Results Lymphoid hypertrophy, autoantibody production, serum cytokine levels, and other indicators of immune activation were markedly increased in STING$^{-/-}$ autoimmune-prone mice compared to STING$^{+/+}$ littermates. As a result, STING$^{-/-}$ autoimmune-prone mice had significantly shorter lifespans than controls. TLR-dependent systemic inflammation during TMPD-mediated peritonitis was similarly aggravated in STING$^{-/-}$ and cGAS$^{-/-}$ mice. Mechanistically, cGAS and STING-deficient macrophages failed to express negative regulators of immune activation, and thus were hyper-responsive to TLR ligands. This hyper-reactivity corresponds to dramatically elevated numbers of inflammatory macrophages and granulocytes *in vivo*.

Conclusions Our findings reveal an unexpected negative regulatory role for STING during chronic inflammation. While the dysregulation of TLR7/9 signalling is a recurrent theme in systemic autoimmune, numerous studies have now revealed a *protective role* for TLR9 in SLE. Importantly, the exacerbated disease we observed in STING/lpr mice resembles that reported for TLR9/lpr mice and implies common protective mechanisms originating from STING and TLR9. Although the precise mechanism remains an open question, it is clear that cGAS/STING-dependent pathways maintain a threshold of negative regulators. We propose a similar setting of thresholds from TLR-dependent pathways and further suggest that such coordinated induction of cell-intrinsic thresholds of negative regulators is key in offsetting inflammation. Our data raise a cautionary note regarding the use of newly developed STING-directed therapeutics in systemic disease, because they may have unintended consequences and perturb a carefully orchestrated balance between cytosolic and endosomal signalling cascades.

II-14 DISTURBED CLEARANCE OF APOPTOTIC DEBRIS IN PRISTANE-TREATED TLR9KO MICE LEADS TO ACCUMULATION OF A UNIQUE MACROPHAGE POPULATION

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Background Nucleic acid binding TLRs have been found to play a critical role in the production of autoantibodies and disease development in animal models of SLE. Intriguingly, TLR9 appears to play both a protective and disease promoting role. While TLR9 is required for the production of anti-dsDNA autoantibodies, TLR9^{KO} autoimmune-prone mice develop more severe disease than their TLR9-sufficient counterparts. Studies from our group and others have pointed to B cell expression of TLR9 as a key determining factor. However, our recent studies point to an additional role for TLR9in myeloid lineage cells.

Materials and methods Pristane injected BALB/c wildtype (WT) and TLR9^{KO} mice were analysed for disease severity at 5 months. Kidney sections were stained for IgG deposition and Ly6G positive cells. Single cell suspensions of different tissues were analysed using flow cytometry. Mixed BM chimaeras (50% WT: 50% TLR9^{KO}) were injected with pristane and myeloid populations were analysed. For apoptotic cell clearance, WT and TLR9^{KO} bone marrow derived macrophages (BMDM) were stimulated with CFSE labelled apoptotic cells and analysed 24 hours later by confocal microscopy.

Results We have found that TLR9-deficiency dramatically exacerbates the onset of renal disease resulting in decreased survival. Increased levels of IgG accumulate in pristane treated TLR9^{KO} glomeruli compared to WT glomeruli, and the increased IgG deposits are associated with an increased myeloid infiltrate. Moreover, this myeloid infiltrate contained an increased frequency of granulocytes a well as an unusual CD11b^{+} Ly6C^{int} Ly6G^{int} (Ly6CG^{int}) subset. To better understand the origin of these populations, the myeloid subsets of pristane-treated mixed (TLR9^{WT} + TLR9^{KO}) BM chimaeras were analysed. Remarkably, the Ly6CG^{int} population was entirely derived from the TLR9^{KO} stem cells. Morphologic analysis revealed that the Ly6CG^{int} population are macrophages containing large lipid droplets, suggesting a role for TLR9 in degradation of pristane. Further *in vitro* analysis of BMDMs stimulated with apoptotic cells showed that most WT BMDMs cleared apoptotic cells by 24 h. However, a large fraction of TLR9-deficient BMDMs still had un-degraded apoptotic cells in the lysosomal compartment, suggesting a role for TLR9 in clearance.

Conclusions These data demonstrate a direct effect of TLR9-deficiency on the expansion of a unique CD11b^{+} population, and further suggest that these cells play a major and direct role in the accelerated disease characteristic in TLR9^{KO} mice. Furthermore, a specific role for TLR9 in the clearance of apoptotic cells may be the underlying cause for the accumulation of this CD11b + subset.

II-15 INHIBITION OF TLR RECOGNITION OF SELF NUCLEIC ACIDS BY PLASMACYTOID DENDRITIC CELLS USING OLIGONUCLEOTIDE-BASED INHIBITORS IN LUPUS

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Background SLE is an autoimmune disease where the immune tolerance to self-nucleic acids is broken with devastating consequences. The hallmark of the disease is an increased IFN-α signature in the blood which is accompanied with high levels of autoantibodies and disease activity. Self-nucleic acid recognition by Toll-like receptors (TLR)7 and TLR9 on B cells and plasmacytoid dendritic cells (PDC) is believed to be key in the pathogenesis of SLE promoting immune complexes (IC) and the production of type I IFN, both of which are associated with the severity of the disease.

Results We have generated and described oligonucleotide-based bi-functional inhibitors of TLR7&9 (called ImmunoRegulatory Sequences, IRS) and have shown that these can block IFN production by PDC as well as B cell activation. In addition, IRS are active in vivo and treatment of lupus-prone mice lead to reduced disease symptoms and end-organ damage. SLE patient are often treated with glucocorticoids (GC) but under maintenance levels often suffer from disease flares that necessitate high dose pulse therapy. We have shown that PDC were significantly more resistant to GC induced death in lupus-prone mice, a phenomenon that was completely reversed by pre-treatment with TLR7&9 inhibitor. These data provide a new understanding of the role of self-recognition of DNA and RNA by TLR as an important parameter during inflammatory response. These data also stress the potential utilisation of TLR7&9 specific inhibitors as corticosparing drugs which would be open new possibilities with respect