PD-L1 Limits the Mucosal CD8+ T Cell Response to *Chlamydia trachomatis*

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*Chlamydia trachomatis* infection is the most common bacterial sexually transmitted disease in the United States. Repeated infections with *C. trachomatis* lead to serious sequelae, such as infertility. It is unclear why the adaptive immune system, specifically the CD8+ T cell response, is unable to protect against subsequent *C. trachomatis* infections. In this article, we characterize the mucosal CD8+ T cell response to *C. trachomatis* in the murine genital tract. We demonstrate that the immunoinhibitory ligand, PD-L1, contributes to the defective CD8+ T cell response. Deletion or inhibition of PD-L1 restores the CD8+ T cell response and enhances *C. trachomatis* clearance. The *Journal of Immunology*, 2014, 192: 1079–1090.

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**Materials and Methods**

**Mice**

C57BL/6, B6.PL-Thy1a (CD90.1/Thy1.1 congenic), and B6.129S7-Ifnγtm1Agt (IFNγ−/−) mice were purchased from The Jackson Laboratory. PD-L1 (Thy1.2 background) and PD-1 (Thy1.1 background)–deficient mice were described previously and were generously provided by Arlene Sharpe. Anti–PD-L1–blocking Ab (clone 10F.9G2) was generously provided by Gordon Freeman; anti–B7-1–blocking Ab (clone 1G10) was purchased from Bio X Cell. For transient-inhibition experiments, mice were treated with 200 μg anti–PD-L1 or anti–B7-1 each day for 3 d prior to infection and then every other day postinfection. All animals were maintained and cared for within the Harvard Medical School Center for Animal Resources and Comparative Medicine (14, 15). All mice were treated with 2.5 mg medroxyprogesterone s.c. 7 d prior to infection with *C. trachomatis* to synchronize the murine estrous cycle. All experiments were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

**Growth, isolation, and detection of bacteria**

*C. trachomatis* serovar L2 (434/Bu) was propagated within McCoy cell monolayers grown in Eagle’s MEM (Invitrogen, Grand Island, NY) supplemented with 10% FCS, 1.5 g/l sodium bicarbonate, 0.1 M nonessential amino acids, and 1 mM sodium pyruvate. Infected monolayers were dissociated from plates using sterile glass beads and were sonicated to disrupt the inclusion. Elementary bodies were purified by density gradient centrifugation, as described previously (16). Aliquots were stored at −80°C in medium containing 250 mM sucrose, 10 mM sodium phosphate, and 5 mM l-glutamic acid and were thawed immediately prior to use. To quantify the levels of *C. trachomatis*, quantitative PCR (qPCR) with 16S primers specific for *C. trachomatis* was performed as previously described (16).

**Flow cytometry**

Tissues were mechanically disaggregated and immediately stained for surface markers or stimulated for 5 h with 50 ng/ml PMA (Alexis Biochemical) and 500 ng/ml ionomycin (Calbiochem) in the presence of brefeldin A (GolgiStop; BD Biosciences) for intracellular cytokine staining. Cells were preincubated with anti-FcγR (Bio X Cell) before staining with anti–CD8–allophycocyanin, anti–CD4 Q-Dot, anti–CD8–allophycocyanin–Cy7, or anti–CD90.2–PerCP (BioLegend). Cells also were incubated with anti–CD11b–PE, anti–CD11c–PE, anti–CD19–FITC, and anti–B220–PE to exclude these populations. For activation marker analysis, we examined anti–CD62L–FITC and anti–CD127–PerCP (BD Biosciences). Anti–IFN-γ PE
By day 7 postinfection, the number of CrpA-specific CD8+ T cells had significantly diminished compared with preinfection numbers by 4 wk postinfection (Fig. 1A). After rechallenge, the peak of the secondary response again occurred at day 7 postinfection, although the total number of CD8+ T cells was still significantly lower than during primary challenge (Fig. 1B). Taken together, our data demonstrate that memory CD8+ T cells have an impaired ability to expand and do not contribute to control of secondary infection.

