Protection against a Malaria Challenge by Sporozoite Inoculation

Meta Roestenberg, M.D., Matthew McCall, M.D., Joost Hopman, M.D., Jorien Wiersma, Adrian J.F. Luty, Ph.D., Geert Jan van Gemert, B.Sc., Marga van de Vegte-Bolmer, B.Sc., Ben van Schaijk, M.Sc., Karina Teelen, Theo Arens, Lopke Spaarman, B.Sc., Quirijn de Mast, M.D., Will Roeffen, Ph.D., Georges Snounou, Ph.D., Laurent Rénia, Ph.D., Andre van der Ven, M.D., Cornelus C. Hermsen, Ph.D., and Robert Sauerwein, M.D.

From the Departments of Medical Microbiology (M.R., M.M., J.H., J.W., A.J.F.L., G.J.G., M.V.-B., B.S., K.T., T.A., L.S., W.R., C.C.H., R.S.) and General Internal Medicine (Q.M., A.V.), Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Center, Nijmegen, the Netherlands; the Department of Parasitology, INSERM Unité 511, Hôpital Pitié–Salpêtrière, and the Université Pierre et Marie Curie — both in Paris (G.S.); and the Laboratory of Malaria Immunobiology, Singapore Immunology Network, Agency for Technology and Research, Biopolis, Singapore (L.R.). Address reprint requests to Dr. Sauerwein at the Department of Medical Microbiology 268, Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Center, P.O. Box 9101, 6500 HB Nijmegen, the Netherlands, or at r.sauerwein@mmb.umcn.nl.

Drs. Roestenberg and McCall contributed equally to this article.


ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND
An effective vaccine for malaria is urgently needed. Naturally acquired immunity to malaria develops slowly, and induction of protection in humans can be achieved artificially by the inoculation of radiation-attenuated sporozoites by means of more than 1000 infective mosquito bites.

METHODS
We exposed 15 healthy volunteers — with 10 assigned to a vaccine group and 5 assigned to a control group — to bites of mosquitoes once a month for 3 months while they were receiving a prophylactic regimen of chloroquine. The vaccine group was exposed to mosquitoes that were infected with Plasmodium falciparum, and the control group was exposed to mosquitoes that were not infected with the malaria parasite. One month after the discontinuation of chloroquine, protection was assessed by homologous challenge with five mosquitoes infected with P. falciparum. We assessed humoral and cellular responses before vaccination and before the challenge to investigate correlates of protection.

RESULTS
All 10 subjects in the vaccine group were protected against a malaria challenge with the infected mosquitoes. In contrast, patent parasitemia (i.e., parasites found in the blood on microscopical examination) developed in all five control subjects. Adverse events were mainly reported by vaccinees after the first immunization and by control subjects after the challenge; no serious adverse events occurred. In this model, we identified the induction of parasite-specific pluripotent effector memory T cells producing interferon-γ, tumor necrosis factor α, and interleukin-2 as a promising immunologic marker of protection.

CONCLUSIONS
Protection against a homologous malaria challenge can be induced by the inoculation of intact sporozoites. (ClinicalTrials.gov number, NCT00442377.)
Malaria is responsible for a significant burden of morbidity and mortality in the developing world, and an effective vaccine against this disease is urgently needed. Despite decades of research, a licensed vaccine is still not available, largely because immunity to Plasmodium falciparum malaria is considered difficult to acquire, whether through natural exposure or artificially through vaccination. A further critical factor is our incomplete understanding of precisely what constitutes protective antimalarial immunity in humans.

The possibility of vaccinating humans against P. falciparum malaria was raised originally by the success of the radiation-attenuated sporozoite model developed several decades ago. Irradiation of infectious mosquitoes disrupts the gene expression of sporozoites, which remain capable of hepatocyte invasion but are no longer capable of complete liver-stage maturation or progression to the pathogenic blood stage. Infection of human volunteers with irradiated sporozoites thus exposes them to liver-stage antigens and generates pre-erythrocytic immunity. However, the requirement of a minimum of 1000 bites by irradiated mosquitoes during five or more immunization sessions in order to successfully induce sterile immunity in humans precludes this method for routine immunization.

A subunit vaccine can be developed on the basis of antigens expressed by pre-erythrocytic, intra-erythrocytic, or sexual stages of the parasite. Unfortunately, results of many such subunit vaccines in humans have been disappointing. To date, only one candidate vaccine, which is based on the circumsporozoite protein and known as RTS,S, has progressed to phase 3 field trials. The protection induced by this vaccine is encouraging, but the ultimate success of this approach remains to be determined.

