Involvement of the CD95 (APO-1/Fas) Receptor and Ligand in Liver Damage

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Summary

Apoptosis occurs in the normal liver and in various forms of liver disease. The CD95 (APO-1/Fas) (CD95) receptor mediates apoptosis, and liver cells in animal models are acutely sensitive to apoptosis initiated by this receptor. We have used primary human hepatocytes as a model system to investigate CD95-mediated apoptotic liver damage. Treatment of fresh human hepatocytes with low concentrations of agonistic antibodies against CD95 resulted in apoptosis of >95% of the cultured liver cells within 4 and 7.5 h. Immunohistology of a panel of explanted liver tissues revealed that hepatocytes in normal livers (n = 5) and in alcoholic cirrhosis (n = 13) expressed low constitutive levels of CD95. CD95 receptor expression was highly elevated in hepatocytes in hepatitis B virus–related cirrhosis (n = 9) and in acute liver failure (n = 8). By in situ hybridization CD95 ligand messenger RNA expression was absent in normal liver but detected at high levels in livers with ongoing liver damage. In cases of hepatitis B virus–related cirrhosis and acute hepatic failure, ligand expression was found primarily in areas with lymphocytic infiltration. In contrast, in patients with alcoholic liver damage, high CD95 ligand messenger RNA expression was found in hepatocytes. These findings suggest that liver destruction in hepatitis B may primarily involve killing of hepatocytes by T lymphocytes using the CD95 receptor–ligand system. In alcoholic liver damage, death of hepatocytes might occur by fratricide and paracrine or autocrine mechanisms mediated by the hepatocytes themselves.

Proliferation and apoptosis of cells play an essential role in development and homeostasis of multicellular organisms (for review see references 1 and 2). Thus, apoptosis is found in the metamorphosis of the tadpole and in the development of the nervous and of the immune system, for example (3–5). Apoptosis may also serve as a defense against viral invasion. Certain viral infections lead to the initiation of an intrinsic death program (6–8), which spares other cells of the same organism from subsequent infection. In addition, cytotoxic T lymphocytes and NK cells eliminate their targets by apoptosis (9–13).

Apoptosis is mediated through activation of the CD95 receptor system. CD95, a member of the TNF receptor/nerve growth factor receptor family is a type I transmembrane protein (14), and it acts as an inducer of apoptosis in CD95-expressing cells in response to agonistic antibodies or ligand binding (15–19). The ligand for CD95 has been recently cloned and found to be a type II transmembrane protein that belongs to the TNF family. The ligand is expressed in various cells, including activated thymocytes and splenocytes, as well as in the testis, lung, and kidney (20, 21). The CD95 receptor–ligand system plays an important role in B and T lymphocyte development and maturation (5). In addition, the CD95 and the perforin system mediate T cell cytotoxicity (10–12, 22–27). CD95 is constitutively expressed in a wide range of tissues (28). Therefore, it may have a general biological role beyond its function in the immune system.

Many nonlymphoid tissues, such as liver, are CD95 receptor positive. The liver is highly sensitive to induction of apoptosis by the agonistic anti-Fas antibody. Mice injected intraperitoneally with 10–100 μg anti–Fas died rapidly, within several hours (29). Biochemical, histological, and electron microscopic analysis revealed that severe liver damage by apoptosis was the most likely cause of death. These findings suggest that CD95 is involved in apoptosis in the liver, and they pose the question of whether CD95-mediated cell death plays a role in liver failure in humans.

Apoptosis has been demonstrated in the acinar zone 3 of the liver as a mechanism to eliminate senescent hepatocytes.
liver cell apoptosis by cytotoxic T cells (and NK cells). Further-
more, apoptosis in the liver has been observed during viral infection (1, 8).
Councilman bodies, a characteristic pathological feature in viral hepatitis, closely resemble apoptotic cells or fragments. During viral hepatitis, activated T cells attack hepatocytes (31).
The CD95 ligand (CD95L) is expressed in T cells upon activation, and the CD95 receptor is constitutively expressed in liver cells (28). Therefore, activated T cells might kill hepatitis B virus (HBV) antigen-expressing hepatocytes by CD95 ligand–receptor interaction and, thus, clear HBV from the liver. Since HBV-infected individuals can either become chronic virus carriers or can clear the virus, individual differences may exist in the induction of liver cell apoptosis by cytotoxic T cells (and NK cells). Furthermore, various states of hepatitis exist in which liver cell apoptosis might be disregulated, possibly involving the CD95 receptor, ligand, or signaling pathway.

