April 1982 Vol 35 No 4

Journal of Clinical Pathology

The Journal of the Association of Clinical Pathologists

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J Clin Pathol 1982;**35**:369-375

Review article

Monoclonal antibodies in oncology

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SUMMARY Molecular biology has made tremendous strides over the last five years. The new biology allows us to prepare monoclonal antibodies to defined antigens; to detect, isolate and clone specific genes; and to insert these genes into defined sites in different cells giving new functions to old organisms. These revolutionary developments have been followed closely by researchers, businessmen, politicians and philosophers, as well as by those involved in the clinical care of patients. Although our understanding of human molecular biology is increasing rapidly, it is the development of monoclonal antibodies that has the most immediate application in the clinic. There have been several reports of their use in the diagnosis, localisation and treatment of human malignant disease. This review describes developments that are likely to have direct relevance to patient care in the near future.

What is a monoclonal antibody?

The immunological response to any foreign antigen is polyclonal: many different clones of B lymphocytes are stimulated to produce antibodies. These antibodies have different molecular structures and in turn recognise different molecular conformation patterns on the stimulating antigen—the antigenic determinants. It is this complexity of antibody response that makes the antigen-antibody interaction difficult to analyse at a molecular level. This is particularly so with complex antigens such as the tumour cell surface. Monoclonal antibodies occur naturally in patients with myeloma. Here neoplastic transformation occurs in a clone of B lymphocytes with the result that large quantities of identical immunoglobulin molecules are produced. It was by using myelomas that the chemical structure of the immunoglobulin molecule was discovered.[1] However, the antigens to which most myeloma immunoglobulins are directed are usually unknown and are unlikely to be important. In 1975 Köhler and Milstein[2] constructed a hybrid myeloma (hybridoma) which produced a monoclonal antibody directed against a specified antigen. Mice were immunised with the antigen (sheep red cells) and their spleen lymphocytes collected. The lymphocytes were fused with an established myeloma line and hybrids selected by growth in selective tissue culture medium. The resultant hybrids were rapidly growing (a property conferred by the myeloma) and yet contained new immunoglobulin genes (from the lymphocytes of the immunised mouse). The hybridomas were cloned by diluting the cells and growing up colonies from single cells. These cloned hybridomas now contained only one set of new immunoglobulin genes (Fig. 1). After growing in tissue culture the supernatant containing the secreted antibody was tested for activity against the immunising antigen. Using this system, antibodies can be isolated which define single antigens in a complex mixture such as the molecules on tumour cell surfaces. These molecules can now be compared to those appearing on non-malignant cells from the same tissue of origin.

Accepted for publication 18 November 1981

Do tumour antigens exist?

There is considerable evidence that the immune system responds to antigens on tumour cells, both in experimental animal systems and in human neoplasia. These tumour antigens are defined by assays which utilise the various modes of immune response to them. It is important to distinguish the antigens present on the tumour cell surface that are unique to tumours and are not shared with normal cells. There are several documented examples of such antigens within experimental tumour systems.[3 4]

Until the development of the monoclonal antibody technology, it has been impossible to sort out

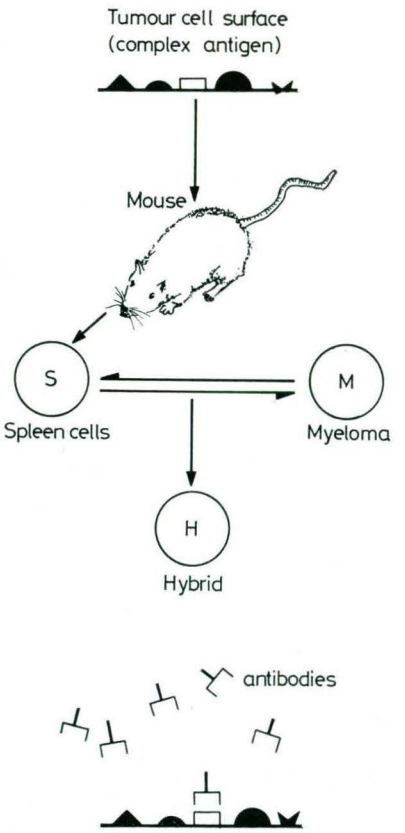

Fig. 1 *Making a monoclonal antibody. A complex antigen, such as a tumour cell surface, is used to immunise mice. The spleen cells (S) are removed and fused with a myeloma line (M). Hybrids are cloned and those antibodies binding to the antigen selected.*

