Absence of Lipopolysaccharide in the Lyme Disease Spirochete, Borrelia burgdorferi

KUNI TAKAYAMA,1,2* RALPH J. ROTHENBERG,3,4 AND ALAN G. BARBOUR5

Mycobacteriology Research Laboratory1 and Rheumatology Service,3 William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital, Madison, Wisconsin 53705; Department of Bacteriology, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 537062; Department of Medicine, Section of Rheumatology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 537924; and Division of Infectious Diseases, Departments of Microbiology and Medicine, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas 782842

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We were unable to demonstrate the presence of the classic enterobacterium-type lipopolysaccharide in the cells of the Lyme disease spirochete, Borrelia burgdorferi B31. This finding was primarily based on chemical analysis and the absence of free lipid A upon mild acid hydrolysis of the appropriate cell extracts. These results do not preclude the possible existence of an unusual lipopolysaccharide-like compound(s) in B. burgdorferi.

Beck et al. (4) recently reported the presence of lipopolysaccharide (LPS) in the Lyme disease spirochete (Borrelia burgdorferi). We wanted to confirm their results and then examine the nature of the lipid A moiety of LPS from this source. We extracted the cells of B. burgdorferi B31 by two well-known methods used in the isolation of LPS from gram-negative bacteria. The appropriate fractions obtained by these two methods were hydrolyzed under mild acid conditions and examined by thin-layer chromatography (TLC) for the presence of free lipid A. Chemical analyses for the presence of 2-keto-3-deoxyoctonate, glucosamine, and hydroxy fatty acids were performed on the extracts. We found no evidence for the presence of lipid A in any of the fractions tested. Thus, we must conclude that the classic LPS associated with gram-negative bacteria is absent in cells of B. burgdorferi.

Cells of B. burgdorferi B31 (ATCC 35210) were grown in BSK II medium (1), washed three times with 50 mM Tris (pH 7.4)–150 mM NaCl–5 mM MgCl2 (2), and lyophilized. In one experiment, the extraction method of Galanos et al. (7) with modifications was used (12, 14). The results of this extraction are summarized in Table 1. Almost all of the extractable material was found in the 90% aqueous ethanol fraction, whereas very little material appeared in the phenol-water-chloroform-petroleum ether fraction, which should contain the rough-type LPS (R-LPS). This latter fraction was hydrolyzed in 0.1 N HCl as previously described for the preparation of monophosphoryl lipid A (14), and 30 µg of the organic extract was analyzed by TLC for the presence of lipid A (12, 14). A mixture of hexa-, penta-, and tetraacyl monophosphoryl lipid A (from LPS of Salmonella typhimurium) was used as a chromatographic standard (13). There was no evidence of the presence of free lipid A in this sample, indicating the absence of R-LPS in the original extract (phenol-water-chloroform-petroleum ether).

Previous studies of lipids X and Y (monosaccharide precursors of LPS) showed that much of X and Y was extracted into the aqueous ethanol fraction (15, 16). Thus, it is conceivable that the 113.2 mg of the 90% ethanol extract (Table 1) might contain the R-LPS. This material was initially fractionated by solvent precipitation to yield 79.9 mg of an acetone-insoluble glycolipid-phospholipid fraction. This fraction was further purified by preparative TLC on Silica Gel G (Merck & Co., Inc.) by a solvent system of chloroform-methanol-water (65:25:4). Five major fractions (designated A to E) were obtained. Each of these fractions was acid hydrolyzed and analyzed by TLC for the presence of lipid A. The results of the analysis of fractions A to D were negative. Fraction E, the slowest-moving TLC band, yielded a hydrolysis product that comigrated near the tetraacyl monophosphoryl lipid A standard. However, this fraction was devoid of 2-keto-3-deoxyoctonate, glucosamine, and hydroxy fatty acid and resulted in no reaction in the Limulus ameobocyte lysate test. It did not stimulate prostaglandin E2 (PGE2) by monolayer cultures of rabbit synoviocytes. LPS from several gram-negative organisms stimulate PGE2 (20), and we have confirmed this finding in unpublished studies (R. J. Rothenberg and K. Takayama). Moreover, fraction E had a higher Rf value than the standard value for monophosphoryl lipid A. Normally, the R-LPS is a slower-moving band on TLC, which upon hydrolysis yields the faster-moving lipid A bands. All of these results together appear to indicate that the hydrolysis of fraction E does not yield lipid A and that this fraction does not contain R-LPS.

