

HANDBOOK OF EXPERIMENTAL IMMUNOLOGY
IN FOUR VOLUMES

Volume 3: Genetics and Molecular Immunology

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Preface

The pace of progress in immunology has not slackened since the last edition of this handbook. The subject now draws heavily on molecular biology and genetics and this has necessitated the inclusion of an additional volume on **Genetics and Molecular Immunology**. The explosion in the development of hybridoma technology and cell culture, since the last edition, can be seen from the many chapters in each volume that employ monoclonal reagents and cell lines. Some idea of the expansion of the field can be gained from the **Cellular Immunology** volume where contributions on phagocytes and lymphocytes now occupy 30 chapters compared to 12 in the previous edition. A new section on immunoregulation contains 14 chapters and there are now 6 chapters devoted to mammalian cell membrane antigens in the **Immunochemistry** volume.

It is now no longer possible for one editor to keep in touch with the enormous expansion in this field, and I am much indebted to my co-editors Len and Leonore Herzenberg who have joined me in the task of co-opting research workers in the wide range of disciplines now contributing to the field of immu-

nology. I am particularly grateful to my wife Dr Caroline Blackwell for her help with the massive editing task.

Amongst the many new features of this edition is the provision of overviews for many of the sections. I am most grateful to our contributors in the methodology sections for their efforts to achieve a consistent style of presentation of the procedures, and I hope that this will help in the accessibility of the descriptive material. A work of this size inevitably takes a number of years to put together but considerable effort has gone into introducing up to date material into the chapters. This has been achieved by enabling and encouraging contributors to introduce new material and references during the proof stages of their chapters.

I wish to thank Hilary Flenley for her careful and thorough index, and Nigel Palmer and his staff at Blackwell Scientific Publications Edinburgh office without whom production of the new edition would have been impossible. Per Saugman has as always, maintained a benevolent paternal interest in the project.

D.M.W.

Contents

List of contributors xi

Preface xvii

VOLUME 3 GENETICS AND MOLECULAR IMMUNOLOGY

Molecular approaches to immunology

85. Overview: Introductory comments on molecular immunology
D. BALTIMORE
86. Construction and screening of recombinant DNA libraries in bacteriophage lambda
P. W. TUCKER
87. The major histocompatibility complex of the mouse
L. SMITH, M. STEINMETZ AND L. HOOD
88. The murine immunoglobulin heavy chain constant region gene locus
N. M. GOUGH AND SUZANNE CORY
89. The Igh-V genes of the mouse
R. RIBLET AND P. H. BRODEUR
90. Classification of mouse V_H sequences
RENATE DILDROP
91. Transfection for lymphocyte cell surface antigens
PAULA KAVATHAS AND L. A. HERZENBERG
92. Lymphoid cell gene transfer
SHERIE L. MORRISON AND V. T. OI

Immunoglobulin genetics

93. Overview: Allotypes
H. H. FUDENBERG
94. Human immunoglobulin allotypes
M. S. SCHANFIELD AND ERNA VAN LOGHEN
95. New methods for human allotyping
D. ZELASCHI, M. J. JOHNSTON, C. J. NEWBY AND LEONORE A. HERZENBERG
96. Gm and disease
Y. NAKAO AND T. SASAZUKI

97. Mouse immunoglobulin allotypes
MARILYN PARSON, LEONORE A. HERZENBERG, A. M. STALL AND L. A. HERZENBERG

98. Rat immunoglobulin allotypes
G. A. GUTMAN

99. Rabbit immunoglobulin allotypes
ROSE G. MAGE

Genetics of the major histocompatibility complex

100. Overview: The murine MHC
D. B. MURPHY
101. The MHC of the laboratory rat, *Rattus norvegicus*
G. W. BUTCHER AND J. C. HOWARD
102. Human HLA genetics and disease associations
GLENYS THOMSON
103. Common assays for identifying immune response genes
C. WALTENBAUGH AND S. D. MILLER

Resources

104. The mouse linkage map
MARGARET C. GREEN
105. Sonatic cell genetics and the human gene map
M. E. KAMARCK AND F. H. RUDDLE
106. Inbred, congenic, recombinant-inbred and mutant mouse strains
R. W. MELVOLD

