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Poster presentation

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## **P16-45. High avidity CD4<sup>+</sup> T cell response directed to an immunodominant Gag epitope in HIV controllers: an ANRS EP36 study**

B Vingert<sup>6</sup>, S Perez-Patrigéon<sup>6</sup>, P Jeannin<sup>6</sup>, O Lambotte<sup>1</sup>, F Boufassa<sup>2</sup>, F Lemaître<sup>3</sup>, WK Kwok<sup>4</sup>, I Theodorou<sup>5</sup>, J Delfraissy<sup>1</sup>, J Thèze<sup>6</sup> and LA Chakrabarti<sup>\*6</sup>

Address: <sup>1</sup>AP-HP, Department of Internal Medicine and Infectious Diseases, Bicêtre Hospital, Le Kremlin-Bicêtre, France, <sup>2</sup>INSERM U822, Bicêtre Hospital, Le Kremlin-Bicêtre, France, <sup>3</sup>G5 Dynamiques des Réponses Immunes, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France, <sup>4</sup>Benaroya Research Institute at Virginia Mason, Seattle, USA, <sup>5</sup>INSERM U543, Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris, France and <sup>6</sup>Unité d'Immunogénétique Cellulaire, Institut Pasteur, Paris Cedex 15, France

\* Corresponding author

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### **Background**

Emerging evidence indicates that HIV controllers contain HIV-1 replication through very active cellular immune responses, though how such responses can persist over time without exhaustion or waning is not yet understood. To investigate the nature of memory CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells responsible for sustained anti-HIV responses, we characterized their capacity to generate primary cell lines specific for immunodominant Gag peptides.

### **Methods**

CD4<sup>+</sup> T cell lines were derived from patients who spontaneously controlled HIV replication (HIV controller group, n = 17) and patients who achieved viral control following successful antiretroviral therapy (HAART group, n = 20). Cell lines were compared for growth kinetics, Vβ repertoire, and sensitivity to antigen.

### **Results**

Specific cell lines were obtained at high rate for both HIV controllers (16/17) and efficiently treated patients (19/20) in response to the immunodominant Gag293 peptide. However, lines from controllers showed faster growth kinetics than those of treated patients. After normalizing for growth rates, IFN-γ responses directed against

the immunodominant Gag293 peptide showed higher functional avidity in HIV controllers, while responses to Gag161, Gag263, or CMV peptides did not differ between groups. Characterization of Gag293-specific CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells through MHC class II tetramer labeling revealed a diverse Vβ repertoire, suggesting that multiple clones contributed to the high avidity CD4<sup>+</sup> T cell population in HIV controllers. The high functional avidity of the Gag293-specific response could be explained, at least in part, by a high avidity interaction between the TCR and the peptide-MHC complex, as demonstrated by class II tetramer binding.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides evidence that HIV controllers harbor a pool of high avidity memory CD4<sup>+</sup> T cell precursors directed against an immunodominant Gag peptide. The capacity to mount a rapid CD4 response in the presence of minimal amounts of Gag antigen helps explain how HIV controllers maintain an active antiviral response in the face of very low viremia.