Although there are significantly fewer C. trachomatis–specific CD8+ T cells during secondary infection compared with primary infection, it is possible that this small population could contribute to reestablishment of C. trachomatis replication via potent cytokine production. We hypothesized that if memory CD8+ T cells are important in controlling secondary infection, then loss of CD8+ T cells should alter bacterial clearance during reinfection. To test this, we infected mice transversely with C. trachomatis and allowed for bacterial resolution and immune memory establishment over the course of 4 wk. We then treated mice with anti-CD8–depleting Ab or isotype-control Ab for 3 d prior to and 2 d after secondary infection. Mice were transversely infected with 106 IFU of C. trachomatis, and bacterial burden was measured by qPCR 5 d postsecondary infection. Data are representative of two independent experiments.
that this CD8+ T cell response is impaired during C. trachomatis infection (4). Studies (19–22) with other chronic pathogens demonstrated that the activation of immunoinhibitory pathways can directly inhibit the CD8+ T cell response. We hypothesized that the upregulation of one or more of these pathways during C. trachomatis infection might contribute to the defect that we observed in the CD8+ T cell response to C. trachomatis. To test this, we infected mice transversally and examined the expression of different immunoinhibitory receptors and ligands by qRT-PCR in whole uterus at the peak of bacterial burden (5 d postinfection) (Fig. 2A). Of the genes tested, the immunoinhibitory ligand PD-L1 was expressed >10-fold higher in the uteri of infected mice compared with uninfected mice (Fig. 2A). Because previous work suggested that PD-L1 expression plays a role in the anti-inflammatory response to C. trachomatis, we started by investigating whether PD-L1 expression was dependent on live C. trachomatis infection or just the result of a general inflammatory response (23). We infected mice with either live or UV-inactivated C. trachomatis and assessed PD-L1 expression in the uterus by qRT-PCR 5 d postinfection. PD-L1 expression in mice infected with UV-inactivated C. trachomatis was similar to mock-infected mice, confirming that the increase in PD-L1 expression is dependent on infection with live C. trachomatis (Fig. 2B).

PD-L1 is expressed on a variety of cell types, such as dendritic cells (DCs), CD4+ T cells, endothelial cells, and epithelial cells. Expression on different cell types can result in different PD-L1–signaling properties (24–26). Therefore, we wanted to examine the expression of PD-L1 on different cellular populations within the uterus and the iliac lymph nodes that drain the uterus. We infected mice transversally with C. trachomatis, harvested uteri and dLNs at different time points during primary and secondary infection, and measured PD-L1 surface expression by flow cytometry. Five days after both primary and secondary infection, PD-L1 surface expression on uterine epithelial cells increased 5-fold in infected mice compared with uninfected mice (Fig. 2C, upper left panel, 2D). PD-L1 surface expression was also significantly higher on DCs in the dLNs 5 d after primary and secondary infection (Fig. 2D, right panel). However, 27 d after primary infection, during the memory phase, there was no difference in PD-L1 expression compared with uninfected mice (Fig. 2D, middle panel). These data demonstrate that PD-L1 is highly upregulated in uterine epithelial cells and dLN DCs during primary and secondary C. trachomatis infection, but this elevated expression is not maintained after primary infection is cleared.

Two receptors of PD-L1 have been described, PD-1 and B7-1, both of which can be expressed on T cells. Engagement of PD-L1 with either receptor on CD8+ T cells can negatively regulate T cell function, and the upregulation of PD-L1 on memory CD8+ T cells is often used as a marker of T cell exhaustion (6, 27). Although neither receptor was upregulated during C. trachomatis infection of mice as measured by qRT-PCR (Fig. 2A), we reasoned that the qRT-PCR assay of the whole uterine tissue might not be sensitive enough to detect subtle differences in PD-1 and B7-1 expression on specific cell types. Therefore, we measured PD-1 and B7-1 surface expression by flow cytometry on different cell subsets during primary infection, during the memory phase, and following secondary infection. There were no differences in the expression of PD-1 or B7-1 in primarily infected mice compared with uninfected mice in any cell type that we examined (Fig. 2E, Supplemental Fig. 2). However, during the memory response, 27 d postinfection, both PD-1 and B7-1 surface expression were upregulated ∼1.5-fold on CD8+ T cells within the dLNs (Fig. 2E, Supplemental Fig. 2). There was also significant upregulation of B7-1 surface expression on CD8+ T cells in the dLNs after the secondary infection. The PD-1 and B7-1 upregulation that we observed during the memory phase suggests that CD8+ memory T cells become exhausted following primary C. trachomatis transversical infection.

Finally, we wanted to understand whether PD-L1 upregulation was dependent on the surrounding tissues and the cytokine milieu. To test this, we infected a cultured thymic epithelial cell line with live C. trachomatis or UV-inactivated C. trachomatis, and we compared the expression of PD-L1 on these cells with uninfected control cells by flow cytometry 18 h later. Similar to our in vivo data, PD-L1 was highly expressed on cells infected with live C. trachomatis but not on cells infected with UV-inactivated C. trachomatis or uninfected cells (Fig. 2F). These data provide evidence suggesting that C. trachomatis may directly upregulate PD-L1 expression.

Taken together, these data demonstrate that PD-L1 expression is highly upregulated on uterine epithelial cells and DCs of the dLNs following C. trachomatis infection and provide evidence for the role of PD-L1 in the inhibition of the CD8+ T cell response during C. trachomatis infection of the uterus.

