

Back to the Basics: The Good Old BCG for COVID-19?

Nada Boutrid^{1,2}, Hakim Rahmoune^{1,2*}, Hala Boutrid³

¹LMCVGN Research Laboratory; Faculty of Medicine, University of Setif-1, Algeria. ²Department of Pediatrics, University Hospital of Setif, Algeria. ³Faculty of Medicine, University of Algiers-1, Algiers, Algeria

ARTICLE INFO

Letter to the Editor

VacRes, 2021

Vol. 8, No.1, 9- 10

Received: August 25, 2021

Accepted: September 07, 2021

Pasteur Institute of Iran

*Corresponding Author:

Hakim Rahmoune

LMCVGN Research Laboratory, Faculty of
Medicine, Setif 1 University, 19000, Algeria

Email: rahmounehakim@gmail.com

Tel/Fax: +98 2155346550

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Prevention,
BCG Vaccine

The outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 from Wuhan, China in late 2019 and the subsequent worldwide pandemic in 2020 [1] are pushing scientists to look for urgent and efficient ways of protecting patients and managing positive cases, and a real “race for a cure” is running forward, but also backward! In fact, several epidemiological data in humans suggest that live vaccines (e.g., Bacillus Calmette–Guérin (BCG), measles, oral polio and vaccinia) may enhance nonspecific resistance to other non-targeted infections [2]. Several epidemiological studies have notably shown that BCG vaccine is capable of providing protection against numerous infections, unrelated to tuberculosis in an innate-immune dependent manner [3]. Such non-specific effects implicate both adaptive and innate immune mechanisms, and recent evidence suggests that epigenetic reprogramming of monocytes termed ‘trained immunity’ is a key mechanism which acts as a boosting effect on the innate immune memory [3-6].

Observations suggest that the innate immune system exhibits memory-like features, remembering the first exposure to the vaccine and responds with an emphasized reaction to future infections [3-4]. Particularly, Natural Killer (NK) cells may contribute to these indirect beneficial effects as BCG immunization enhances the cytokine production by human NK cells [7]. Different clinical trials (e.g., BRACE trial in Australia, NCT04327206) are currently underway to investigate the potential benefits of BCG immunization to confer such protection [8]. These trials, due to several paradigms, are

essentially restricted to health care providers as an initial step [9].

Moreover, an interesting monocentric trial in the United Arab Emirates was recently published with encouraging results. It compared two groups, comprised of BCG booster-vaccinated healthcare professionals versus unvaccinated professionals. The rate of SARS-CoV-2 infection was compared between the groups, more than 3 months later. The results indicated that the infection rate in the unvaccinated cohort was 8.6% versus 0% in the booster vaccinated cohort (Fisher's exact test P -value = 0.004), highlighting the potential efficiency of this booster BCG vaccine [10]. Finally, regarding the safety of this potential BCG revaccination, a 2021 systematic review encompassing 24 studies has concluded this strategy had no serious adverse events in immuno-competent patients and that such revaccination carries only minimal risks of mild local and systemic reactions [11]. The near future will tell us whether this century-aged BCG vaccine could be a cure of youth for COVID-19 pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are supported by the Directorate General for Scientific Research and Technological Development (DGRSDT), MESRS, Algeria. The sponsor had no involvement in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; and in the decision to submit the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Wu Z, McGoogan JM (2020) Characteristics of and Important Lessons From the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Outbreak in China: Summary of a Report of 72 314 Cases From the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. *JAMA* 323:1239
2. Aaby P, Benn CS (2012) Saving lives by training innate immunity with bacille Calmette-Guerin vaccine. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 109:17317–17318
3. Vaseghi-Shanjani M (2019) BCG-Induced Trained Innate Immunity in Alveolar Macrophages and Their Role in Early Protection Against Tuberculosis. Thesis
4. Uthayakumar D, Paris S, Chapat L, Freyburger L, Poulet H, De Luca K (2018) Non-specific Effects of Vaccines Illustrated Through the BCG Example: From Observations to Demonstrations. *Front Immunol* 9:2869
5. Netea MG, van Crevel R (2014) BCG-induced protection: effects on innate immune memory. *Semin Immunol* 26:512–517
6. Netea MG, Quintin J, van der Meer JWM (2011) Trained immunity: a memory for innate host defense. *Cell Host Microbe* 9:355–361
7. Kleinnijenhuis J, Quintin J, Preijers F, Joosten LAB, Jacobs C, Xavier RJ, van der Meer JWM, van Crevel R, Netea MG (2014) BCG-induced trained immunity in NK cells: Role for non-specific protection to infection. *Clin Immunol* 155:213–219
8. Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (2021) BCG Vaccination to Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 in Healthcare Workers (BRACE) Trial. clinicaltrials.gov
9. Curtis N, Sparrow A, Ghebreyesus TA, Netea MG (2020) Considering BCG vaccination to reduce the impact of COVID-19. *Lancet* 395:1545–1546
10. Amirlak L, Haddad R, Hardy JD, Khaled NS, Chung MH, Amirlak B (2021) Effectiveness of booster BCG vaccination in preventing Covid-19 infection. *Hum Vaccin Immunother* 1–3
11. Bannister S, Sudbury E, Villanueva P, Perrett K, Curtis N (2021) The safety of BCG revaccination: A systematic review. *Vaccine* 39:2736–2745.