In the present study, we investigated induction of apoptosis in primary human hepatocytes upon CD95 activation. Receptor activation by addition of low amounts of agonistic antibodies to hepatocyte cultures rapidly and efficiently killed these cells. Immunohistology of liver tissue from patients with chronic HBV infection or acute hepatic failure showed highly elevated CD95 receptor expression in hepatocytes relative to normal livers. In situ hybridization detected CD95L messenger RNA (mRNA) in lymphocytes in HBV-related and acute liver damage. It is interesting to note that, in alcoholic cirrhosis, high ligand mRNA levels were found in hepatocytes directly.

Materials and Methods

Primary Human Hepatocyte Cultures. Primary human liver cells were prepared from healthy liver tissue obtained during hepatic surgery. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Medical Faculty of the University of Heidelberg (Heidelberg, Germany). Cells were isolated as described (32, 33). Briefly, the resected piece of liver was perfused via a central vessel, first with S-MEM (GIBCO BRL, Paisley, Scotland) for 10–15 min, and then with Williams’ medium E (WME; GIBCO BRL) containing 0.05% collagenase (Sigma Chemical Co., Munich, Germany) and 5 mmol/liter calcium for another 10–15 min. Subsequently, nonperfused parts were discarded, and the cell suspension was filtered through gauze, washed four times with ice-cold WME containing 5% FCS (Sigma Chemical Co.) by differential centrifugation, and seeded in maintenance medium at a density of 1 × 10^6 viable cells/cm^2 on collagen-coated tissue culture dishes (Costar Corp., Cambridge, MA). Viability was determined by trypan blue dye exclusion (34). The medium was changed 0.5 h after plating and every 1–2 d thereafter. For seeding and maintenance of cells, WME was used, supplemented with 0.066 μmol/liter insulin (Serva Biochemicals, Heidelberg, Germany), 0.1 μmol/liter glucagon (El Lilly, Giessen, Germany), 0.1 μmol/liter triiodothyronine (Serva Biochemicals), 5 mmol/liter glutamine (Flow Laboratories GmbH, Meckenheim, Germany), 37 μmol/liter inosine (Serva Biochemicals), 10 μg/ml gentamycin (Flow Laboratories GmbH), 100 μg/ml streptomycin (Flow Laboratories GmbH), 100 μg/ml penicillin (Flow Laboratories GmbH) and 20 mmol/liter Hepes (Flow Laboratories GmbH). Cultures were incubated at 37°C in 5% CO_2 in air.

To investigate the capability of human hepatocytes to undergo apoptosis upon CD95 stimulation, cells were treated 12 or 48 h after plating with the mAb anti–APO-1 (IgG3-containing hybridoma supernatant) at concentrations of 1, 10, 20, or 100 ng/ml. Unless otherwise indicated, 20 ng/ml was used. This antibody has been shown to induce apoptosis in CD95 antigen–expressing cells by receptor cross-linking (15, 35). Control cultures were treated with an mAb at the same concentrations recognizing an influenza viral epitope.

Liver Tissues. All tissues examined in this study were obtained from hepatectomy specimens during liver transplantation, immediately snap frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at −80°C until analyzed. The diagnosis alcoholic cirrhosis was based on histologically proven cirrhosis and a daily intake of >60 g alcohol in women and >80 g in men for >10 yr in the absence of serological markers for HBV or hepatitis C virus (HCV). The diagnosis of chronic HBV infection was based on a long-standing history of chronic hepatitis, the presence of serological markers for HBV, and immunohistological detection of hepatitis B surface Ag and/or hepatitis B core Ag in the liver tissue.

The criterion used for the diagnosis of acute hepatic failure was the development of hepatic encephalopathy within 12 wk from the onset of jaundice in the absence of preexisting liver disease (36). Hyperacute liver failure (LF) was assumed in cases in which encephalopathy developed within 7 d, acute LF in cases with an interval of between 8 and 28 d, and subacute LF in cases with an interval of between 5 and 12 wk. The patients with acute hepatic failure are listed in Table 1. This group consisted of three patients with HCV infection, one with HBV infection, one with hepatitis A virus (HAV) infection, and three cases with unknown etiology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Etiology*</th>
<th>Course</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>HCV</td>
<td>Subacute LF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Subacute LF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>HCV</td>
<td>Subacute LF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>HAV</td>
<td>Hyperacute LF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>HCV</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>HBV</td>
<td>Acute LF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Acute LF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Cases with Acute Liver Failure

