Osteoprotegerin-Mediated Homeostasis of Rank⁺ Thymic Epithelial Cells Does Not Limit Foxp3⁺ Regulatory T Cell Development

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Osteoprotegerin-Mediated Homeostasis of Rank+ Thymic Epithelial Cells Does Not Limit Foxp3+ Regulatory T Cell Development

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In the thymus, medullary thymic epithelial cells (mTEC) regulate T cell tolerance via negative selection and Foxp3+ regulatory T cell (Treg) development, and alterations in the mTEC compartment can lead to tolerance breakdown and autoimmunity. Both the receptor activator for NF-κB (RANK)/RANK ligand (RANKL)/osteoprotegerin (OPG) axis and expression of the transcriptional regulator Aire are involved in the regulation of thymus medullary microenvironments. However, their impact on the mechanisms controlling mTEC homeostasis is poorly understood, as are the processes that enable the thymus medulla to support the balanced production of mTEC-dependent Foxp3+ Treg. In this study, we have investigated the control of mTEC homeostasis and examined how this process impacts the efficacy of Foxp3+ Treg development. Using newly generated RANK Venus reporter mice, we identify distinct RANK+ subsets that reside within both the mTECm and mTECm compartments and that represent direct targets of OPG-mediated control. Moreover, by mapping OPG expression to a subset of Aire+ mTEC, our data show how cis- and trans-acting mechanisms are able to control the thymus medulla by operating on multiple mTEC targets. Finally, we show that whereas the increase in mTEC availability in OPG-deficient (Tnfrsf11b−/−) mice impacts the intrathymic Foxp3+ Treg pool by enhancing peripheral Treg recirculation back to the thymus, it does not alter the number of de novo Rag2pGFP+Foxp3+ Treg that are generated. Collectively, our study defines patterns of RANK expression within the thymus medulla, and it shows that mTEC homeostasis is not a rate-limiting step in intrathymic Foxp3+ Treg production. The Journal of Immunology, 2015, 195: 000–000.

An essential feature of thymus function is its capacity to impose self/non-self discrimination, which limits the generation of mature T cells with specificity for self-antigens and the potential to generate unwanted autoimmune responses (1, 2). Both negative selection and the generation of Foxp3+ regulatory T cells (Treg) are key to thymic tolerance, and several studies have identified the importance of the thymus medulla, and medullary thymic epithelial cells (mTEC) in particular, in these processes (3–6). The mTEC compartment is known to be heterogeneous and is subject to both positive and negative regulation that ensures the maintenance of organized medullary microenvironments. Positive regulation of the mTEC lineage involves extrinsic signals, which regulate the development and growth of the thymus medulla. Significantly, several members of the TNFR superfamily, including receptor activator for NF-κB (RANK) (7, 8), CD40 (9), and lymphotixin β receptor (10–13), have been shown to be expressed by mTEC and to play key roles in this process, which involves the provision of RANK ligand (RANKL), CD40L, and lymphotixin α by hemopoietic cells within the thymus (14–16). In contrast, negative regulation of mTEC numbers involves factors that are intrinsic to mTEC. These include the transcriptional regulator Aire (17, 18) and the soluble mediator osteoprotegerin (OPG) (8, 19), the latter acting as a decoy receptor for RANKL that inhibits RANK-mediated effects.

Many studies have provided insight into the mechanisms regulating the development of the mTEC lineage, including the identification of mTEC progenitors (20–23). Additionally, several reports have revealed complexity within the mTEC compartment with multiple subsets defined by a range of markers, including MHC class II, CD80, Aire, and CCL21. Despite a clearer understanding of the phenotypic makeup of mTEC, the mechanisms that maintain the overall balance of multiple mTEC subsets are not clear. This is of particular significance in relation to the function of the thymus medulla for T cell tolerance induction, where alterations in the mTEC compartment have been shown to be important in the balanced production of conventional and Foxp3+ Treg (3, 19). However, although both Aire and OPG are known to influence the mTEC compartment (8, 17, 19, 24), the mechanisms that control mTEC homeostasis and Foxp3+ T cell development remain poorly understood.

