CONSTITUTIVE SECRETION OF CYSTATIN C (γ-TRACE) 
BY MONOCYTES AND MACROPHAGES AND ITS 
DOWNREGULATION AFTER STIMULATION 

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Cystatin C (γ-trace) is a basic protein with a molecular weight of 13,000–14,500, which is present as a constituent of normal plasma, cerebrospinal fluid, urine, and seminal fluid (1). Recently, a variant of cystatin C was found to be the major constituent of the amyloid fibrils in vessel walls of brains of patients with the Icelandic form of hereditary cerebral hemorrhage with amyloidosis (HCHWA-I) (2). At the time these latter observations were made, independent studies were conducted on the regulation of lysozyme (LZM) secretion of mononuclear phagocytes (3). Since LZM is also a constitutively secreted 14,500 mol wt cationic protein, and since it had been suggested by others (4) that macrophages (Mφ) may be among many other cells containing cystatin C, the possibility that cystatin C secreted into the culture medium by Mφ could comigrate with LZM on SDS-PAGE of Mφ supernatants was entertained. The question was of particular interest to us in the context of our studies on the downregulation of selected Mφ functions during chronic inflammatory states (3, 5, 6). Since cysteine proteinases are released during inflammation, it seemed conceivable that cystatin C, an inhibitor of cysteine proteinases, may be modulated during the inflammatory response. In this article, data are presented showing that, indeed, cystatin C is secreted by monocytes/Mφ and that its secretion is downregulated when the cells are stimulated.

Materials and Methods

Reagents. IFN was rat IFN-γ (AMGen Biologicals, Thousand Oaks, CA). Descriptions of other reagents and additional procedures are given in references (3, 7). Peritoneal Mφ. Resident (Res)- and thioglycollate (TG)-elicited peritoneal Mφ were obtained from C57BL/6J mice, and cultured as described (3). After incubation at 37°C in an atmosphere of 10% CO₂, the cells were washed with warm HBSS and then cultured either with medium only, DME, plus 0.2% lactoalbumin hydrolysate (LAH), with LPS or IFN-γ for 24 h at 37°C. After the incubation period, the conditioned medium (CM) was removed from the dishes and prepared for SDS-PAGE (3).

Human Monocytes and Lymphocytes. Mononuclear cells were separated from heparinized bloods of healthy donors by Ficoll/Hypaque gradient centrifugation (5). Aliquots of the

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Interphase cells were plated on 35-mm plastic petri dishes (Falcon Labware, Oxnard, CA) containing cover slips in concentrations of $10^6$ cells/ml of RPMI supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated autologous serum. The cells were incubated for a minimum of 5 h in a 5% CO$_2$ atmosphere. For some experiments, the nonadherent cells were removed and designated lymphocyte preparations.

**Cell Lines.** The following cell lines were used in these studies: Rob me, SK-CO-1, HT-29, HM-54, U937, J774, P388D.1, and human fetal fibroblasts. Conditioned media were prepared from cell lines by culturing $10^6$ cells in 1–2 ml of DME containing 0.2% LAH for 24 h in 35-mm tissue culture dishes maintained at 37°C in an atmosphere of 10% CO$_2$. The CM were then processed as described earlier.

**Brain Cells.** Astroglial and microglial cells were isolated from newborn C57BL/6J mice as described (8). The CM were prepared as described above.

**Gel Electrophoresis, Western Blots, and Protein Determination.** Details of these procedures have been published (3). The primary antibody for the Western blotting was rabbit antiserum to purified amyloid protein monomer of amyloid fibrils obtained from the leptomeninges of patients with HCHWA-I (2), and the secondary antibody was goat antibody to rabbit IgG peroxidase (E-Y Laboratories, Inc., San Mateo, CA).

**Detection and Quantitation of Cystatin C Secretion.** The relative amounts of cystatin C secreted into the medium by the variously treated macrophages were quantitated by scanning densitometry of the Western blots or by a radioactive procedure. After washing off unbound anti-HCHWA-I from the Western blots, the blots were incubated with $^{35}$S–protein A (New England Nuclear, Boston, MA), washed with buffer several times, and then autoradiographs were prepared. The autoradiographs were used as templates to locate and excise the bands in the Western blots corresponding to the cystatin C. The removed bands were counted in a gamma counter (model 4000; Beckman Instruments, Inc., Fullerton, CA). The data were normalized to counts per milligram of cellular protein.

**Immunoprecipitation of Cystatin C From Macrophage-conditioned Medium.** Human histiocytic lymphoma cells U937 were incubated with $[^{35}$S]$\text{methionine}$ in methionine-free RPMI 1640 for 24 h. The radiolabeled proteins in the CM were immunoprecipitated with anti-HCHWA-I. The immunoprecipitates were treated with protein A–Sepharose, the complexes were washed several times, prepared for SDS-PAGE, electroblotted onto nitrocellulose paper, and then autoradiographs were prepared.

