Crucial Role of Antibodies to Pertactin in *Bordetella pertussis* Immunity

Sandra M. M. Hellwig,¹ Maria E. Rodriguez,¹,²,³ Guy A. M. Berbers,¹ Jan G. J. van de Winkel,¹,³ and Frits R. Mooi¹,⁴

¹Immunotherapy Laboratory, Department of Immunology, and ²Eijkman-Winkler Institute, University Medical Center, and ³Genmab, Utrecht, and ⁴Laboratory for Clinical Vaccine Research and ⁵Laboratory for Infectious Diseases, National Institute of Public Health and the Environment, Bilthoven, The Netherlands; ⁶Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de Fermantaciones Industriales, La Plata University, La Plata, Argentina

Pertussis, a serious infectious disease of the respiratory tract caused by *Bordetella pertussis*, is reemerging in vaccinated populations. Efforts to curtail this disease are hampered by limited insight into the basis of protective immunity. Opsonophagocytosis was recently found to play a central role in cellular bactericidal activity against *B. pertussis*. In the present study, we studied the specificity of opsonic antibodies. Anti-pertactin antibodies, but not anti-pertussis toxin, anti-fimbriae, or anti-filamentous hemagglutinin antibodies, were found to be crucial for *B. pertussis* phagocytosis. These data are consistent with field studies showing that levels of antibodies to pertactin correlate with protection.

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a serious disease of the respiratory tract caused by the gram-negative bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. Despite >40 years of vaccination, pertussis is a disease that occurs in endemic areas, with epidemic outbreaks occurring every 3–5 years. Pertussis ranks fifth, after hepatitis B, measles, tetanus, and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, as a cause of global mortality, according to vaccine-preventable pediatric infectious diseases [1]. In some vaccinated populations (e.g., in Australia, Canada, The Netherlands, and United States), the incidence of pertussis has been increasing over the last decade [2]. This is exemplified by the situation in The Netherlands. In 1996, the number of reported pertussis cases increased 12-fold, compared with the previous year, and, since then, the incidence of pertussis has remained high [3]. Furthermore, it has become clear that pertussis is not only a childhood disease. Several studies indicated that 12%–26% of adults with persistent cough were infected by *B. pertussis* [4]. Of importance, pertussis in adults is associated with significant morbidity.

Historical data suggest that, initially, the introduction of whole cell–pertussis vaccines in the 1950s significantly reduced disease burden. Although generally effective, whole cell vaccines are reactogenic, causing fever and local reactions. Concerns about the safety of whole cell vaccines led to the development of acellular vaccines, composed of ≥1 of the following *B. pertussis* proteins: pertussis toxin (Ptx), filamentous hemagglutinin (FHA), pertactin (Prt), and serotype 2 and 3 fimbriae (Fim2 and Fim3). Acellular vaccines have now been introduced in a number of countries, replacing whole cell vaccines. As yet, it is unclear whether acellular vaccines will prove more effective than whole cell vaccines in the long run.

Lack of insight into the basis of protective immunity against disease and infection has hampered efforts to improve pertussis vaccines. Two studies indicated that persons with high levels of antibodies to Prn, Fim2, Fim3, or Ptx are less likely to develop clinical disease when exposed to pertussis [5, 6]. However, the mechanism of antibody-mediated protection is poorly understood. The present study provides a rational basis...
for the observed correlation between protection against pertussis and antibodies to Prn and shows that such antibodies are crucial for phagocytosis of B. pertussis by immune cells.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Bacterial strains.** B. pertussis B213 and B1686 are Tohama streptomycin-resistant derivatives. Strain B1686 does not produce pertactin because of a knockout mutation. The strains were transformed with plasmid pCW505 [7] (supplied by Dr. A. A. Weiss, Cincinnati), which induces cytoplasmic expression of green fluorescent protein. Bacteria were stored at −70°C, recovered by growth on Bordet-Gengou agar plates at 35°C for 3 days, and subsequently recultured overnight on Bordet-Gengou plates before use in phagocytosis experiments.

