

1271 This Week in *Science*

Editorial

1273 Recognizing Self from Nonself

Letters

1280 Health Care and the Law: M. D. GREEN ■ Full Disclosure at the University of Florida: D. R. PRICE AND D. R. CHALLONER; E. MARSHALL ■ Neural Interfacing: G. T. A. KOVACS ■ Engineering Design: J. R. DIXON ■ Global Warming Questions: W. M. KAULA ■ Unscrambling an Egg: L. HAYFLICK

News & Comment

1299 Cold Fusion Conundrum at Texas A&M ■ Wolf: My Tritium Was an Impurity
1304 North Carolina Protests Chinese Pig Cartel
1305 Amazonian Biodiversity
1306 New Head for the WHO Global Program on AIDS
1307 Peer Review Under Review
1308 *Briefings*: Voyager's Last Light ■ Damage to Animal Research Mounts ■ Third World Pollution ■ Soviet Missile on Display ■ INS Puts Limits on Togetherness ■ U. of Maryland Gains from Glasnost ■ Turtle Navigation

Research News

1310 The Worm Project
1313 No Pain, No Gain?
1314 From One Coral Many Findings Blossom ■ Coral Pushes Back the Past

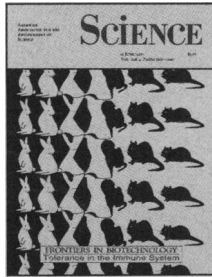
Articles

Tolerance in the Immune System

1335 The Role of the T Cell Receptor in Positive and Negative Selection of Developing T Cells: M. BLACKMAN, J. KAPPLER, P. MARRACK
1342 Clonal Deletion Versus Clonal Anergy: The Role of the Thymus in Inducing Self Tolerance: F. RAMSDELL AND B. J. FOWLKES
1349 A Cell Culture Model for T Lymphocyte Clonal Anergy: R. H. SCHWARTZ
1357 T Cell Reactivity to MHC Molecules: Immunity Versus Tolerance: J. SPRENT, E.-K. GAO, S. R. WEBB
1364 Tolerance in Transgenic Mice Expressing Major Histocompatibility Molecules Extrathymically on Pancreatic Cells: L. C. BURKLY, D. LO, R. A. FLAVELL
1369 Self-Nonself Discrimination by T Cells: H. VON BOEHMER AND P. KISIELOW
1373 The Need for Central and Peripheral Tolerance in the B Cell Repertoire: C. C. GOODNOW, S. ADELSTEIN, A. BASTEIN
1380 Autoimmune Diseases: The Failure of Self Tolerance: A. A. SINHA, M. T. LOPEZ, H. O. McDEVITT

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COVER An allegory of immune tolerance, inspired by M. C. Escher. Immune function depends on distinguishing between self and nonself. When the immune system cannot determine whether an antigen is self or foreign, self tolerance may break down and autoimmune disease ensues. The articles on tolerance in the immune system begin on page 1335. [Concept by Linda J. Miller, illustration by Julie Cherry]

1388 The Influence of Allogeneic Cells on the Human T and B Cell Repertoire: J. J. VAN ROOD AND F. H. J. CLAAS

Reports

- 1394 Axial Oxygen-Centered Lattice Instabilities and High-Temperature Superconductivity: S. D. CONRADSON, I. D. RAISTRICK, A. R. BISHOP
- 1398 North-South Contraction of the Mojave Block and Strike-Slip Tectonics in Southern California: J. M. BARTLEY, A. F. GLAZNER, E. R. SCHERMER
- 1402 Partial Symmetrization of the Photosynthetic Reaction Center: S. J. ROBLES, J. BRETON, D. C. YOUVAN
- 1405 Correlated Evolution of Female Mating Preferences and Male Color Pattern in the Guppy *Poecilia reticulata*: A. E. HOUDE AND J. A. ENDLER
- 1408 Identification of an Inhibitor of Neovascularization from Cartilage: M. A. MOSES, J. SUDHALTER, R. LANGER
- 1410 Fibroblast Growth Factor Receptor Is a Portal of Cellular Entry for Herpes Simplex Virus Type 1: R. J. KANER, A. BAIRD, A. MANSUKHANI, C. BASILICO, B. D. SUMMERS, R. Z. FLORKIEWICZ, D. P. HAJJAR
- 1413 Correction of CD18-Deficient Lymphocytes by Retrovirus-Mediated Gene Transfer: J. M. WILSON, A. J. PING, J. C. KRAUSS, L. MAYO-BOND, C. E. ROGERS, D. C. ANDERSON, R. F. TODD III
- 1416 Cell Cycle Dependence of Chloride Permeability in Normal and Cystic Fibrosis Lymphocytes: J. K. BUBIEN, K. L. KIRK, T. A. RADO, R. A. FRIZZELL
- 1419 Flunarizine Protects Neurons from Death After Axotomy or NGF Deprivation: K. M. RICH AND J. P. HOLLOWELL
- 1421 Inhibition of Factor VIIa-Tissue Factor Coagulation Activity by a Hybrid Protein: T. J. GIRARD, L. A. MACPHAIL, K. M. LIKERT, W. F. NOVOTNY, J. P. MILETICH, G. J. BROZE, JR.

