Neutrophils Regulate Humoral Autoimmunity by Restricting Interferon-\(\gamma\) Production via the Generation of Reactive Oxygen Species

**Highlights**

- Mice pre-depleted of neutrophils develop more autoantibodies after pDC activation
- The pDC-IFN-\(\alpha/\beta\) pathway stimulates NK cells to produce IFN-\(\gamma\) by inducing IL-15
- ROS released by neutrophils decreases IL-15 and thus inhibits IFN-\(\gamma\) production
- Neutrophils in male NZB/W F1 mice suppress NK cell and autoimmune B cell activation

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**In Brief**

Huang et al. find that IFN-\(\alpha/\beta\) produced by plasmacytoid dendritic cells (pDCs) stimulates NK cells to secrete IFN-\(\gamma\), which is essential for the development of autoantibodies. ROS-producing neutrophils negatively regulate this NK-IFN-\(\gamma\) pathway and control autoimmune progression in lupus-prone mice.
Neutrophils Regulate Humoral Autoimmunity by Restricting Interferon-γ Production via the Generation of Reactive Oxygen Species

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.celrep.2015.07.021
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SUMMARY

Here, we examine the mechanism by which plasmacytoid dendritic cells (pDCs) and type I interferons promote humoral autoimmunity. In an amyloid-induced experimental autoimmune model, neutrophil depletion enhanced anti-nuclear antibody development, which correlated with heightened IFN-γ production by natural killer (NK) cells. IFN-α/β produced by pDCs activated NK cells via IL-15 induction. Neutrophils released reactive oxygen species (ROS), which negatively modulated the levels of IL-15, thereby inhibiting IFN-γ production. Mice deficient in NADPH oxidase 2 produced increased amounts of IFN-γ and developed augmented titers of autoantibodies. Both the pDC-IFN-α/β pathway and IFN-γ were indispensable in stimulating humoral autoimmunity. Male NZB/W F1 mice expressed higher levels of superoxide than their female lupus-prone siblings, and depletion of neutrophils resulted in spontaneous NK cell and autoimmune B cell activation. Our findings suggest a regulatory role for neutrophils in vivo and highlight the importance of an NK-IFN-γ axis downstream of the pDC-IFN-α/β pathway in systemic autoimmunity.

INTRODUCTION

Aberrant innate immune responses play a critical role in promoting the autoimmune adaptive immune response and exacerbate disease pathogenesis. A type I interferon (IFN-α, β, ω, τ, IFN-I) molecular signature is found in patients with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), a heterogeneous systemic disease with autoantibodies to nuclear antigens (ANA) and double-stranded DNA (dsDNA) (Rönnblom and Pascual, 2008; Kono et al., 2013; Lipsky, 2001). An IFN-1-stimulated gene (ISG) profile is significantly correlated with the levels of anti-dsDNA antibody and disease severity. IFN-α/β triggered by cells sensing nucleic acids is increasingly implicated as a key factor in antibody-mediated autoimmunity.

Plasmacytoid dendritic cells (pDCs) are a unique dendritic cell (DC) subset that specializes in rapid production of high amounts of IFN-I upon sensing RNA or DNA by endosomal Toll-like receptor (TLRs), thereby functioning as an immediate early IFN-I producer during viral infections (Gilliet et al., 2008). In SLE, pDCs serve as a major source of aberrant IFN-I in response to immune complexes (ICs). These complexes are composed either of autoantibodies to chromatin and ribonucleoprotein complexes or of DNA-containing neutrophil extracellular traps (NETs) induced by autoantibodies (Gilliet et al., 2008; Caielli et al., 2012). In recent years, using various genetic and cell-type-specific ablation strategies, several groups have demonstrated that pDCs play a pivotal role in autoantibody development and disease progression in vivo (Di Domizio et al., 2012a; Baccala et al., 2013; Rowland et al., 2014; Sisirak et al., 2014). However, how pDCs and IFN-I instruct autoimmune responses is not clear.

Neutrophils are abundant innate immune cells that rapidly infiltrate sites of infection or injury to provide host protection against microbes (Mayadas et al., 2014; Nauseef and Borregaard, 2014). SLE patients display defects in clearing apoptotic neutrophils and have aberrant neutrophils in the periphery, which constitute signature lupus erythematosus cells (Pisetsky, 2012; Caielli et al., 2012). NETs formed by IFN-I- and autoantibody-activated neutrophils stimulate pDCs to secrete IFN-I, which further promotes the generation of mature antigen-presenting cells and
activates autoreactive B cells to enhanced autoantibody production in vitro (Caielli et al., 2012). In the kidney of lupus patients, netting neutrophils can induce tissue damage; SLE patients with impaired DNase I function or failure to dismantle NETs have an increased incidence of lupus nephritis (Hakkim et al., 2010). In lupus-prone mice, inhibition of peptidylarginine deiminase, a key enzyme required for NET formation, protected against vascular, kidney, and skin damage (Knight et al., 2013). Separately, patients from a subgroup of vasculitides, a systemic disease with inflammation of blood vessels, develop anti-neutrophil cytoplasmic antibodies (ANCAs), which are also present in some SLE patients. It was shown that ANCA induction can be initiated by NETs through transfer of cytoplasmic neutrophil antigens to DCs (Sangaletti et al., 2012).