In rodent models, sterile protection against malaria can be achieved by the inoculation of intact sporozoites while treating the animals concomitantly with chloroquine, a drug that kills parasites in the asexual blood stage but not in the pre-erythrocytic stage. The efficacy of this treatment is significantly higher than that of the radiation-attenuated sporozoite model. We therefore designed a proof-of-concept study in volunteers who had not been previously exposed to malaria to investigate whether protection can be induced by this approach in humans and to explore the immune responses elicited.

**Methods**

**Study Subjects**

We recruited 15 healthy volunteers between the ages of 18 and 45 years who had no history of malaria or of living in an area in which malaria is endemic in the 6 months before study entry. Only one volunteer had ever been in an endemic area, several years earlier. All volunteers underwent routine physical examination and hematologic and biochemical screening at the Clinical Research Center at Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre. The results of serologic analysis for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B and C, and asexual P. falciparum parasites were negative in all subjects.

**Study Oversight**

All subjects provided written informed consent. The trial was approved by the institutional review board at the Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre. The study sponsor, the Dioraphte Foundation, was not involved in the design of the study, in the gathering or analysis of the data, or in the writing of the manuscript. All authors vouch for the accuracy and completeness of the data.

**Study Design**

We randomly assigned the subjects in a double-blind fashion to two study groups: 10 to a vaccine group and 5 to a control group (Fig. 1). The mean (±SD) age of the subjects was 22.0±1.5 years in the vaccine group and 24.0±1.4 years in the control group; seven subjects in the vaccine group were women, as were four subjects in the control group.

Chloroquine was provided to all subjects in a standard prophylactic regimen of a loading dose of 300 mg on each of the first 2 days and then 300 mg once a week, starting on day 7, for a total duration of 13 weeks. While receiving chloroquine, subjects in the vaccine group were exposed on three occasions at monthly intervals to bites of 12 to 15 mosquitoes that had been infected with P. falciparum, for a total exposure of bites from 36 to 45 infected mosquitoes per subject. Control subjects received bites from an equal number of uninfected mosquitoes on the same occasions.

Anopheles stephensi mosquitoes were reared ac-
The New England Journal of Medicine

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sulfoxide, and stored in liquid nitrogen. Antibody titers were assessed by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and immunofluorescence assay, according to standard protocols.\textsuperscript{22} Cellular responses to cryopreserved asexual parasites were assessed by 24-hour in vitro peripheral-blood-stimulation assays,\textsuperscript{22} followed by intracellular cytokine staining with the use of a Fix and Perm Kit (Caltag Laboratories) and flow cytometry. A more detailed description of these immunologic assays is provided in the Supplementary Appendix, available with the full text of this article at NEJM.org.

**STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

We performed flow cytometric analysis using CellQuest software, and all analyses were performed with the use of SPSS software. Differences in responses among subjects at various time points and between subjects in the vaccine group and those in the control group were analyzed by non-parametric measures (Wilcoxon and Mann–Whitney tests, respectively). A two-sided $P$ value of less than 0.05 was considered to indicate statistical significance.

**RESULTS**

**STUDY SUBJECTS**

All 15 subjects completed the immunization phase of the study. All subjects received chloroquine prophylaxis and subsequently underwent a malaria challenge (Fig. 1).

No parasites were seen in the peripheral-blood smears of any of the 10 subjects in the vaccine group after each of the three immunization sessions during chloroquine prophylaxis. However, after the first immunization, a brief submicroscopic parasitemic episode was detected in all vaccinees (Fig. 2A). This finding was not unexpected, since chloroquine has no effect against either sporozoites, liver-stage parasites, or the early ring forms of the first generation of blood-stage parasites that are caused by merozoites released from mature hepatic schizonts.\textsuperscript{11} After each of the subsequent two immunizations, a progressively reduced incidence and burden of submicroscopic parasitemia was seen.

In line with these findings, all vaccinees reported solicited or unsolicited symptoms that were recorded as adverse events at least once during the immunization phase. With the exclusion of local itching after the mosquito bites, adverse events were most commonly reported after the first immunization (in 9 of 10 subjects), with headache being the most frequent symptom (reported by 7 subjects) (Table 1). Only a few adverse events were reported in the vaccine group subsequently (in two subjects after the third immunization). Severe adverse events were reported by
### Table 1. Adverse Events after the First, Second, and Third Exposures to Immunizing Mosquito Bites and after Challenge with Infectious Mosquito Bites.²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adverse Event</th>
<th>Vaccine Group (N=10)</th>
<th>Control Group (N=5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After Immunization</td>
<td>After Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exposure I</td>
<td>Exposure II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdominal pain — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headache — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of appetite — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaise — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myalgia — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nausea — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vomiting — no.</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total — no. (%)†</td>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>4 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>3 (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>2 (20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² Subjects could have more than one adverse event, and reports of events could have been either solicited or unsolicited. Only adverse events that were possibly or probably related to the study are listed.

