Major Surgery Suppresses Maximal Production of Helper T-Cell Type 1 Cytokines Without Potentiating the Release of Helper T-Cell Type 2 Cytokines

Ramon Berguer, MD; Capt Normita Bravo, MS, USAF; Mark Bowyer, MD; Craig Egan, MD; Tom Knolmayer, MD; David Ferrick, PhD

Background: Major surgery is known to suppress T-cell function; however, its differential effects on the production of helper T-cell type 1 (TH1) and type 2 (TH2) cytokines remains unknown.

Objective: To measure the production patterns of TH1 (interleukin 2 [IL-2] and interferon γ) and TH2 (IL-4 and IL-10) cytokines following major surgery.

Design, Setting, and Patients: A cohort study of patients (both active and former members of the armed forces) at a military hospital.

Intervention: Aortic surgery or carotid endarterectomy and measurement of serum IL-6 levels by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay.

Main Outcome Measures: Unstimulated and stimulated intracellular levels of IL-2, IL-4, IL-10, and interferon γ in CD4+, CD8+, and γδ+ T cells and serum IL-6 levels immediately before and for 2 days after aortic surgery or carotid endarterectomy.

Results: No unstimulated production of TH1 or TH2 cytokines was detected. Stimulated intracellular levels of IL-2 and interferon γ were significantly depressed during the postoperative period in all T-cell subsets in both patient groups. There were no postoperative increases in stimulated IL-4 or IL-10 levels.

Conclusion: Major surgery suppresses the potential responses of TH1 cytokines without enhancing production of TH2 cytokines.

Arch Surg. 1999;134:540-544

During the past 2 decades, clinicians and researchers have recognized that surgery results in an impaired immune response in the early postoperative period1 and that this phenomenon may contribute to infectious complications2 and cancer metastasis.3 The immunosuppressive effect of surgery has been variously attributed to serum factors,4 stress hormones,5 the activation of suppressor cells,6 decreased secretion of the cytokines interferon γ (IFN-γ) and interleukin 2 (IL-2),7,8 and, most recently, to a shift in the balance of helper T-cell type 1 (TH1) and type 2 (TH2) cytokines from peripheral blood mononuclear cells.9,10 A better understanding of perioperative immune function might enable clinicians to stratify patients as immunologically high risk before surgery and take appropriate preventive action or delay surgery. Alternatively, patients demonstrating substantial postoperative immune suppression could be considered for additional prophylactic treatment aimed at reducing the risk of infectious complication.

The present study used recently developed flow cytometry techniques for direct intracellular cytokine measurements along with current concepts of lymphocyte immunomodulation to arrive at a more precise understanding of the effects of surgical injury on immune function. The hypothesis was that surgical trauma suppresses cytokines through an increase in the production of TH2 cytokines.

RESULTS

The patient characteristics for the 2 surgical groups are listed in the Table. Complete blood cell counts (Figure 1) demonstrated significant postoperative increases in the numbers of neutrophils in both groups compared with preoperative levels. Absolute lymphocyte counts decreased in both groups compared with preoperative levels. The postoperative platelet count decreased significantly in the aortic surgery group but not in the ca-
PATIENTS AND METHODS

This study consisted of a cohort of 18 patients in the Veterans Affairs and US Department of Defense who underwent elective aortic surgery (n = 10) or carotid endarterectomy (n = 8). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at David Grant Medical Center, Travis Air Force Base, Calif, and all patients signed informed consent forms prior to participation in the study. Entry criteria excluded patients with diseases known to affect the immune system, such as acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, chronic hepatitis B and C, known active malignancy, and the use of immunosuppressive medications.

Samples of peripheral venous blood (20 mL in EDTA for flow cytometry and 7-mL clot tube for serum assays) were obtained by venipuncture from each patient no more than 6 hours preoperatively and every morning after surgery until discharge from the hospital or for a maximum of 5 days. A group of 17 healthy volunteers were studied as reference subjects.