VOLUME 1 IMMUNOCHEMISTRY

Antigens

1. Overview: Antigens
M. SELA

- 2 Preparation of synthetic antigens
M. SELA AND SARA FUCHS
- 3 Haptens and carriers
O. MÄKELÄ AND I. J. T. SEPPÄLÄ
- 4 Isolation and identification of bacterial antigens
I. R. POXTON AND C. CAROLINE BLACKWELL
- 5 Preparation of viral antigens
C. J. BURRELL
- 6 Antigens of parasites
T. W. PEARSON AND M. W. CLARK
- 7 Fungal antigens
JOAN L. LONGBOTTOM AND P. K. C. AUSTWICK
- 8 Immunization of experimental animals
D. W. DRESSER
- 9 Carbohydrate antigens in higher animals
S. HAKOMORI AND R. KANNAGI
- 10 The chemistry and standardization of allergens
S. DREBORG, R. EINARSSON, JOAN L. LONGBOTTOM
- Immunoglobulins:
Purification and characterization**
- 11 Overview: The quest for antibody homogeneity: the *sine qua non* for structural and genetic insights into antibody complementarity
E. A. KABAT
- 12 Immunochemical analysis of human and rabbit immunoglobulins and their subunits
D. R. STANWORTH AND M. W. TURNER
- 13 Purification and characterization of monoclonal antibodies
R. R. HARDY
- 14 Preparation and purification of active fragments from mouse monoclonal antibodies
P. PARHAM
- 15 Determination of the three-dimensional structures of immunoglobulins
A. B. EDMUNDSON AND KATHERYN R. ELY
- 16 Immunoabsorbents
SARA FUCHS AND M. SELA
- 17 Two-dimensional crystals of immunoglobulins
J. REIDLER, E. E. UZGIRIS AND R. D. KORNBERG
- 18 Sources of myeloma proteins, and M-components
M. POTTER
- Mammalian cell membrane antigens**
- 19 Overview: Mammalian cell surface antigens
R. D. KORNBERG
- 20 Membrane and secretory immunoglobulins: structure, biosynthesis and assembly
J. W. GODING
- 21 Class I MHC antigens of mouse and humans
J. E. COLIGAN AND T. J. KINDT
- 22 Glycoprotein antigens of the lymphocyte surface and their purification by antibody affinity chromatography
A. F. WILLIAMS AND A. N. BARCLAY
- 23 Immunofluorescence methods to study cell surface and cytoplasmic proteins, and their dynamics
E. R. UNANUE AND J. BRAUN
- 24 Measurement of lateral diffusion by fluorescence photobleaching recovery
N. O. PETERSEN, S. FELDER AND E. L. ELSON
- Antibody interaction with soluble and cellular antigens**
- 25 Overview: Introduction to methods used to study the affinity and kinetics of antibody-antigen reactions
M. W. STEWARD
- 26 Radioimmunoassays and related methods
A. E. BOLTON AND W. M. HUNTER
- 27 Enzyme immunoassays: heterogeneous and homogeneous systems
R. M. NAKAMURA, A. VOLLER AND D. E. BIDWELL
- 28 Preparation and use of fluorochrome conjugates
G. D. JOHNSON AND E. J. HOLBOROW