**Serum samples.** Serum samples from a study with pertussis vaccines in Dutch children aged 4 years [8] were used in this study. Children were vaccinated at the ages of 3, 4, 5, and 11 months with the Dutch whole cell vaccine and were boosted with an acellular vaccine consisting of FHA, Ptx, and Prn (Glaxo-SmithKline) at the age of 4 years. Before and after booster vaccination, serum agglutination activity and titers of specific antibody to Ptx, FHA, Prn, Fim2, and Fim3 were determined (table 1). Written informed consent was obtained from a parent, guardian, or adult before enrollment. This study was approved by the institutional review board of the National Institute of Public Health and the Environment, The Netherlands.

**Peripheral blood polymorphonuclear leukocytes (PMNLs).** Peripheral blood PMNLs were isolated from heparinized venous blood of healthy human volunteers (age range, 25–45 years) by Histopaque (Sigma-Aldrich) gradient centrifugation. PMNLs were harvested, and the remaining erythrocytes were removed by hypotonic lysis. Cell viability was >99%, as determined by trypan blue exclusion. Before functional assays, PMNLs were washed twice with RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated fetal calf serum, resuspended, and used immediately. All experiments described in this study were conducted with freshly isolated PMNLs lacking Fcγ receptor type 1 expression, as monitored by cell cytometric analyses with fluorescein isothiocyanate–conjugated anti-Fcγ receptor type 1 monoclonal antibody 22 [9].

**Phagocytosis.** Phagocytosis of B. pertussis was evaluated as described elsewhere [10]. In brief, green fluorescent protein–expressing B. pertussis were grown overnight on Bordet-Gengou agar plates and resuspended in RPMI 1640 medium containing 10% fetal calf serum. Bacteria were incubated with or without 5% human serum for 30 min at 37°C. After being washed, opsonized and nonopsonized bacteria were incubated with phagocytic cells in a 70:1 ratio for 45 min at 4°C, to allow for binding of bacteria to PMNLs. After extensive washing to remove nonattached bacteria, cells were split into 2 aliquots and were further incubated for 30 min at either 4°C or 37°C. Next, remaining cell surface–bound opsonized bacteria were detected by incubation (30 min at 4°C) with phycocerythrin-conjugated goat F(ab')2, of anti–human IgG (Southern Biotechnology). After washing, samples were analyzed by flow cytometry. Five thousand cells per sample were analyzed. Green and red fluorescence intensities of cells maintained at 4°C throughout served as controls for bacterial binding (i.e., no phagocytosis). The decrease in red fluorescence of green-positive cells after incubation at 37°C reflects bacterial phagocytosis, as confirmed microscopically [10]. Phagocytosis rates were calculated from the drop in mean red fluorescence intensity of green-positive cells, as described elsewhere [10].

**ELISA and bacterial agglutination.** Titers of antibodies to Ptx, FHA, Prn, Fim2, and Fim3 were determined by ELISA, as described elsewhere [11]. In brief, 96-well plates were coated with purified Ptx, FHA, Fim2, Fim3 (National Institute of Health and the Environment), or Prn (Chiron) at a concentration of 1, 2, 3, 3, and 3 μg/mL, respectively. For each serum, eight 2-fold dilutions were tested starting with a 1:60 dilution. Bound IgG was detected after 2 h of incubation (room temperature) with alkaline phosphatase–
conjugated goat anti–human IgG (Sigma; working dilution, 30,000).

ELISA units (EU) were calculated relative to the US reference pertussis antiserum (human; obtained from the US Food and Drug Administration), lot 3 for Ptx, FHA, and Fim and lot 4 for Prn, by use of the 4-parameter fit method in KC4 (Kinetical for Windows) with a BioTek plate reader (EL312c; BioTek). The minimum level of detection was estimated to be 2 EU/mL for anti–Ptx and anti–FHA antibodies, 4 EU/mL for anti–Prn antibodies, 2 EU/mL for anti–Fim2 antibodies, and 1 EU/mL for anti-Fim3 antibodies.