However, several recent studies have revealed that neutrophils can inhibit systemic autoimmunity in vivo. Defective ROS production, and presumably NETosis, as a result of phagocyte NADPH oxidase 2 (NOX2) deficiency paradoxically exacerbates lupus development in MRL-Fas−/− mice, an observation consistent with the increased incidence of lupus in patients with X-linked chronic granulomatous disease (Campbell et al., 2012). Moreover, Trigunaite et al. recently reported that Gr-1+ cells protect male New Zealand black × New Zealand white (NZB/W) F1 mice from developing autoantibodies and lupus-like disease (Trigunaite et al., 2013). Therefore, how neutrophils participate in autoimmune pathogenesis versus protection remains an unresolved question.

We recently have established an animal model in which activation of pDCs and IFN-γ production promotes the development of a lupus-like syndrome in healthy mice (Di Domizio et al., 2012a). Accompanying pDC activation, prominent neutrophilia was induced. In this study, we have investigated the contribution of neutrophils and their possible interactions with pDCs in instigating autoantibody development with an attempt to reveal the key pathways promoting humoral autoimmunity.

RESULTS

Neutrophils Negatively Regulate pDC-Mediated Autoantibody Development

Amyloid fibrils are stable insoluble aggregates of misfolded proteins, and amyloidogenic proteins can act as danger-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs), triggering NLRP3 inflammasome activation (Masters and O’Neill, 2011). Native proteins form amyloid fibrils by transiting through a state of amyloid precursors, a key enzyme required for NET formation, protected against vascular, kidney, and skin damage (Knight et al., 2013). Amyloid fibrils can similarly function as DAMPs.

As reported previously, DNA-containing amyloid can trigger selective infiltration of IFN-γ-producing pDCs into peritoneal cavity after intraperitoneal (i.p.) inoculation (Di Domizio et al., 2012a). We injected BALB/c mice with HSA amyloid containing DNA (precipitate formed by mixing amyloid precursor of HSA protein and genomic DNA of E. coli; we will refer it simply as amyloid hereafter) or a mixture of a comparable amount of native HSA and DNA (referred as control). High amounts of IL-1β transcript were detected in peritoneal exudate cells (PECs) harvested 18 hr after inoculation of amyloid (Figure 1B). Neutrophilia represents a hallmark of IL-1β-mediated inflammation. Accordingly, significant numbers of neutrophils infiltrated the peritoneal cavity of mice that received amyloid, which peaked at 6 hr after injection (Figure 1C). Apparently, IL-1β stimulates the neutrophilia, as Il1r−/− mice had drastically reduced infiltrating neutrophils after amyloid inoculation (Figure 1D).

Residing in the peritoneal cavity of naive mice are two subsets of macrophage: large peritoneal macrophages (LPMs) and small peritoneal macrophages (SPMs) (Ghosh et al., 2010; Cain et al., 2013; Okabe and Medzhitov, 2014; Gautier et al., 2014). Amyloid inoculation resulted in the disappearance of LPMs and slight increase of SPMs in PECs (Figure S1A). Injection of clodronate encapsulated in liposomes prior to amyloid inoculation depleted LPMs, but not SPMs (Figures S1A and S1B). Although LPM depletion reduced recruitment of neutrophils and dendritic cells, it did not diminish the expression of IL-1β induced by amyloid (Figures S1B–S1D). Among PEC populations, both SPMs and neutrophils transcribed IL-1β (Figure S1E), suggesting that the resident SPM, other than LPM, is likely the primary source of IL-1β upon sensing amyloid.

Given the dual infiltration of pDCs and neutrophils and the importance of these cells in systemic autoimmunity, we expected that neutrophils might facilitate a pDC-mediated humoral autoimmunity that is triggered by immunization with DNA-containing amyloid (Di Domizio et al., 2012a). To examine the functional role of neutrophils, we pre-injected BALB/c mice with anti-Ly6G monoclonal antibody (mAb) (clone 1A8), which selectively and transiently depleted neutrophils in vivo (Figure 1E). Unexpectedly, mice without neutrophils at the time of amyloid inoculation developed a heightened ANA response (Figures 1F and 1G) and increased antibodies reactive to tissue antigens (Figure 1H). We have observed that, in addition to ANA, amyloid-immunized BALB/c mice quickly developed ANCA with a cytoplasmic staining pattern (Figure S2). Different from ANA, ANCA was reduced in mice injected with anti-Ly6G, suggesting that infiltrating neutrophils are probably involved in ANCA development (Figure S2). Therefore, our data revealed an unexpected regulatory role of neutrophils in pDC-mediated ANA development.

