis, the proportion of responding CD8+ T cells was reduced by infection, but the effect on the testis was much more profound. Only 2.2% (range 1.5–3.2%) testicular CD8+ T cells produced cytokines upon stimulation by 10–11 wk of infection compared with 8.0% (range 7.4–17.0%) in the blood. Furthermore, almost no CD8+ T cells or CD4+ T cells from the 24–30 wk infected animals could be activated (Fig. 6A–C), with the exception of the SIV-controlling animal, which was not as strongly affected by infection in this assay. These results demonstrate that considerably less testicular T cells were capable of effective immune responses than T cells from the blood and that SIV infection reduced T cell responses further, essentially ablating them by chronic infection.

DISCUSSION

These experiments have characterized the effects of SIV infection on the macaque testis and provided evidence for a localized suppression of CD8+ T cell responses in this region. SIV infection reduced the numbers of central memory CD4+ T cells, macrophages, and DCs in the testis and led to an increase in effector memory CD8+ T cells. Although SIV-specific CD8+ T cells were present in the infected testes at similar proportions
to those found in the blood, the capacity of CD8+ T cells from the testis to be activated was reduced severely with SIV infection. These data imply that local suppression of immune responses in a region of immune privilege may be reducing the ability of CD8+ T cells to respond to SIV or HIV.

In this study, the small sample size (n = 4) for many comparisons unfortunately limits the conclusions that we can make and make it impossible to use valid statistical tests. Many differences in cell phenotypes, cytokine production, and SIV-peptide-tetramer staining were large, obvious, and reproducible; however, more subtle differences may have gone unnoticed as a result of the small sample sizes. Furthermore, the memory phenotyping of testicular CD4+ T cell subsets (Fig 3D and E) was compromised by some samples having low numbers of cells, as a result of the reduction in CD4+ T cell numbers with SIV infection.

Damage to the seminiferous tubules may have occurred as a result of early inflammatory responses to the infection or of prolonged effects of chronic infection. All 4 infected animals had high peak SIV viremia early in infection, although 1 of the animals in this study controlled viremia, with very low levels at wk 10 of infection and no viremia by the late time-point. For the

Figure 5. SIV-specific CD8+ T cells in the testis and blood. SIV-specific cells were detected in the testis by use of a PE-labeled tetramer of SIV peptides (KP9 from gag; KSA10 and KVA10 from tat) and Mane-A1*08.4 MHC-I protein. Blood and testicular interstitial cells were gated for live, single, CD45+, CD3+, CD8+ cells before the plots shown. (A) Examples of KP9 tetramer staining of testicular interstitial CD8+ T cells from uninfected, 10–11 wk and 24–30 wk infection time-points. Shown is the proportion of SIV-specific (tetramer-positive) cells among CD8+ T cells in the testis and blood in all animals for the SIV peptides KP9 (B), KSA10 (C) and KVA10 (D). Horizontal lines on the graphs denote medians. Triangles on graphs denote the SIV-controlling animal.

Figure 6. Cytokine production by testicular and blood T cells after mitogen stimulation. Blood or testicular cells from uninfected or SIV-infected animals were stimulated with 2 μg/ml PMA, 15 mg/ml PHA, and 1 mg/ml Staphylococcus Enterotoxin-B for 6 h. T cells producing TNF, IFN-γ, or both cytokines were detected by use of an intracellular cytokine staining assay. (A) Examples of gating on testicular interstitial cells expressing TNF, IFN-γ, or both cytokines after stimulation. Before these plots, cells were gated on live, single CD45+ and CD3+ cells, as well as CD4+ (upper) or CD8+ (lower). The proportion of CD4+ cells (B) and CD8+ cells (C) producing TNF, IFN-γ, or both cytokines was calculated for all animals by use of the percentage of cells that were producing either or both cytokines. Horizontal lines on the graphs denote medians. Triangles on graphs denote the SIV-controlling animal.
purposes of this study, this animal was considered to be “infected,” but each graph was depicted as a triangle to distinguish it from the other 3 that had much higher plasma SIV at both time-points. Interestingly, this “controller” animal shared some characteristics with the other 3 infected animals but not in all analyses. For instance, the controller had a damaged testis tubule phenotype, increase in CD8+ T cell numbers (Fig. 4C), and SIV-specific CD8+ T cells in the testis (Fig. 5B–D), similar to the other infected animals. However, this animal did not have the loss of CD4+ T cells (Fig. 4B) or the severe loss of CD8+ T cell cytokine production upon activation (Fig. 6B) that the other infected animals displayed. These results suggest the tentative hypothesis that early viremia is sufficient to affect spermatogenesis and lead to an influx of CD8+ T cells.

