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Human T cells express CD25 and Foxp3 upon activation and exhibit effector/memory phenotypes without any regulatory/suppressor function

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Abstract

Background: Foxp3 has been suggested to be a standard marker for murine Tregs whereas its role as marker for human Tregs is controversial. While some reports have shown that human Foxp3+ T cells had no regulatory function others have shown their role in the inhibition of T cell proliferation.

Methods: T cell activation was performed by means of brayostatin-1/ionomycin (B/I), mixed lymphocyte reaction (MLR), and CD3/CD28 activation. T cell proliferation was performed using BrdU and CFSE staining. Flow cytometry was performed to determine Foxp3 expression, cell proliferation, viabilities and phenotype analyses of T cells.

Results: Both CD4+ and CD8+ T cells expressed Foxp3 upon activation *in vitro*. Expression of Foxp3 remained more stable in CD4+CD25+ T cells compared to that in CD8+CD25+ T cells. The CD4+CD25+Foxp3+ T cells expressed CD44 and CD62L, showing their effector and memory phenotypes. Both FoxP3- responder T cells and CD4+FoxP3+ T cells underwent proliferation upon CD3/CD28 activation.

Conclusion: Expression of Foxp3 does not necessarily convey regulatory function in human CD4+CD25+ T cells. Increased FoxP3 on CD44+ effector and CD44+CD62L+ memory T cells upon stimulation suggest the activation-induced regulation of FoxP3 expression.

Background

In mice, scurfy mutation in forkhead/winged helix transcription factor gene *Foxp3* causes autoimmune lesions

including massive lymphoproliferation, diabetes, exfoliative dermatitis, thyroiditis and enteropathy. Such autoimmunity can be cured by a transgene encoding a wild-type

Foxp3 allele [1]. The expression of *Foxp3* in CD4+CD25+ T cells in wild-type mice and the diminished numbers of these T cells in scurfy and *Foxp3*-knockout (*Foxp3*⁻) mice suggested a role for *Foxp3* in the development of regulatory T cells (Tregs) [2]. In addition, *Foxp3* has been shown to be a specific marker for murine CD4+ Tregs because activation of non-Tregs did not induce *Foxp3* expression [2]. Ectopic expression of *Foxp3* was shown to be sufficient to activate a program of suppressor function in peripheral murine CD4+ T cells [2].

In humans, the gene encoding *Foxp3* was discovered during efforts to understand the genetic basis for a rare X-linked fatal autoimmune disease known as IPEX (immune dysregulation, polyendocrinopathy, enteropathy, X-linked) syndrome [3,4]. However, the role of *Foxp3* as a key marker for Tregs in humans remains controversial. Unlike mice, activation of human CD4+ T cells by T-cell receptor (TcR) stimulation resulted in the expression of *Foxp3* [5-12]. Most of these studies showed that induction of *Foxp3*, even in the presence of TGF- β , did not correlate with suppressive function of CD4+ T cells [6,10-12]. Although it was suggested that lack of suppression during the activation-induced expression of *Foxp3* in human CD4+ T cells was because of transient expression of *Foxp3*, the observation still argues against a role for *Foxp3* as key regulator of suppression in human CD4+ T cells upon expression. Regardless of the status of *Foxp3*, many studies considered CD4+CD25^{high} as Tregs in humans without being able to show their regulatory functions *in vivo* [13-15]. Most recently, it was reported that maternal alloantigens promoted development of Tregs in the human fetus that could suppress fetal antimaternal immunity. The authors considered CD4+CD25+*Foxp3*+ T cells as Tregs because of their partial suppressive function in a mixed lymphocyte reaction (MLR) *in vitro* [16]. These controversial reports prompted us to determine whether induction of *Foxp3* expression in human T cells during activation and during MLR may confer regulatory functions. Our studies showed that activation-induced expression of *Foxp3* was transient in CD8+CD25+ T cells but it was more stable in CD4+CD25+ T cells. These *Foxp3*+ T cells were mainly of effector and memory phenotypes.