Neutrophils Do Not Affect IFN-α/β but Rather Regulate IFN-γ Production

To understand the mechanism underlying the surprising observation, we examined whether neutrophils affect pDC infiltration and/or IFN-γ production. The number of pDCs in the peritoneal cavity 24 hr after amyloid injection was reduced in the absence of neutrophils, while the number of conventional dendritic cells (cDCs) remained unaffected (Figure 2A). However, the overall expression of ISGs in PECs, a functional readout of IFN-γ, was not significantly affected in the absence of neutrophils (Figure 2B).
Next, we searched for the genes whose expression is affected by neutrophils and found that PECs from mice received anti-Ly6G prior to amyloid inoculation invariably expressed high levels of IFN-γ, i.e., type II interferon (IFN-II) (Figure 2C). Consistently, Ifi30, Ciita, and Irf1, genes sensitively affected by IFN-II, were upregulated in the same group (Figure 2C). Of note, the transcripts of Ifng and Ifi30 were detected in all the mice that received amyloid in the presence of neutrophils. We also found consistently that neutrophil depletion caused a significant increase in IFN-γ protein secretion (Figure 2D). By contrast, IL-12 p40 production was unaffected by neutrophils. Granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF) can potently mobilize neutrophils from bone marrow and increase the number of peripheral neutrophils. Mice that received G-CSF had elevated numbers of neutrophils and decreased IFN-γ levels in the peritoneal cavity after amyloid inoculation (Figure 2E), revealing a negative correlation between neutrophil presence and production of IFN-γ. Collectively, our findings indicate that neutrophils might downregulate IFN-γ production but have no significant impact on IFN-γ-mediated activation amidst an inflammatory response that can result in autoimmunity.

Infiltrating NK Cells Produce IFN-γ
To identify the cellular source of IFN-γ that is subjected to neutrophil regulation, we sorted peritoneal cells after amyloid inoculation and performed qPCR analysis. Natural killer (NK) cells uniquely expressed high levels of IFN-γ transcripts (Figure 3A). Kinetic analysis revealed a selective infiltration and a further expansion of NK cells in response to amyloid (Figure 3B). Consistent with the transcript analysis, peritoneal NK cells from amyloid-inoculated mice produced elevated IFN-γ protein detectable by intracellular staining (Figure 3C). No IFN-γ was detected in other peritoneal leukocytes (not shown). In addition to IFN-γ secretion, the infiltrating NK cells display a more mature phenotype, i.e., a higher percentage of NK cells expressing CD11b but lacking expression of CD27 (Figure 3A). To examine the requirement of NK cells for IFN-γ production, we injected C57BL/6 (B6) mice with anti-NK1.1 mAb to deplete NK cells prior to the inoculation of amyloid and examined the amount of IFN-γ in the peritoneal fluid. As expected, NK cell depletion severely abolished IFN-γ production but had no effect on IL-12 p40, which is produced by myeloid cells (Figure 3D).

IL-15 is a key cytokine that is required for NK cell development (Sun and Lanier, 2011). Ifi5ra−/− mice failed to produce IFN-γ.
in response to amyloid, which correlates with the absence of peritoneal NK cells (Figure 3E). Taken together, our findings suggest that NK cells are the primary producer of IFN-γ during the innate immune response to amyloid.

**Neutrophils Inhibit IFN-γ Response via ROS Production**

To understand how neutrophils control IFN-γ production, we further characterized these cells amidst the amyloid-induced peritonitis. The infiltrating neutrophils expressed IL-1β (Figure S1E) and upregulated the surface expression of CD80 and MHC class II (Figure 4A). Activated neutrophils can potently generate ROS. We detected increased levels of superoxide in neutrophils harvested from the peritoneum of amyloid-inoculated mice by staining with a specific fluorescent probe dihydrorhodamine 123 (DHR; Figure 4B). In addition, peritoneal fluid neutrophils harvested from amyloid-inoculated mice contained significant amounts of hydrogen peroxide, consistent with the ROS production (Figure 4C, left). Furthermore, high amounts of myeloperoxidase (MPO) were detected in the peritoneal fluid after amyloid inoculation (Figure 4C, right). Hence, infiltrating neutrophils are highly activated and produce effector molecules that might affect the immune response by other cells.

