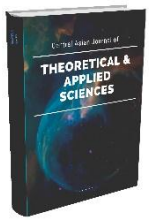

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CD48 and Tumor Progression: The Critical Immunoregulatory Function

Muhammad Usama Uzair [1], Muhammad Afan [3]
[1, 3] Muhammad Nawaz Sharif University of Agriculture Multan, Department Name: Zoology, wildlife, and Fisheries

Hamna Shaukat [2]
[2] Department of Biosciences Cancer Genetics Lab, COMSATS University Islamabad

Sami Ullah [4]
[4] Department of Sciences, The Superior University Lahore

Hammad Ahmad [5]
[5] Department of Zoology, Superior University

Hamad Ahmad [6], Fareeda Tahir [8]
[6, 8] Department of Zoology, University of Sargodha

Farheen Rubab [7]
[7] Institute of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology, The University of Lahore

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Abstract: *CD48, a cell surface glycoprotein belonging to the signaling lymphocytic activation molecule (SLAM) family, has emerged as a potential therapeutic target with significant clinical implications. In the context of cancer immunotherapy, CD48 plays a crucial role in immune evasion mechanisms and the modulation of immune responses. Engagement of CD48 with tumor-associated macrophages (TAMs) can influence their polarization towards an immunosuppressive M2-like phenotype, contributing to tumor progression. Inhibition of CD48-mediated interactions has the potential to enhance anti-tumor immune responses and improve the efficacy of immunotherapeutic approaches, including immune checkpoint blockade and CAR T cell therapy. Combination therapies, patient stratification based on biomarkers, and careful consideration of safety profiles are important aspects to be explored.*

Introduction to CD48 and its role in immune regulation

CD48, also known as SLAMF2 (Signaling Lymphocytic Activation Molecule Family member 2), is a cell surface glycoprotein that belongs to the signaling lymphocytic activation molecule (SLAM) family. It is expressed on various immune cells, including T cells, B cells, natural killer (NK) cells, and antigen-presenting cells (APCs). CD48 interacts with its ligands, CD2 and CD244, on neighboring cells to modulate immune responses (Bolomini-Vittori et al., 2009). The primary function of CD48 is to regulate immune cell activation, differentiation, and effector functions. It plays a crucial role in immune synapse

formation and signal transduction, leading to immune cell activation and subsequent immune responses. CD48 engagement with its ligands provides co-stimulatory signals that enhance T cell receptor (TCR) signaling and promote T cell activation and proliferation (Veillette & Guo, 2013).

CD48 also participates in immune cell interactions and immune cell-mediated cytotoxicity. It is involved in the formation of immunological synapses between T cells and APCs, facilitating antigen presentation and T cell activation. Moreover, CD48 interactions contribute to the regulation of NK cell cytotoxicity against target cells (Cannons, Tangye, & Schwartzberg, 2011; Hahn, Burakoff, & Bierer, 1993).

Furthermore, CD48 has been implicated in the modulation of immune tolerance and immune checkpoint pathways. It has been shown to interact with PD-1 (Programmed Cell Death Protein 1) and PD-L1 (Programmed Death Ligand 1), suggesting a potential role in immune checkpoint regulation. CD48 engagement may influence the balance between immune activation and immune tolerance, thereby impacting the anti-tumor immune response (McArdel, Terhorst, & Sharpe, 2016a).