- 29 Flow cytometry and fluorescence activated cell sorting (FACS)
D. R. PARKS, L. L. LANIER AND L. A. HERZENBERG
- 30 Data analysis in flow cytometry
W. A. MOORE AND R. A. KAUTZ
- 31 Purification and coupling of fluorescent proteins for use in flow cytometry
R. R. HARDY
- 32 Immunodiffusion and immunoelectrophoresis
Ö. OUCHTERLONY AND L.-Å. NILSSON
- 33 Passive cutaneous anaphylaxis
Z. OVARY
- 34 Solid-phase radioimmune assays
C. J. NEWBY, K. HAYAKAWA AND LEONORE A. HERZENBERG
- 35 Immunological techniques for the identification of antigens and antibodies by electron microscopy
G. A. ANDRES, K. C. HSU AND BEATRICE C. SEGAL
- 36 Affinity targeting and fusion of vesicles to cells
W. GODFREY, J. GUYDEN AND L. WOFSY
- 37 Immunotoxins
OLIVIA MARTINEZ AND L. WOFSY
- 38 Kinetics of antibody reaction and the analysis of cell surface antigens
D. W. MASON AND A. F. WILLIAMS
- Complement**
- 39 Complement technology
R. A. HARRISON AND P. J. LACHMANN
- 40 Complement fixation by monoclonal antigen-antibody complexes
R. R. HARDY
- 42 Overview: The mononuclear phagocyte system
R. VAN FURTH
- 43 Plasma membrane markers to study differentiation, activation and localization of murine macrophages. Ag F4/80 and the mannosyl, fucosyl receptor
S. GORDON, PHYLLIS M. STARKEY, D. HUME, R. A. B. EZEKOWITZ, S. HIRSCH AND J. AUSTYN
- 44 Methods for studying the ontogeny of mononuclear phagocytes
C. C. STEWART
- 45 Macrophage cell lines
P. RALPH
- 46 *In vitro* determination of phagocytosis and intracellular killing by polymorphonuclear and mononuclear phagocytes
P. C. J. LEIJH, R. VAN FURTH AND THEDA L. VAN ZWET
- 47 Secreted proteins of resting and activated macrophages
ZENA WERB, M. J. BANDA, R. TAKEMURA AND S. GORDON
- 48 Macrophage membrane receptors
J. STEWART, ELIZABETH J. GLASS, D. M. WEIR AND M. R. DAHA
- 49 Dendritic cells
R. M. STEINMAN, W. C. VAN VOORHIS AND D. M. SPALDING
- 50 Reduction and excitation of oxygen by phagocytic leukocytes: biochemical and cytochemical techniques
J. A. BADWEY, J. M. ROBINSON, M. J. KARNOVSKY AND M. L. KARNOVSKY
- 51 Locomotion and chemotaxis of leukocytes
P. C. WILKINSON
- 52 Assays for phagocyte ecto-enzymes
P. J. EDELSON

VOLUME 2 CELLULAR IMMUNOLOGY

Phagocytes

- 41 Overview: The function of receptors in phagocytosis
S. D. WRIGHT AND S. C. SILVERSTEIN *

The lymphoid system

- 53 Overview: Lymphocytes and their relations
H. S. MICKLEM

- 54 Physical methods for separation of lymphocyte subpopulations
R. G. MILLER
- 55 Preparative immunoselection of lymphocyte populations
S. V. HUNT
- 56 Genetic markers for following cell populations
J. D. ANSELL AND H. S. MICKLEM
- 57 Following cellular traffic: methods of labelling lymphocytes and other cells to trace their migration *in vivo*
E. C. BUTCHER AND W. L. FORD
- 58 Human leukocyte subpopulations
P. BEVERLEY
- 59 Lymphokines
J. KAPPLER AND PHILLIPA MARRACK
- 60 Natural killer cells
H. WIGZELL AND U. RAMSTEDT
- 61 Genetics and cell distributions of mouse cell surface alloantigens
LORRAINE FLAHERTY AND J. FORMAN

Lymphocyte responses

- 62 Overview: Lymphocyte responses
G. J. V. NOSSAL
- 63 Lymphocyte responses to polyclonal B and T cell activators
EVA SEVERINSON AND EVA-LOTTA LARSSON
- 64 Assays for immunoglobulin-secreting cells
D. W. DRESSER
- 65 Limiting dilution analysis of effector cells and their precursors *in vitro*
M. ZAUDERER
- 66 *In vitro* evaluation of human lymphocyte function
H. C. LANE, GAIL WHALEN AND A. S. FAUCI
- 67 Assay for *in vivo* adoptive immune response
G. M. IVERSON
- 68 Analysis of cytotoxic T cell responses
ELIZABETH SIMPSON AND P. CHANDLER