**PD-L1 and PD-1 contribute to control of C. trachomatis burden in the uterus**

The significant upregulation of PD-L1 expression upon C. trachomatis infection led us to consider whether expression of PD-L1 may alter the clearance of C. trachomatis. To test this, we examined bacterial burden of WT mice or PD-L1-deficient mice 5 d after primary transversical infection. PD-L1-deficient mice exhibited a 10-fold lower bacterial load compared with WT mice (Fig. 3A, Supplemental Fig. 3A). We also tested whether the loss of PD-L1 affected protection during secondary challenge. WT and PD-L1-deficient mice were transversally infected with C. trachomatis, allowed to recover for 4 wk, and then reinferred transversally. Bacterial levels 5 d after secondary infection were similar between WT and PD-L1-deficient mice (Fig. 3A). These data demonstrate that loss of PD-L1 improves bacterial clearance during primary infection, but it has no effect on the ability of the host to clear secondary infection.

Because PD-L1–deficient mice clear primary infection more efficiently, we sought to determine whether therapeutically blocking PD-L1 would also enhance bacterial clearance. To test this, we transiently blocked PD-L1 by administering anti–PD-L1 Ab 3 d prior and 2 d after primary infection. Five days after primary infection, we measured bacterial burden in the uterus of mice and observed that mice treated with anti–PD-L1 Ab showed a 2-log reduction in bacterial burden compared with mice treated with isotype Ab (Fig. 3B). Similar to results observed in PD-L1–deficient mice, mice that were treated with anti–PD-L1 Ab prior to primary infection, and then subsequently reinferred 4 wk later, exhibited no difference in bacterial burden compared with mice treated with isotype Ab (Fig. 3B). These data indicate that transient blockade of PD-L1 during primary infection is sufficient to improve bacterial clearance, and it does not affect bacterial burden during secondary infection. These data suggest that protection during secondary infection may be mediated by PD-L1–independent adaptive immune responses (Fig. 3B).

PD-L1 can signal through the receptors PD-1 and B7-1. To determine which receptor PD-L1 was acting through to limit efficient bacterial clearance, we compared bacterial levels in mice deficient for PD-1 to Thy1.1 (WT) mice 5 d after primary transversical infection. PD-1–deficient mice had significantly lower bacterial burden compared with WT mice (Fig. 3C, Supplemental Fig. 3B). To determine whether PD-L1 also acts through the receptor B7-1, we treated mice 3 d before and 2 d after primary infection with an Ab to block B7-1 or an isotype-control Ab. Five days after transversical infection, we measured bacterial burden in the uterus and determined that there was no significant
FIGURE 2. PD-L1 is highly expressed upon C. trachomatis infection. (A) Mice were transcervically infected with 10⁶ IFU of C. trachomatis. RNA was extracted from uterine tissue 5 d postinfection, qRT-PCR was performed using primers specific for the indicated genes, and expression levels were compared with mock-infected mice. Bars represent the mean of five mice. Error bars indicate SEM. (B) Mice were infected with 10⁶ IFU of live C. trachomatis or UV-inactivated C. trachomatis. RNA was extracted from uterine tissue 5 d postinfection, and qRT-PCR was performed to measure PD-L1 expression. Bars represent the mean of five mice. Error bars indicate SEM. (C) Mice were infected with 10⁶ IFU of C. trachomatis; at indicated time points postinfection, uteri (upper panels) and dLNs (lower panels) were examined for PD-L1 expression by flow cytometry. Epithelial cells were gated on live CD326⁺ populations; DCs were gated on live CD45.2⁺CD11c⁺CD4⁺CD8⁺ populations. Representative data for PD-L1 expression are shown. The open graphs represent infected mice; the shaded graphs represent uninfected mice. (D) Average geometric mean fluorescence intensity (gMFI) of PD-L1 expression on uterine epithelial cells (left panel), uterine DCs (middle panel), and lymph node DCs (right panel) (n = 5 mice/time point). Error bars represent SEM. (E) gMFI of PD-L1 expression (left panel) or B7-1 expression (right panel) on CD3⁺CD8⁺ T cells in the dLNs; shown is the average of five mice/time point, and error bars represent SEM. (F) 1308.1 thymic epithelial cells were infected at a multiplicity of infection of 1:1 with live C. trachomatis or UV-inactivated C. trachomatis. PD-L1 expression was measured by flow cytometry at 18 h postinfection. Shown is the mean of three independently infected wells; error bars indicate SEM. Data are representative of two independent experiments. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001, Mann–Whitney U test (A–E) or unpaired t test (F).
FIGURE 3. PD-L1 expression limits bacterial clearance. (A) WT and PD-L1–deficient mice were transcervically infected with 10^6 IFU of C. trachomatis. Five days after primary and secondary infection, bacterial levels in the uterus were measured by qPCR. Similar results were obtained in three independent experiments. (B) WT mice were treated with anti-PD-L1 Ab or isotype-control Ab 3 d prior to and 2 d after transcervical infection with 10^6 IFU. Bacterial levels were measured by qPCR 5 d after primary or secondary infection. Similar results were obtained in two independent experiments. (C) WT and PD-1–deficient mice were transcervically infected with 10^6 IFU of C. trachomatis. Bacterial levels in the uterus were measured by qPCR 5 d after primary infection. Similar results were obtained in two different experiments. (D) WT mice were treated with anti-B7-1 Ab or isotype control 3 d prior to and 2 d after transcervical infection with 10^6 IFU of C. trachomatis. The bacterial levels in the uterus were measured by qPCR 5 d after primary infection. Error bars represent SEM. Data are representative of two independent experiments. *p < 0.05, Mann–Whitney U test.