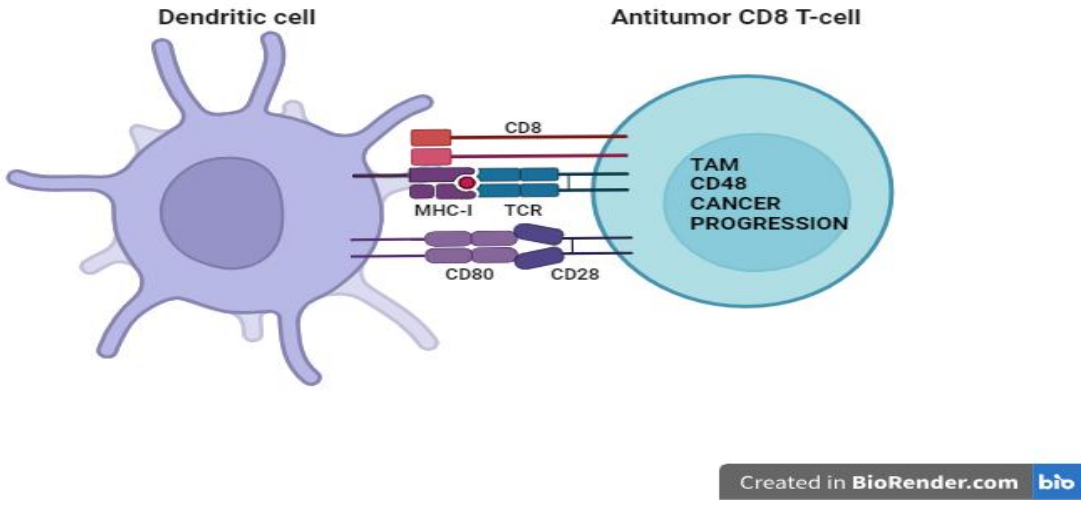

Figure 1: Schematic representation of a dendritic cell (DC) and a tumor-associated macrophage (TAM) within the tumor microenvironment.

CD48 expression in tumor microenvironment

The expression of CD48 in the tumor microenvironment can play various roles in tumor progression. Here are some key aspects of CD48 expression in the tumor microenvironment including:

Immune cell interactions: CD48 expression on tumor cells can engage with its ligands, such as CD2 and CD244, on neighboring immune cells. This interaction can modulate immune responses, including T cell activation, co-stimulation, and cytokine production. CD48 engagement with immune cells may influence the balance between immune activation and immune tolerance in the tumor microenvironment (Elishmereni, Levi-Schaffer, & biology, 2011).

Immune evasion: CD48 expression on tumor cells has been associated with immune evasion mechanisms. By interacting with immune cells, CD48 can promote immune cell exhaustion or inhibit immune cell activation, thereby suppressing anti-tumor immune responses. This immune evasion strategy allows tumors to escape immune surveillance and promotes tumor progression (Elias et al., 2014).

Tumor-associated macrophages (TAMs): CD48 expression has also been observed on TAMs, which are immune cells that infiltrate the tumor microenvironment. CD48 interactions with TAMs may influence their polarization and function. Modulation of TAMs by CD48 could promote tumor-promoting phenotypes, such as M2-like polarization, immunosuppression, and angiogenesis, thereby facilitating tumor growth and metastasis (Xiang, Wang, Lu, Xu, & therapy, 2021).

Stromal cells: CD48 expression has been detected on stromal cells within the tumor microenvironment, including fibroblasts and endothelial cells. The crosstalk between CD48-expressing stromal cells and immune cells may contribute to tumor immune evasion, angiogenesis, and tissue remodeling, all of which can support tumor progression (Paul & Lal, 2017).

Clinical implications: The expression levels of CD48 in the tumor microenvironment have been associated with clinical outcomes in various cancers. Higher CD48 expression has been correlated with poorer prognosis and reduced survival in certain tumor types. CD48 expression may serve as a potential prognostic or predictive biomarker for tumor progression and response to immunotherapy (He, Yu, Chen, & Mi, 2023).

CD48-mediated immune evasion

CD48-mediated immune evasion refers to the mechanisms by which CD48 expression on tumor cells or interactions with CD48 ligands on immune cells contribute to the evasion of immune surveillance and suppression of anti-tumor immune responses including :

Inhibition of immune cell activation: CD48 engagement with its ligands, such as CD2 and CD244, on immune cells can inhibit immune cell activation signals. This can result in reduced T cell receptor (TCR) signaling, impaired co-stimulation, and decreased production of pro-inflammatory cytokines. CD48-mediated inhibition of immune cell activation can hinder the ability of immune cells to mount an effective anti-tumor immune response (K. S. Boles, Stepp, Bennett, Kumar, & Mathew, 2001).

