**A Natural Repertoire of T Cells Recognizing ApoB-100 is Generated Early in Life and is Progressively Depleted During Atherosclerotic Disease**

**Dennis Wolf**, Teresa Gerhardt, Jacqueline Miller, Sara McArdle, Takayuki Kimura, La Jolla Inst for Allergy and Immunology, San Diego, CA; Marc Jenkins, Univ of Minnesota Medical Sch, Minneapolis, MN; Klaus Ley, La Jolla Inst for Allergy and Immunology, San Diego, CA

**Background:** A large body of evidence implicates a role for T cell driven auto-immunity in atherosclerosis. T cells in the atherosclerotic plaque specifically respond to auto-antigens, including ApoB-100, the main protein in low-density lipoprotein (LDL). However, existence, function, and location of auto-reactive T cells in mice have not been demonstrated.

**Methods and Results:** We have previously identified several peptides derived from mouse ApoB-100 that bind with high affinity to the I-A^b^ MHC class II molecule of C57BL/6 mice. Immunization with these peptides conferred atheroprotection. We designed a novel fluorochrome-labeled P6:I-A^b^ multimer to detect T cells specifically recognizing this complex by flow cytometry. Surprisingly, we detected small numbers of P6:I-A^b^ CD4^+^ T cells in young C57Bl/6 mice that reside in peripheral lymph nodes, indicating the existence of a small natural repertoire of P6:I-A^b^ auto-reactive T cells. This repertoire of T cells was increased in atherosclerosis-prone Apoe^{-/-} and Ldlr^{-/-} mice and showed signs of previous antigen-exposure in 4 week old animals. T cells recognizing P6:I-A^b^ were undetectable directly after birth, but expanded rapidly within the first 28 days in lymph nodes. The majority of P6:I-A^b^ T cells expressed the defining transcription factors of TH1, T-bet, TH17, ROR-gamma T, or of T-regulatory cells, FoxP3. Feeding of Apoe^{-/-} mice with a western diet induced a further skew towards the TH1 and TH17 lineage, but also resulted in a progressive loss of antigen-specific cells over time. In Apoe^{-/-} mice fed with a western diet for 1 year, but not in Apoe^{-/-} mice fed with a standard chow diet, auto-reactive T cells disappeared. Mechanistically, we found enhanced expression of exhaustion markers like ICOS-1 or PD-1 in antigen-specific T cells likely due to persisting antigen-exposure in this model.

**Conclusion:** Our findings indicate that T cells specifically recognizing a peptide derived from ApoB-100 do not expand during the natural course of disease, but instead exist in atherosclerosis-prone animals in early life. Chronic exposure to antigen induces a progressive loss of auto-reactive T cells.

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