† The highest-grade event is listed per subject per infection.
three vaccinees: two had a fever above 39°C after
the first immunization, and one reported severe
malaise after the last immunization.

After challenge with the homologous NF54
strain of *P. falciparum*, asexual blood-stage para-
sites were detected in peripheral-blood smears of
all five control subjects between days 7 and 11
after exposure (mean prepatent period, 9.2 days).
Real-time PCR analyses revealed the expected
cyclical multiplication of blood-stage parasites
(Fig. 2B). The clinical course and kinetics of para-
site multiplication were similar to those in previ-
sous studies involving subjects who had not been
exposed to malaria, with all control subjects
reporting severe events, in particular fever above
39°C and malaise (Table 1). In contrast, there was
no evidence of blood-stage parasites in any of the
vaccinees at any time during the post-challenge
follow-up period until day 21, either by repeated
microscopy of peripheral-blood smears or by real-
time PCR analyses (Fig. 2B). Interestingly, in the
week after the malaria challenge, nine vaccinees
reported mild-to-moderate events. No serious ad-
verse events occurred during any part of the trial,
and all 15 subjects completed follow-up according
to protocol.

Mean peak plasma levels of chloroquine and
desethylchloroquine were 76 μg per liter (range,
58 to 104) and 13 μg per liter (range, 5 to 33), re-
spectively, which were deemed to be below the
minimum therapeutic concentrations in vivo.

Furthermore, blood-stage parasite multiplication
kinetics in the control subjects were identical to
those in previous studies, which suggested that
any residual chloroquine levels had no measurable
parasiticidal effect.

After immunization, antibody responses to
both sporozoites and blood-stage parasites de-
veloped in vaccinees but not in control subjects,
as shown by ELISA (Table 2) and immunofluor-
escence assay (Fig. 1 in the Supplementary Ap-
pendix). Seroconversion to the circumsporozoite
protein, an immunodominant sporozoite-stage and
liver-stage antigen, occurred in eight vaccinees. In
contrast, seroconversion to crude asexual-stage
antigen occurred in only three vaccinees. Antibod-
ies to two predominantly asexual antigens, apical
membrane antigen 1 (AMA-1) and glutamate-rich
protein (GLURP), both of which are leading vac-
cine candidates, were undetectable. These data are
consistent with the relatively low-dose exposure
to asexual blood-stage antigens in the vaccinees.

Cellular immune responses were assessed by
counting cytokine-producing cells in peripheral-
blood specimens from the subjects, with the use
of intracellular cytokine staining and flow cytom-
etry after 24 hours of in vitro stimulation with
erthrocytes infected with the homologous strain
of *P. falciparum* or with uninfected erythrocytes
(Fig. 3, and Fig. 2 and 3 in the Supplementary
Appendix). Whereas cellular responses to unin-
fected erythrocytes did not differ in any experi-

### Table 2. Antibody Reactivity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Day I-1</th>
<th>Day C-1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vaccine Group (N=10)</td>
<td>Control Group (N=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of Subjects</td>
<td>Median Antibody Titer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSP</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMA-1</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLURP</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asexual blood-stage antigen</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>&lt;0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data are for subjects who had a detectable response. Numbers in parentheses are ranges. All analyses were performed with the use of an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay. Plasma was collected from all subjects before immunization (day I-1) and before the malaria challenge (day C-1). A plasma pool obtained from 100 Tanzanian adults living in an area in which malaria was endemic was used as a reference positive control, set at 100 arbitrary units (AU). Thresholds for circumsporozoite protein (CSP), apical membrane antigen 1 (AMA-1), glutamate-rich protein (GLURP), and asexual blood-stage positivity were 12, 5.8, 42, and 0.6 AU, respectively. ND denotes not done.
ment from responses to culture medium alone, stimulation with infected erythrocytes elicited small percentages of lymphocytes producing interferon-γ or TNF-α, but not interleukin-2, in the two groups before immunization (see day I-1 in Figure 2 in the Supplementary Appendix).