To reveal the role of neutrophils in regulating the cytokine response, we harvested PECs 10 hr after inoculation of amyloid and subsequently depleted neutrophils by using anti-Ly6G antibody-coated beads. After culture of the PECs with amyloid for 24 hr, significantly higher amounts of IFN-γ, but not IL-12 p40, were detected in the culture depleted of neutrophils compared with the culture containing neutrophils (Figure 4D). This result confirms a potent regulatory effect by neutrophils on IFN-γ production. Because several molecules produced by neutrophils are capable of inhibiting immune responses (Nauseef and Borregaard, 2014; Mayadas et al., 2014), we tested small-molecule inhibitors against ROS, arginase, inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS), and MPO in the culture of PECs upon re-stimulation with amyloid in vitro. Intriguingly, IFN-γ production was enhanced solely by the inhibition of ROS with N-acetyl-L-cysteine (NAC) and catalase, but not by blocking the other molecules (Figure 4E). Consistently, no significant induction of arginase, iNOS, or IL-10 by amyloid was detected in vivo (Figure S3B).

NOX2 is primarily expressed by phagocytes and is responsible for oxidative burst in neutrophils (Sareila et al., 2011). We thus compared neutrophils isolated from wild-type (WT) and Nox2−/− B6 mice for their ability to modulate IFN-γ production in neutrophil-depleted PECs in vitro. Although as expected, WT neutrophils actively suppressed IFN-γ production, neutrophils lacking Nox2 lost the ability to downregulate IFN-γ (Figure 4F), indicating an essential function of ROS in the regulatory activity of neutrophils. Conversely, IFN-γ production by Nox2−/− PECs was dose-dependently inhibited by the addition of H2O2 in culture (Figure 4G). Lastly, Nox2−/− mice secreted higher amounts of IFN-γ in comparison with WT mice in the peritoneal fluid after amyloid inoculation in vivo (Figure 4H). In summary, our results reveal that neutrophils potently regulate the NK cell-mediated IFN-γ response through the production of ROS.

**ROS Regulates IFN-γ by Controlling IFNz/β-Induced IL-15**

Neither human nor mouse NK cells respond directly to amyloid by producing IFN-γ in vitro (data not shown). During the early phase of mouse cytomegalovirus infection, pDCs produce IFN-I and promote transient NK cell activation and cytotoxicity in vivo (Swiecki et al., 2010). To investigate the role of pDC-dependent IFN-I pathway in NK cell activation, we inoculated amyloid into...
Figure 3. Amyloid Induces NK Cell Infiltration and IFN-γ Production
(A) Relative levels of Ifng transcript in different leukocytes isolated from peritoneal cells 18 hr after amyloid inoculation (n = 4 from two experiments).
(B) Kinetics of NK cell infiltration into the peritoneal cavity (n = 10 from two experiments).
(C) Intracellular staining for IFN-γ protein in NK cells in peritoneal cells harvested 18 hr after amyloid inoculation. Cells were stained for NK cell markers (CD3+ DX5+) and IFN-γ, then analyzed by flow cytometry. A representative sample is shown (n = 8).
(D) Levels of cytokines in the peritoneal fluid of mice pre-injected with anti-NK1.1 mAb or control IgG2a, and then inoculated with control or amyloid and harvested after 18 hr (n = 8 from three experiments).
(E) Number of NK cells and levels of IFN-γ in the peritoneal cavity of WT or Il15ra−/− B6 mice 18 hr after inoculation of control or amyloid (n = 7 from three experiments).

Data represent mean and SEM. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001. NS, not significant. See also Figures S3 and S7.
of TFH-like cells have been detected in SLE patients (Craft, 2012; Tangye et al., 2013). We investigated the generation of TFH cells induced by IFN-γ and pDC-produced IFN-α/β in a culture system. Enriched splenic CD11c+ DCs containing both pDCs and cDCs were co-cultured with Bcl6 reporter CD4+ T cells (Kitano et al., 2011) in the presence of CpG A, a TLR9 agonist that induces an IFN-I response from pDCs, or/and IFN-γ for 3 days. CpG A effectively stimulated the generation of Bcl6+ TFH cells (Figure 6A). Although IFN-γ alone failed to increase the number of Bcl6-expressing in T cells, IFN-γ significantly enhanced the development of Bcl6+ TFH cells when added to CpG A-containing cultures. This result illustrates a synergy between IFN-I and IFN-II to promote TFH differentiation.

Because Nox2−/− mice produced higher levels of IFN-γ than WT B6 mice in response to amyloid (Figure 4H), we examined their ability to support the development of humoral autoimmunity induced by amyloid. As shown in Figure 6B, anti-histone
immunoglobulin G (IgG) developed early and in higher titers in the Nox2<sup>−/−</sup> mice in comparison with WT B6 mice after immunization with amyloid. Consistently, amyloid-immunized Nox2<sup>−/−</sup> mice displayed an elevated ANA response (Figure 6C), suggesting that Nox2 deficiency, which is associated with exacerbated IFN-γ production, facilitates the onset of humoral autoimmunity. In contrast, mice lacking IL-1 receptor, which had diminished neutrophil infiltration (Figure 1D), developed autoantibodies similarly as WT B6 mice after immunization with amyloid (Figure S4A). Further analysis revealed that NK cells (not shown). Therefore, seemingly, neutrophils and IL-1 differentially affect IFN-γ levels and autoantibody development.