- 69 T cell lines and hybrids in mouse and man
C. G. FATHMAN AND E. G. ENGLEMAN

- 70 B cell growth factors
MAUREEN HOWARD

Immunoregulation

- 71 Overview: Helper and suppressor T cells
K. OKUMARA AND T. TADA
- 72 Overview: Ir genes
B. BENACERRAF
- 73 Overview: Idiotypic regulation
K. RAJEWSKY
- 74 Overview: Epitope-specific regulation
LEONORE A. HERZENBERG
- 75 Overview: T cell clones
H. CANTOR
- 76 Subtractive cDNA hybridization and the T-cell receptor genes
M. M. DAVIS
- 77 Detection of suppressor cells and suppressor factors for delayed-type hypersensitivity responses
S. D. MILLER AND M. K. JENKINS
- 78 Detection of suppressor cells and suppressor factors for antibody responses
C. WALTENBAUGH AND B. S. KIM
- 79 Contrasuppressor T cells: a practical guide to the identification of contrasuppressive effects in immunoregulatory systems
D. R. GREEN
- 80 Antigen-specific suppressor molecules produced by T cells
M. TANIGUCHI AND T. TOKUHISA
- 81 Immunosuppressive agents
D. J. G. WHITE AND J. F. L. SHAW
- 82 Studies of autoimmune diseases
ELIZABETH S. RAVECHE AND A. D. STEINBERG
- 83 Primary immunodeficiencies: definitions and diagnosis
F. S. ROSEN

- 84 Studying immune regulation with protein and peptide antigens
N. SHASTRI AND E. E. SERCARZ

VOLUME 4 APPLICATIONS OF IMMUNOLOGICAL METHODS IN BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

Monoclonal antibodies

- 107 Overview: Monoclonal antibodies
C. MILSTEIN
- 108 Schemata for the production of monoclonal antibody-producing hybridomas
T. J. KIPPS AND L. A. HERZENBERG
- 109 Hybridoma immunoglobulin isotype switch variant selection with the fluorescence activated cell sorter
T. J. KIPPS AND L. A. HERZENBERG
- 110 Isotype switch variants
A. RADBRUCH
- 111 Growing hybridoma and producing monoclonal antibodies *in vivo*
K. OKUMURA AND S. HABU

Applications: Monoclonal Antibodies

- 112 Neurobiology
JANET WINTER, KAREN L. VALENTINO AND L. F. REICHARDT
- 113 Monoclonal antibodies in the study of parasites and host-parasite relationships
E. HANDMAN AND G. F. MITCHELL
- 114 Application of monoclonal antibodies in bacteriology
C. CAROLINE BLACKWELL AND F. P. WINSTANLEY
- 115 Applications of monoclonal antibodies in virology
W. GERHARDT AND T. BACHI
- 116 Special applications of tissue section immunologic staining in the characterization of monoclonal

al antibodies and in the study of normal and neoplastic tissues
R. V. ROUSE AND R. A. WARNKE

- 117 Monoclonal antibodies directed to carbohydrate antigens
R. KANNAGI AND S. HAKOMORI
- 118 Macrophages
J. C. UNKELESS AND T. A. SPRINGER

Applications: Immunological methods

- 119 Application of immunological techniques in bacteriology
F. P. WINSTANLEY AND C. CAROLINE BLACKWELL
- 120 Application of immunological methods in virology
E. J. STOTT AND D. A. J. TYRRELL
- 121 Applications of immunological methods in mycology
JOAN L. LONGBOTTOM
- 122 Applications of immunological methods in protozoology
E. H. R. LUMSDEN
- 123 Applications of immunological methods in helminthology
W. J. L. SOULSBY AND SHEELAGH LLOYD
- 124 Immunological aspects of human pregnancy
J. A. MACINTYRE AND W. PAGE FAULK
- 125 Applications of immunological techniques to the study of the tumour-host relationship
G. J. DOUGHERTY, C. A. ALLEN AND NANCY M. HOGG

Additional clinical applications of immunological methods

- 126 Tests of immune function
S. J. URBANIAK, M. C. MCCANN, A. G. WHITE, G. R. BARCLAY AND A. B. KAY
- 127 Provocation tests and measurements of media-

