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Perspective

Transplantation Immunology and Xenotransplantation: Challenges and Potential Solutions

Andrea Zanichelli*

Department of Systems Medicine, University Hospital of Padua, Padua, Italy

ABOUT THE STUDY

Transplantation is a life-saving medical procedure that involves the transfer of organs or tissues from a donor to a recipient. While human-to-human organ transplantation has become increasingly successful, the shortage of suitable donor organs remains a critical problem. This scarcity has led to the exploration of alternative sources, such as xenotransplantation, which involves the transplantation of organs or tissues from non-human animals to humans. However, several immunological barriers hinder the success of both human-to-human and xenotransplantation.

Challenges in transplantation immunology

Tissue and organ rejection: The immune system recognizes transplanted organs or tissues as foreign and activates an immune response to reject them. This rejection occurs due to the recognition of non-self antigens on the transplanted cells by the recipient's immune system. The complex interaction between the donor and recipient immune systems leads to both acute and chronic rejection. Acute rejection occurs shortly after transplantation and involves a cellular immune response, while chronic rejection develops over a more extended period and involves a combination of cellular and antibody-mediated immune responses.

HLA compatibility: Human Leukocyte Antigen (HLA) matching plays a crucial role in determining the success of organ transplantation. HLA molecules are highly polymorphic, and the recipient's immune system may recognize the donor's HLA antigens as foreign, leading to an increased risk of rejection. Achieving close HLA compatibility between the donor and recipient reduces the risk of rejection but poses a challenge due to the diversity of HLA alleles in the population.

Immunosuppression: To prevent organ rejection, transplant recipients often require lifelong immunosuppressive drugs. However, these medications have side effects and can increase the susceptibility to infections and certain malignancies. Furthermore, immunosuppression does not completely eliminate the risk of rejection, and long-term drug toxicity remains a concern.

Challenges in xenotransplantation

Hyperacute rejection: Xenotransplantation faces a unique challenge known as Hyperacute Rejection (HAR), which occurs within minutes to hours after transplantation. This immediate rejection results from the activation of pre-existing antibodies present in the recipient against antigens on the donor's organ, particularly the Alpha-1,3-Galactosyltransferase (α1,3GT) enzyme in pig organs. HAR involves the activation of the complement system, resulting in rapid tissue damage and organ failure.

Cellular rejection and xenogeneic immune response: Even if the patient overcomes HAR, cellular rejection remains a significant hurdle in xenotransplantation. The recipient's immune system recognizes numerous xenogeneic antigens on the transplanted organ, leading to a robust immune response. The cross-species differences in Major Histocompatibility Complex (MHC) molecules and co-stimulatory pathways contribute to the activation of T cells and other immune effector cells.

Risk of xenozoonosis: Xenotransplantation raises concerns about the transmission of known and novel infectious agents from the donor animal to the human recipient. Retroviruses, particularly Porcine Endogenous Retroviruses (PERVs), have been a major focus of concern. PERVs are integrated into the pig genome and have the potential for transmission and subsequent replication in human cells.

Potential solutions

Immune tolerance induction: Developing strategies to induce immune tolerance in transplant recipients could minimize the risk of rejection. This includes the use of immunomodulatory agents, such as regulatory T cells, which can suppress immune responses and promote tolerance to the transplanted organ or tissue.

Genetic modification: Genetic engineering techniques can be employed to modify the donor organ or tissue to reduce the

Correspondence to: Andrea Zanichelli, Department of Systems Medicine, University Hospital of Padua, Padua, Italy, E-mail: Zanichelli@edu.com

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immunogenicity. For instance, the knockout or suppression of α1,3GT in pigs can minimize HAR by reducing the antigenic target for recipient antibodies.

Xenogeneic immune response modulation: Various approaches can be used to modulate the xenogeneic immune response, such as the blockade of co-stimulatory pathways or the use of antibodies targeting specific immune cell populations. Inhibiting the activation of T cells and other effector cells involved in cellular rejection can improve graft survival.

Pathogen-free donor animals: The generation of pathogen-free donor animals, particularly pigs, is essential to reduce the risk of xenozoonosis.

Advances in gene editing technologies like CRISPR-Cas9 (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats-associated protein 9) can be utilized to eliminate or inactivate viral sequences in the donor animal genome, significantly reducing the potential for viral transmission.