Lastly, we immunized feeble mice, which have defects in pDC-mediated IFN-α/β production, or IFN-γ-deficient mice and found that the pDC-IFN-α/β pathway and IFN-γ are both required by amyloid to break humoral immune tolerance (Figures 6D and 6E). Collectively, our studies have revealed a critical role of IFN-γ and a close interplay between two IFN families in stimulating humoral autoimmunity.

Figure 5. ROS Restricts IFN-γ Response by Regulating IL-15 Expression

(A) Percentage of NK cells producing IFN-γ in peritoneal cells from WT, feeble, or Ifnar<sup>−/−</sup> B6 mice 18 hr after inoculation of amyloid or control. Cells were stained for NK cell markers and IFN-γ, then analyzed by flow cytometry (n = 6 from three experiments).

(B) PECs from amyloid-inoculated B6 mice were depleted of NK cells in vitro (+). NK cells were added back to the (−) PECs either directly or in Trans wells to reconstitute to their original percentage in PECs. The mixed cells were cultured with 10 μg/ml amyloid for 24 hr. The levels of IFN-γ relative to (−) culture were calculated after ELISA analysis. Data represent results from three experiments.

(C) Expression of IL-15 transcripts by PECs 18 hr after inoculation of control or amyloid (n = 6 from two experiments).

(D) Expression of IL-15 transcripts by peritoneal cells of WT, feeble or Ifnar<sup>−/−</sup> B6 mice 18 hr after inoculation of amyloid (n = 6 from two experiments).

(E) Number of NK cells in the peritoneal cavity of mice pre-injected with anti-Ly6G or control IgG2a, then inoculated with control or amyloid and harvested after 18 hr (left) and the percentage of IFN-γ<sup>+</sup> NK cells from mice inoculated with amyloid (right) (n = 5 from two experiments).

(F) Transcript expression of ISGs and cytokines by cDCs or monocytes sorted from peritoneal cells harvested 6 hr after inoculation of amyloid. The heatmap is shown.

(G) Peritoneal NK cells isolated from amyloid-inoculated B6 mice were cultured in medium (−), with NK-depleted PECs from WT mice, or with PECs from Ifnar<sup>−/−</sup> B6 mice, then stimulated with 10 μg/ml amyloid for 24 hr. The levels of cytokines relative to (−) culture were calculated after ELISA analysis. Data represent results from six experiments.

(H) Expression of IL-15 transcript by peritoneal cells of WT or Nox2<sup>−/−</sup> B6 mice 18 hr after inoculation of amyloid (n = 6 from two experiments).

(A–E and G) Data represent mean and SEM.

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, and ***p < 0.001. NS, not significant. See also Figures S3 and S7.
Neutrophils Prohibit B Cell Autoimmunity in Male Lupus-Prone Mice

F1 progeny of NZB/W mice spontaneously develop an autoimmune syndrome with remarkable similarity to human SLE. We compared young B6 and age-matched NZB/W mice and detected somewhat lower number of splenic neutrophils in the NZB/W strain (Figure 7A, left). In humans, many types of autoimmune pathology display strong female predominance (Fish, 2008). Likewise, female NZB/W mice develop an accelerated lupus-like disease compared with male NZB/W mice. Further examination revealed a selective decrease in the number of neutrophils in female NZB/W in comparison with female B6 mice (Figure 7A, right). Analysis of the plasma samples revealed higher levels of circulating H2O2 in young male compared with female mice in both strains (Figure 7B, left). By contrast, the amount of circulating MPO was not significantly different (Figure 7B, right), which echoes the discordant in vivo production between MPO and H2O2 observed earlier (Figure S1C). Although no overt difference was detected in the number of splenic NK cells (Figure S5A), male NZB/W mice contain significantly higher numbers of NK cells than B6 males (Figure 7C). In general, NZB/W mice harbored the elevated numbers of mature NK cells (Figure 7D). Strikingly, all NK cells from NZB/W mice, regardless of maturation status or sex, express significantly increased levels of the activating NK cell receptor NKP46 (Figures 7E and S5B). Therefore, neutrophils and NK cells seemingly are differentially regulated between young lupus-prone and healthy mice, which are also influenced by gender.

