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1 **Viral mimic poly-(I:C) attenuates airway epithelial T cell suppressive capacity;**
2 **implications for asthma**

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4 Jürgen Schwarze¹, Paul M. Fitch¹, Janneke Heimweg², Claire Errington¹, Reina Matsuda¹,
5 Harold G. de Bruin², Maarten van den Berge^{3,4}, Antoon J.M. van Oosterhout⁴, Irene H.
6 Heijink^{2,3,4}

7
8 ¹The University of Edinburgh, MRC –Centre for Inflammation Research, Queen’s Medical
9 Research Institute, Edinburgh, UK, ²University of Groningen, University Medical Center
10 Groningen, Department of Pathology and Medical Biology, Experimental Pulmonology and
11 Inflammation Research, ³University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen,
12 Department of Pulmonology, ⁴University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen,
13 GRIAC Research Institute

14
15 **Corresponding author:** Dr. I.H. Heijink University Medical Center Groningen, Hanzeplein 1,
16 9713 GZ, Groningen, The Netherlands, Phone: +31 (0)50 3610998; Fax: +31 (0)50 3610570, E-
17 mail: h.i.heijink@umcg.nl

18
19 **Take home message:** Airway epithelial regulation of T cell activity may be impaired during
20 virus-induced exacerbations in asthma.

21 **Running title:** Epithelial regulation of T cell activity

22 **Key words:** Airway epithelial cells; Allergic inflammation; Asthma immunology; T cell-
23 modulation

1 *To the Editor*

2 In allergen-sensitized asthmatic individuals, allergen-specific type-2 T-helper (Th2) cells
3 proliferate and secrete type-2 cytokines (e.g. interleukin (IL)-4, -5 and -13), driving the airway
4 inflammatory response that gives rise to the clinical symptoms of asthma. Both early-life
5 sensitization to aeroallergens and lower respiratory viral infections are important environmental
6 risk factors for developing asthma. Respiratory viral infections are also the most common trigger
7 for asthma exacerbations. Of interest, many asthma susceptibility genes are expressed in the
8 airway epithelium[1], which forms the first continuous line of defense against inhaled
9 environmental insults, including viruses and aeroallergens. Impaired immune regulation and
10 failure to maintain tolerance to allergens is thought to contribute to allergic sensitization. Asthma
11 epithelium may be deficient in its innate immune defense against virus infections, resulting in
12 increased viral replication upon rhinovirus infection compared to non-asthma-derived epithelial
13 cultures[2]. Furthermore, there is evidence for loss of the mucosal immune barrier in asthma,
14 with disruption of epithelial integrity[1,3]. This may not only lead to increased permeability, but
15 also result in the release of pro-inflammatory mediators, specifically of cytokines that drive type-
16 2 responses[3,4]. We recently observed that the ability of allergens to disrupt epithelial barrier
17 function is related to the development of type-2-mediated inflammation in asthma[5,6].
18 Furthermore, we demonstrated that healthy murine lung epithelium is a potent inhibitor of T cell
19 proliferation and that this inhibition is lost upon viral infection[7]. It is unknown if this immune
20 regulatory effect is displayed by human epithelium and is dysregulated in asthma. We
21 hypothesize that changes in this regulatory effect translate into aberrant regulation of T cell
22 responses in asthma. We studied the epithelial regulation of T cell proliferation and cytokine
23 responses upon epithelial stimulation with a viral mimic, using co-culture of human T cells and
24 primary bronchial epithelial cells (PBECs) from healthy controls and asthma patients.