* As determined by HCV, HCV RNA in liver tissue; HAV, anti-HAV IgM in the absence of other viral markers; HBV, hepatitis B surface Ag and hepatitis B core Ag in liver tissue; ?, unknown etiology.
Kit (Vector Laboratories, Inc., Burlingame, CA) and amino-
block endogenous liver avidin (Avidin Biotin Blocking Kit;
Electrophoresis was carried out in a 2% agarose gel, and the gel
diate CD95 expression; 3, high CD95 expression.

Immunohistochemistry. CD95 antigen detection was performed
using a monoclonal IgG1 antibody directed against CD95 (35).
The avidin-biotin peroxidase method was applied. Cryosections
(4–5 μm thick) were fixed immediately after sectioning for 5 min
in cold acetone, air dried overnight, and either used directly for
immunolabeling or stored at −80°C until used. Fixed and, in case
of storage, thawed sections were washed in PBS. Sections were
then preincubated with streptavidin and biotin for 15 min to
block endogenous liver avidin (Avidin Biotin Blocking Kit; Genex, Gaithersburg, MD). After another wash, sections were
incubated for 60 min at room temperature with the primary mAb
at a concentration of 10 μg/ml. Bound mAbs were visualized by
the avidin-biotin peroxidase method using VECTASTAIN Elite
Kid (Vector Laboratories, Inc., Burlingame, CA) and amino-
ethylcarbazol as chromogen. Counterstaining was performed
with hemalaun.

The liver tissues were graded as follows: 0, absence of CD95
expression; 1, low constitutive CD95 expression (28); 2, inter-
mediate CD95 expression; 3, high CD95 expression.

RNA In Situ Hybridization. Cryosections (5 μm thick) were
prepared from human liver tissues that had been stored at −80°C
since explantation. Sections were transferred onto siliconized glass
slides and fixed in 4% (wt/vol) paraformaldehyde/PBS (20 min,
room temperature), and then briefly washed in PBS (room tem-
perature) and dehydrated by sequential transfer through 70 and
95% ethanol baths. The in situ hybridization procedure was per-
formed essentially as described by Bosch et al. (38) using an in
vitro-synthesized, 35S-labeled antisense RNA corresponding to
the sequence coding for amino acids 100-246 of the human
CD95L (39). Controls for the specificity of the ligand signal were
performed by parallel treatment of cryosections with a 20-fold
molar excess of unlabeled, competitor antisense RNA. This re-
resulted in a marked reduction in the strength of ligand signals in
expressing cells. In situ hybridizations were dipped into liquid
film emulsion (K5; Ilford Ltd., Basildon, UK) and exposed for
3–4 wk. Development of the slides was performed according to
the instructions of the manufacturer. The developed in situ hy-
bridizations were counterstained with hematoxylin and eosin and
were prepared for microscopy.

Results

Induction of Apoptosis by Anti–Apo-1. Initial experiments
were aimed at determining the sensitivity of human hepato-
cytes to the induction of apoptosis by the agonistic anti-
body anti–Apo-1. Freshly plated cells were treated with 1,
10, 20, or 100 ng/ml anti–Apo-1. Control cultures were
treated with an irrelevant antibody directed against an in-
fluenza viral epitope. Treatment for ~7.5 h with concen-
trations of 10 ng/ml or above resulted in extensive cell
death (>95%) as exemplified in Fig. 1 b for 20 ng/ml.
Control cultures remained unaffected (Fig. 1 a). The first
morphological changes were noted after 4–4.5 h, when
cells became round in shape, started to lose contact with

neighboring cells, and formed cytoplasmic “blebs” (Fig. 1
b, inset). These changes were pronounced after 5.5 h, and
after 7.5 h essentially all cells were dead and mostly de-
tached (Fig. 1 b).

A quantification of the anti–Apo-1 effect using liver cells
12 h after plating is shown in Fig. 2 a. Nearly all hepato-
cytes died within a short period of 4–7.5 h after the be-
inning of the antibody treatment. In contrast, control cul-
tures maintained 90% viability throughout the entire culture
period. Treatment with anti–Apo-1 48 h after plating re-
sulted in similar kinetics of death but affected only ~60% of
the cells (Fig. 2 b). This demonstrates a loss in respon-
siveness to CD95 stimulation with time in culture, which
might reflect the loss of differentiated characteristics typically
encountered in aging liver cells in primary culture (40).