A recent study suggested that Gr-1^hiCD11b^ cells suppress lupus pathogenesis in young male, but not female, NZB/W mice, based on the observation that continuous administration of anti-Gr-1 antibody increased both anti-dsDNA antibody titers and deposition of IgG immune complexes in the kidney (Trigunaite et al., 2013). To examine whether anti-Gr-1-treatment affects NK cell function, we administrated a single injection of anti-Gr-1 antibody to young male NZB/W mice and detected the appearance of IFN-γ^+^ NK cells in the spleen 4 days later (Figure S6A). As expected, injection of anti-Gr-1 antibody depleted both neutrophils and Ly6C^+^ myeloid cells (Figure S6B). To compare with the earlier findings from amyloid-induced autoimmunity model, we tested the impact of transient neutrophil depletion in young NZB/W mice. Specifically, we injected anti-Ly6G mAb i.p. once into male NZB/W mice, which selectively depleted neutrophils (Figure S6C). CD3^−^NK1.1^+^ NK cells isolated 2 days from the spleen of neutrophil-depleted mice transcribed significantly higher levels of Eomes and Prdm1 (also known as Blimp1), two transcriptional factors highly expressed by NK cells, and more Ifng, indicating strong NK cell activation (Figure 7F). Four days after mAb injection, B cells isolated from mice injected with anti-Ly6G significantly enhanced the expression of genes critical for B cell survival (Bcl2 and Akt1), immunoglobulin gene recombination (Aicda, which encodes activation-induced cytidine deaminase, and Adar, which encodes RNA-specific adenosine deaminase), costimulation (Cd40 and Cd80), and terminal differentiation (Xbp1 and Irf4) (Figure 7G).

To evaluate the functional consequence of neutrophil depletion, we isolated B cells from male NZB/W mice after a single anti-Ly6G mAb injection and cultured them with TLR7 agonist R848. B cells from neutrophil-depleted mice produced significantly higher levels of autoreactive IgG (Figure 7H). Furthermore, male NZB/W mice depleted of neutrophils continuously...
developed increased serum autoantibodies against single-stranded DNA and dsDNA in vivo (Figure 7I). To apprehend the underlying mechanism, we isolated neutrophils from spleen of naive male and female young NZB/W mice and detected the elevated expression of genes whose products are components of neutrophil primary granules (Mpo and Prtn3, which encodes serine protease enzyme 3) or involved in immune suppression (Cd274 and Pdcdg1, which encode PD-L1 and PD-L2, respectively) (Figure 7J). Collectively, these observations reveal a compelling regulatory function of neutrophils in curtailing B cell autoimmunity in male lupus-prone mice.

**DISCUSSION**

Although autoimmune responses are potently restrained by regulatory lymphocytes, how innate immune cells regulate autoimmunity is less well understood. In this study, we have revealed a remarkable role played by neutrophils in limiting the magnitude of immune responses and cell proliferation under various conditions, contributing to the resolution of inflammation (Sareila et al., 2011). In humans and mice alike, NOX2 mutation in gp91phox results in X-linked chronic granulomatous disease, which renders the patients simultaneously prone to serious infections by microbial pathogens, sterile chronic inflammation, and occasionally SLE (Campbell et al., 2012; Sareila et al., 2011). Consistently, a mutation in neutrophil cytosolic factor 2 (NCF2), which results in a reduction of Nox2 activity and ROS production, confers substantially increased SLE (Jacob et al., 2011). Interestingly, rodents bearing Ncf1 mutation are susceptible to autoimmune arthritis (Hultqvist et al., 2004). Our results are consistent with the report showing that Nox2 inhibits the pathogenesis of lupus in MRL-Fas<sup>−/−</sup> mice (Campbell et al., 2012). Further, our findings have revealed that Nox2 controls IFN-γ production, which promotes autoimmune responses (Figure S7).

The functional contribution by neutrophils in autoimmune pathogenesis is seemingly multifaceted (Mayadas et al., 2014; Nauseef and Borregaard, 2014). The inhibitory function of neutrophils we have revealed is closely associated with inflammation-induced activation. In another inductive lupus model, neutrophils infiltrate the peritoneal cavity in response to pristane, a hydrocarbon oil capable of inciting chronic inflammation and autoimmunity (Lee et al., 2011). Interestingly, depletion of neutrophils significantly ameliorated diffuse pulmonary hemorrhage in these mice (Shi et al., 2014). Of note, we did not detect neutrophil activation or death in response to amyloid upon examination of both human and mouse neutrophils, nor did we observe NET formation in vitro or in vivo (not shown). Therefore, how NETosis impacts autoantibody development in amyloid-induced autoimmune model remains uncertain. The observation that neutrophil depletion abolished ANCA (Figure S2) nevertheless implies a role of neutrophils in facilitating neutrophil-specific autoantibody response in vivo. Separately, we have demonstrated that IL-1 did not affect ANA development in the amyloid-inducible autoimmune model, despite its critical role in neutrophil recruitment (Figures 1D and S4). This and the fact that Ifnar−/− mice were defective in general leukocyte recruitment but maintained normal IFN-γ levels indicate a dispensable role of IFN-1 in regulating the cellular cascade critical for humoral autoimmunity.