In this study, we have addressed two issues. First, we have investigated the mechanisms regulating mTEC homeostasis in the adult thymus. Using newly generated reporter mice, we analyzed the mTEC compartment for expression of RANK, a key regulator of medulla formation. We also define the intrathymic source of OPG and map its expression in relation to that of Aire. These
experiments identify the RANK+ targets of OPG regulation as novel subsets residing within both mTEC\(^{hi}\) and mTEC\(^{lo}\) compartments. When correlated to detailed analysis of mTEC alterations in mice deficient in either Aire or OPG (Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\)), they explain the broad impact that loss of OPG-mediated control has on the thymus medulla and also identify distinct mechanisms of mTEC control via Aire and OPG. Second, we have studied how alterations in mTEC homeostasis impact Foxp3+ Treg development in accordance with local and U.K. Home Office regulation. RANK Venus mice were generated that showed evidence of germline transmission. All mice were housed at the Biomedical Services Unit at the University of Birmingham in accordance with local and U.K. Home Office regulation. RANK Venus BAC transgenic mice were generated using a genomic BAC clone (BAC RP24-353D23) obtained from the BACPAC Resources Center (Oakland, CA). The fluorescent protein Venus was recombined into the nucleoside of FVB embryos using standard protocols. Three founder lines (Oakland, CA). The fluorescent protein Venus was recombined into the nucleoside of FVB embryos using standard protocols. Three founder lines were generated that showed evidence of germline transmission. All mouse lines analyzed showed strong levels of Venus expression in thymic epithelial cells, and data shown in the present study are from one representative founder line.

Materials and Methods

Mice

Adult wild-type (WT) C57BL/6 mice, Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) (25), Rag2pGFP transgenic (26), and Aire\(^{-/-}\) (27) mice were used at 8–12 wk of age. Rag2pGFP mice were crossed with Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) mice to generate Rag2GFP/Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) progeny. For the generation of timed pregnancies, the detection of a vaginal plug was set as day 0. All mice were produced at the Biomedical Services Unit at the University of Birmingham in accordance with local and U.K. Home Office regulation. RANK Venus BAC transgenic mice were generated using a genomic BAC clone (BAC RP24-353D23) obtained from the BACPAC Resources Center (Oakland, CA). The fluorescent protein Venus was recombined into the nucleoside of FVB embryos using standard protocols. Three founder lines were generated that showed evidence of germline transmission. All mouse lines analyzed showed strong levels of Venus expression in thymic epithelial cells, and data shown in the present study are from one representative founder line.

FIGURE 1. Analysis of RANK Venus reporter mice reveals multiple mTEC targets of OPG-mediated control. CD45\(^{-}\) EpCAM\(^{+}\)Ly51\(^{-}\) total mTEC (A) from adult RANK Venus reporter mice were analyzed for expression of RANK Venus. Gates are set on RANK Venus negative littermate controls. (B) Analysis of RANK Venus expression in total mTEC\(^{hi}\) and Aire\(^{+}\) and Aire\(^{-}\) mTEC\(^{lo}\) subsets (left panels) and in total mTEC\(^{hi}\) cells, and CCL21\(^{+}\) and CCL21\(^{-}\) mTEC\(^{lo}\) subsets (right panels). (C) RANK Venus expression in TEIC isolated from RANK Venus mice correlates with Tnfrsf11a mRNA expression, as indicated by quantitative PCR analysis. Tnfrsf11a mRNA expression in mTEC\(^{hi}\) isolated from WT mice is shown for comparison. Flow cytometry data are typical of three independent experiments using a minimum of three mice per group. All error bars are SEM. *p < 0.05 (unpaired Student t test).

Cell preparation and thymus digestion

Thymocyte and splenocyte suspensions were produced by mechanical disaggregation. For analysis of thymic stromal cells, adult thymic tissue was enzymatically digested with collagenase dispase (Roche) and DNAse I (Sigma-Aldrich), followed by microbead depletion of CD45\(^{-}\} cells (Miltenyi Biotec) as described (28).