difference in bacterial levels in mice treated with anti-B7-1 Ab compared with mice treated with an isotype-control Ab (Fig. 3D). Together, these data suggest that PD-L1 acts through PD-1 and not B7-1 to inhibit the immune response in the uterus. Moreover, blockade or deletion of the interaction between PD-L1 and the receptor PD-1 leads to enhanced bacterial clearance.

CD8+ T cells contribute to enhanced C. trachomatis clearance in PD-L1–deficient mice

PD-L1 and PD-1 signaling limits efficient C. trachomatis clearance from the genital tract. We hypothesized that the enhanced clearance in the absence of PD-L1/PD-1 signaling was due to an enhanced CD8+ T cell response. To test this, we administered anti-CD8 or isotype-control Ab to PD-L1–deficient and WT mice 3 d before and 2 d after primary infection. We confirmed, by flow cytometry, a > 10-fold decrease in CD8+ T cells in the uterus, dLNs, and spleen of mice treated with the anti-CD8 Ab (Fig. 4B). We measured bacterial levels 5 d postinfection. CD8+ T cell depletion in WT mice did not exacerbate bacterial burden compared with WT mice treated with control Ab (Fig. 4A, Supplemental Fig. 3C). As expected, PD-L1–deficient mice treated with control Ab showed significantly lower bacterial burden compared with WT mice treated with control Ab (Fig. 4A, Supplemental Fig. 3C). However, PD-L1–deficient mice treated with anti-CD8 Ab showed significantly higher bacterial levels compared with PD-L1–deficient mice treated with control Ab (Fig. 4A). Although CD8+ T cells appear to be dispensable in WT mice, CD8+ T cells contribute to the majority of C. trachomatis clearance observed in PD-L1–deficient mice. These data show that the enhanced bacterial clearance seen in PD-L1–deficient mice is mediated, in part, by an enhanced CD8+ T cell response.

The PD-L1 pathway contributes to the inhibition of the uterine CD8+ T cell response following transcervical C. trachomatis infection

Our data indicate that PD-L1 expression leads to an abrogated CD8+ T cell response and results in the defect in bacterial clearance that we observed during primary infection (Fig. 4A). We hypothesized that PD-L1 signaling was responsible for altering the phenotype of the CD8+ T cells. To test this, we assessed the phenotype of the CD8+ T cells that developed during infection in WT and PD-L1–deficient mice. Upon priming and activation CD8+ T cells can be broadly separated into two subsets: central memory T (Tcm) cells and effector memory T (Tem) cells (28, 29). These subsets are defined by the expression of the surface markers CD62L and CD127 (28-30). The lymph node–homing marker, CD62L, directs CD8+ T cells to the lymphoid organs and is highly expressed on naive and Tcm cells but not on Tem cells (29). The IL-7R, CD127, is necessary for CD8+ T cells to respond to IL-7, which promotes T cell development and persistence in the periphery. CD127 is highly expressed on central and effector memory subsets. To test whether PD-L1 expression affects the CD8+ T cell phenotype during C. trachomatis infection, we transcervically infected WT and PD-L1–deficient mice and compared the Tem and Tcm populations by flow cytometry during primary infection (5 d after primary infection), memory phase (27 d after primary infection), or secondary infection (5 d after secondary infection). Five days after primary infection, we observed a 3-fold decrease in the percentage of Tcm cells (CD62L^hi/CD127^hi) in PD-L1–deficient mice compared with WT mice (Fig. 5A, 5B, left panels, Supplemental Fig. 4A). Additionally, there was a slight, but significant, increase in the percentage of Tcm cells (CD62L^low/CD127^hi) in the uterus of PD-L1–deficient mice (Fig. 5A, 5B, left panels). When we measured total numbers of Tem and Tcm cells in the uteri, there was a significant 3-fold increase in the ratio of Tem/Tcm cells in PD-L1–deficient mice compared with WT mice during the memory phase (Fig. 5A–C, middle panels). These data indicate that PD-L1 expression skews the CD8+ T cells toward a central memory phenotype during a primary C. trachomatis infection and that a loss of PD-L1 shifts CD8+ T cells toward the effector memory phenotype.
Next, we tested whether the shift toward the CD8+ T cell effector memory phenotype in PD-L1–deficient mice would affect functions such as Ag-specific T cell abundance or IFN-γ production. Although PD-L1 deficiency did not alter secondary bacterial clearance, we hypothesized that the altered memory CD8+ T cell phenotype would affect the secondary CD8+ T cell response. Therefore, we assessed whether the absence of PD-L1 would restore the magnitude of the secondary CD8+ T cell response that is blunted in WT C. trachomatis–infected mice. Five days after secondary infection, we observed a significant 1.5-fold increase in the number of C. trachomatis–specific CD8+ T cells in the genital tract of PD-L1–deficient mice compared with WT mice (Fig. 5D, Supplemental Fig. 4B). Moreover, we observed that the number of C. trachomatis–specific CD8+ T cells in PD-L1–deficient mice was significantly higher in secondary infection compared with primary infection (Fig. 5D). These data suggest that the absence of PD-L1 signaling results in memory CD8+ T cells that are able to expand to greater numbers upon rechallenge or are more efficiently recruited to the genital tract.