Methods

Blood samples

PBMC were collected from two healthy donors, and duplicate experiments were performed.

Flow cytometry

Three-color staining and FACS analyses were performed as previously described by our group [17]. Extracellular staining were performed using anti-human antibodies from Biolegend: PE- and FITC-CD25 (clone BC96), PE- and FITC-CD44 (clone IM7), FITC-CD62L (clone DREG-

56), PE/Cy5-CD4 (clone OKT4) and PE/Cy5-CD8 (clone RPA-T8). Appropriate isotype control antibodies were used to exclude nonspecific binding. *Foxp3* intracellular staining was done with PE anti-human *Foxp3* Flow Kit (Biolegend, clone 206D) according to the manufacturer's protocol. Apoptosis was determined by staining of cells with Annexin V (BD Pharmingen).

Proliferation assay

FITC BrdU Flow Kit (BD Pharmingen) was used in proliferation assays. T cells were also labeled with CFSE by incubation at 5×10^7 cells/mL in 5 μ M CFSE/HBSS for 5 min at room temperature. Cells were then added with an equal volume of FBS, followed by three washes in FBS-containing HBSS.

Mixed lymphocyte reaction (MLR)

Blood samples were diluted two-fold with PBS and layered onto Ficoll-Hypaque. Each tube was centrifuged at 400 g for 30 min and the lymphocytes at the interface were collected. These cells were washed once with RPMI 1640 medium containing 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 μ g/ml streptomycin, and 2 mM L-glutamine. They were then resuspended at 10^7 cells/ml in the same medium containing 10% heat inactivated FBS. Allogeneic stimulating cells were irradiated in a cesium irradiator to a total dose of 5,000 rad, to abolish their capacity to proliferate. Cultures were set up in flat-bottomed 24-well plates and 3×10^6 responder cells were mixed with 2×10^6 irradiated stimulators in 2 mL. Cultures, set up in triplicates, were incubated for 8 days at 37°C. Control cells cultured with medium containing low dose IL-2 (20 U/mL) in order to maintain T cell viability during a 3-day culture. No IL-2 or anti-CD3 Ab was used in MLR samples. Some cultures were pulsed with 10 μ M BrdU (BD Pharmingen).

Statistical analysis

Statistical comparisons between groups were made using the Student *t* test with $P < 0.05$ being statistically significant.

Results and discussion

Activation of T cells induces expression of CD25 and *Foxp3* associated with effector and memory phenotype differentiation

PBMC were stimulated with bryostatin-1 (5 nM) and ionomycin (1 μ M) (B/I) in the presence of 80 U/mL of IL-2 (Peprotech) for 16 h. B/I activation mimic intracellular signals that result in T cell activation by increasing protein kinase C activity and intracellular calcium, respectively [18-20]. Cells were washed three times and cultured at 10^6 cells/mL in complete medium with 40 U/mL IL-2 (Peprotech) for 3 days and expression of *Foxp3* was determined using flow cytometry analysis. Expression of *Foxp3* was also determined on freshly isolated T cells on day 0. As

shown in Fig. 1A (top panel), presence of IL-2 alone for 3 days did not markedly increase expression of Foxp3 or CD25 above baseline levels on day 0 (Fig. 1C). The B/I activation, however, induced Foxp3 and CD25 expression in CD4+ and CD8+ T cells (Fig. 1A, middle panel). Upon B/I activation, CD4+CD25+Foxp3+ T cells were increased from 1% to 23% ($P = 0.016$) and CD8+CD25+Foxp3+ T cells were increased from 0.6% to 9% ($P = 0.013$). Extension of culture in the presence of IL-2 for 6 days without any further stimulation retained CD4+CD25+Foxp3+ T cells above the baseline levels in unactivated T cells (1% vs. 7%; $P = 0.031$) whereas CD8+CD25+Foxp3+ T cells dropped to baseline levels (0.6%). These results suggest that activation-induced expression of Foxp3 in CD4+CD25+ T cells is more stable than that in