Abs and flow cytometry

For T cell and thymocyte analysis, cells were stained with the following Abs: Brilliant Violet 711 anti-CD4 (RM4-5, BioLegend), Brilliant Violet/510 anti-CD8c (53-6.7, BD Biosciences), allophtocyanin–Fluor 780 anti-TCR\(\beta\) (H57-597, BioLegend), and PE/allophycocyanin anti-CD25 (PC61.5, eBioscience). For intracellular staining of Foxp3 alongside GFP preservation, cells were fixed using the BD Cytofix/Cytoperm kit according to the manufacturer’s instructions, and stained with eFlora 450 anti-Foxp3 (FJK-16s, eBioscience). For analysis of thymic B cells, the following Abs (both from eBioscience) were used: anti–CD19-allophycocyanin (MB1-91) and anti-B220 (RA3-6B2, eFluor 450). Isolated thymic stromal cells were stained with the following Abs: allophycocyanin–Fluor 780 anti-CD45 (30-F11, eBioscience), allophtocyanin/PerCP-Cy5.5 anti-EpCAM1 (G8.8, BioLegend), allophycocyanin/PE anti-Ly51 (6C3, eBioscience), BV605 anti-CD80 (16-10A1, BioLegend), and Pacific Blue anti-IA/IE (MS/114.15.2, BioLegend). To analyze CCL21 and Aire expression in TEC from WT, Aire\(^{-/-}\), and Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) mice, intracellular staining of stromal preparations was performed using the Foxp3/Transcription factor staining buffer set (eBioscience) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. For analysis of TEC in RANK Venus BAC transgenic mice, the fluorescent protein Venus was preserved using the BD Cytofix/Cytoperm kit. Intracellular staining of cells was performed using the following Abs: Alexa Fluor 488/eFluor 660 anti-Aire (SH12, eBioscience), biotinylated anti-OPG (R&D Systems), and rabbit anti-CCL21 (Lifespan Biosciences), followed by Alexa Fluor 647–conjugated goat anti-rabbit Ab (Life Technologies).

Fetal thymus organ culture

Freshly isolated embryonic day 15 thymus lobes were placed in organ culture dishes containing 1.33 mM 2-deoxyguanosine, as described (7). After 7 d, fetal thymic organ cultures (FTOC) were stimulated with 10 μg/ml anti-RANK (R&D Systems). After a further 7 d, FTOC were
disaggregated with 0.25% trypsin in 0.02% EDTA for TEC analysis by flow cytometry (7).

Quantitation of Rag2pGFP+ recent thymic emigrants

To quantitate thymus output, mechanically prepared spleen suspensions from 8- to 12-wk-old WT Rag2pGFP and Tnfrsf11b−/− Rag2pGFP mice were subjected to RBC lysis and cells were counted. Cell suspensions were then analyzed by flow cytometry for CD4, CD8, TCRβ, and Foxp3 expression together with Rag2GFP expression, as described above. The number of Rag2pGFP+ cells within total CD4+ T cells, as well as T conventional cells (CD4+Foxp3−) and Treg (CD4+Foxp3+) subsets, was then calculated to determine the frequency of recent thymic emigrants (RTE).

Immunohistochemistry

Adult thymus tissues were sectioned to a thickness of 7 μm, fixed with acetone, and stained for the following Abs: Alexa Fluor 488 anti-Aire (5H12, eBioscience), biotinylated anti-OPG (R&D Systems), and mTEC marker ERTR5 (29) detected with Alexa Fluor 647 goat anti-rat IgM. Images were acquired using an LSM 780 Zen microscope (Zeiss).