Agglutinating antibodies were measured essentially as described elsewhere [12], with use of B. pertussis 3838 as antigen. US pertussis antiserum was used as reference, and a control serum was included on each plate. For each serum, a 2-fold dilution series in 8 wells was tested (starting with a 1:4 dilution). The agglutination titer is expressed as the reciprocal of the highest final dilution of serum resulting in agglutination.

Statistical analysis. Antibody titers were converted to log_{10} values before analysis for linear correlation. Pearson’s product moment correlation coefficient [13] was calculated for phagocytosis rates and the inverse of log-converted titers of antibody to selected bacterial antigens. Student’s t test was used to assess the significance of differences between phagocytosis rates induced by the different sera. Significance was accepted at P<.05.

RESULTS

B. pertussis containing pCW505, a plasmid coding for the green fluorescent protein, was incubated with serum specimens from 16 children obtained before and after booster vaccination with acellular vaccine. Subsequently, bacteria were incubated with human PMNLs, and phagocytosis was quantified by flow cytometry. Thirteen of the 16 postvaccination serum samples enhanced phagocytosis. In contrast, no phagocytic effect was observed and no antibodies were detected by ELISA or agglutination in any of the 16 serum samples obtained before booster vaccination (figure 1A). A statistically significant correlation was found between phagocytosis and titers of antibody to Prn (R^{2}_{agg} = 0.71 and P_{agg} = .001; figure 1B), whereas correlations with agglutination titers (R^{2}_{agg} = 0.01 and P_{agg} = .9) or titers of antibody to Ptx, FHA, Fim2, and Fim3 were not significant (respectively, R^{2}_{agg} = 0.32 and P_{agg} = .13; R^{2}_{agg} = 0.03 and P_{agg} = .17; R^{2}_{agg} = 0.2 and P_{agg} = .09; and R^{2}_{agg} = 0.05 and P_{agg} = .4).

To further investigate the role of antibodies to Prn in inducing phagocytosis, 3 serum samples with different levels of anti–pertactin antibodies (donors 9, 13, and 16) were depleted of antibodies to Prn, Fim2, or Fim3 by incubation with the respective purified proteins. Purity of Prn and Fim antigens used for depletion was confirmed by SDS-PAGE and immunoblot analyses. After depletion of antibodies to Prn, the ability of the serum to induce phagocytosis was nearly absent, whereas depletion of antibodies to Fim2 and Fim3 had no such effect (figure 2A). Of importance, although a drastic decrease in anti–Prn antibody titer was observed after incubation with purified Prn, neither titers of antibodies to the other antigens (Ptx, FHA, Fim2, and Fim3) nor serum agglutinating activity were affected (data not shown). Similarly, incubation of serum samples with Fim2 and Fim3 antigens solely depleted anti–Fim2 and anti–Fim3 antibodies from serum, as determined by ELISA. Finally, serum samples that were potent in facilitating phagocytosis exhibited a strongly reduced ability to induce phagocytosis of a B. pertussis strain defective in Prn expression (figure 2B). In combination, these data show Prn to represent an important target for antibody-mediated phagocytosis.
DISCUSSION

