Six year prospective immunological study of alemtuzumab treated patients: identification of markers of the clinical response

This is a pre print version of the following article:

Original Citation:

Availability:
This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1757497 since 2020-10-02T10:21:39Z

Publisher:
SAGE PUBLICATIONS LTD

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Abstract: EP1707

Type: ePoster

Abstract Category: Therapy - disease modifying - 28 Long-term treatment monitoring

Background: Alemtuzumab is a highly effective treatment for relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) that selectively targets the CD52 antigen, with consequent profound T and B lymphocyte depletion. In particular alemtuzumab induced a CD4+ T cells lymphopenia, a decrease of Th17 and Th1 cells and pro-inflammatory molecules and a restored Treg suppressor function that long last for years. 25-30% MS patients, however, relapse after alemtuzumab treatment.

Aims: Long-term immunological study of RRMS patients after alemtuzumab treatment to identify markers that could help to predict the clinical response to the drug.

Methods: Multicenter follow-up of 29 alemtuzumab-treated RRMS patients from 6 European sites in the CARE-MS I and CARE-MS II trials. Patients received two courses of alemtuzumab at Month 0 and 12. Further courses have been repeated in non responders. Clinical and immunological evaluation were performed at Months 0, 6, 12, 18, 24, 36, 48, 60 and 72. CD4+ T cells, Treg, Th1 and Th17 cells were evaluated in the peripheral blood mononuclear cells by FACS analysis. mRNA levels of cytokines, chemokines, chemokine receptors and transcriptional factors with pro-inflammatory (IL-1β, IL-2, IL-6, IL-17A, IL-17F, IL-21, IL-22, IL-23, IL-26, IFN-γ, T-bet, RORC, TNF-α, CCR3, CCR4, CCR5, CCR6, CCR8, CXCL10, CCL20, VLA4) or anti-inflammatory function (IL-10, IL-27, TGF-β, FoxP3) were quantified by TaqMan® low density array real-time polymerase chain reaction in whole blood.

Results: Nine patients had a clinical or MRI disease activity resumption between Month 20 and 32. At Month 18 they had a higher Th17/Treg ratio and increased IL-1β mRNA levels compared to patients that remained stable. Two patients continued to present evidence of disease activity despite repeated alemtuzumab courses. They display an atypical CD4+ T population behaviour different from the other patients. Despite that lymphocyte count strongly decreased after the first administration of alemtuzumab and then fluctuated accordingly to alemtuzumab administration, the percentage of CD4+ cells was not or just mildly affected.

Conclusions: An increase of Th17/Treg ratio and of the pro-inflammatory cytokine IL-1β mRNA level after alemtuzumab could be an early marker of MS disease activity resumption suggesting alemtuzumab retreatment. Furthermore, the evaluation of the CD4+ cell percentage could represent a helpful tool to address the individual clinical response to the drug.

Disclosure:
LD received personal compensation by Sanofi-Genzyme for participating to advisory boards; by Merck for editorial collaborations and had travel expenses for congresses paid by Merck, Biogen, Novartis and Sanofi-Genzyme; SR had travel expenses for congresses paid by Merck, Biogen, Novartis and Sanofi-Genzyme; EC received support for participating to advisory boards from Biogen, Bayer, Genzyme- Sanofi, Serono, Novartis and Teva and for lectures from Almirall, Biogen, Bayer, Serono, Novartis, Genzyme- Sanofi and Teva; AV: nothing to disclose; PA received support for consultancy from Sanofi-Genzyme, Novartis, Teva, Biogen, Serono and Roche, for lectures from Biogen, Teva and Novartis, for travel accommodation from Sanofi-Genzyme, Biogen and Teva; DH was supported by the Czech Ministry of Education project Progres Q27/LF1, and received compensation for travel, speaker honoraria and consultant fees from Biogen Idec, Novartis, Merck, Bayer, Sanofi Genzyme, Roche, and Teva, as well as support for research activities from Biogen Idec; MC received personal compensation by Merck and Biogen for participating to advisory boards; by Merck for editorial collaborations and had travel expenses for congresses paid by Merck, Biogen, Novartis and Sanofi-Genzyme.