the antigenic complexity of human tumour cell surfaces. The evidence for the existence of unique tumour specific antigens in man analogous to the tumour-specific transplantation antigens in animals is circumstantial. The natural history of certain tumours, the waxing and waning of tumour masses and the occurrence of spontaneous regression suggests that there may be some host control of tumour growth.[5] Similarly, the relation between histological evidence of tumour infiltration by immunocompetent cells and prognosis suggests that these infiltrating cells have some controlling influence of tumour growth.[6] Further circumstantial evidence comes from the increased incidence of malignancy in immunosuppressed patients, although here the spectrum of tumour types found is not similar to that found in the normal population.[7] Serological analysis and assays of lymphocyte function have shown that the immune system in man can actually recognise the tumour cell surface.[8 9] Whether immune mechanisms are able effectively to destroy tumour cells in vivo remains in question.

Production of monoclonal antibodies to human tumours

FUSION SYSTEM

Currently there are three systems in which anti-tumour monoclonal antibodies can be raised; mouse, rat, and human. For human tumours, mice and rats have the obvious advantages of responding to a wide variety of antigens and are thus the choice for an exhaustive analysis of tumour cell surface components. This wide response may be a disadvantage in that xenogeneic immunisations often result in antibodies directed against histocompatibility antigens and blood group substances.

It is now possible to fuse human lymphocytes directly from patients with tumours, either with mouse or rat myelomas, so obtaining mixed species hybrids which produce human monoclonal antibodies. The frequency of hybridisation and the quantity of human immunoglobulin produced by interspecies hybrids is considerably less than in mouse-mouse or rat-rat fusions. A further problem is the preferential loss of human chromosomes in rodent-human hybrids which results in frequent loss of immunoglobulin production. There are now, however, several human myeloma lines available which are suitable for fusion.[10 11] Such lines must be rapidly growing and have an appropriate genetic selection mechanism to enable the parent myeloma to be killed in the hybridoma mixture. Once established, human-human hybrids show no apparent preferential loss of chromosomes and thus the stability of the hybrid is assured. The quantity of immunoglobulin secreted by these human-human hybrids is usually of the order of 1 μg/ml which is one tenth of the output of the corresponding mouse hybridoma system. There are several advantages in using human lymphocytes to produce monoclonal antibodies. The spectrum of the human immune response which serologically defines tumour-specific antigens can be examined. There is abundant evidence that patients with cancer at some time in the natural history of the tumour have in their serum antibodies which recognise their own tumours.[12] The titre of these antibodies is low and so far there have been no good studies on the chemical nature of the determinants recognised by such antibodies. By obtaining the antibodies in monoclonal form and in sufficient quantity such chemical studies are possible. Lymphocytes from cancer patients can be collected from several sites. Peripheral blood lymphocytes may not represent a good starting

population from which to perform fusions. More likely to be involved in antitumour activity are the lymphocytes in the lymph nodes draining a tumour. Such lymphocytes can easily be collected in large quantities from patients with breast, lung and colorectal cancer. Another source of lymphocytes for fusion comes from the tumour itself. Certain tumours, for example gliomas, are often heavily infiltrated by lymphocytes. These lymphocytes can be collected, separated from the tumour and fused to a human myeloma line.[13]

IMMUNISATION SCHEDULE

For xenogeneic immunisations the choice of antigenic material and the schedule in which it is used for immunisation has varied considerably. Very little detailed work has been performed on optimising these schedules. Sources of tumour material for immunisation can come from cell lines grown in vitro, pieces of fresh tumour tissue, membrane preparations from fresh tissue, or fractionated solubilised components from fresh tumour cell membranes. These different immunisation procedures will almost certainly result in different spectra of antibodies.