- tors from mast cells and basophils in asthma and allergic rhinitis
O. CROMWELL, S. R. DURHAM, R. J. SHAW,
JUDITH A. MACKAY AND A. B. KAY
- 128 Methods for detecting immune complexes in biological fluids
M. H. KLEIN AND K. SIMINOVITCH
- 129 Immunohistochemistry in pathology
EADIE HEYDERMAN, I. STRUDLEY AND T. C. RICHARDSON
- 130 Quantification of IgE and IgG4 both as total immunoglobulins and as allergen-specific antibodies
T. G. MERRETT
- General methods for immunologic studies**
- 131 Statistical aspects of planning and design of immunological experiments
R. A. ELTON AND W. H. MCBRIDE
- 132 Guidelines to statistical analysis
W. LUTZ
- 133 Laboratory animal techniques for immunology
W. J. HERBERT, F. KRISTENSEN, with RUTH M. AITKEN, M. B. ESLAMI, ANNE FERGUSON, KATHLEEN G. GRAY, W. J. PENHALE
- Index to Volume 3 xix

Chapter 85

Overview: Introductory comments on molecular immunology

D. BALTIMORE

Combinational variation, 85.2
Evolution of the libraries, 85.4

Somatic variation, 85.4

Final comments, 85.5

Molecular immunology is, today, largely the study of the nucleic acids involved in the specification of immunoglobulin structure and concentration. The initial studies of immunoglobulins as proteins, however, posed the questions that were later solved using nucleic acid methodologies. Protein structural analysis taught us to see the immunoglobulin molecule as a hierarchical organization of fragments.

At the grossest level, the immunoglobulin molecule consists of two polypeptide chains, a light chain and a heavy chain. These two chains form a heterodimer that readily associates in pairs to produce the monomeric, 4-chain molecule. At a finer level, each of the two polypeptide chains can be separated into protein domains of approximately 110 amino acids. The most N-terminal of the two domains in the light chains and of the four domains of the heavy chain have a highly variable amino acid sequence. The other domains of the molecules fall into a small number of classes and within any one class the structure is quite constant. Thus protein structural analysis posed the central problem of molecular immunology 'how do you construct a polypeptide with a variable N-terminal structure appended to a chain of basically constant structure?'

Dreyer & Bennett [1] published the most widely held belief about how the unique structure of immunoglobulin polypeptides could have come about. They suggested that two sets of genes are involved: one large library of variable regions and a second very small number of constant regions. A given immunoglobulin molecule would thus have to be made by the recombination of protein molecules, messenger RNA molecules or DNA molecules.

At the finest protein structural level there is a further differentiation of immunoglobulin structure. Wu & Kabat [2], by careful analysis of the primary structure of variable regions, showed that the variable region is actually composed of two types of sequences: hypervariable regions and moderately variable regions.

These are interspersed through the variable region giving rise to five mini-segments. Later work has indicated that the hypervariable regions are the parts of the immunoglobulin molecule that directly contact antigen and, therefore, we now call them complementarity-determining residues or CDRs. The seven subregions of the variable region are therefore denoted FR1 (framework 1), CDR1, FR2, CDR2, FR3, CDR3, FR4.

The final level of variation that was identified by sequencing proteins was variation in the structure of the N-terminal domain that arises due to somatic mutation. Here, Weigert *et al.* had the insight to realize that the variable regions of mouse λ light chains was probably encoded by a single gene segment [3]. Thus the variation of structure in the N-terminal domain of λ molecules must be a consequence of somatic variation of structure rather than of genetic variation. They originally postulated that a somatic mutation mechanism gave rise preferentially to changes in the CDRs.

Analysis of immunoglobulin protein structure thus uncovered three levels of sequence variability that we now recognize as the three fundamental mechanisms leading to immunoglobulin diversity. These mechanisms are: (1) evolution of a large library of different structures; (2) joining of pieces from the libraries to create combinatorial diversity; (3) somatically generated further variation of the inherited immunoglobulin structures. Molecular immunologists working with nucleic acids uncovered the basis of these mechanisms in a much less orderly fashion than they can now be presented. To give honour where it is due, we must first discuss the combinatorial mechanisms and then later consider how evolution generated the large set of variable regions and how somatic mutation is able to further vary them.