The second functional consequence of PD-L1 deficiency that we assessed was the expression of IFN-γ, a cytokine critical for restricting C. trachomatis growth. We compared the ability of endogenous uterine CD8+ T cells to produce IFN-γ in WT and PD-L1–deficient mice. In comparison with WT mice, we observed, by flow cytometry, that PD-L1–deficient animals had a significant increase in the number of IFN-γ–producing CD8+ T cells during both primary and secondary responses (Fig. 5E, Supplemental Fig. 4C). This suggests that PD-L1 deficiency leads to enhanced IFN-γ production by CD8+ T cells during both primary and secondary infection.

**CD8+ T cells contribute to secondary protection in the absence of PD-L1 signaling**

Although the enhanced CD8+ T cell recall response that we observed (Fig. 5) could potentially contribute to bacterial clearance, PD-L1 deficiency did not lead to improved C. trachomatis clearance during secondary infection (Fig. 3). We reasoned that it is possible that any secondary protection afforded by the enhanced CD8+ T cells in PD-L1–deficient mice would be masked by the even more efficient CD4+ T cell response. To decouple secondary protection mediated by CD4+ T cells from CD8+ T cells, we depleted CD4+ T cells prior to secondary challenge in WT and PD-L1–deficient mice. Mice were transcervically infected and examined for bacterial burden and T cell counts 5 d later. As expected, depletion of the CD4+ T memory pool in WT mice led to exacerbated bacterial burden (Fig. 6A, Supplemental Fig. 4C). However, CD4+ T cell depletion in PD-L1–deficient mice did not lead to exacerbated bacterial burden as in WT mice; in fact, there were significantly lower bacterial levels in PD-L1–deficient mice treated with anti-CD4 Ab compared with WT mice treated with anti-CD4 Ab (Fig. 6A). Thus, CD4+ T cells are not necessary for protection against secondary challenge in PD-L1–deficient mice. These data also suggest that CD8+ T cells can compensate for a lack of CD4+ T cells during secondary infection in PD-L1–deficient mice.

We hypothesized that the enhanced secondary clearance that we observed in PD-L1–deficient mice was due to a superior CD8+ T cell population. To determine whether Ag-experienced CD8+ T cells from WT and PD-1–deficient mice were distinguishable in their ability to protect mice against infection, we collected CD8+ T cells from the spleen, lymph nodes, and genital tracts of previously infected WT and PD-1–deficient mice (Fig. 6B). We then transferred equal numbers of purified CD8+ T cells into groups of naive congenic IFN-γ–knockout mice, so that the only source of IFN-γ was from the transferred CD8+ T cells. One day after CD8+ T cell transfer, we transcervically infected recipient mice with C. trachomatis (Fig. 6B). We measured the quantity of CD8+ T cells in the dLNs and uteri 5 d postinfection. Cells from both WT and PD-1–deficient mice were able to migrate to the uterus and the
FIGURE 5. PD-L1 expression shifts the ratio of Tem/Tcm CD8+ T cells during C. trachomatis infection. (A) WT and PD-L1−deficient mice were trans cervically infected with 10⁶ IFU of C. trachomatis. At the indicated time points, uteri were harvested and stained for CD62L and CD127 expression. CD8+ memory populations were gated on live, CD90.2−CD127−CD44+CD8+ cells; graphs of CD62L expression of this population are shown. (B) Quantification of uterine Tem cells (CD127⁺/CD62L⁻) and Tcm cells (CD127⁺/CD62L⁺) at time points indicated in WT and PD-L1−deficient mice. Bars represent mean of four or five mice/group. (C) Ratio of the absolute numbers of Tem/Tcm CD8+ T cells found in (Figure legend continues)
dLNs of the recipient mice (Fig. 6C). We recovered almost equal percentages of WT and PD-1–deficient CD8+ T cells in the uterus and dLNs (Fig. 6C). When we measured bacterial levels in the genital tract of infected recipient mice, we found that mice receiving CD8+ T cells from previously infected (C. trachomatis) WT and PD-1–deficient mice were then transferred to naive IFN-γ-knockout mice. One day after T cell transfer, recipient mice were transcervically infected with 10^6 IFU of C. trachomatis. Five days postinfection, bacterial burden and T cell recruitment were measured. (C) Transferred CD8+ T cell recruitment was measured in the uteri and dLNs of recipient mice. (D) Bacterial burden in the uterus was measured by qRT-PCR in recipient mice 5 d after C. trachomatis transcervical infection. Data are representative of two independent experiments, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, Mann–Whitney U test.