Although there was no significant difference in the overall proportion of cells producing individual cytokines (interferon-γ or TNF-α) in either group after immunization (day C-1), a significant increase was observed in the proportion of cells producing multiple cytokines in response to infected erythrocytes in vaccinees, as compared with baseline: P=0.03 for the within-group comparison for interferon-γ and interleukin-2; P=0.046 for TNF-α and interleukin-2; and P=0.03 for interferon-γ, TNF-α, and interleukin-2 (Fig. 3A, 3B, and 3C). The importance of these pluripotent lymphocytes in acquired immune protection is suggested by their higher cytokine content and may reflect better effector function (Fig. 3D, 3E, and 3F). The major contributors to this increase in pluripotent lymphocytes with a response to infected erythrocytes were CD3+CD45RO+ memory-like T cells (P=0.02 for the comparison with day I-1) (Fig. 3G, and Fig. 3 in the Supplementary Appendix). CD4+CD8− cells showed a particularly marked response (P=0.005 for the comparison with day I-1) (Fig. 3H). Most noticeably, these new pluripotent lymphocytes were predominantly of the effector memory CD62L−CD45RO+ phenotype (P=0.005 for the comparison with day I-1), although there was also a small but significant increase in the numbers of responding central memory CD62L+CD45RO+ cells in vaccinees (P=0.02 for the comparison with day I-1) (Fig. 3I).

**Discussion**

Our study shows that the inoculation of intact sporozoites induces more effective protection against a homologous challenge with *P. falciparum* malaria than does irradiation-attenuated sporozoite immunization. In the endemic situation, however, nonsterile semi-immunity is acquired only after years of repeated natural exposure. We believe that the improved efficiency of our approach was due to a critical balance of exposure to pre-erythrocytic and intraerythrocytic antigens. In contrast to irradiated sporozoites that arrest early during liver-stage development,4 intact sporozoites under chloroquine cover mature fully and develop into a first generation of blood-stage parasites,11 thus presenting to the host’s immune system a broader array of pre-erythrocytic antigens, as well as erythrocytic-stage antigens (albeit at relatively low dose).

The contribution of intraerythrocytic antigens to the development of protective immunity is suggested by Pombo et al.,25 who reported that repeated intravenous injection of ultra-low densities of blood-stage parasites, followed by drug cure with atovaquone–proguanil, induced protection in human volunteers against a similarly low-dose blood-stage challenge. However, caution needs to be exercised when interpreting the latter results, since residual concentrations of antimalarial drugs may partially or even fully have accounted for the observed protection.26

**Figure 3 (facing page). In Vitro Pluripotent Cytokine Responses to *Plasmodium falciparum* Parasites on Flow Cytometry.**

The proportion of lymphocytes that produced interferon-γ (IFN-γ) and interleukin-2 (Panel A), tumor necrosis factor α (TNF-α) and interleukin-2 (Panel B), or IFN-γ, TNF-α, and interleukin-2 (Panel C) after in vitro stimulation with erythrocytes infected with the homologous strain of *P. falciparum* (PRBC), with uninfected erythrocytes (uRBC), or with phytohemagglutinin (PHA) as a positive control are shown before immunization (day I-1) and before malaria challenge (day C-1). Dashed lines represent the proportion of positive cells in unstimulated wells (culture medium only). The geometric mean fluorescence intensity of cells producing IFN-γ (Panel D), TNF-α (Panel E), and interleukin-2 (Panel F) that were isolated from vaccinees on day C-1 is shown after stimulation in vitro with infected erythrocytes. Cells are grouped according to their positivity or negativity for each of the other two cytokines. In Panels G, H, and I, the proportion of lymphocytes that produced IFN-γ and interleukin-2 in response to infected erythrocytes are shown on day I-1 and day C-1 for lymphocyte phenotypes, including naive T cells (CD3+CD45RO−), memory T cells (CD3+CD45RO+), and non-T lymphocytes (CD4−CD8−) (Panel G); for T-cell phenotypes, including helper T cells (CD4+CD8−), cytotoxic T cells (CD4−CD8+), and other lymphocytes (CD4−CD8−) (Panel H); and for memory phenotypes, including naive T cells (CD62L+CD45RO−), effector memory T cells (CD62L−CD45RO−), and other lymphocytes (CD62L−CD45RO−) (Panel I). The proportions of lymphocytes that produced IFN-γ and interleukin-2 after stimulation with uninfected erythrocytes were below 0.005% (not shown). All P values are for the comparison between the vaccine group and the control group and were calculated with the use of the Mann–Whitney test. The T bars represent standard errors.
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In the field, in contrast, patent parasitemia typically develops before patients seek treatment. In such patients, acute blood-stage infection may suppress the induction of protective pre-erythrocytic immunity, as has been shown in rodent models. Indeed, parasitemic episodes or attacks of febrile malaria in Kenyan children are prospectively associated with a poorer induction and more rapid attrition of cellular ex vivo and memory responses to a pre-erythrocytic *P. falciparum* antigen. Thus, patent parasitemia and probably chronic subpatent parasitemia, which occur regularly in children in endemic areas, appear to induce inhibitory mechanisms that delay the generation of protective antiparasite immunity. Meta-analysis of studies of intermittent preventive therapy in infants has decreased the concern about a rebound effect of prophylaxis and in some cases even indicates sustained protection after discontinuation of prophylaxis, thus further indicating that the

