Redefining strategies to introduce tolerance-inducing cellular therapy in human beings to combat autoimmunity and transplantation reactions

Anja ten Brinke1,*, Irma Joosten2, S. Marieke van Ham1, Cees van Kooten3 and Berent Jan Prakken4

1 Department of Immunopathology, Division Research and Landsteiner Laboratory, Sanquin Blood Supply, Academic Medical Center, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2 Laboratory for Medical Immunology, Department of Laboratory Medicine, Radboud University Medical Center, Nijmegen, Netherlands
3 Department of Nephrology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, Netherlands
4 Laboratory for Translational Immunology, Center for Molecular and Cellular Immunology, Wilhelmina Children's Hospital, University Medical Centre Utrecht, Utrecht, Netherlands

*Correspondence: Anja ten Brinke, Department of Immunopathology, Division Research, Sanquin Blood Supply, P.O. Box 9190, 1006 AD Amsterdam, Netherlands. e-mail: a.tenbrinke@sanquin.nl

Clinical translation of tolerance-inducing cell therapies requires a novel approach focused on innovative networks, patient involvement, and, foremost, a fundamental paradigm shift in thinking from both Academia, and Industry and Regulatory Agencies. Tolerance-inducing cell products differ essentially from conventional drugs. They are personalized and target interactive immunological networks to shift the balance toward tolerance. The human cell products are often absent or fundamentally different in animals. This creates important limitations of pre-clinical animal testing for safety and efficacy of these products and calls for novel translational approaches, which require the combined efforts of the different parties involved. Dedicated international and multidisciplinary consortia that focus on clinical translation are of utmost importance. They can help in informing and educating regulatory policy makers on the unique requirements for these cell products, ranging from pre-clinical animal studies, (animal) model systems] and subsequently be applied in human subjects in clinical studies. This process entails a number of essential and intricate steps, which require optimal fine-tuning. These steps serve to demonstrate proof-of-concept for the therapeutic potential of the product and to gain optimal information on the safety of the product. Failures or hurdles at any of these steps will substantially slow down the translation of the tolerance-inducing cell therapies (Figure 1 and Table 1).

WRONG INCENTIVES

Publications in high impact journals enhance the career of young academic scientist and their esteem and improve their chances for subsequent funding. Currently, these journals have a preference for highly innovative studies, which are by nature often fundamental. Studies in human subjects are less straightforward and relatively seldom make it to the top journals in the field. Thus, the current academic reward structure has created a wrong incentive for researchers, namely, to keep their research focused on what yields the highest chance of a next top publication and not on what directly or indirectly might be beneficial for translation into human application. This can be considered as a detrimental development for the design of novel clinical therapies.

CONFUSED REGULATORS

Currently, regulatory bodies treat cellular therapy in a similar fashion as conventional drugs. Unfamiliarity with tolerance-inducing cell therapies is at the basis of this view and is readily explained by
the novelty of these therapies. All cell-based therapeutic products (irrespective whether they aim to induce immunological tolerance or immune activation) are essentially different from conventional chemical drugs. Still, for efficacy and safety of cell products, regulatory agencies mostly rely on the models used for testing conventional drugs. This leads to the request for similar product requirements in extensive animal studies on dosage, conventional toxicology, and pharmacodynamics. Many of the characteristics of chemical compounds (solubility, diffusion capacity, turnover into toxic side products) that are tested in such studies, however, do not apply to cells. Therefore, these studies are often of little use for predicting efficacy or safety of a cellular product upon infusion. These studies create additional costs, slow down clinical translation, and hamper effective progression of cell-based therapies.

**MEN ARE NOT MICE**

Up to today, much emphasis has been put on the use of experimental animal models as a necessary step toward the clinic, not in the least by regulatory bodies. The use of animal models to learn about mechanisms of action, define therapeutic targets, and design potential therapeutics is beyond doubt. Meta-analysis has shown that only about a third of highly cited animal research is translated at the level of human randomized trials (12). This is in part due to the fact that studies on animals do not always predict the effects of immunomodulatory therapies in human beings correctly. Specifically, for tolerance-inducing therapies, its use needs redefining.

It is important to distinguish the value of animal models based on the type of immunomodulatory therapy used, i.e., biologicals versus cell-based products. Studies in mice have contributed
to the success of biologicals, e.g., TNFα blocking therapies. Initial interesting observations that TNFα blockage diminished IL-1 production in in vitro human rheumatoid synovial cultures led to extensive studies in mouse models for rheumatoid arthritis, which have resulted into very successful treatment of rheumatoid arthritis with TNFα blocking agents in human beings [as reviewed in Ref. (13)]. Also studies in mice supported evidence that inhibitory molecules like CTLA-4 are involved in immune control and facilitated the use of anti-CTLA-4 antibodies in clinical practice to treat cancer (14).