Book Reviews

- 1428 Behind the Factory Walls, reviewed by P. R. GREGORY ■ The Invisible Work Force, K. CHRISTENSEN ■ Flight Strategies of Migrating Hawks, T. C. WILLIAMS ■ Rheology of Solids and of the Earth, J.-P. POIRIER ■ Books Received

Products & Materials

- 1432 Biological Culture Collection Goes Online ■ Monoclonal Antibodies ■ Benchtop Cleanroom ■ DNA Sequence Computer Entry System ■ Scientific Information Managing Software ■ Transcription Translation System ■ Literature

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Recognizing Self from Nonself

Of all the mysteries of modern science, the mechanism of self versus nonself recognition in the immune system ranks at or near the top. The immune system is designed to recognize foreign invaders. To do so it generates on the order of 10^{11} different kinds of immunological receptors so that no matter what the shape or form of the foreign invader there will be some complementary receptor to recognize it and effect its elimination. The ability to respond to any foreign substance no matter how contemporary or how bizarre is puzzle enough, but the added mystery is that the immune system can distinguish foreign carbohydrates, nucleic acids, and proteins from those that exist within the organism, often in shapes barely distinguishable from the invaders. When the immune system is working well it never gets activated by self substances, but unerringly responds to the nonself substances. When the system is not working well this distinction gets blurred and diseases of autoimmunity occur.

As might be expected from the importance and the difficulty of the task that it must perform, the immune system is extremely complex. These cells can unleash powerful binding and enzymatic forces that must contain and expel toxic substances ranging from molecules to whole cells, and yet not allow these forces to damage the delicate machinery of the body.

The mechanism by which this self-nonself distinction is achieved is beginning to be understood. The cells of the immune system (the B and T lymphocytes) are rendered tolerant to their own organism's molecules by two processes, one that results in elimination of the cell that would otherwise produce an anti-self response (clonal deletion), and another that results in their inactivation (clonal anergy). The combination of papers in this special issue, assembled under the editorial supervision of Linda J. Miller, addresses the steps that have led to that conclusion and the new research to delineate the process in molecular terms. Each of these investigators uses a different system and a different approach to the problem. Blackman, Kappler, and Marrack, for example, examine the paradox that T cells that bear these receptors can be either stimulated to proliferate (positive selection) because they have some degree of complementarity, or become inactivated (negative selection) because their affinity to self MHC (major histocompatibility complex) or self peptide is so high that the clones are deleterious. Ramsdell and Fowlkes use chimeric mice to clarify the role of the thymus in the inactivation of developing T cells. Schwartz, on the other hand, uses an in vitro model of tolerance to show that clonal anergy makes a T cell incapable of producing its own growth hormone, interleukin-2. Sprent, Gao, and Webb use chimeric mice to compare tolerance induction in developing versus mature T cells, since one theory suggests that deletion occurs in young cells, whereas anergy primarily occurs in more mature cells. Burkly, Lo, and Flavell use transgenic mice to examine the role of MHC molecules that are expressed outside of the thymus in inducing tolerance. Von Boehmer and Kisielow also use transgenic mice, but they examine the events within the thymus that affect T cell development and show that the binding of the T cell receptor to MHC molecules directs differentiation (positive selection). Goodnow, Adelstein, and Basten use transgenic mice to study tolerance in B cells and find that both deletion and inactivation occur. Sinha, Lopez, and McDevitt focus on those systems in which the discrimination breaks down and diseases of autoimmunity occur. About 5 to 7 percent of the population are subject to autoimmune diseases, which include insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, myasthenia gravis, and psoriasis. Van Rood and Claas examine the complex process of the immune system in its responses to transplantation of organs from one human being to another. The goal is to generate lifelong tolerance to a foreign organ in mature adults, just as can be induced in a newborn mouse.

The general framework that arises suggests that during maturation the lymphocytes first rearrange the genes needed to make receptors specific. If at this immature stage a cell is exposed to an antigen or the peptide-MHC complex, it is either killed or becomes inactivated. Only the cells that respond to nonself should survive to maturity. Although recent work on tolerance has emphasized T cells, which have different functions than B cells, new studies suggest that both follow similar patterns in self-nonself activation and suppression. The understanding at the molecular level will not only be a solution to a fascinating intellectual puzzle, but offers practical suggestions for treating very serious diseases.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.