IgG marker of optic-spinal multiple sclerosis binds to the aquaporin-4 water channel

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Neuromyelitis optica (NMO) is an inflammatory demyelinating disease that selectively affects optic nerves and spinal cord. It is considered a severe variant of multiple sclerosis (MS), and frequently is misdiagnosed as MS, but prognosis and optimal treatments differ. A serum immunoglobulin G autoantibody (NMO-IgG) serves as a specific marker for NMO. Here we show that NMO-IgG binds selectively to the aquaporin-4 water channel, a component of the dystroglycan protein complex located in astrocytic foot processes at the blood–brain barrier. NMO may represent the first example of a novel class of autoimmune channelopathy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
NMO antigen is in CNS and non-CNS tissues, and colocalizes with AQP4
To determine whether the NMO antigen is restricted to the CNS, we tested NMO-IgG–positive patients’ sera by indirect immunofluorescence on sections of normal mouse liver, kidney, and stomach tissues. In contrast to the characteristic intense staining of pial and mi-
Crovascular elements in the brain, NMO-IgG did not bind to any vascular or visceral autonomic neural elements in stomach, kidney, or liver (e.g., myenteric and submucosal plexi, or sympathetic nerves accompanying arterioles). However, NMO-IgG bound prominently to distal urine-collecting tubules in the renal medulla and to basolateral membranes of epithelial cells deep in the gastric mucosa (Fig. 1 A); the immunoreactive gastric mucosal cells were identified immunohistochemically as parietal cells (not depicted). The distribution of NMO-immunoreactivity in CNS, kidney, and gastric mucosa suggested the water channel protein, AQP4, as a candidate antigen (11). By use of dual immunostaining with AQP4–specific rabbit IgG, confocal microscopy demonstrated that the antigen to which NMO patients’ IgG binds colocalizes with AQP4 in all of these tissues (Fig. 1 A).

**NMO-IgG does not bind to CNS tissue from AQP4–null mice**

Next, we investigated whether IgG in any of six coded patients’ sera bound to frozen sections of brain tissue obtained from transgenic AQP4 null mice (11). Three were NMO-IgG positive sera and three were control sera from patients who had neuropsychiatric diagnoses (age- and sex-matched to the NMO patients). IgG in the three NMO patients’ sera bound to microvessels, pia, and subpia in the wild-type brain tissue in a pattern that was indistinguishable from that yielded by rabbit anti-AQP4–IgG (Fig. 1 B). However, neither human serum IgG nor the rabbit anti-AQP4–IgG bound detectably to AQP4-null mouse brain tissue.

**NMO-IgG binds selectively to membranes of AQP4–transfected cells**

We tested the same six patients’ coded sera, in blinded conditions, for IgG binding to a stably transfected human embryonic kidney cell line (HEK-293) expressing a transgene encoding full-length AQP4. No patient’s IgG bound to the HEK-293 cells transfected with plasmid encoding GFP without AQP4 (Fig. 2). However, IgG in the sera of all three patients who had NMO stained the periphery of AQP4-transfected cells intensely in a plasma membrane pattern (corresponding to that seen with rabbit anti-AQP4–
IgG, where it colocalized with GFP. The distribution of GFP-AQP4 that did not colocalize with NMO-IgG was compatible with endoplasmic reticulum or cytoplasmic transport packages, presumably inaccessible to NMO-IgG in nonpermeabilized cells. IgG in the three controls’ sera did not bind to the GFP-AQP4–transfected cells.

NMO-IgG binds to the AQP4 water channel component of the dystroglycan complex

The selective binding of NMO-IgG to substrates expressing AQP4, and its lack of reactivity with vector-transfected cells and AQP4-null mouse brain, strongly implicate AQP4 as the autoantigen of NMO-IgG. However, in astrocytic endfeet, the distribution of AQP4 is dependent on its association with elements of the dystroglycan complex at the BBB (12–14). Therefore, it is conceivable that the target of NMO-IgG is one of these associated proteins. To investigate this possibility, we tested lysates of the AQP4 and control transfected cell lines by immunoprecipitation. Despite endogenous expression of α-syntrophin, β-dystroglycan, and dystrophin (Dp71) in HEK-293 cells (Fig. 3 A), only GFP-AQP4 was precipitated from lysates by serum IgG from patients who had NMO (and by rabbit anti-AQP4–IgG; Fig. 3 B). The immunoprecipitates did not contain α-syntrophin, β-dystroglycan, Dp71, or free GFP (Fig. 3 B). Control human IgG did not precipitate GFP-AQP4 or any of the dystroglycan-complex proteins.

Our results identify a water channel protein as the first defined autoantigen pertinent to an inflammatory demyelinating disorder of the human CNS. AQP4 is an integral protein of astrocytic plasma membranes (15–18), and is highly concentrated in foot process domains facing microvessels where it interacts with dystrophin–associated proteins (10, 17). The AQP4 channel is mercurial-insensitive, and is the predominant water channel in the CNS. It has a pathophysiological role in brain edema formation following water intoxication (14, 19, 20) or focal cerebral ischemia (21). Brain edema occurring in oncologic contexts is attributed to the up-regulation of AQP4 in high-grade astrocytomas and in reactive astrocytes related to cerebral adenocarcinoma metastases (21, 22).