1 Normal PBECs obtained from Lonza (Walkersville, MD) were used, except for the
2 comparison between healthy and asthmatic epithelium, when PBECs derived by bronchial
3 brushings from 5 healthy individuals and 5 patients with mild-moderate asthma, all non-smokers,
4 were used (see fig. 1E for further characteristics). The study was approved by the Medical Ethics
5 Committee of the UMCG. All subjects gave their written informed consent. PBECs were
6 cultured in hormonally-supplemented bronchial epithelium growth medium (BEGM, Lonza) as
7 described before[8-10]. PBECs were seeded in 12-well plates, grown to ~90% confluence,
8 placed in BEGM/1% FCS overnight and pre-treated with/without 12.5µg/ml poly-(I:C) for 8
9 hours and washed before placing in co-culture with T cells. CD4⁺ T cells were isolated from 10
10 ml peripheral blood of healthy non-allergic non-smoking volunteers by Ficoll-Hypaque
11 (Lymphoprep; Nycomed, Oslo, Norway) by density-gradient centrifugation followed by MACS
12 sorting using CD4⁺ T cell Isolation Kit II (Miltenyi Biotec, San Diego, CA). T cells were seeded
13 in duplicates at a concentration of 1.25*10⁵/ml in 12 well plates with/without PBECs (2:1
14 PBECs:T cells) or in the upper well of a transwell system (0.4µM pores, Corning Costar) placed
15 above PBECs. T cells were stimulated for 96 hours in the presence/absence of PBECs in
16 BEGM/1% FCS or in conditioned-medium from 24 hours PBEC culture. T cell proliferation was
17 induced by α-CD3/α-CD28 immobilized to beads (Dynabeads, Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) and
18 analyzed by labeling with 10 µM carboxy fluorescein succinimidyl ester (CFSE, Life
19 Technologies, Grand Island, NY) just prior to stimulation. CFSE dilution measurements were
20 performed using flow cytometry (Calibur, BD) in viable CD4⁺/7-amino-actinomycin-D^{negative} T
21 cells. The division index was calculated at (100-Y)/Y, where $Y(\%) = x_0 + x_1/2 + x_2/4 + x_3/8 +$
22 $x_4/16$, x_0 = % of T cells that have not divided and x_{1-4} = T cells within progressive CFSE division
23 gates. Levels of interferon (IFN)-γ, IL-4, IL-5, IL-10 and IL-13 were analyzed in cell-free

1 supernatants using a multiplex ELISA kit (Millipore, Billerica, MD) and Luminex technology
2 (Luminex Corporation, Austin, TX).

3 We first studied the regulatory effects healthy human PBECs on T cell proliferative
4 responses and observed an almost complete prevention of α -CD3/ α -CD28-induced T cell
5 proliferation, with suppression of all T cells (fig. 1A, B), without significant effects on T cell
6 viability (not shown). We previously observed in mice that T cell proliferation is equally well
7 suppressed by lung epithelial cells, whether they were cultured submerged or at the air-liquid
8 interface (data not shown). Here, we show that the suppressive effect was still present when
9 PBECs and T cells were separated in a transwell system, suggesting the effect does not require
10 direct cell-cell contact (fig. 1B). In addition, the suppressive effect could be transferred by
11 conditioned-medium derived from 24-hours culture of the epithelial cells (fig. 1C), indicating the
12 involvement of one or several soluble mediators. Assessing cytokine production, there was no
13 significant effect on the type-1 cytokine IFN- γ , while healthy PBECs strongly inhibited the α -
14 CD3/ α -CD28-induced secretion of the type-2 cytokines IL-4, IL-5, IL-10 and IL-13 (fig. 1D).
15 PBECs cultured alone did not secrete detectable levels of any of these cytokines.

16 To study whether airway epithelium in asthma is deficient in its immunosuppressive
17 capacity, we compared the effect of PBECs from asthma patients and healthy controls (fig. 1E).
18 Both asthma-derived and control-derived PBECs formed confluent cell monolayer, without
19 morphological differences as observed by microscopy, and both markedly inhibited T cell
20 proliferation (fig. 1F). However, asthma-derived PBECs were significantly less potent in doing
21 so (fig. 1F). Furthermore, PBECs from both asthmatics and healthy controls had a similar
22 capacity to inhibit type-2 cytokine production, as shown for IL-13 (fig. 1G), without significant
23 differences between the subject groups.

1 We previously showed that regulatory effect of healthy murine epithelial cells was lost
2 upon viral infection[7]. Respiratory RNA viruses act on Toll-like receptor (TLR)3, potentially
3 mediating airway inflammation in virus-induced asthma exacerbations[11,12]. Therefore, we
4 used the TLR3 agonist poly-(I:C) as a viral mimic. PBECs from controls and asthmatics were
5 exposed to poly-(I:C) and then washed, leaving the cells viable and fully confluent, before T
6 cells were added. Pre-treatment with poly-(I:C) strongly reduced the suppressive effect of both
7 control and asthma-derived PBECs on T cell proliferation (fig. 1H, 1I) and attenuated the
8 inhibitory effect of control PBECs on type-2 cytokine secretion, as shown for IL-13 (fig. 1J).