Combinatorial variation

Immunology moved from the stage of protein structure analysis to that of molecular genetics with the experiment of Hozumi & Tonegawa [4] who showed that synthesis of a κ light chain immunoglobulin molecule is accompanied by a reorganization by the DNA that encodes the variable and constant regions. Their experiment implied that the puzzle codified by Dreyer & Bennett had its solution at the DNA level. A flood of further publications from many laboratories then clarified the picture showing us that, for the κ light chain, there is a large library of the V_κ regions and a single C_κ gene segment [5]. Formation of a completed piece of DNA that can encode a κ protein involves the joining of one out of the library of V_κ segments to the single C_κ region. That joining is mediated by a set of five J_κ regions located upstream from C_κ . Examination of the sequence at the joining site between the V_κ segments and the J_κ segments further showed a slight variability in the position of that join, giving rise to microcombinatorial sequence heterogeneity at the position of the join. The J_κ segment, to a first approximation, contributes FR4 to the molecule; the microcombinatorial variation occurs in CDR3 and the rest of the V_κ region variability must then be due to evolutionary variation in the sequences of the V_κ library.

The situation with the λ light chain genes is quite different from that of κ . In the mouse, there are four C_λ regions and only two V_λ regions. This apparent violation of our notion of what is variable and what is constant was, like most of the other facts of molecular immunology, presaged by protein structural analysis showing classes of λ molecules. This complexity is a minor footnote, however, because the λ variable regions, like the κ variable regions, are put together by the joining of V_λ segments to J_λ segments.

For heavy chains the situation is a bit more complicated because there is a tripartite origin of heavy chain variable regions. The segments of the gene are drawn from three libraries: V_H segments, D segments and J_H segments (Fig. 85.1). Two joining reactions are therefore involved, one joining D to J_H and the other joining V_H to D. As with light chains, the J_H segments contribute the FR4 region but the heavy chain CDR3 region is formed by a combination of

D-to- J_H and V_H -to-D joining. Recent evidence has shown that the D-to- J_H join is made first, followed by V_H joining to the preformed D- J_H segment (Fig. 85.2) [15]. There are four J_H regions, of the order of twenty D segments and probably hundreds of V_H segments; therefore an enormous potential variability exists within the CDR3 region.

There is, however, another sequence element contributing to CDR3 which generates an even greater variability. This was first recognized by a combination of protein and nucleic acid sequence analysis, which showed that CDR3 structure cannot be completely explained by sequences encoded in V_H , D and J_H . This led to the author's postulate that there is nucleic acid sequence inserted between D and J_H and between V_H and D during the process of joining [6]. It has long been known that T lymphocytes and B lymphocytes that are in the process of developing their specificity contain an enzyme able to synthesize random DNA polymers (terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase; [7]). These random polymers have a tendency to be high in G residues. Because the sequence elements that are not encoded in the heavy chain libraries also appear to be rich in G residues (or C residues that are complementary to G residues), it was suggested that there are N regions inserted between D and J and between V and D by semi-random polymerization of nucleotides. A recent detailed analysis of the structure of D- J_H and V_H -D- J_H regions in developing immunocytes has borne out this prediction of the existence of N regions. Fig. 85.3 shows the sequences of V_H regions as they are forming. In this figure, another element of sequence variation becomes evident: as D and J_H regions are joined, they are often trimmed back at the joining point, thus providing significant variability as a consequence of the specific sequences that appear at the joint. In one case, a D- J_H region has formed and then subsequently been removed as the V_H region is appended because of the trimming process. Because of this trimming, we denote a trimmed region by putting a 'prime' at the side of the region that has been truncated. Thus a complete heavy chain variable

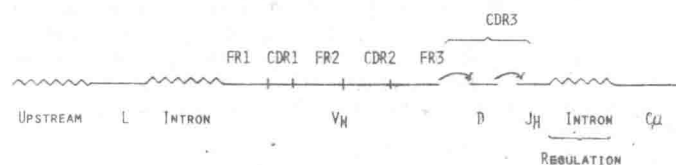


Fig. 85.1. Formation of a heavy chain variable region. The three encoded DNA elements that contribute to the heavy chain are the V_H segment (contributing L, the leader, FR1,2,3 and CDR1,2); the D segment (contributing the core of CDR3) and the J_H segment (contributing mainly FR4). The J_H segment is followed by an intron that has crucial regulatory signals and then the constant region of the μ chain.