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### Lymphocyte Phenotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vaccine</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD3+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD4+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD8+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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### T-Cell Phenotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vaccine</th>
<th>Control</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD4+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD8+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Memory Phenotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vaccine</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD62L+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
acquisition and maintenance of protective immunity do not depend on chronic blood-stage exposure.

Thus, the salient feature of our approach seems to be the exposure of the immune system to a greater array of pre-erythrocytic and intra-erythrocytic antigens, while restricting the development of symptomatic and potentially immuno-suppressive parasitemia. Since NF54 is known to be a chloroquine-sensitive strain in vitro, we cannot formally exclude a synergistic effect of residual subtherapeutic chloroquine levels on immunologic parasite clearance. However, chloroquine levels before the malaria challenge approached or fell below the limit of detection and had no measureable parasiticidal effect in control subjects. Of more importance, the longevity of immunologic responses, both naturally acquired and vaccine-induced, remains a critical issue in malaria, and follow-up studies are planned to address this issue.

In this model, we have identified responses of pluripotent effector memory T cells as being associated with protection. In one study, undefined subgroups of lymphocytes with the same cytokine profile were associated with the induction and maintenance of antigen-specific T-cell memory in subjects who were immunized with pre-erythrocytic candidate malaria vaccines, but associations with protection were not explored. However, the potent effector function of pluripotent cells, as suggested by their high cytokine content, has been noted in other investigations that showed their protective role in other infectious diseases. Further detailed investigations will be necessary to determine the longevity of this immunologic response, its association with central memory-type T-cell activity, and its ability to serve as a true correlate of protection.

Since the magnitude of the first wave of parasitemia is thought to directly reflect the burden of erupting mature liver schizonts, the stepwise decrease of such organisms after each subsequent immunizing infection and the absence of PCR-detectable parasitemia after the malaria challenge would suggest that the protection in our model was primarily due to pre-erythrocytic immunity. However, a component of blood-stage immunity (i.e., the inhibition of erythrocyte invasion and maturation of minute liver-derived merozoite inocula that cannot be detected on PCR) is also possible. Indeed, we found that cellular responses to asexual blood-stage parasites before challenge were a discriminative marker of exposure and protection in our subjects, and similar immune responses may have contributed to protection in the rodent model. However, many of the best-studied P. falciparum antigens conferring protective immunity are shared among sporozoite, liver-stage, and blood-stage parasites. Thus, it is plausible that our findings represent the response to a broad antigenic repertoire that transcends parasitic developmental stages, making a division between pre-erythrocytic immunity and intraerythrocytic immunity inappropriate. At present, the stage specificity of the protective immune response must remain formally unresolved, although one way to further address this issue in future studies would be a blood-stage challenge.

Although the methods described here do not represent a widely implementable vaccine strategy, the induction of sterile protection against a homologous malaria challenge suggests that the concept of a whole-parasite malaria vaccine warrants further consideration. In addition, this model allows the nature of protective immune responses against malaria, both stage-specific and antigen-specific, to be further investigated.

Supported by the Dioraphte Foundation, by a fellowship from the European Union FP6 Network of Excellence (to Dr. McCall), and by grants from the NutsOhra Foundation (to Dr. van der Ven) and Agence Nationale de la Recherche in France (to Dr. Snounou). Dr. Snounou reports receiving consulting fees from Sigma Tau and GlaxoSmithKline. No other potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

We thank the study volunteers for their participation; K. Nganou Makamdop for help with the RT-PCR assays; J. Bakkers and W. Melchers for parasite genotyping; W. Arts, N. Huibers, and P. Beckers for reading blood slides; P. Houze and D. Mazer for chloroquine measurements; J. Claassen, L. Pelser-Posthumus, J. Kuhnene, and A. Pouwelsen for technical assistance generating infected mosquitoes; the safety monitors for the study, B. Schouwenberg and P. Smits; and independent physician A. Brouwer.

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