CD8+CD25+ T cells. Absolute number of T cells increased 3 and 6 days after the B/I stimulation and expansion in the presence of IL-2 (Fig. 1B). Activation of T cells by means of anti-CD3/CD28 Abs for 3 days produced similar results as for B/I activation by increasing CD4+CD25+Foxp3+ T cells from 0.4% to 8.7% (Fig. 1C). Phenotype analyses of T cells revealed CD44+ effector and CD44+CD62L+ memory phenotypes prior to and 6 days after the B/I activation (Fig. 1D, top panel). While effector CD4+ and CD8+ T cells were reduced after activation (18% to 9% and 21% to 13%, respectively), memory CD4+ and CD8+ T cells were increased (82% to 91% and 79% to 87%, respectively). Upon B/I activation, CD4+ T cells showed a 6-fold increases of FoxP3 expression in CD44+, CD62L+ phenotypes (CD44+: 2.6% to 15%;

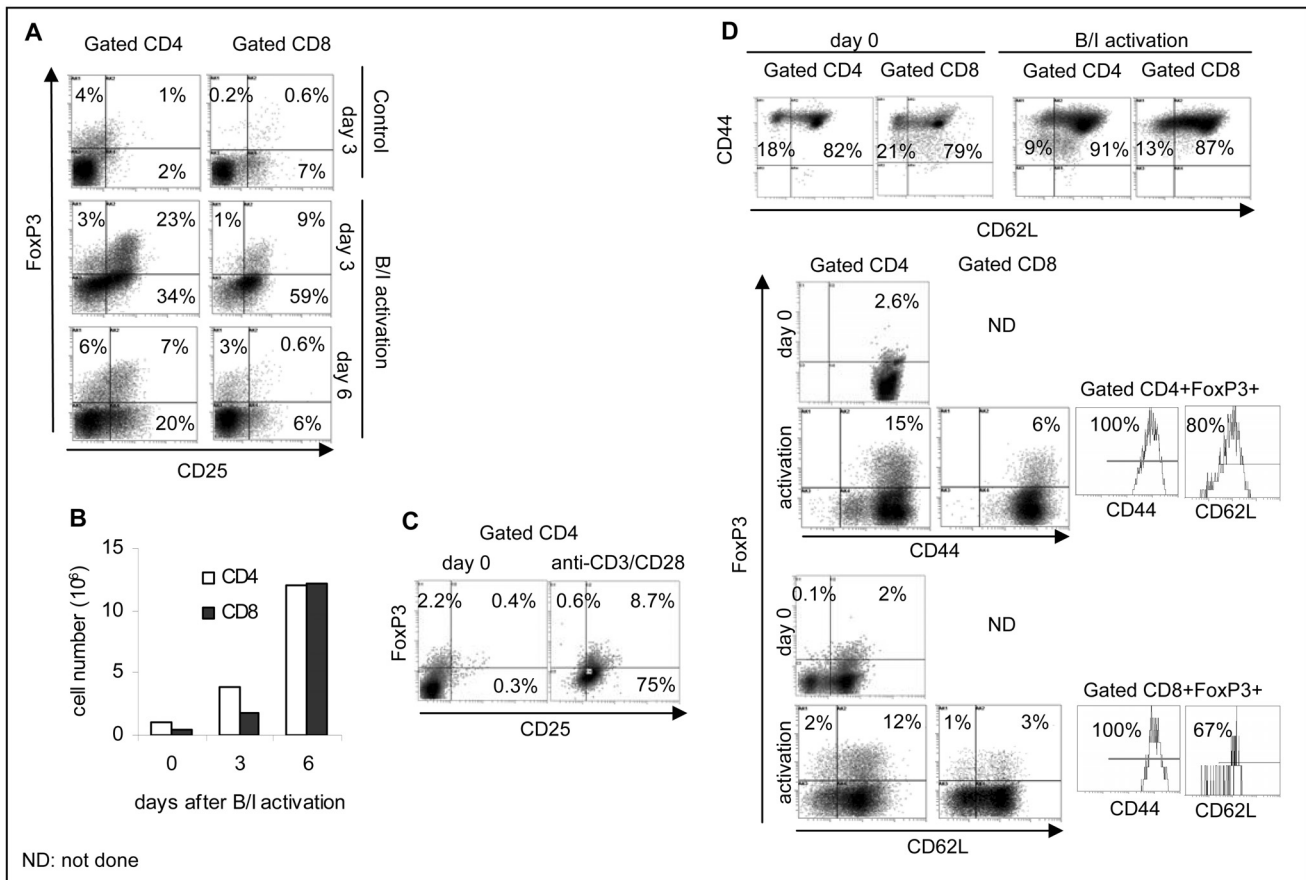


Figure 1

Foxp3 expression following T cell activation. T cells were isolated from healthy volunteers and split into two groups. Control group remained unactivated and cultured in the presence of IL-2 for 3 days (A; top panel) and another group was activated with B/I for 16 h and cultured in the presence of IL-2 for 3 days (A; middle panel) or 6 days (A; bottom panel). Absolute numbers of CD4+ and CD8+ T cells on pooled samples were determined on days 0, 3, and 6 post-culture by flow cytometry analysis (B). Expression of FoxP3 and CD25 were determined in freshly isolated CD4+ T cells (day 0) and after a 3-day stimulation with anti-CD3/CD28 Abs (C). Freshly isolated and B/I-activated T cells were subjected to flow cytometry to determine T cell phenotypes (D; top panel); Foxp3+ effector and memory T cells were determined in gated CD4+Foxp3+ cells or gated CD8+Foxp3+ cells (D; bottom panel). Representative data are shown from two donors in duplicate experiments.