Results

Mapping the cellular targets of OPG-mediated mTEC homeostasis in RANK Venus reporter mice

The TNFR superfamily member RANK (Tnfrsf11a) plays a key role in the development of Aire+ mTEC that regulate tolerance induction via negative selection and Foxp3+ Treg generation (8, 9). Importantly, detailed analysis of the mechanisms controlling the thymus medulla has been prevented by an inability to examine RANK expression on a per cell basis within the mTEC compartment. To address this problem, we adopted multiple approaches to examine intrathymic patterns of RANK expression and directly define the cellular targets of OPG-mediated control. First, we generated BAC transgenic mice expressing the fluorescent protein Venus under control of the regulatory elements of the murine Tnfrsf11a gene. In these mice, the BAC transgene does not disrupt endogenous Tnfrsf11a gene expression, and thymus development and organization are normal (not shown). Analysis of multiple tissues of RANK Venus mice revealed detectable Venus expression in bone, skin, and lymph node, but not in liver, kidney, and lung. Moreover, and as expected by their lack of detectable expression of Tnfrsf11a mRNA, flow cytometric analysis showed that thymocytes lacked RANK Venus expression (not shown). In contrast, both Venus+ and Venus− cells were readily detectable within the total mTEC population (Fig. 1A), as well as both the mTEC hi and mTEC lo subsets (Fig. 1B). Importantly, when we used FACS to isolate Venus+ and Venus− cells within the total mTEC population, Tnfrsf11a mRNA was only detectable in the Venus+ cells (Fig. 1C), indicating that Venus expression correlates with Tnfrsf11a gene expression.

As further mTEC heterogeneity can be defined by expression of CCL21 (13) and Aire (30), we used intracellular staining methods that did not compromise detection of Venus (data not shown) to analyze expression of these markers within RANK Venus+ and RANK Venus− mTEC. Simultaneous analysis of RANK Venus expression with CCL21 and Aire identified additional novel mTEC subsets, including RANK Venus+Aire+ and RANK Venus+Aire− cells within mTEC hi, and RANK Venus+CCL21+ and RANK Venus+CCL21− cells within mTEC lo (Fig. 1B). To our knowledge, these findings provide the first direct demonstration...
Moreover, given the role of OPG in the control of RANK–RANKL–mediated development of mTEC, these findings support the idea that OPG controls their homeostasis by operating directly on multiple targets at various stages in the development of the mTEC lineage.

**FIGURE 3.** OPG and Aire differentially regulate mTEC homeostasis. Flow cytometric analysis of CD45 EpCAM\(^{+}\)Ly51\(^{-}\) mTEC in adult WT, Aire\(^{-/-}\), and Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) mice was performed, and mTEC were subdivided further on the basis of expression of MHC class II and CD80 (mTEC\(^{hi}\) and mTEC\(^{lo}\)), as well as CCL21 and Aire. (A) Ratio of mTEC\(^{hi}\)/mTEC\(^{lo}\) in WT and Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) mice (upper panel) and WT and Aire\(^{-/-}\) mice (lower panel). (B) Quantification of total mTEC and the indicated mTEC subsets in WT and Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) mice (top row) and WT and Aire\(^{-/-}\) mice (bottom row). The quantitation of mTEC subsets was performed in three independent experiments, with a minimum of three mice per group. All error bars are SEM. *\(p < 0.05\), **\(p < 0.01\), ****\(p < 0.0001\) (unpaired Student t test).