T-cell subsets and their intracellular cytokine production were identified by multiparametric flow cytometry. Peripheral blood mononuclear cells were isolated from 20 mL of anticoagulated (EDTA) venous blood by density centrifugation and incubated at 37°C in a 5% carbon dioxide incubator for 4 hours in RPMI (Roswell Park Memorial Institute; Sigma-Aldrich Corp, St Louis, Mo) medium containing 10-µg/mL brefeldin A (Epitope Technologies, Madison, Wis) to dissipate the Golgi complex and enable the intracellular accumulation of proteins. During the incubation period, half the cells were separately stimulated with 20-ng/mL phorbolmyristateacetate (Sigma-Aldrich Corp) and 1-µg/mL ionomycin (Sigma-Aldrich Corp) to assess submaximal cytokine production, while the other half remained unstimulated. After incubation, cell suspensions were divided into 18 tubes with approximately 1 × 10^6 cells per tube corresponding to cell type (CD4+, CD8+, or γδ T) cytokine combination (isotype control, IFN-γ/IL-4, or IL-2/IL-10), and stimulation category (unstimulated or stimulated). Cells were resuspended in buffer (phosphate-buffered saline plus 0.1% sodium azide plus 1% bovine serum albumin plus 5-mmol EDTA) and incubated for 15 minutes at 25°C with a 1:5 dilution of Tricolor conjugated (a tandem conjugate of phycoerythrin and Cy-5; Becton Dickinson Immunocytometry Systems). After standard calibration of the flow cytometer, fluorescence measured was less than 1%. Reference assays using isotype-matched fluorochrome-conjugated IgG and arithmetically subtracted from the measured intracellular cytokine fluorescence to obtain the net detectable intracellular fluorescence. The average background fluorescence measured was less than 1%. Reference assays using fixed, but not permeabilized, cells demonstrated a reduction in the intracellular detection of IL-2 and IFN-γ by 99% and 98%, respectively. Preincubation with recombinant human cytokines before intracellular staining reduced intracellular detection of IL-2 and IFN-γ by 99% and 98%, respectively. Serum IL-6 levels were measured by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay by the Clinical Investigation Facility at David Grant Medical Center.

A complete data set in both surgical groups was obtained for the preoperative point and the first 2 postoperative days. These data were analyzed using 2-way repeated-measures analysis of variance and Tukey post hoc test. Patient characteristics were compared using χ^2 analysis for proportional data and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for unpaired comparisons that were not normally distributed. All statistical analyses were performed with statistical software (STATISTICA; StatSoft, Tulsa, Okla) for Windows (version 5.0; Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Wash).

rotid surgery group. Postoperative serum IL-6 levels were significantly elevated in the aortic surgery group only (Figure 1).

Unstimulated intracellular cytokine production was not detectable above nonspecific background activity in any T-cells subset. The stimulated production of the intracellular T_h1 cytokines IFN-γ and IL-2 was significantly decreased in the postoperative period in all T-cell subsets and in both surgical groups compared with preoperative values (Figure 2 through Figure 4, C and D). There were no increases in T_h2 cytokine production after surgery. Small preoperative differences (<1.5%) in the stimulated production of IL-4 in CD4+ and CD8+ cells and IL-10 in γδ T cells between surgery groups were at the threshold of nonspecific background activity, although the differences were statistically significant (Figures 2-4, A and B). There were no significant differences in preoperative or postoperative stimulated
Intracellular cytokine production between patients when grouped by operation type, preoperative cardiovascular risk factors (diabetes mellitus, history of coronary artery disease, and smoking), the presence of homologous or autologous transfusion, intraoperative blood loss, operating time, hospital stay, or the development of infectious complications.

**COMMENT**

There were no significant postoperative changes in unstimulated production of Th1 or Th2 cytokines after major vascular operations. These results suggest that major surgery does not trigger a systemic antigen-specific immune response. In contrast, stimulated (potential) production of Th1 cytokines in CD4⁺, CD8⁺, and γδ T cells significantly decreased in the postoperative period (P < .05). This effect persisted through the second postoperative day and was independent of the level of the type of operation performed. The decrease in stimulated production of Th1 cytokines was not accompanied by a simultaneous postoperative increase in production of Th2 cytokines. There were no differences in the cytokine responses when patients were stratified by preoperative medical diagnosis or by the presence of postoperative complications, although the small sample size limits the power of this observation.

The results of the present study are consistent with previous reports that demonstrated that surgical trauma results in a depression of in vitro lymphocyte blastogenesis and proliferation during the early postoperative period. This effect has been attributed to stress-mediated decreases in the production of Th1 cytokines IL-2 and IFN-γ, when measured in bulk supernatants from in vitro cultures of peripheral blood mononuclear cells. More recently, immunosuppression in human disease has been attributed to a shift in cytokine production from a Th1 (IL-2 and IFN-γ) to a Th2 (IL-4 and IL-10) pattern. The present study confirms a specific negative effect of surgical injury on the production of Th1 cytokines without a simultaneous increase in the production of Th2 cytokines. These findings differ from recent reports by Decker et al. that suggested that postoperative suppression of Th1 cytokine responses is associated with an increase in Th2 cytokine production.