To investigate nuclear morphology, DAPI staining of
acellular DNA was performed. Control cultures maintained
their nuclear morphology throughout the culture period
(Fig. 3 a). In contrast, anti–Apo-1 treatment resulted in
progressive condensation and fragmentation of the nuclei,
changes characteristic of apoptosis (Fig. 3 b, after 5 h of
 treatment). Biochemical analysis of chromosomal DNA in
dead cells that had detached from the culture plates after
7.5 h of treatment demonstrated fragmentation of DNA,
yielding a typical “ladder” pattern in agarose gel electro-
phoresis (Fig. 4).

CD95 Expression in Patients with Active Liver Disease.
We investigated CD95 receptor expression in liver tissues
from patients who underwent liver transplantation. A panel
of tissues derived from patients with liver failure due to
chronic HBV infection–related cirrhosis (n = 9), alcoholic

Figure 1. Primary human hepatocytes treated with a control antibody
(a) or with 20 ng/ml anti–Apo-1 (b) for 7.5 h. Phase contrast, ×160. The inset in b shows a rounded-up hepatocyte with cytoplasmic blebs af-

fter 5 h of treatment at 360-fold magnification.

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Figure 2. Viability of hepatocytes in the presence (●) or absence (○) of 20 ng/ml anti-APO-1. Treatment was started 12 h (a) or 48 h (b) after plating. Viability was assessed morphologically after trypan blue staining. The data represent mean ± SD of three independent wells.

cirrhosis (n = 13), or acute hepatic failure (n = 8) was analyzed by immunohistology. In addition, normal liver tissues (n = 5) were examined. Normal liver and the majority (12 out of 13) of the cases with alcoholic liver disease showed a low constitutive level of CD95 expression on the hepatocytic cell membrane, homogeneously distributed throughout the liver sections, as exemplified in Fig. 5 a for alcoholic cirrhosis. In contrast, in patients with HBV-related cirrhosis (8/9), highly up-regulated CD95 expression was detected on the cell membrane of hepatocytes (Fig. 5 b). In the eight patients with acute hepatic failure, only small islands of dying hepatocytes surrounded by monocytic cells were seen. These islands displayed CD95 expression at high levels in all cases (Fig. 5 c). The data on CD95 expression levels in the panel of human liver tissues are summarized in Table 2.

CD95L mRNA Expression in Patients with Chronic and Acute Liver Failure. To determine whether the CD95L is expressed in cases of ongoing liver damage, our panel of liver tissues was also examined for expression of CD95L mRNA. CD95L mRNA expression was not detectable in normal liver (zero out of three cases examined). However, easily detectable or high levels of CD95L mRNA were found in livers with ongoing cell damage. It is interesting to note that two different patterns of expression were discerned. In cases with HBV-related cirrhosis (three out of three), CD95L mRNA expression was found in the periphery of the pseudolobules at the border to the perportal tracts at the side of piecemeal cell death (Fig. 6, a and a'). Thus, CD95L mRNA expression localizes to the area of lymphocytic infiltration. Similarly, in one out of three cases (Table 1, case No. 4) with virus-induced, acute hepatic failure, ligand mRNA expression was detected in lymphocytes surrounding islands of dying hepatocytes (not shown).

Figure 3. DNA staining with DAPI in controls (a) and anti-APO-1-treated (b) liver cells after 5 h of treatment. ×400.

Figure 4. Agarose gel electrophoresis of cellular DNA from hepatocytes after 7.5 h of treatment with anti-APO-1 (right) or a control antibody (left).
Table 2. CD95 Receptor Expression in Human Liver

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liver tissue of</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>CD95 receptor expression*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal liver</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholic cirrhosis</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBV-related cirrhosis</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute liver failure</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table gives the mean on the basis of the immunohistological grading of the human liver tissues as outlined in Materials and Methods. The SE was always <0.4.

*Score for immunohistology: 0, no expression; 1, weak expression; 2, intermediate expression; 3, high expression.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates that triggering of the CD95 receptor by agonistic anti-APO-1 antibodies rapidly induces massive apoptotic cell death in primary human hepatocytes. This finding in human hepatocytes reflects the acute sensitivity of the liver to CD95 stimulation previously observed in the mouse in vivo (29) and in vitro (41), and it shows that constitutive receptor expression levels are functionally sufficient for CD95-mediated apoptosis.