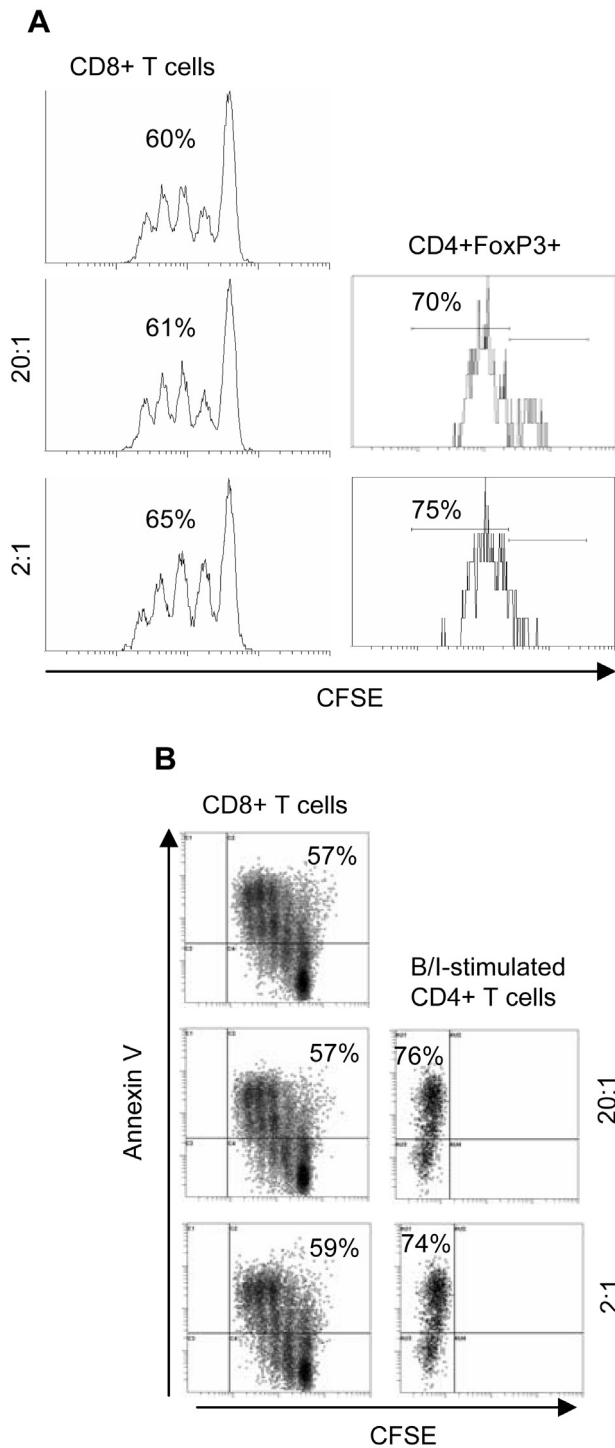


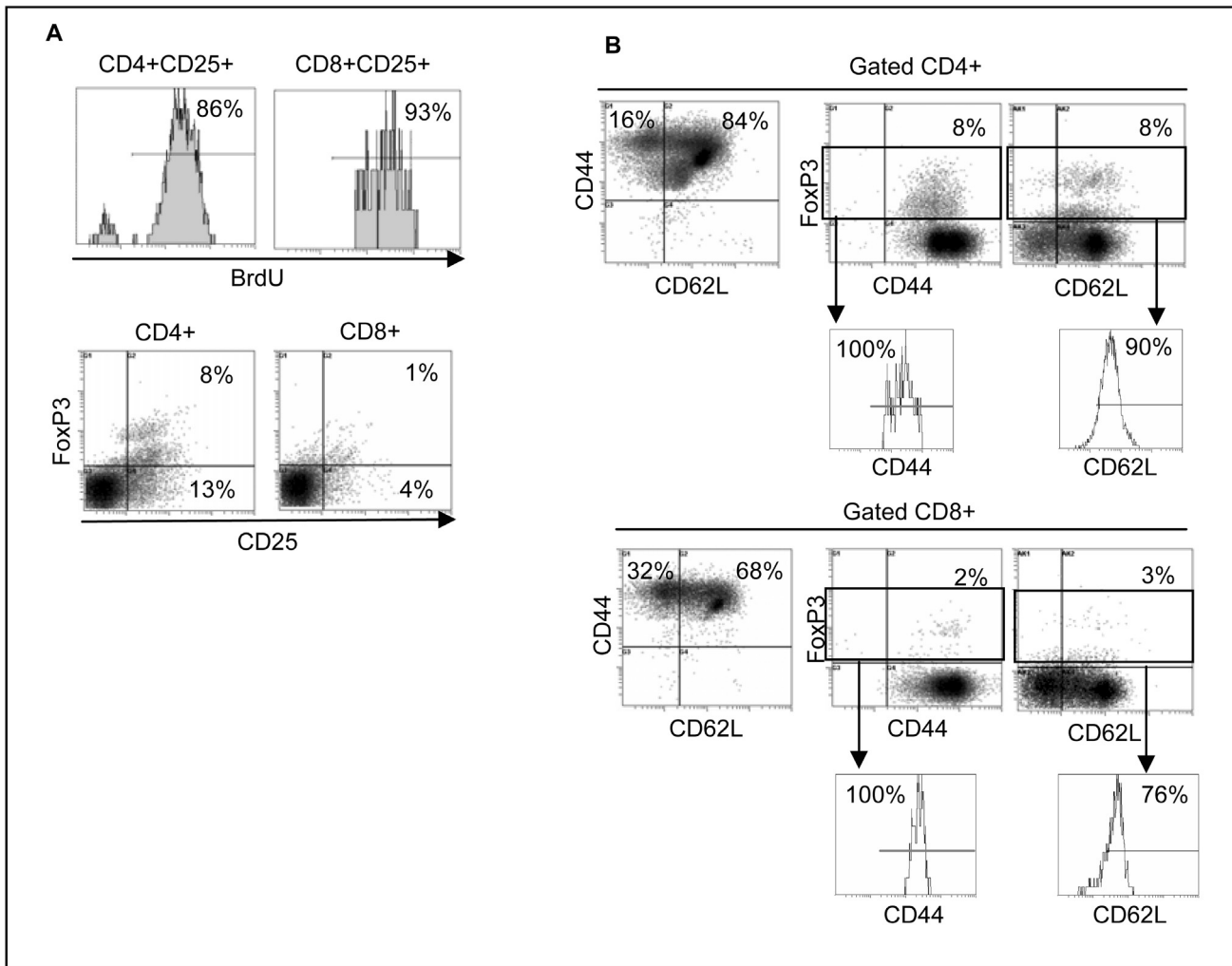
Figure 2

CD62L+: 2% to 12%). In addition, both CD4+ and CD8+ T cells showed FoxP3^{high} expression following activation compared to FoxP3^{low} expression on day 0 (Fig. 1D, middle and bottom panels). All CD4+Foxp3+ T cells expressed CD44 among which 80% also expressed CD62L (Fig. 1D, middle panel, far right). These data show that 20% of CD4+Foxp3+ T cells are effector and 80% are memory phenotypes. A similar phenotypic trend was detected for CD8+Foxp3+ T cells, showing 100% CD44+ of which 67% were CD62L+ T cells (Fig. 1D, bottom panel, far right). These results show that 33% of CD8+Foxp3+ T cells are effector and 67% are memory phenotypes. Data presented in Figs. 1A-D suggest that increased expression of FoxP3^{high} in effector T cells was due to the cell differentiation rather than cell proliferation, because relative percent of CD44+CD62L- effector T cells decreased after B/I activation. Similar mechanism may exist in memory T cells because of the expression of FoxP3^{high} after activation compared to FoxP3^{low} on day 0.