One explanation for the lack of an observed Th1 cytokine response in the present study may be a high threshold of detection resulting from the use of a 2-step staining technique that might mask the expected 1% to 3% of T cells that produce IL-4 in response to phorbolmyristate and ionomycin stimulation. The determination of the exact patterns of postoperative cytokine production is also difficult because of the uncertainty of the precise timing of potential Th2 responses after injury. The results of animal studies demonstrated that the Th2 cytokine IL-4 is detectable in splenocytes within 24 hours of traumatic injury, whereas the same cytokine is not measurable in splenic or peritoneal cavity T cells until 5 to 8 days after intraperitoneal infection with Nippostrongylus brasiliensis, a potent inducer of Th2. Therefore, it is possible that the first cytokine measurement at

**Table 1.** Patient Characteristics for the Surgical Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Aortic Surgery† (n = 10)</th>
<th>Carotid Endarterectomy (n = 8)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age, y</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/female</td>
<td>9/1</td>
<td>8/0</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coronary artery disease</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoker</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSAID user</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autologous donation</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autologous transfusion</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homologous transfusion</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean blood loss, mL</td>
<td>1685</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>&lt; .001‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infectious complications</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean length of stay, d</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>&lt; .005‡</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Values are expressed as percentages except where noted. NS indicates not significant (level of significance at P < .05); NSAID indicates nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug.
†Seven patients underwent abdominal aortic aneurysmal repair and 3, aortic bifemoral grafting.
‡Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

**Figure 1.** Results of complete blood cell count and serum interleukin 6 measurements in 18 patients undergoing vascular surgery. Dashed lines represent the upper and lower 95% confidence intervals obtained from 17 reference subjects. Statistical analysis performed using analysis of variance and Tukey post hoc test. The asterisk indicates P < .05 vs preoperative levels; dagger, P < .05 aortic vs carotid surgery groups.
24 hours postoperatively was too late to detect an early TH2 response, which was reported by others. It is also plausible that TH2 responses developed in patients after the last measurement on postoperative day 2. However, a review of the limited data obtained in the present study between postoperative days 2 and 5 demonstrated no TH2 cytokine production. Finally, cytokine production in the present study was only measured in T cells, not in other antigen-presenting cells or natural killer cells. These other cell types have been reported to produce TH2 cytokines in humans. Thus, TH2 cytokine production by cells other than T cells may explain other reports of postoperative elevations of T H2 cytokine levels not seen in the present study. One study suggested, however, that it would be unlikely to observe TH2 cytokine responses in humans that do not involve CD4+ T cells.

The observation that the degree of postoperative suppression of TH1 cytokine responses was the same after carotid endarterectomy and aortic surgery was surprising. This finding suggests the occurrence of a generalized suppression of T-cell function during the postoperative period that may be independent of the degree of tissue injury. Such a generalized immune suppression following surgical injury may change the immunological significance of what has been defined as major and minor surgery. An unexpected finding was the large variance in preoperative stimulated intracellular cytokine levels in the aortic surgery group; this variance was not present in the carotid endarterectomy group. The difference in preoperative immune reactivity between groups may reflect differences in the patient population, underlying vascular disease, or other unmeasured confounding factors. The potential correlation of decreased preoperative immune function in patients undergoing aortic surgery needs to be further investigated with respect to the risk of postoperative infectious complications.

The initial cytokine milieu is one of the main factors determining TH1 and TH2 differentiation in T cells. γδ T cells are an epithelial-associated lymphocyte subset that respond early to infection and cell injury. These specialized lymphocytes can release TH1 and TH2 cytokines, which are thought to play a role in modulating the
TH1 cytokines are significantly down-regulated after surgical trauma without functional differentiation of the T-cell response. The present study demonstrates that γδ T cells play an important role in the epidermal barrier to bacterial infections, in neutrophil recruitment and the process of epithelial repair.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that surgical trauma suppresses TH1 cytokine responses without increasing TH2 cytokine production. These results provide further information that may direct future treatments based on the TH1 and TH2 paradigm focused on decreasing the risk of postoperative infectious complications.

Reprints: Ramon Berguer, MD, Surgical Service, Department of Veterans Affairs Northern California Health Care System, 150 Muir Rd, Mail Code 112, Martinez, CA 94553 (e-mail: berguer.ramon@martinez.va.gov).

ARCH SURG/VOL 134, MAY 1999

Figure 4. Results of intracellular helper T-cell type 1 (TH1) and type 2 (TH2) cytokine measurements in T-cell receptor γδ+ lymphocytes using multiparameter flow cytometry in 18 patients undergoing vascular surgery. IL indicates interleukin; plus sign, positive; and IFN, interferon. See legend for Figure 1 for definition of dashed lines, statistical analyses, asterisk, and dagger.