FIGURE 6. Ag-experienced CD8+ T cells confer superior protection in the absence of PD-L1/PD-1 signaling. (A) WT and PD-L1–deficient mice were treated with isotype-control Ab or anti-CD4 Ab 3 d prior to and 2 d after secondary infection. Bacterial burden was measured in the uterus by qRT-PCR 5 d after secondary infection. (B) Schematic diagram of the experimental design of the T cell-transfer experiment; CD8+ T cells were isolated from previously infected (C. trachomatis) WT and PD-1–deficient mice. Isolated CD8+ T cells were then transferred to naive IFN-γ-knockout mice. One day after T cell transfer, recipient mice were transcervically infected with 10^6 IFU of C. trachomatis. Five days postinfection, bacterial burden and T cell recruitment were measured. (C) Transferred CD8+ T cell recruitment was measured in the uteri and dLNs of recipient mice. (D) Bacterial burden in the uterus was measured by qRT-PCR in recipient mice 5 d after C. trachomatis transcervical infection. Data are representative of two independent experiments, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, Mann–Whitney U test.

PD-L1 expression is required on both hematopoietic and nonhematopoietic cells to inhibit protection against C. trachomatis

PD-L1 can be expressed on a variety of cell types, including DCs, T cells, endothelial cells, and epithelial cells. We sought to determine which of the cell populations expressing PD-L1 influenced the shift in the CD8+ T cell response to a more central memory response. It seemed likely that PD-L1 expression on APCs would be needed to bias the CD8+ T cell response toward the central memory phenotype during priming in WT mice. To test this, we created reciprocal bone marrow chimeras from WT and PD-L1–deficient mice. After ensuring successful chimerism > 96%, mice were treated with anti–PD-L1–blocking Ab or isotype-control Ab 2 d prior and 2 d after primary transcervical infection with 10^6 IFU of C. trachomatis. Mice were allowed to recover for 4 wk, at which point they were rechallenged transcervically with 10^6 IFU of C. trachomatis. Five days after rechallenge, the ratio of CD8+ Tem/Tcm cells was determined in the genital tract. Data are representative of at least two independent experiments, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, Mann–Whitney U test.
response 5 d later. As expected, PD-L1–deficient mice that received PD-L1–deficient bone marrow had a significantly higher ratio of Tem/Tcm cells in the uterus compared with WT mice that received WT bone marrow (Fig. 7A, 7B). WT mice that received PD-L1–deficient bone marrow also had a significantly higher ratio of Tem/Tcm cells compared with WT mice that received WT bone marrow. However, the shift toward an effector memory phenotype was still significantly lower than that observed in PD-L1–deficient mice that received PD-L1–deficient bone marrow (Figs. 6B, 7A). PD-L1–deficient mice that received WT bone marrow had a similar ratio of Tem/Tcm cells in the uterus compared with WT mice that received WT bone marrow (Fig. 7A, 7B). Overall, these data indicate that PD-L1 expression on hematopoietic cells largely influences the CD8+ T cell response and drives CD8+ T cells to a more central memory phenotype during C. trachomatis infection. However, the absence of PD-L1 is required on both hematopoietic and nonhematopoietic cells to fully recapitulate the CD8+ T cell response observed in PD-L1–deficient mice.

The absence of PD-L1 expression on hematopoietic cells alone was able to promote a CD8+ T cell response that closely resembled that of PD-L1–deficient mice; however, it was unclear whether it was sufficient to decrease bacterial burden. Therefore, we measured bacterial burden in the chimeric mice 5 d postinfection. As shown in Fig. 7D, the absence of PD-L1 on either hematopoietic or nonhematopoietic cells alone was not enough to confer protection against C. trachomatis. Therefore, these data suggest that the expression of PD-L1 on both hematopoietic and nonhematopoietic cells contributes to limiting C. trachomatis clearance.

**Discussion**

In this study, we sought to identify mechanisms that contribute to the defective CD8+ T cell response to C. trachomatis. We hypothesized that one or more inhibitory mechanisms may be upregulated during infection that would affect the quality of the CD8+ T cell response. We found that PD-L1 is strongly upregulated during C. trachomatis infection. Because PD-L1 plays a role in T cell exhaustion, we tested whether PD-L1 affects the CD8+ T cell response during C. trachomatis infection. Our data demonstrate that PD-L1 expression alters the CD8+ T cell memory phenotype and impairs the effector function of CD8+ T cells, thus limiting their ability to restrict C. trachomatis replication.