Although such result was unexpected, inflammasome activation has been shown to impact SLE ambivalently (Shaw et al., 2011; Yin et al., 2013).

Neutrophils and NK cells engage in a bidirectional crosstalk under many conditions (Costantini and Cassatella, 2011; Vivier et al., 2011). In steady state, neutrophils critically facilitate terminal NK cell maturation (Jaeger et al., 2012). In the spleen of NZB/W mice, the homeostasis of neutrophils and NK cells is jointly influenced by gender: young males have more neutrophils and significantly more NK cells than female mice. The elevated number of neutrophils in male NZB/W mice has been shown to be controlled by testosterone, evidenced by the effects of castration and hormone supplementation (Trigunait et al., 2013). Therefore, an increased number of neutrophils may facilitate a larger population of NK cells in these mice. In healthy mice, a clear sex difference exists in the immune cell populations, and during acute inflammation, more neutrophils infiltrate the peritoneal cavity of male mice than females, indicating intrinsic difference between the genders (Scotland et al., 2011). Similar to our observation in mice, plasma hydrogen peroxide production reportedly is significantly higher in men than women, and intriguingly, high H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> levels are correlated with reduced renal and glomeruli dysfunction (Lacy et al., 2000). Therefore, it would be interesting to examine whether the ROS-mediated protective mechanism is breached in male SLE patients.

In response to various stimuli in vitro, human pDCs engage with NK cells through IFN-α/β, costimulatory molecules, and NK receptor-ligand interactions (Gillet et al., 2008). In mice, pDCs are essential for the activation and expansion of NK cells shortly after certain viral infections (Swiezki et al., 2010). Additionally, TLR9-activated pDCs within melanomas can secrete IFN-I, which recruits and activates NK cells, and induce tumor regression in vivo (Liu et al., 2008). Here, we have shown that the pDC-IFN-I pathway stimulates NK cell activation via induction of IL-15 presentation by cDCs. Therefore, a powerful innate immune activation cascade involving pDC-IFN-α/β/cDC-IL-15-NK-IFN-γ is likely operational under diverse physiological conditions—viral infection, autoimmune inflammation, and anticancer immune responses. ROS-producing neutrophils intercept this pathway by downregulating the expression of IL-15.

The contribution of NK cells to systemic autoimmunity remains uncertain (Tian et al., 2012; Fogel et al., 2013). Decreased NK cell numbers or impairment of NK cell-mediated cytotoxicity has been observed in many autoimmune disorders; however, such findings do not correlate with the accumulation of NK cells in inflamed tissues. Nevertheless, NK cells have been directly linked to the pathogenesis of organ-specific autoimmunity, and chronic NK cell lymphocytosis is associated with autoimmune syndromes (Fogel et al., 2013). Importantly, genotype combinations...
Figure 7. Neutrophils Control Autoimmune B Cells in Male NZB/W Mice

(A) Numbers of neutrophils in the spleen of naive B6 and NZB/W mice aged 6–9 weeks (n = 8–10 [left] or 4–6 [right] from two experiments).

(B) Levels of H2O2 and MPO in the plasma of young naive B6 and NZB/W mice as in (A).

(C) Numbers of NK cells in the spleen of young naive B6 and NZB/W mice as in (A).

(D and E) Phenotypes of splenic NK cells in young naive B6 and NZB/W mice as in (A) based on the expression of CD27 and CD11b (D) and NKP46 (E). CD11b+/CD27+ cells are defined as the mature NK cell population, CD11b−/CD27+ as intermediate, and CD11b−/CD27− cells as the immature NK cell population.

(F and G) Relative gene expression by NK cells (F) or B cells (G) isolated from spleen of young NZB/W mice 2 days (F) or 4 days (G) after receiving anti-Ly6G mAb or control IgG2a (n = 4 from two experiments).

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of killer cell immunoglobulin-like receptors and their HLA class I ligands that favor NK cell activation predispose individuals to certain autoimmune disorders (Fogel et al., 2013). Furthermore, genetic polymorphisms in the activating NK cell receptor Nkp30 that results in reduced gene transcription conveys protection from primary Sjogren’s syndrome (pSS), whereas Nkp30-dependent IFN-γ secretion by NK cells is significantly elevated in Sjogren’s patients (Rusakiewicz et al., 2013). These observations collectively suggest a potential involvement of NK cells in promoting systemic autoimmunity. In pre-autoimmune NZB/W mice, we have shown that NK cells are more mature and express high levels of the activating receptor Nkp46. Intriguingly, depletion of neutrophils in male NZB/W mice rapidly stimulated NK cells, which preceded the activation of autoimmune B cells. Early attempts to study the involvement of NK cells in lupus-prone mice were hampered by the concurrent depletion of invariant natural killer T (iNKT) cells after injection of NK1.1 mAb, a serious complication because iNKT cells affect autoimmunity development (Novak and Lehuen, 2011). A detailed study using NK cell-specific knockout mice is necessary to definitively establish the role played by NK cells in lupus pathogenesis.