**Fluorescent Microscopy.** Details of these procedures have been published (8).

**Results and Discussion**

As evident from several reports, many cell types contain cystatin C (4, 9). Among human peripheral blood cells, indirect immunofluorescence proved monocytes to be strongly positive for this protein, whereas lymphocytes were negative, even when cultured for 3 d (Fig. 1). This observation was substantiated by immunoblotting culture supernatants of $\text{M}$φ from four different sources with an antibody to HCHWA-I (Fig. 2). Faint higher molecular weight bands were also seen, which were due to aggregation of cystatin C (2). The cystatin C detected in $\text{M}$φ CM was shown to be synthesized by these cells (Fig. 3). This was demonstrated by radiolabeling U937 cells for 24 h with $[^{35}$S]$\text{methionine}$ and then immunoprecipitating the cystatin C from the CM with anti-HCHWA-I. Autoradiographs prepared from electrophores of the immunoprecipitates revealed a major band identical to that identified by Western blots of CM as cystatin C (Fig. 3). Table I summarizes the results of the examination for cystatin C secretion by other cells that were selected at random from our tissue culture collection. Thus, the release of cystatin C is not unique to monocytes/macrophages, but is a property shared by many cell types, as has been reported by others (4, 9). However, the present study focused primarily on monocytes/$\text{M}$φ because of the
possible role cystatin C may play in inflammation. The ubiquitous distribution and constitutive secretion of this protein is reminiscent of other proteinase inhibitors secreted by MΦ. For instance, although the α1 proteinase-inhibitor, as well as the α2-macroglobulin, are functionally important products of monocytes/MΦ (10, 11), other cells secrete these inhibitors as well (12, 13). Cystatin C is a potent inhibitor of cathepsin B, an enzyme contained in lysosomes and released during phagocytosis and inflammation (14, 15). Therefore, it is judicious to assume that this inhibitor serves to limit the acute inflammatory reaction. In line with this hypothesis, it seemed of interest to determine whether, or how, an inflammatory stimulus would affect the constitutive secretion of this proteinase inhibitor by MΦ. Accordingly, resident mouse peritoneal MΦ were incubated for 24 h in the presence of either medium alone, medium containing LPS, or
medium containing IFN-γ. The relative differences among cystatin C levels in the CM from these cells are shown in Tables II and III. All three types of Mφ secreted cystatin C. However, the amount of cystatin C secreted by the cells stimulated with LPS or by cells stimulated with IFN-γ was much less than the amount elaborated by untreated cells. The degree of suppression in cystatin C secretion was dose dependent upon the LPS or IFN-γ concentrations. IFN-α and IFN-β treatments have also been shown to decrease cystatin C secretion (16). It was further found that untreated TG-elicited Mφ secreted 59% less cystatin C than untreated resident Mφ and that LPS treatment of TG-elicited Mφ caused a further reduction to 71%. This observation suggests that Mφ stimulation in vivo with agents like TG which have been demonstrated to stimulate Mφ and enhance
certain properties (17), may concomitantly downregulate other functions, like
the secretion of cystatin C. The present data show that Mφ stimulated with the
same agents that we reported to decrease the constitutive secretion of LZM (3),
namely TG, LPS, and IFN, also caused a downregulation of cystatin C produc-
tion. The significance of a reduced level of LZM secretion during the inflam-
matory response is difficult to assess at the present time. However, a reduction
in the amount of cystatin C production has more obvious pathophysiologic
implications. Cystatin C is a cysteine proteinase inhibitor able to neutralize acid
hydrolases (14, 15), and recently it has been shown to possess close homologies
with the kininogens (2, 18). A decreased level of the antiproteinase–α1-antitrypsin
has been shown to be associated with several chronic disease states (19), and the
level of α2-macroglobulin may also be affected (20, 21). Thus, it is reasonable to
postulate that during a chronic inflammatory condition, particularly one domi-
nated by mononuclear phagocytes, downregulation of cystatin C production may
lead to tissue pathology attributable to persistence of unopposed proteolysis.

Summary

Cystatin C (γ-trace) was found to be a constitutively secreted protein of isolated
human monocytes and mouse peritoneal macrophages, as well as the histiocytic
lymphoma cell lines U937, P388D.1, and J774. This proteinase inhibitor is not
uniquely secreted by monocytes/macrophages, but was also identified in the
conditioned media from several primary cells, including brain cells, and diverse
established cell lines. In vitro treatment of resident mouse peritoneal macro-
phages with either LPS or IFN-γ caused a downregulation in cystatin C secretion.
Elaboration of this protein was also diminished by macrophages that had been
stimulated by thioglycollate in vivo, and treatment of these cells with LPS led to
further decline. It is suggested that, under some inflammatory conditions,
downregulation of cystatin C may contribute to tissue pathology.

References

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