9 Together, our data suggest that asthma and viral infection compromise the
10 immunosuppressive capacity of airway epithelium, which may be most impaired during virus-
11 induced exacerbations of asthma, resulting in severe inflammation and a loss of asthma control.
12 Such a major compromise of epithelial immune suppressive capacity was not found and not
13 expected in the epithelium from stable asthma patients studied here. Viral infection of murine
14 pulmonary epithelial cells strongly reduces their T cell suppressive capacity[7] and our current
15 data indicate that viral infection of human airway epithelial cells will have a similar effect. Even
16 without using live virus, the epithelial immunosuppressive effect on T cells was strongly
17 attenuated upon exposure to the viral mimic and TLR3 agonist poly-(I:C). We speculate that
18 such inhibition of epithelial immune regulation could enhance type-2 cytokine secretion during
19 viral infection in early life, an important risk factor for asthma development, and during virus-
20 induced asthma exacerbations. Indeed, viral infection is accompanied by an increase in type-2
21 cytokine secretion in mouse models[13] and in asthmatic airways, where type-2 cytokine levels
22 relate to exacerbation severity[14].

1 In conclusion, we show that human bronchial epithelium exerts potent inhibitory effects
2 on T cell proliferation and type-2 cytokine secretion. These effects are attenuated following
3 exposure to a viral mimic, and asthma epithelium displays reduced inhibition of T cell
4 proliferation. Identification of the responsible mechanisms and mediator(s) involved in epithelial
5 immune regulation may provide new targets for novel disease modifying therapeutic and
6 preventive strategies in asthma.

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3

1 **Figure legend**

2

3 **Figure 1. Primary bronchial epithelial cells (PBECs) inhibit α -CD3/ α -CD28-induced T cell**
4 **proliferation and associated type-2 cytokine production, an effect that is attenuated by viral**
5 **stimulation and in asthma. A)** Representative CFSE dilution measurement. **B)** Proliferation of
6 T cells cultured in direct contact with PBECs (Lonza) compared to T cells and PBECs separated
7 in a transwell system ($n=5$). **C)** Proliferation of T cells cultured in conditioned medium (CM) of
8 24 hour-PBEC (Lonza) cultures ($n=5$). **D)** IFN- γ , IL-4, IL-5, IL-10 and IL-13 levels measured in
9 cell-free supernatants by multiplex ELISA after T cell stimulation with α -CD3/ α -CD28-coupled
10 beads for 4 days in the absence/presence of PBECs ((Lonza, $n=9-10$). **E)** Characteristics of the
11 subjects from whom bronchial brushings were taken. Stable mild-moderate asthma patients were
12 included based on the presence of allergy (assessed by skin test or Phadiatop) and bronchial
13 hyperresponsiveness (assessed by PC₂₀ AMP<16mg/ml, PC₂₀ methacholine<8mg/ml or PC₂₀
14 histamine<8mg/ml), and the absence of other lung diseases and of any corticosteroid, long-acting
15 β -agonist, and long-acting anticholinergic use for at least 4 weeks preceding the study. Medians
16 (range) or number (%) are presented. FEV₁% pred =forced expiratory volume during the first
17 second as percentage of predicted. **F)** Proliferation of T cells cultured with/without PBECs from
18 controls or asthma patients. **G)** IL-13 levels in cell-free supernatants of the T cells co-cultured
19 with/without PBECs from controls or asthma patients ($n=5$). **H)** Proliferation of T cells cultured
20 alone, with PBECs (Lonza), or with PBECs (Lonza) that were pre-treated with 12.5 μ g/ml poly-
21 (I:C) ($n=5$). **I)** Proliferation of T cells cultured with PBECs from asthma patients that were pre-
22 treated with/without 12.5 μ g/ml poly-(I:C) ($n=3$). **J)** IL-13 levels in cell-free supernatants of the
23 co-cultures described in H. Means \pm SEM are shown. *= $p<0.05$, **= $p<0.01$, and ***= $p<0.001$

- 1 as analyzed by 1-way ANOVA with Bonferroni's multiple comparison test in all graphs except
- 2 for panel D and I, where an unpaired and paired Student's t-test was used, respectively.