Promotion of immune cell exhaustion: CD48 expression on tumor cells or interactions with CD48 ligands can contribute to immune cell exhaustion. Chronic stimulation of immune cells through CD48 engagement can lead to the upregulation of inhibitory receptors, such as PD-1 (Programmed Cell Death Protein 1), CTLA-4 (Cytotoxic T Lymphocyte Antigen 4), or Tim-3 (T-cell Immunoglobulin and Mucin-domain containing-3). Immune cell exhaustion impairs the effector functions of immune cells, inhibiting their ability to eliminate tumor cells (N. C. Boles et al., 2011).

Suppression of immune cell-mediated cytotoxicity: CD48 interactions with immune cells, particularly natural killer (NK) cells, can negatively regulate their cytotoxic activity against tumor cells. CD48 engagement can impair NK cell degranulation and the release of cytolytic molecules, such as perforin and granzymes, thereby reducing their ability to kill tumor cells. This CD48-mediated suppression of immune cell-mediated cytotoxicity enables tumor cells to evade immune attack (Park et al., 2022).

Induction of immunosuppressive immune cell subsets: CD48 interactions in the tumor microenvironment can influence the differentiation and polarization of immune cells towards immunosuppressive phenotypes. For example, CD48 engagement with TAMs (tumor-associated macrophages) may promote their polarization towards an M2-like phenotype, which exhibits immunosuppressive properties and supports tumor growth and progression (He et al., 2023).

Immune checkpoint modulation: CD48 has been implicated in crosstalk with immune checkpoint pathways, such as PD-1/PD-L1 or CTLA-4. CD48 expression or interactions can potentially impact the balance of immune checkpoint signaling, leading to the suppression of anti-tumor immune responses. CD48-mediated modulation of immune checkpoint pathways may contribute to immune evasion and immune tolerance within the tumor microenvironment (McBride et al., 2021).