The lack of marked total leukocyte infiltration into the testis, minimal influx of neutrophils, modest damage to testicular architecture, and no accumulation of collagen after SIV exposure indicates that SIV infection induces minimal inflammation in the testis. The time-points used in this study (10–11 wks and 24–30 wk), however, may not be optimal for observing acute inflammatory and innate immune responses. Both HIV and SIV lead to innate immune responses in other regions that include release of type 1 IFNs and TNF by DCs, activation of NK cells, and the release of proinflammatory and immunoregulatory factors [37]. These responses may have occurred in the testis at earlier time-points than we studied. A previous macaque study, however, is consistent with the lack of inflammatory damage seen here. Le Tortorec et al. [5] report that acute SIV infection of cynomolgus macaques did not lead to major changes in tubule morphology when examined after 2 wk of infection, despite the presence of SIV in the testis. Together the present results and those of Le Tortorec et al. [5] indicate that SIV does not lead to major inflammatory damage in the testis of macaques; however, this needs to be confirmed by studies specifically examining inflammation and innate immune responses in the testis. Overall, the minimal inflammatory response to SIV in the macaque testis is consistent with immunosuppression and therefore, a degree of immune privilege in the primate testis.

The most notable effect of SIV on testicular leukocyte populations was a dramatic loss of CD4+ T cells, particularly those with a central memory phenotype. In the blood, the loss of CD4+ T cells was not as pronounced at the same time-points. CD163+ macrophages also appeared to be reduced in the testis after infection, as well as DCs. This was not unexpected, as these cells are all potential targets of SIV; however, it is unlikely that all of these cells are infected. Indeed, in a previous study from our group, SIV-infected CD4+ T cells, macrophages, and DCs could be detected among testicular leukocytes, but they were only a small proportion of these cells in the testis [6]. One likely explanation for the dramatic loss of testicular CD4+ T cells is SIV-induced bystander apoptosis [38, 39].

With the use of specific MHC-I tetramers, we observed SIV-specific CD8+ T cells in the testes of infected animals at similar levels to the blood. The presence of these antigen-specific cells does not indicate whether they are activated or capable of being activated to control infection. Our previous study demonstrated that significantly less CD8+ T cells in the testis could produce cytokines upon antigenic stimulation compared with CD8+ T cells in the blood [7]. In this study, we found that SIV infection reduced the ability of all testicular CD8 T cells to become activated and express cytokines. These results indicate that testicular CD8+ T cell responses are generally inhibited during SIV infection. An analysis of the cytokine responses of the SIV-specific CD8+ T cells from the testis will provide more definitive information on SIV-specific immune responses in the testis during future studies. Two important studies of immune responses in the mouse testis are mostly consistent with the present results. During pancreatic islet allografts in the mouse testis, CD8+ T cells homed to the testis but underwent apoptosis instead of activation [26]. Nasr et al. [40] found that the testis attracted less antigen-specific CD8+ T cells and more CD4+CD25+ regulatory T cells during transplantations compared with other sites. It is possible that regulatory T cells in the testis attracted less antigen-specific CD8+ T cells homed to the macroce testis with SIV infection, although experiments that use CD25 staining showed no convincing increase in CD25+ cells in the testis (data not shown). A more detailed study is required to determine whether regulatory T cells are present in the macaque testis at basal levels and after infection.

Whereas the existence of immune privilege in the rodent testis is well characterized, whether immune privilege exists in humans or nonhuman primates has not been fully investigated. Immunosuppression in the rodent testis is predicted to protect germ cells from autoimmune attack, as they are immunogenic [41]. Evidence in favor of immunosuppression in the primate testis includes the findings that 1) germ cells are protected from autoimmune attack, which can lead to infertility [42]; 2) local injury of seminiferous tubules caused by fine-needle biopsies causing tubule injury in humans does not cause orchitis [43]; 3) T cell responses in the macaque are relatively weak [7]; and 4) human germ cells tolerate early HIV infection with little response [44]. There is, however, some evidence against immune privilege in the testis, namely the rejection of thyroid tissue transplants by macaque testis [45] and the rejection of human testis tissue transplanted into the mouse [46]. It is not known whether germ cells are immunogenic in primates; they may be protected from autoimmune attack as a result of thymic, or central, tolerance instead. The present study showing that activation of CD8+ T cell cytokine responses is very low in the SIV-infected testis and absent at the late time-point provides further evidence in favor of local immunosuppression in the primate testis.

The persistence of HIV during antiretroviral treatment is a major barrier to HIV cure. Herein is examined the possibility that regions of local immune suppression, such as sites of immune privilege, might diminish the responses to SIV in the macaque model. Our results indicate that despite an early SIV-induced reduction in CD4+ T cells in the testes, CD8+ T cell responses are substantially inhibited during SIV infection. Exploring the mechanism by which this occurs may allow immunomodulatory approaches to control active and quiescent HIV infection in the testes.
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DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

REFERENCES


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