In another experiment, the extraction method of Westphal and Jann (18) was used. Table 1 shows that a considerable amount of material was extracted with the aqueous hot phenol (166.6 mg, 48%), the distribution of which in the three subfractions is indicated (Table 1). The smooth-type LPS (S-LPS) is normally found in the aqueous layer of the phenol extract, but in certain bacteria (i.e., Brucella abortus and Rhodopseudomonas palustris), the LPS can partition into the phenol layer (9, 17). All three fractions from the aqueous phenol extract were hydrolyzed under mild acid conditions and analyzed by TLC for the presence of lipid A as previously described (Fig. 1). The acid-hydrolyzed aqueous layer (lane A) was completely devoid of lipid A. The acid-hydrolyzed water-soluble phenol layer (lane C) contained a very light band which had an Rf value similar to that of the tetraacyl monophosphoryl lipid A. The acid-hydrolyzed water-insoluble phenol layer (lane D) contained more of this slower-moving band. However, all three hydrolyzed samples were devoid of bands migrating at the Rf of the hexa- and pentaacyl monophosphoryl lipid A (the expected products of hydrolysis of LPS). Lane E of Fig. 1 shows that the unhydrolyzed water-insoluble phenol layer contained a com-

* Corresponding author.
component with an $R_f$ identical to that of fraction E of the 90% ethanol extract previously discussed. The hydrolysis of this fraction yielded a product that was identical to the slower-moving TLC band (the lipid A-like material) of the two hydrolyzed phenol layers. However, it was already shown that fraction E does not contain lipid A or R-LPS. All three of the aqueous phenol-extracted fractions were devoid of 2-keto-3-deoxyoctonate. These results suggested that the S-LPS was also absent in cells of *B. burgdorferi*.

The aqueous layer of the phenol extract did result in a positive response in the *Limulus* amebocyte lysate test at a concentration of 0.02 ng/ml, a response similar to the limit of detection of the reference standard. The residue was positive only at concentrations of 200 ng/ml, and the water-insoluble material of the phenol extract had no reaction in the lysate test at this concentration. This finding indicates that some type of water-soluble material can cause a positive lysate test reaction but that it is not LPS.

Extracts of the Lyme disease spirochete were incubated with a monolayer culture of rabbit synovioocytes which were previously incubated with [3H]arachidonic acid to label phospholipids. The release of [3H]PGE\textsubscript{2} was monitored as a measure of cellular activation by LPS. Control cultures released 2,034 ± 133 cpn of [3H]PGE\textsubscript{2} (n = 4). *Salmonella minnesota* (100 µg/ml) resulted in 11,039 ± 518 cpn released (n = 4). In other studies by radioimmunoassay techniques, this finding corresponds to a doubling of basal PGE\textsubscript{2} levels in the medium. The lyophilized material from the aqueous layer at 100 µg/ml resulted in only 2,144 ± 27 cpn (n = 3), and the water-insoluble material caused a release of 2,513 ± 263 cpn (n = 4). Comparison of the control samples, the aqueous layer, and the water-insoluble layer by analysis of variance yielded no significant difference in the groups ($P = 0.213$). Similarly, no increase in the synthesis of [3H]PGE\textsubscript{2} was observed when the fractions B through E of the material which would extract with lipid A were tested (data not shown). Therefore, no biological activity of these extracts was detected, in contrast to the marked response to *S. minnesota* LPS.

Several past studies on *Borrelia* and *Treponema* spp. suggested the possible involvement of endotoxinlike activity associated with those organisms (3, 5, 10, 11, 19). However, no precise chemical characterization was performed in these studies. Fumaraola et al. (6) showed that the spirochete from the *Ixodes ricinus* ticks gave a positive *Limulus* lysate reaction at a concentration of 10$^6$ cells per ml. Beck et al. (4) recently reported the isolation of an LPS from *B. burgdorferi*. Using a more precise definition of LPS, we were not able to confirm this finding. We did not perform sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis on these samples because it is, at most, a supplemental analytical technique. It alone does not add to the knowledge of the presence or absence of LPS. The interesting stained bands that appear still have to be carefully characterized. However, this characterization can be done much more easily at the lipid A level by TLC.

We made a basic assumption in this study that when a true LPS is treated under mild acid conditions, free lipid A must be liberated which should contain one or more of the following: an amino sugar (either glucosamine or diamino sugar), normal or hydroxy fatty acids, and phosphate. We were unable to generate free lipid A from the two extracts of *B. burgdorferi*, which were prepared by methods known to yield either S-LPS or R-LPS from enterobacterial cells. This finding strongly suggests that the classic enterobacterium-type LPS is absent in cells of *B. burgdorferi*. It is possible that an LPS-like or a non-LPS compound might be present in these cells as it appears to be in *Bacteroides gingivalis* (8).
could elicit some of the LPS-like biological activities, as shown by Beck et al. (4).

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LITERATURE CITED