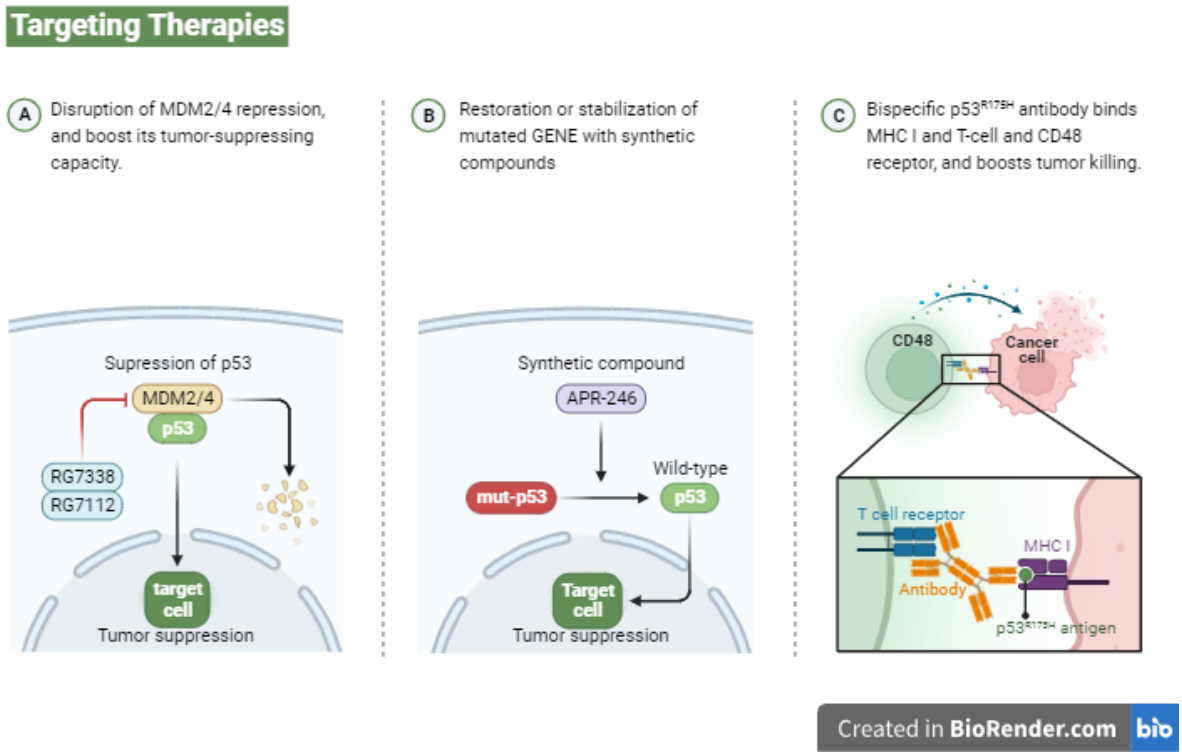

Figure 2: Mechanism action of immune cell regulation

CD48 and immune checkpoint pathways

Immune checkpoint pathways are regulatory mechanisms in the immune system that maintain self-tolerance and prevent excessive immune responses. They play a crucial role in modulating immune activation and preventing immune-mediated damage to healthy tissues. However, cancer cells can exploit these immune checkpoint pathways to evade immune recognition and destruction (Zhang et al., 2021)

CD48, although not traditionally classified as an immune checkpoint receptor, has been implicated in crosstalk with immune checkpoint pathways including:

PD-1/PD-L1 pathway: CD48 expression on tumor cells or immune cells can influence the PD-1/PD-L1 immune checkpoint pathway. Programmed Death-1 (PD-1), expressed on T cells, can bind to its ligand, Programmed Death Ligand-1 (PD-L1), which is expressed on tumor cells and immune cells within the tumor microenvironment. CD48 interactions or signaling may impact the expression or regulation of PD-L1, potentially affecting the balance of PD-1/PD-L1 signaling, immune activation, and immune evasion (Y. Wei et al., 2021).Moreover,CTLA-4 pathway Cytotoxic T Lymphocyte Antigen 4 (CTLA-4) is an inhibitory receptor expressed on activated T cells. It competes with the co-stimulatory receptor CD28 for binding to CD80 and CD86 molecules on APCs. CD48 engagement with immune cells may influence the regulation or signaling of CTLA-4, affecting the balance between immune activation and immune tolerance (Alegre, Frauwirth, & Thompson, 2001).In addition,TIM-3 pathway T-cell Immunoglobulin and Mucin-domain containing-3 (TIM-3) is an immune checkpoint receptor expressed on various immune cells, including T cells, NK cells, and monocytes. CD48 interactions or signaling may impact the expression or function of TIM-3, potentially modulating immune responses and tumor immune evasion (Chen, Zha, Tang, & Chen, 2023) .

CD48 and tumor-associated macrophages

Tumor-associated macrophages (TAMs) are a type of immune cell that infiltrates the tumor microenvironment. They play a significant role in tumor development, progression, and immune regulation. TAMs are derived from monocytes that are recruited to the tumor site, where they differentiate into macrophages with distinct functional phenotypes (Pan, Yu, Wang, & Zhang, 2020). CD48 has been detected on TAMs, and its interactions with TAMs can influence their polarization and function in the tumor microenvironment. Here are some key aspects of the relationship between CD48 and tumor-associated macrophages including:

Polarization of TAMs: CD48 engagement with TAMs can influence their polarization towards specific functional phenotypes. In some contexts, CD48 signaling has been associated with the promotion of an M2-like polarization phenotype in TAMs. M2-like TAMs are characterized by an immunosuppressive and pro-tumoral phenotype that supports tumor growth, angiogenesis, tissue remodeling, and immunosuppression (Huang, Wu, Geller, & Yan, 2023).Moreover, Immunosuppressive function inCD48 interactions with TAMs can contribute to their immunosuppressive function within the tumor microenvironment. This can include the production of immunosuppressive factors, such as IL-10 and TGF-beta, which inhibit anti-tumor immune responses. CD48-mediated signaling in TAMs may also lead to the expression of co-inhibitory molecules, such as PD-L1, which can suppress T cell activation and promote immune evasion by tumor cells (McArdel, Terhorst, & Sharpe, 2016b). Furthermore, Crosstalk with tumor cells in CD48 expression on tumor cells can engage with CD48 ligands on TAMs, leading to bidirectional signaling and reciprocal interactions. This crosstalk between CD48-expressing tumor cells and TAMs may contribute to tumor immune evasion, immune regulation, and tumor progression (Zhou, Zhang, & Guo, 2021).

CD48 as a therapeutic target

CD48 has emerged as a potential therapeutic target in various diseases, including cancer and autoimmune disorders. Targeting CD48 can be explored to modulate immune responses and improve therapeutic outcomes including, antibody-based therapies in Monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) targeting CD48 can be developed to block its interactions with immune cells or its ligands, such as CD2 and CD244. These antibodies can inhibit CD48-mediated immune cell activation or immune checkpoint signaling, potentially enhancing anti-tumor immune responses and overcoming immune evasion mechanisms (J. Wei, 2006). Moreover, Chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T cell therapy or CAR T cell therapy involves genetically engineering patient-derived T cells to express a CAR specific for a tumor-associated antigen. CD48 expressed on tumor cells can serve as a target for CAR T cell therapy. CAR T cells engineered to recognize and eliminate CD48-expressing tumor cells may provide a targeted and potent approach for cancer treatment (De Bousser, Callewaert, & Festjens, 2021).In addition combination therapies to Target CD48 in combination with other immune checkpoint inhibitors or immunomodulatory agents can be explored to enhance the efficacy of immunotherapy. Combining CD48-targeted therapies with strategies that activate immune responses, such as immune checkpoint blockade or cytokine therapy, may synergistically promote anti-tumor immune responses and overcome immune evasion (Jing et al., 2015).Furthermore, small molecule inhibitors: Small molecule inhibitors can be developed to disrupt CD48 signaling pathways and interfere with its interactions with immune cells or ligands. These inhibitors can potentially modulate immune cell activation, immune checkpoint signaling, or tumor-associated macrophage (TAM) polarization, leading to improved immune responses against tumors (Gao et al., 2015).

Clinical implications and future directions

Targeting CD48 as a therapeutic strategy holds significant clinical implications, particularly in the field of cancer immunotherapy. By inhibiting CD48-mediated immune evasion mechanisms, such as immune cell inhibition, immunosuppression, or immune checkpoint signaling, it may be possible to enhance anti-tumor immune responses and improve the efficacy of immunotherapeutic approaches like immune checkpoint blockade or CAR T cell therapy. Combining CD48-targeted agents with existing immunotherapies or other treatment modalities could lead to synergistic effects and potentially overcome resistance mechanisms. Further research is needed to identify biomarkers for patient stratification, assess safety considerations and potential toxicities, investigate CD48's role in other diseases, and conduct preclinical and clinical studies to validate the efficacy and safety of CD48-targeted therapies. Overall, targeting CD48 shows promise as a therapeutic approach, and continued research is necessary to fully understand its potential and translate it into clinical practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, CD48 emerges as a promising therapeutic target with important clinical implications, particularly in the context of cancer immunotherapy. Its involvement in immune evasion mechanisms and its potential to modulate immune responses make it an attractive candidate for therapeutic interventions aimed at enhancing anti-tumor immunity. However, further research is needed to fully understand the complex interactions and signaling pathways associated with CD48 and to optimize treatment strategies. Clinical studies and biomarker discovery are necessary to identify patient populations that are most likely to benefit from CD48-targeted therapies. With continued investigation and development, CD48-targeted approaches may offer new avenues for improving outcomes in cancer and other immune-related disorders.

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