The PD-1/PD-L1 pathway is a critical T cell regulatory pathway that is important in maintaining the balance between immune tolerance and effector function. In some pathogen models, engaging PD-1 on T cells can have detrimental effects on pathogen elimination. For example, infection with lower respiratory viruses, such as influenza A virus or metapneumovirus, induces PD-L1 expression on lung epithelial cells, which leads to CD8+ T cell impairment. Blockade of PD-L1 reverses CD8+ T cell impairment, improves IFN-γ production, and enhances viral clearance (31). In cancer models, contact of CD8+ T cells with PD-L1+ tumor cells results in a reduction of the cytolytic activity of the CD8+ T cells and an impaired ability to clear the tumor cells (32). For bacterial pathogens, the role of PD-1/PD-1 is less clear. PD-L1 blockade in mice infected with Listeria monocytogenes impaired the CD8+ T cell response and led to exacerbated bacterial burden, indicating that PD-L1 may act as a stimulatory signal in this context (33, 34). However, blockade of PD-L1 on monocytes infected with Staphylococcus aureus improved IL-2 production by CD8+ T cells (35). Interestingly, our data indicate that blockade of PD-L1 improves the IFN-γ response of CD8+ T cells during C. trachomatis infection, leading to the enhanced bacterial clearance that is observed during primary infection.

A major source of variability in previous studies has been the anatomical site of infection, which may give rise to the diversity of effects attributed to the PD-1/PD-L1 pathway. Some anatomic sites need protection from host immune responses, and inhibitory mechanisms may be necessary to limit inflammation damaging to the host. In the respiratory tract, for example, inhibitory PD-L1 signaling properly restricts T cells to avoid inflammation that could damage the lungs. The genital tract is also a privileged immune site, because excessive inflammation could result in reduced fertility. During C. trachomatis infection, PD-L1 expression may allow the host to avoid an exaggerated and damaging CD8+ T cell response. In fact, evidence suggests that CD8+ T cells contribute to the uterine pathology that results from C. trachomatis infection (36, 37). One recent study (23) demonstrated that blockade of PD-L1 in combination with the inhibitory receptor, Tim3, led to enhanced uterine pathology of mice infected with Chlamydia muridarum. Although it was unclear from that study what factors mediate the enhanced pathology, it provides evidence that immune-inhibitory pathways are important for limiting inflammation and pathology in the genital tract. Additional in-depth pathology studies will be required to understand whether the lack of PD-L1 alone leads to enhanced pathology in the genital tract during C. trachomatis infection. It is possible that multiple inhibitory pathways are engaged during C. trachomatis infection to avoid inflammation in the host, and deleting one of these pathways may not be sufficient to observe changes in gross pathology. We observed upregulated expression of other inhibitory molecules, 2B4 and CD160, in infected mice, and it will be interesting to investigate whether these molecules also contribute to reducing pathology and immune impairment during C. trachomatis infection.

Although upregulation of the PD-1/PD-L1 pathway may be important in limiting damage to the host, there is no doubt that impairing the CD8+ T cell response would also be beneficial to the invading pathogen. Although CD4+ T cells are the main mechanism of C. trachomatis clearance during natural infection, it was shown that C. trachomatis can be susceptible to the CD8+ T cell response when these T cells are stimulated by vaccination or passively transferred (3). Therefore, C. trachomatis may benefit from mechanisms to subvert the CD8+ T cells. The evidence presented in this article indicates that C. trachomatis is able to limit expansion and/or recruitment of CD8+ T cells in the genital tract. Our data suggest that C. trachomatis is able to limit recrui-tment of secondary CD8+ T cells to the genital tract by skewing the CD8+ T cell response to a central memory phenotype. In fact, other studies (38) demonstrated that human papillomavirus excludes CD8+ T cells from the genital epithelium by skewing CD8+ T cells toward a central memory phenotype; however, additional experiments will investigate whether this hypothesis holds true for C. trachomatis. Future experiments will also be needed to determine whether other inhibitory mechanisms contribute to the impaired CD8+ T cell response during C. trachomatis infection, because we have no evidence to suggest that PD-1/PD-1 deficiency alone provides an optimum CD8+ T cell response.