These observations raise the question of whether liver damage in humans in vivo is mediated by the CD95 system. In this context, we examined explanted liver tissues from patients with normal livers, HBV-related and alcoholic cirrhosis, and acute liver failure. Our results confirm the observation of constitutive low expression of CD95 in normal human liver (28). In contrast, in livers from patients with chronic HBV infection or acute hepatic failure but not with alcoholic cirrhosis, CD95 receptor expression was found to be up-regulated. Increased CD95 expression as observed in livers with ongoing cell damage in this study may have several implications. Enhanced receptor expression might initiate the disease. Alternatively, CD95 expression might be increased in response to a primary stimulus and render the hepatocyte more susceptible to CD95L stimulation. This assumption is supported by the observation that induction of CD95 expression occurs as a result of chronic, lymphohistiocytic inflammation in different epithelial cells (28).

To assess CD95L synthesis and to define the ligand-producing effector cell, mRNA in situ hybridization was performed. In patients with chronic HBV infection, CD95L mRNA was found to be expressed in areas with lymphocytic infiltration, in contrast to normal liver, where no signal was detectable. In vitro evidence exists that activated T cells express the CD95L. In addition, the CD95 pathway constitutes a major mechanism of T cell–mediated cytotoxicity (10, 20, 21, 27, 42–45). Moreover, expression of Kupffer cells and endothelial cells) are present. This was confirmed by investigation of hematoxylin and eosin–stained parallel sections (not shown). This finding strongly suggests that the CD95L can be expressed in hepatocytes. Indeed, higher magnification revealed the presence of silver grains in hepatocytes (Fig. 6 c), as morphologically identified by their large round nuclei localized centrally within a broad cytoplasm.
the CD95L has been shown recently for liver-infiltrating mononuclear cells in patients with hepatitis C (46). Therefore, activated T-killer cells may kill HBV-infected hepatocytes using the CD95 system. A different degree of CD95-mediated cytotoxicity may account for various disease stages. Such different levels of cytotoxicity may explain ineffective viral clearance in chronic hepatitis, regular clearance in acute, self-limiting hepatitis, or over-effective clearance in fulminating hepatitis. Indeed, in chronic HBV-induced liver failure, a poor response to HBV antigens has been described for MHC class I- and II-restricted T cells (47).

Unexpectedly, in alcoholic hepatitis, the CD95L was expressed at high levels in hepatocytes directly. The presence of ligand mRNA and receptor in the same cell points to a new mechanism of liver cell damage. Initial investigation of ligand expression in the rat revealed that the CD95L is not expressed in the liver (20). However, our data demonstrate that, in alcoholic liver damage, human hepatocytes themselves can up-regulate the CD95 system. The CD95L might be expressed as a membrane-bound form and might mediate apoptosis as “fratricide” interacting with the CD95 receptor on neighboring cells. Alternatively, CD95-mediated apoptosis may occur in an autocrine or paracrine fashion via a soluble form of the ligand. Indeed, soluble ligand activity capable of inducing apoptosis has been detected in supernatants of anti-CD3-stimulated T cells (43). Our data show that the above forms of CD95-mediated killing are not restricted to lymphocytes but may also occur in non-

Figure 6. CD95L mRNA expression in chronic liver disease. (a) Dark field; (a') bright field view of an HBV-related cirrhosis with chronic hepatitis. A cirrhotic nodule (CN) is shown surrounded by a dense inflammatory infiltrate. A prominent ligand signal is detectable at the border (arrow) of the same cirrhotic nodule in dark field view. (b) Dark field; (b') bright field view of an alcoholic cirrhosis. A cirrhotic nodule (CN) is surrounded by fibrous bands and fibrotic portal tracts (arrows). The silver grain signal in the dark field view is found in the center of the same cirrhotic nodule. (c) Higher magnification of b' with evidence of CD95L mRNA within a hepatocyte. (a, a', b, and b') ×30; (c) ×980.
lymphoid cells such as hepatocytes. Therefore, it is conceivable that the CD95 system is highly relevant for apoptosis of various tissues throughout the body.

The involvement of the CD95 pathway in hepatocellular damage offers a new fundamental understanding of destructive liver disease, particularly in alcoholic cirrhosis, and it may provide new therapeutic approaches based on interference with CD95 receptor–ligand interaction or with the signaling pathway.

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