**FIGURE 4.** mTEC expression of OPG occurs independently of Aire. (A) Flow cytometric analysis of OPG expression in CD45 EpCAM\(^{+}\)Ly51\(^{-}\) mTEC, mTEC\(^{lo}\), and mTEC\(^{hi}\) in WT (upper panels) and Aire\(^{-/-}\) (lower panels) mice. (B) Quantitation of the number and proportion of OPG\(^{+}\) cells in mTEC\(^{hi}\) from WT and Aire\(^{-/-}\) mice. (C) Confocal analysis of adult thymic sections from WT (left) and Aire\(^{-/-}\) (right) mice for expression of Aire, OPG, and the mTEC marker ERTR5. Scale bars, 10 \(\mu\)m. (D) Flow cytometric analysis of WT, Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\), and Aire\(^{-/-}\) dGuo FTOC stimulated with anti-RANK for 7 d. Levels of OPG expression were set on anti-RANK stimulated Tnfrsf11b\(^{-/-}\) dGuo FTOC. (E) Quantitation of proportions of OPG\(^{+}\) mTEC\(^{hi}\) in untreated (−) or anti–RANK-stimulated (+) WT and Aire\(^{-/-}\) dGuo FTOC. Data represent at least two independent experiments, with three or more individual mice per group. Error bars represent SEM. N/D, not detected. ****\(p < 0.0001\) (unpaired Student t test).
Next, to complement our analysis of RANK expression by mTEC on a per cell basis, we used flow cytometry and confocal microscopy to analyze expression of OPG within the thymus. Freshly prepared stromal populations were stained with Abs to MHC class II and CD80, then permeabilized and stained with Abs to Aire and to OPG. Importantly, to provide appropriate staining levels in control samples, we performed side-by-side analysis of stromal populations from OPG-deficient Tnfrsf11b<sup>−/−</sup> mice to allow us to set the staining threshold of the anti-OPG Ab used in this study (Fig. 2A, 2B). Further subdivision of adult mTEC into mTEC<sup>hi</sup> and mTEC<sup>lo</sup> subsets on the basis of MHC class II (Fig. 2B, 2C) and CD80 expression (not shown) showed that OPG was restricted to a fraction of the mTEC<sup>hi</sup> population, whereas mTEC<sup>lo</sup> were uniformly OPG<sup>+</sup>. As the mTEC<sup>hi</sup> subset is heterogeneous for expression of Aire, and mTEC alterations in Aire<sup>−/−</sup> mice indicate its role in the regulation of mTEC development (17, 18, 24), we analyzed expression of both OPG and Aire in the mTEC lineage. Because Aire<sup>+</sup> mTEC initially emerge in the embryonic period (31), we performed an ontogenetic analysis to determine the pattern of Aire and OPG expression in mTEC during thymus development. Analysis of embryonic and neonatal thymus showed a similar pattern to that seen in the adult thymus, including the predominance of OPG<sup>+</sup> cells within the first cohort of Aire<sup>+</sup>mTEC<sup>hi</sup> in the embryonic thymus (Fig. 2D, 2E). Thus, in both the developing and steady-state thymus medulla, OPG expression defines a subset of Aire<sup>+</sup> cells in the mTEC<sup>hi</sup> population.

**OPG and Aire differentially impact mTEC homeostasis**

Given the overlap in expression of OPG and Aire, we next performed comparative analysis to assess the impact that the absence of OPG- or Aire-mediated regulation had on the mTEC compartment. To address this, we defined mTEC heterogeneity on the basis of expression of MHC class II, CD80, Aire, and CCL21 in Aire<sup>−/−</sup> mice (Fig. 3A, 3B). Significantly, Tnfrsf11b<sup>−/−</sup> mice also showed increased numbers of mTEC<sup>lo</sup>, including both the CCL21<sup>+</sup> and CCL21<sup>−</sup> subsets, which was not evident in Aire<sup>−/−</sup> mice (Fig. 3B). Thus, despite Aire and OPG being restricted to a subset of mTEC<sup>hi</sup> (Fig. 2), their absence resulted in a differential impact on the mTEC compartment.