Despite signaling through distinct receptors, IFN-I and IFN-II induce largely overlapping interferon-stimulated genes as a result of similar JAK-STAT signaling. Interestingly, both IFN-I and IFN-II are implicated in SLE: SLE patients have elevated levels of circulating IFN-γ and IFN-γ-induced molecular signature, and lack IFN-α, patients receiving IFN-γ treatment occasionally develop lupus-like disease (Pollard et al., 2013; Chiche et al., 2014). In pSS, the presence of pDCs and NK cells correlates with the dual signature of IFN-I and IFN-II in the salivary glands (Rusakiewicz et al., 2013; Gottenberg et al., 2006). Furthermore, polymorphism of IFNG favoring elevated gene expression and combinational polymorphisms of the gene encoding IFN-γ receptor are associated with increased SLE susceptibility and lupus nephritis (Kim et al., 2010). Consistently, transgenic mice overexpressing IFN-γ develop ANA and lupus nephritis (Seezy et al., 1997). Lupus-prone mice, such as MRL-Fas−/− and NZB/W, invariably require IFN-γ signaling for disease pathogenesis, as do mice in pristane-induced and chemically induced lupus models (Pollard et al., 2013). However, the mechanism by which IFN-γ promotes autoimmune progression remains elusive. Our study demonstrates a sequential link between type I and type II interferons and reveals a dual obligation of these interferons in humoral autoimmunity. We have identified NK cells as a source of IFN-γ downstream of pDC activation and demonstrated that IFN-γ can boost pDC-induced Th1 development. Lee et al. reported that autoimmune RoquinRKO mice overproduce IFN-γ and have exaggerated Th1 development and a dysregulated germinal center response (Lee et al., 2012). Further detailed characterization is needed to fully elucidate the involvement of NK cells in facilitating B cell development and the synergistic interplay between IFN-I and IFN-II.

Various therapeutic strategies have been developed with an aim to block the function of IFN-I in SLE (Thanou and Merrill, 2014). Our findings suggest that a successful treatment regimen should also attempt to block IFN-II or target both IFN families, if enhanced susceptibility to infection can be managed. To harness the strategy deployed by the male mice with genetic predisposition to autoimmunity, specific NOX2 agonists may provide a means to restore the B cell tolerance and reduce systemic inflammation in patients. Strategies to target NK cells and other IFN-γ-producing producers might also benefit the effort.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

**Mice**

All experiments were conducted with sex- and age-matched mice. Animal studies were approved by the institutional animal care and use committee of University of Texas MD Anderson. C57BL/6, BALB/cByJ, Ifng−/− (B6.129S-Iftngtm1Tch/J), Nox2−/− (B6.129S6-Cybbtm1Pir/J), NZB/W (NZBWF1/J), and B6-Fas−/− (B6.129S6-MRl-Faslpr/J) mice were purchased from The Jackson Laboratory. Dr. W. Overwijk (University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX) provided Infar1−/− C57BL/6 mice, and Dr. T. Okada (RIKEN, Research Center for Allergy and Immunology, Yokohama, Japan) provided B6.129SvP2−/− C57BL/6 mice. If5a−/− and feebly C57BL/6 mice were described previously (Castillo et al., 2009; Biasius et al., 2012). All animal experiments were conducted on 8- to 12-week-old mice unless otherwise specified.

**SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION**

Supplemental Information includes Supplemental Experimental Procedures, three figures, and seven tables and can be found with this article online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cellrep.2015.07.021.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

X.H., J.L., S.D.-E., J.D.D., and S.M.A. performed research; S.S.W., D.P., Z.L., P.B., Y.Y., and K.S.S. contributed tools; L.L.L. contributed to experimental design, data interpretation, and manuscript preparation; and W.C. designed and performed research, analyzed and interpreted data, and wrote the manuscript.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We thank Drs. T. Okada and W. Overwijk for providing B6.129SvP2−/− and Infan1−/− mice. This research was supported by Institutional Research Grant from The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center (to W.C.), grants from the National Institutes of Health (AI074809 to W.C. and AI068129 to L.L.L.), Natural Science Foundation of China (31470854), and partly through MD Anderson’s Cancer Center Support Grant from the NIH (CA016672). We thank Dr. Shao-Cong Sun for critically reading the manuscript and the MD Anderson Flow Cytometry Core for technical assistance.

Z.L., P.B., and Y.Y. are employees of Medimmune, LLC.

Received: January 4, 2015

Revised: June 12, 2015

Accepted: July 9, 2015

Published: August 6, 2015
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