Activation-induced FoxP3 expression in CD4+ T cells fails to convey regulatory function in vitro

T cells were labeled with CFSE and stimulated with anti-CD3 (1 ug/ml) and anti-CD28 (1 ug/ml) Abs in the presence or absence of the B/I-activated CD4+CD25+FoxP3+ T cells (2:1 and 20:1 responder:suppressor ratios) for 3 days. Flow cytometry analysis showed similar rates of proliferation of gated CD8+ T cells in the absence or presence of inducible FoxP3+ T cells (Fig. 2A, 60% vs. 61% and 65%). The CD3/CD28 activation also induced FoxP3 expression in responder CD4+ T cells. Gated CD4+Foxp3+ T cells also showed 70-75% proliferation upon activation (Fig. 2A). Analysis of T cell apoptosis revealed similar rates of apoptosis in responder T cells in the absence or presence of CD4+FoxP3+ T cells (Fig. 2B, 57% vs. 57 and 59%). Majority of the B/I-activated CD4+FoxP3+ T cells (74-76%) were found to be apoptotic during anti-CD3/CD28 activation in co-culture with responder T cells.

Figure 2
T cell proliferation in the presence of inducible CD4+FoxP3+ T cells. To perform a co-culture suppression assay, responder T cells were labeled with CFSE and cultured in the absence or presence of different ratios of inducible FoxP3+ T cells (20:1 and 2:1) for 3 days in the presence of anti-CD3/CD28 Abs. Gated CD8+ T cells showed CFSE dilution (A, left panel). Responder CD4+ T cells that expressed FoxP3 due to a 3-day activation were also gated and analyzed for CFSE dilution (A, right panel). Cells obtained from a co-culture suppression assay (A, left panel) were also stained for Annexin V in order to determine apoptosis in responder CD8+ T cells (B, left panel) and the B/I-activated CD4+FoxP3+ T cells (B, right panel).

**Figure 3**

Foxp3 expression following allogeneic MLR. Cells were analyzed by flow cytometry after an 8-day MLR. BrdU incorporation was determined on gated CD4+CD25+ or CD8+CD25+ T cells (A; top panel). Gated CD4+ or CD8+ T cells were analyzed for the detection of CD25+Foxp3+ cells (A; bottom panel). Gated CD4+ T cells (B; top panel) or CD8+ T cells (B; bottom panel) were analyzed for the expression of CD44, CD62L, Foxp3. The CD44+ and CD62L+ T cells were determined by gating on CD4+Foxp3+ or CD8+Foxp3+ T cells. Representative data are shown from two donors in duplicate experiments.