Clear differences exist between biologicals and cell-based products. First, biologicals are generated in batches, while cell-based products are personalized and often consist of modified cells of individual patients. This obviously complicates animal testing of the latter. Biologicals are also different to cell-based products in terms of mechanism of action. Whereas biologicals initially target one single molecule, cellular products target multiple effector molecules and cells that act in highly interactive networks to shift the immunological balance toward immune activation (anti-cancer therapy) or toward immune tolerance. This fact has important consequences when realizing that the human immune system differs more from rodent models than often is assumed in genetic make-up and immunological maturity. A recent study clearly underscored that genome-wide inflammatory responses in some major diseases/disease models significantly differed between human beings and mice (15). As a consequence, experimental models – though useful in many other ways – mimic poorly human disease. Also for biologicals, the different genetic make-up of the target of the biological in animal models compared to human beings has created a false sense of safety in the past. The development of anti-CD40 ligand antibodies to prevent transplant rejection and treat SLE was halted when the first studies in human beings showed thrombo-embolic complications (16, 17).

We foresee several ways to speed up the translation of tolerance-inducing cell therapies into the clinic, as discussed below.

CHANGE INCENTIVES

The changed environment requires a transformation in the appraisal of science. Because of the limitations of animal studies for the final translation toward human beings, academic evaluators and journals need to re-evaluate the value of the complex and often more messy studies in human beings. Likewise, as single research groups cannot perform such extensive human studies, granting organizations should give priority support to large international and multidisciplinary consortia to prevent overlap and to accelerate the process.

USE A MODEL AS A MODEL

It is clear that men are not mice. If we want to cure a human disease, we should keep this as a primary focus when considering the use of experimental models. Though seemingly obvious, it requires a paradigm shift in thinking, not only from researchers but also from journals and regulators. To date, major journals and regulators almost always request validation in animal models as a golden standard. We believe that for the development of cellular therapy this is not the right approach. Even "humanized" mouse models can only mimic the human system and never completely reflect a human disease with its enormous heterogeneity and complexity (23). Animal models should be used for what they are developed for, namely, as model for mechanistic pathways and not as model...
for a specific disease. As such, they can be instrumental for specific issues that cannot be addressed in human beings directly, like the in vivo interaction of cellular products with other immune cells and local tissues and effects thereof. Animal models may be specifically valuable to evaluate issues as homing, longevity, and stability of the tolerance-inducing cellular products. Still, definite proof for these issues needs to be obtained in clinical trials in human beings. Therefore, while being a valuable source for mechanistic data and safety data on product stability, animal models should not be used as a single decisive requirement for tolerance-inducing cellular therapy development.

USE THE HUMAN MODEL

Efforts should be made to obtain data from human studies. For example, migration potential, dosing, and life-span of tolerance-inducing cell therapies can be deduced from experiences with cellular therapy in cancer. Sometimes, a case-report in human beings can be as valuable and informative as a study in a mouse model (24). Certainly, the first trial on tolerance-inducing cell therapies will yield valuable information. Phase "0" studies using very low dosage of the product may be specifically considered to establish the stability of the tolerance-promoting capacity of the cellular product. Finally, to establish clinical efficacy of novel tolerance-inducing cell therapies, it is imperative to define reliable surrogate outcome parameters that reflect effective immunotherapy. This needs to arise from reverse translation, i.e., from bedside-to-bench, and thus again through studies in human beings (25).

For that reason, we strongly advocate that development of cell-specific immunomonitoring technology in human beings is further advanced and promoted. Thus, clinical and animal model-based observations ideally should complement each other and lead to insights, which would not be possible by either one alone.

SCIENTIFIC COLLABORATION

The development of cellular therapies can only be realized through extensive international collaborative networking. Experience and data should be shared to prevent repetition, waste of funding, and to reach consensus on difficult questions. This requires a different mind-set from the general competitive nature of basic biomedical research. Promising initiatives in this respect are the ONE study, a unified approach evaluating cellular immunotherapy in solid organ transplantation, the Immune Tolerance Network (ITN, sponsored by NIAID), the recently initiated EU COST Action A FACTIT (Action to Focus and Accelerate tolerance-inducing cellular therapies), and the development of broad platforms for biological studies such as UCAN-U (Understanding Childhood Arthritis Network) (26).

INOLVE THE STAKEHOLDERS

Patients (and patient organizations) are the true stakeholders of cellular therapy development. They should be more closely involved in risk and benefit analysis of cellular therapies. There are various examples of patient organizations as true catalysts for novel development, for example, in the field of muscular dystrophy (27). We propose that basic scientists, clinicians, regulators, industry, and patients collaboratively develop guidelines for strategic development of defined cellular therapies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Anja ten Brinke, Irma Joosten, S. Marieke van Ham, Cees van Kooten, and Berent Jan Prakken wrote the paper.

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