In the production of human monoclonal antibodies immunisation is not possible and the choice lies in the source of lymphocytes for fusion. There is as yet no evidence to suggest that any particular source of lymphocytes—peripheral blood, spleen, lymph node or intratumour—results in a higher frequency of the required antibodies.

SCREENING METHODS

The production of antibodies against human tumour cell surfaces requires the screening of many fusion products to find suitable immunoglobulins. Several strategies have been developed. The commonest method is to immunise mice with a chosen tumour cell line, for example a melanoma. The fusion products are screened on that melanoma in an indirect binding radioimmunoassay (see Fig. 2) and the activity of any positive supernatants determined on other melanomas as well as on cell lines of different types, both normal and malignant (Fig. 3). In this way the specificity of the monoclonal antibody is characterised and its ability to distinguish tumour cells from their normal counterparts is determined.

Screening can also be performed using primary tumour material. Membrane preparations of tumours can be used to immunise rodents; the same membrane preparation can be bound to plastic wells and used in a solid phase radioimmunoassay to screen the activity of resulting monoclonal antibodies. A variant of this screening procedure is to use

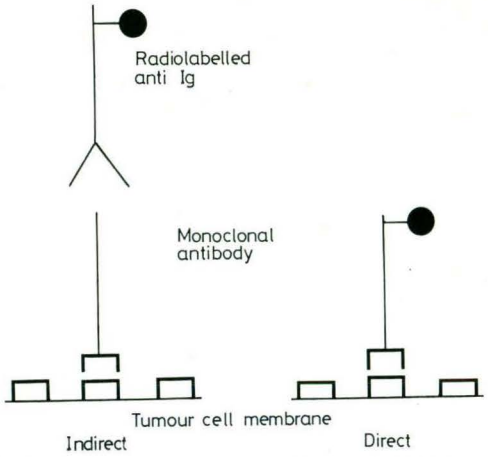

Fig. 2 *Binding assays for monoclonal antibodies. In the indirect assay bound monoclonal antibody is detected by a radiolabelled anti-immunoglobulin. In the direct assay internally labelled—for example, ^{3}H-lysine, antibody is used.*

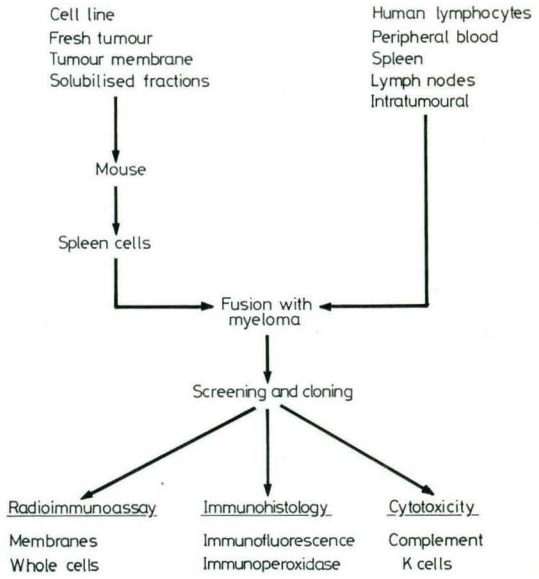

Fig. 3 *Strategies for making and screening monoclonal antibodies to human tumour antigens.*

sections of normal and tumour material to look at the activity of monoclonal antibodies histologically by immunofluorescence on frozen sections or by an immuno-peroxidase technique. This latter technique has the advantage of allowing retrospective surveys of paraffin block material readily available from hospital pathology departments. By comparing tumour samples from different patients with cancer

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