Previous studies have indicated that antibodies to Prn are important for protection against disease. Field trials revealed clinical protection to correlate with levels of anti-Prn antibodies [5, 6]. Furthermore, 3-component acellular vaccines containing FHA, Ptx, and Prn were shown to be significantly more efficacious than 2-component vaccines with solely FHA and Ptx in the same study (vaccine efficacies of 84% vs. 59%) [14]. Prn is one of the few B. pertussis proteins that exhibit antigenic variation [15], and antigenic divergence between vaccine strains and clinical isolates has been observed in a number of vaccinated populations, which suggests a significant effect of anti-Prn antibodies on strain transmission [16–19]. By use of a mouse model, it was shown that the variable region of Prn harbors a protective epitope and that a whole cell vaccine was less effective against strains producing nonvaccine-type Prn variants [20]. Phagocytosis and subsequent killing of microorganisms represents a potent immune mechanism for clearing bacteria from the respiratory tracts of infected persons. We have recently demonstrated that antibody-mediated phagocytosis is a key mechanism for B. pertussis killing by phagocytes [9, 21]. By using a flow cytometry-based phagocytosis assay that allows accurate assessment of B. pertussis phagocytosis, we could determine that, in the absence of opsonic antibodies, binding of B. pertussis to phagocytes is drastically reduced. Under these conditions, neither bacterial phagocytosis nor cellular bactericidal effector functions against this pathogen takes place. In the present study, anti-Prn antibodies, but not anti-Ptx, anti-Fim2, anti-Fim3, or anti-FHA antibodies, were shown to be crucial for B. pertussis phagocytosis. These data provide a biological basis for the well-documented, but poorly understood, observation of a close correlation between antibodies to Prn and protection. In contrast to anti-FHA antibodies, antibodies to Ptx, Fim2, and Fim3 also were found to correlate with protection in humans [5, 6]. Although we found no evidence for involvement of antibodies to Ptx, Fim2, and Fim3 in phagocytosis, these antibodies may well confer protection by other mechanisms, such as complement-mediated killing, blocking of bacterial adherence, and antitoxin activity. Prn is the only antigen present in acellular vaccine that induces opsonic antibodies. Prn variants have been documented in a number of populations over the years and are presently causing outbreaks [15–19]. This study provides a new view on the importance of Prn as a vaccine candidate despite the traditional view of this antigen as a mere adhesin to be blocked. Moreover,
it provides new and relevant evidence that sheds some light on
the problem of B. pertussis persistence within the population.

References
1. Ulmer JB, Lin MA. Ethical issues for vaccines and immunization. Nat
2. Mooi FR, van Loo IH, King Al. Adaptation of Bordetella pertussis to
vaccination: a cause for its re-emergence? Emerg Infect Dis 2001;7
3. de Melker HE, Schellekens JE, Neppelenbroek SE, Mooi FR, Rumke
HC, Conyn-van Spaendonck MA. Re-emergence of pertussis in the
highly vaccinated population of the Netherlands: observations on sur-
B. Pertussis is a frequent cause of prolonged cough illness in adults
5. Cherry JD, Gornbein J, Heiminger U, Stehr K. A search for serologic
correlates of immunity to Bordetella pertussis cough illnesses. Vaccine
6. Storsaeter J, Hallander HO, Gustafsson L, Olin P. Levels of anti per-
tussis antibodies related to protection after household exposure to
7. Weingart CL, Broitman-Maduro G, Dean G, Newman S, Peppler M,
Weiss AA. Fluorescent labels influence phagocytosis of Bordetella per-
8. Berbers G, Lafeber AB, Labadie B, Vermeer de Bondt PE, Bolscher
DJA, Plantinga AD. A randomized controlled study with whole-cell or
acellular pertussis vaccines in combination with regular DT-IPV vac-
cine and a new polomyelitis (IPV-Vero) component in children 4 years
affinity receptor for IgG (Fc gamma RI, CD64) after in vivo application of
recombinant human granulocyte colony-stimulating factor. Blood
JGL. Fc receptor–mediated immunity against Bordetella pertussis. J Im-
munol 2001;167:6545–51.
of serologic assays used in a multicenter trial of acellular pertussis
12. Nagel J, de Graaff S, Schijf Evers D. Improved serodiagnosis of whoop-
ing cough caused by Bordetella pertussis by determination of IgG anti-
W, Willems RJ, Polymorphism in the Bordetella pertussis virulence factors
P69/pertactin and pertussis toxin in the Netherlands: temporal trends
16. Mooi FR, He Q, van Oirschot H, Mertsola J. Variation in the Bordetella
pertussis virulence factors pertussis toxin and pertactin in vaccine
Bordetella pertussis strains isolated from vaccinated and unvaccinated
T. Polymorphism in Bordetella pertussis pertactin and pertussis toxin
182:1402–8.
19. Njamkepo E, Rimlinger F, Thiberge S, Guno N. Thirty-five years’ ex-
perience with the whole cell pertussis vaccine in France: vaccine strains
region I of the Bordetella pertussis protein pertactin in immunity.
FR, van De Winkel JGL. Targeting to Fcy receptors, but not CR3 (CD11b/
CD18), increases clearance of Bordetella pertussis. J Infect Dis 2001;