To examine further the relationship between Aire and OPG, we investigated whether the regulation of OPG in mTEC was linked to the expression of Aire. Thymuses from adult WT and Aire<sup>−/−</sup> mice were digested and mTEC<sup>hi</sup> and mTEC<sup>lo</sup> were identified by flow cytometry (Fig. 5A). Analysis of T cell development, CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>+</sup> Treg, and CD25<sup>+</sup>Foxp3<sup>−</sup>/CD25<sup>−</sup> Foxp3<sup>+</sup> Treg precursors in adult WT and Tnfrsf11b<sup>−/−</sup> Rag2GFP mice. (B) Quantitation of total thymic Treg, newly generated Rag2GFP<sup>+</sup> Treg/precursors, and Rag2GFP<sup>+</sup> Treg populations in Tnfrsf11b<sup>−/−</sup> Rag2GFP and Rag2GFP mice. (C) GFP expression is retained after fixation required for intracellular staining of Foxp3. Shaded histograms represent fluorescence levels in WT thymocytes. (D) Frequency of total Rag2GFP<sup>+</sup> CD4<sup>+</sup> RTE, Rag2GFP<sup>+</sup> Treg RTE, and Rag2GFP<sup>+</sup> conventional CD4<sup>+</sup> RTE in the spleens of Rag2GFP and Tnfrsf11b<sup>−/−</sup> Rag2GFP mice. (E) Flow cytometric analysis of the proportion and frequency of thymic B cells in WT and Tnfrsf11b<sup>−/−</sup> mice. Data are representative of three separate experiments, and at least three mice per group were used. Error bars show SEM. **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001, ****p < 0.0001 (unpaired Student t test).
cytometry. Fig. 4A and 4B show that OPG+ mTEClo are detectable in both WT and Aire−/− mice, demonstrating that Aire is not required for the in vivo expression of OPG by mTEC. This was confirmed by confocal microscopy where OPG+ mTEC were detected in both WT and Aire−/− adult thymus tissue sections (Fig. 4C). Additionally, in vitro anti-RANK stimulation of 2dGuo-treated FTOC from WT and Aire−/− embryos showed a similar induction of OPG within mTEClo in both cases (Fig. 4D, 4E). Interestingly, whereas Aire was not required for expression of OPG, the proportion and number of OPG+ mTEClo actually increased in the absence of Aire (Fig. 4B). Whether this indicates that Aire may act to repress OPG expression is not clear. Alternatively, changes in the lifespan of Aire−/− mTEClo that cause a progressive accumulation of OPG+ cells is a further possibility. Whatever the case, our findings identify a subset of Aire+ mTEChi as the cellular source of OPG, a key regulator of mTEC homeostasis, and demonstrate that OPG-mediated control of mTEC homeostasis occurs independently of Aire.

Flox3+ Treg development is not limited by OPG-mediated mTEC homeostasis

The thymus medulla, and mTEC in particular, are essential in guiding the stepwise generation of Foxp3+CD25+ thymocytes from their precursors. In contrast, the generation of conventional CD4+ thymocytes is mTEC-independent (3). However, the mechanisms that constrain intrathymic Treg development and maintain the balanced production of conventional and regulatory CD4 T cells are unknown. Importantly, direct analysis of the mechanisms controlling this process requires accurate measurement of the intrathymic frequency of newly generated Foxp3+ T cells, which is made difficult by the presence of T cells that recirculate back to the thymus from the periphery (32, 33). Indeed, in Rag2GFP transgenic mice, where GFP+ thymocytes represent de novo T cell development, up to half of all Foxp3+ cells in the thymus lack GFP expression and include recirculating Treg (33–35).