The present study is the first to implicate AQP4 in the pathogenesis of any autoimmune disorder. NMO may represent the first example of a novel class of autoimmune channelopathies. Unlike MS, the cerebrospinal fluid in patients who have NMO lacks evidence of intrathecal synthesis of IgG, such as oligoclonal bands (4). IgG produced in peripheral lymphoid tissues has limited access to the extracapillary space in the brain because of the endothelial tight junctions that constitute the BBB. However, this barrier is not absolute (23, 24). If AQP4–specific IgG is the proximal cause of NMO, we envisage two potential mechanisms for the pathogenicity of the small amount of IgG that penetrates this barrier: (a) initiation of an inflammatory immune response against astrocytic AQP4 protein by direct binding of antigen-specific IgG molecules to the outer face of the water channel; the homotetrameric structure of this protein would enable potent activation of complement by appropriate IgG classes; and (b) in the absence of initial complement activation, inflammation and demyelination may be a consequence of IgG-mediated dysregulation of tissue water homeostasis. We speculate that endothelial leakage accompanying inflammatory events initiated by the binding of NMO-IgG to the extracellular face of AQP4 accounts for the abundance of IgM in immune complexes deposited around penetrating vessels in lesions of autopsied spinal cord from patients who had NMO (2). Vascular leakage would allow secondary binding of IgM rheumatoid factor (an extremely potent activator of the complement cascade) to astrocytic endfeet displaying NMO-IgG; low affinity interactions of other IgMs entering the lesion site would amplify the inflammatory process (Eisen, H.N., personal communication). Numerous autoantibodies (nonorgan-specific and organ-specific) are a frequent serologic finding in patients who have NMO (4). However, unlike NMO-IgG, no other autoantibody is restricted to patients who have NMO. Lucchinetti et al. classified four MS lesion subtypes immunohistochemically (25). The most common (“pattern 2” MS lesion) is characterized by deposits of complement and immunoglobulins. However, immune complexes in “pattern 2” MS lesions are located at sites of...
active myelin destruction and not in the prominent perivascular distribution that characterizes NMO lesions.

The wide distribution of AQP4 does not explain the restricted immunopathology of patients who have NMO. Renal abnormalities have not been reported in NMO; however AQP4-null mice have only minimal perturbation of renal function, which reflects the small and noncritical nephron segment that expresses AQP4 (11). Although NMO-IgG binds to rodent brain tissues, inflammatory lesions in the CNS of patients characteristically are restricted to optic nerves and spinal cord. This incongruity may relate to potential species differences in the distribution of AQP4 in the CNS of humans and mice, or differences in accessibility of AQP4 epitopes to IgG in vivo and in vitro. Regional differences in the spatial distribution or molecular orientation of AQP4 epitopes on astrocytic endfeet at sites other than optic nerve and spinal cord might preclude complement activation (26) or intermolecular cross-linking (27). Now that a putative target autoantigen has been identified for NMO, and human IgG of high titer is available, direct investigation of potential pathogenic autoimmune mechanisms is feasible in laboratory animals by active immunization and by passive transfer of selected patients’ autoantibodies (28, 29).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

These studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, and the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees of Mayo Clinic and the University of California, San Francisco.

Antibodies. We selected sera from 13 adult patients (9 were pooled) in whom NMO-IgG was detected at 1:3,840 dilution or greater by indirect immunofluorescence on mouse CNS tissues (7), and from 50 additional patients who had miscellaneous neuropsychiatric disorders. We pooled sera from 50 control patients who had NMO (20 μl/ml), and subsequently from individual patients, was added to one aliquot; pooled sera from 50 control patients was added to a second aliquot; and rabbit anti-AQP4–IgG (Sigma-Aldrich) was added to a third aliquot (2 μl/ml). Lysates were incubated with antibodies overnight at 4°C. Protein G-agarose (Zymed Laboratories) was added to each lysate (30 μl/ml). After incubating for 1 h at 4°C, beads were pelleted and washed three times in 50 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.5), 200 mM NaCl, and 0.1% NP-40. Beads were resuspended in standard 2X SDS Laemmli sample buffer containing β-mercaptoethanol (20 μl/ml), to release immune complexes.

Subsequent steps were at room temperature. Immune complexes were electrophoresed on 4–15% gradient polyacrylamide gels and transferred electrophoretically to nitrocellulose paper. The nitrocellulose paper was blocked in buffer (20 mM Tris, pH 7.6, 137 mM sodium chloride, 0.1% Tween 20) containing 10% powdered milk, and exposed for 1 h to a panel of IgG probes specific for: α-syntrophin (1:1,000); GFP (1:1,000); β-dystroglycan (1:100), and Dp71 dystrophin (1:1,000). Blots were washed three times for 5 min in 20 mM Tris, pH 7.6, 137 mM sodium chloride, 0.1% Tween-20 and then incubated for 30 min with horseradish peroxidase–labeled goat anti-mouse IgG or goat anti-rabbit IgG. After washing, bound IgG was detected autoradiographically by enhanced chemiluminescence (GE Healthcare).

Transgenic AQP4−/− mice. Transgenic AQP4-null mice were generated and characterized as described previously (11). These mice totally lack AQP4 protein.

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