Allogeneic activation of T cells during MLR induces Foxp3 expression in CD4+CD25+ T cells associated with effector/memory phenotype

We performed an 8-day allogeneic MLR to determine whether induction of Foxp3 expression in T cells was stable during MLR and whether such an induced Foxp3+ expression might inhibit T cell proliferation. Responder and stimulator cells were obtained from different healthy donors. Stimulator cells were irradiated (5000 rad) and cultured with responder cells for 8 days in the presence of 10 μ M BrdU (BD Pharmingen). Cells were then stained with relevant Abs and subjected to flow cytometry analysis. As shown in Fig. 3A (top panel) 86% of CD4+CD25+

T cells and 93% of CD8+CD25+ T cells showed BrdU incorporation as a result of cell proliferation. No proliferation was detected in the responder or stimulator cells alone (data not shown). Such allogeneic proliferation took place in the presence of an activation-induced Foxp3 expression in CD4+ T cells such that 8% of CD4+ T cells were CD25+Foxp3+ (Fig. 3A, bottom panel). CD8+CD25+ T cells, on the other hand, did not show stable expression of Foxp3. These results are consistent with our observation in Fig. 1 showing that expression of Foxp3 in CD4+ T cells is more stable than that in CD8+ T cells 6-8 days following T cell activation. In previous reports, suppressive assays *in vitro* were conducted in the

presence of high ratios of CD4+CD25+ T cells (Tregs) to responder cells, to determine the suppressive function on T cell activation and proliferation. Such artificial increases in the ratio of CD4+CD25+ T cells to responder cells would reduce *in vivo* validity of the observation. The frequency of CD4+CD25+Foxp3+ T cells induced during MLR was 8% which is considered to be within the physiologically relevant range as reported by other groups [21-24]. Frequency of naturally occurring Tregs in mouse is also around this range, yet having regulatory effects for the inhibition of autoimmunity. If Foxp3 expressing CD4+ T cells had any regulatory function, it should have inhibited cell proliferation during the culture *in vitro*. Similar to B/I-induced T cell activation, T cell phenotypes in a MLR included CD44+ effector (16%) and CD44+CD62L+ memory T cells (84%) (Fig. 3B). Again, all CD4+Foxp3+ T cells expressed CD44 among which 90% also expressed CD62L (Fig. 2B). These data show that 10% of CD4+Foxp3+ T cells are effector and 90% are memory phenotypes. A similar phenotypic trend was detected for CD8+Foxp3+ T cells, showing 100% CD44+ of which 76% were CD62L+ T cells. These results show that 24% of CD8+Foxp3+ T cells are effector and 76% are memory phenotypes. Lack of regulatory function in these Foxp3+ T cells may be because of their effector/memory phenotype since it has been reported that expression of Foxp3 in human memory T cells resulted in diminished suppressor activity [25]. In addition, Treg type 1 (Tr1) cells confer suppressor function in the absence of FoxP3 expression [26]. Given the role of Foxp3 as master regulator of Treg lineage commitment and maintenance in mouse [27], it does not seem to have such bona fide regulatory function for Treg lineage commitment in human T cells.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study shows that Foxp3 expression is not a reliable marker for human Tregs. T cell activation, CD4+ T cells in particular, is associated with the expression of Foxp3 in effector/memory T cells without detectable regulatory function when present at physiologically relevant ratios.

Abbreviations

PBMC: peripheral blood mononuclear cells; AICD: activation induced cell death; MLR: mixed lymphocyte reaction; T regs: regulatory T cells.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

MK performed B/I activation of T cells, flow cytometry, MLR, and BrdU proliferation assays; MG performed flow cytometry; LG performed B/I activation of T cells; KG participated in study design; HDB participated in study

design and manuscript preparation; FMM participated in study design and data analysis; MHM designed the experiments, analyzed data, and prepared the manuscript.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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