To directly examine the impact of increased mTEC availability on the de novo production of Foxp3+ T cells from their immature precursors, we crossed Rag2GFP transgenic mice with OPG-deficient Tnfrsf11b−/− mice, which show an overall increase in mTEC numbers (Fig. 3). Analysis of conventional CD4+ αβT cell development in Tnfrsf11b−/− Rag2GFP mice compared with WT Rag2GFP mice revealed no major alterations in the numbers and proportions of newly generated CD69+Qa2+ and mature CD69−Qa2+ single-positive thymocytes (Fig. 5A and data not shown). In contrast, the proportion and number of Foxp3+ Treg in Tnfrsf11b−/− Rag2GFP mice were increased (Fig. 5A, 5B). To directly quantitate newly generated thymocytes, and so exclude recirculating GFP+ T cells, we then analyzed GFP+ cells and used anti-Foxp3 staining methods that did not affect detection of GFP (Fig. 5C). Importantly, Fig. 5B shows that the increase in total Foxp3+CD4+ cells in Tnfrsf11b−/− mice was not caused by an increase in newly generated Rag2GFP+Foxp3+cells, but was caused by an increase in Foxp3+ T cells lacking Rag2GFP expression. Furthermore, analysis of Treg precursor populations (36, 37) showed that the number of Rag2GFP+FDC255 Foxp3+ and Rag2GFP+CD255Foxp3+ cells was not increased in Tnfrsf11b−/− Rag2GFP mice compared with WT Rag2GFP controls. In fact, the number of Rag2GFP+CD255 Foxp3+ cells actually decreased in the absence of OPG (Fig. 5B). Importantly, when we assessed thymic output by measuring the frequency of Rag2GFP+ RITE, no significant differences were observed in the number of Foxp3+Rag2GFP+ Treg RITE in the spleens of WT Rag2GFP and Tnfrsf11b−/− Rag2GFP mice (Fig. 5D). Thus, despite increased mTEC availability (Figs. 3, 6), the numbers of Foxp3+ Treg that are produced by and emigrate from the thymus are not altered in Tnfrsf11b−/− mice, demonstrating that the mechanisms controlling mTEC homeostasis do not determine the efficacy of the intrathymic generation of Foxp3+ Treg. Finally, given that the thymus medulla is also known to contain additional cell types, including invariant NKT cells (28, 38) and B cells (39), we analyzed the potential impact that loss of OPG-mediated control of the mTEC compartment had on these populations. Whereas no changes in the makeup of the intrathymic invariant NKT cell pool were detected (not shown), we saw a marked increase in the proportion and absolute number of thymic B cells in the thymus of adult Tnfrsf11b−/− mice (Fig. 5E). However, although B cells have been recently linked to intrathymic Treg development (40, 41), when taken together with the observation that the generation of Rag2GFP+ Treg is unaltered in Tnfrsf11b−/− mice, this finding suggests that the increased availability of B cells within the thymus does not enhance Foxp3+ T cell development.

Discussion

The thymus imposes T cell tolerance via multiple mechanisms including negative selection and Foxp3+ Treg generation (3, 5, 42). The requirement for medullary thymic microenvironments for Foxp3+ Treg development is well established, as is the importance of RANK signaling in mTEC development (3, 7, 43). However, whether the mechanisms that control mTEC homeostasis affect the control of intrathymic Foxp3+ T cell development is not clear. In our study, we have addressed this issue by analyzing the ways in which two cell-intrinsic regulators of the mTEC compartment, Aire and OPG, control thymus medulla homeostasis.

Our findings show that despite the coexpression of OPG with Aire, their absence affects the mTEC compartment differently. Whereas Aire exerts a relatively modest effect on mTEClo alone, OPG controls numbers of both mTEClo and mTEChi. This broad impact that OPG has on the mTEC compartment is consistent with the patterns of mTEC expression of RANK seen in the analysis of RANK Venus reporter mice, which identifies the direct targets of OPG control as novel subsets within both the mTEClo and mTEChi.
populations. Our finding that production of the soluble regulator OPG is limited to a subset of mTECβ cells, yet RANK expression occurs within both mTECβ and mTECα populations, also indicates that novel cis- and trans-acting mechanisms operate within the thymic medulla to control mTEC numbers (Fig. 6). These findings provide new insight into how distinct mTEC populations are able to influence one another to control homeostasis within the total mTEC compartment, and they identify further heterogeneity within mTEC that will be important to examine in future work.

Perhaps most significant in relationship to how the thymus medulla controls the balanced production of Foxp3α regulatory and conventional T cells is our finding that negative regulation of mTEC homeostasis does not control the efficacy of intrathymic Foxp3α Treg development. Thus, although mTEC are essential for Treg development, this finding suggests that additional factors that are distinct to microenvironmental regulation and perhaps intrinsic to the T cell lineage also influence the numbers of Foxp3α Treg that the thymus produces. Whereas our data contrast with other studies concluding that increased mTEC numbers enhance Foxp3+ T cell production. Whereas our data contrast with other studies concluding that increased mTEC numbers enhance Foxp3+ T cell production. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate that this does not relate to the number of mTEC required for their selection, and rather suggest that the mechanisms controlling Foxp3α Treg generated intrathymically are distinct from those that control mTEC homeostasis.

Disclosures

The authors have no financial conflicts of interest.

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