Our data illuminate one mechanism by which the CD8+ T cell response is impaired during C. trachomatis infection. During the primary response to C. trachomatis, it is clear that PD-L1 expression limits the number of IFN-γ-producing CD8+ T cells present in the uterus. C. trachomatis is highly susceptible to IFN-γ, and the additional IFN-γ-producing CD8+ T cells in PD-L1–deficient mice may explain the enhanced clearance that we observe during primary infection. This is consistent with our data demonstrating that bacterial clearance during primary infection of PD-L1–deficient mice is dependent on CD8+ T cells (Fig. 4). PD-
L1 expression during primary infection skews the memory CD8+ T cell response toward a Tcm phenotype in the genital tract, and this may be one way to limit the number of IFN-γ-producing CD8+ T cells in the genital tract. When Tem and Tcm cells were first described in the literature, data indicated that the Tcm cells were the more effective subset in terms of expansion and clearance capabilities (39). However, further studies (40) demonstrated that the contribution of Tcm and Tem cells to pathogen control depends on the particular pathogen and the site of infection. For pathogens that replicate in lymphoid organs, Tcm cells are required for controlling pathogen burden. For example, Tcm cells are more efficient than Tem memory CD8+ T cells at lysing LCMV-infected cells (41). However, for mucosal infections, Tcm CD8+ T cells are less effective because they are more confined to
lymphoid organs and slow to respond to peripheral challenge. In contrast, Tem cells reside in the tissue and, thus, are closer to the site of the pathogen upon reinfection; therefore, they can immediately engage the pathogen and limit its replication (42–44). PD-L1 expression during C. trachomatis infection results in a reduction in the number of effector memory, IFN-γ-producing CD8+ T cells and results in incomplete bacterial clearance.

Importantly, our data show that CD8+ T cells generated during C. trachomatis infection in the absence of PD-1/PD-L1 signaling are able to provide superior protection compared with memory cells from WT mice. Although the major difference between Tcm and Tem cells may be in their capacity to migrate to peripheral tissues, our data indicate that there is a functional difference as well, which is mediated by the PD-1/PD-L1 interaction. As such, these data provide an interesting model that could explain how PD-L1 deficiency alters the CD8+ T cell response to improve bacterial clearance during both primary and secondary infections. During primary infection, PD-L1 expression on epithelial cells may directly protect these cells from cytolytic killing by CD8+ T cells by disengaging the CD8+ T cell. Alternatively, when CD8+ T cells are engaged by PD-L1, it may cause transcriptional changes in the CD8+ T cell that lead to the Tcm phenotype and a dampening of the cytolytic response. The interaction with PD-L1–expressing epithelial cells leads to inefficient bacterial clearance during primary infection, which can be reversed by PD-L1 deficiency or blockade. In the absence of PD-L1, CD8+ T cells have an enhanced ability to recognize and engage infected cells or have an improved cytolytic capacity that contributes to bacterial clearance. Future experiments will test the cytolytic response of CD8+ T cells to infected cells in vitro, with and without PD-L1 blockade, to investigate whether CD8+ T cell cytokine production is reduced in the presence of PD-L1.

Once engaged by PD-L1, the CD8+ T cell may be headed down a transcriptional course that results in the increased expression of PD-1 and the development of the Tcm phenotype. PD-1 expression indicates that CD8+ T cells may be exhausted as infection is cleared and memory is established, thus T cells are more prone to apoptosis and have a decreased ability to produce cytokines. Furthermore, the PD-L1/PD-1 interaction drives CD8+ T cells to a Tcm phenotype, which further disables the secondary response by sequestering Ag-experienced CD8+ T cells from the genital tract. Upon reinfection, the secondary CD8+ T cells that are able to migrate to the genital tract have lost the capacity to produce IFN-γ and other inflammatory cytokines; thus, these CD8+ T cells do not contribute to secondary bacterial control. During secondary infection, adaptive immune responses other than CD8+ T cells are able to quickly control infection. However, in the absence of PD-L1, CD8+ T cells become sufficient for controlling infection. Future studies will investigate the transcriptional changes that occur in CD8+ T cells following C. trachomatis infection in the presence and absence of PD-L1. It will be interesting to test whether the transcriptional profile of memory CD8+ T cells from C. trachomatis is similar to what has been described for exhausted CD8+ T cells in other models (45).

Finally, these data provide insight into peripheral CD8+ T cell responses in general. Unlike systemic infections, an efficient secondary CD8+ T cell response in the periphery is defined by the effector phenotype of the CD8+ T cell population and not by their capacity to greatly expand. In this study, we provide evidence that the PD-1/PD-L1 pathway is an important factor in regulating peripheral CD8+ T cell responses by skewing the CD8+ T cells to a more central memory phenotype, ultimately impairing the ability of these CD8+ T cells to respond upon rechallenge. Little is known about the development of Tcm and Tem cells in the genital tract. We show that the Tem cell subset can be an important memory population in the genital tract during C. trachomatis infection. Mechanisms to promote the expansion and retention of effector memory CD8+ T cells, whether by inhibiting PD-L1 or by other means, will be an important concept in the design of Chlamydia vaccines. An effective C. trachomatis vaccine may have to overcome inhibition mediated by PD-L1 to improve the CD8+ T cell response without causing immunopathologies in the genital tract.

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Disclosures

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References


