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Understanding the human innate immune system

In-silico studies

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General Summary and Conclusions

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The human innate immune system proudly stands as an essential partner of the adaptive immune response. As a matter of fact, only vertebrates possess the additional advantage of the adaptive immune response, while majority of the organisms that thrive on the planet can survive on the innate immune system alone ⁶.

My thesis is devoted in understanding the complexities, intricate details, and underlying mechanisms of how the human innate immune system (HIIS) functions especially when provoked with different types and levels of insult.

In **Chapter 1**, I presented a model of the human innate immune response to systemic inflammation that incorporates all fundamental players. The HIIS model is validated and calibrated against clinical trials data of patients undergoing cardiac surgery with bypass filter. The model shows the dynamics of different key parameters in the human innate immune response at the onset of surgery and up until 36 hours post- surgery.

An induction mechanism of endogenous alkaline phosphatase (AP) was

observed at the onset of surgery for those patients who are continuously infused with bovine alkaline phosphatase (bIAP) or supplemented alkaline phosphatase. It was hypothesized that the existence of this induced endogenous AP could be the body's way of assisting HIIS to counteract such an extensive degree of insult. The calibrated and validated HIIS also incorporates an equation that describes this induction mechanism. *In-silico* experiments designed to represent various regimes of alkaline phosphatase supplementation reveals the positive effect that AP has in neutralizing the current inflammation. Additional Phase III clinical trials are currently on the way to confirm this beneficial effect of AP in patients undergoing cardiac surgery.

The model, however, has several drawbacks. Using ordinary differential equations, it neglects the spatial dynamics of cellular and molecular entities, which would potentially help unravel more of the underlying mechanisms of HIIS. More so, the calibration and validation of the model is only done against the median of the population per treatment. Despite its drawbacks, the HIIS model in its current form offers preliminary insights in understanding what is going on in the body during systemic inflammation.

The human innate immune response is inscribed deep into the germline of humans that has been the work of evolution itself. Consequently, whatever remains in the contemporary version of HIIS is what nature has decided to be the most useful, shedding inferior mechanisms over the course of evolutionary time. In **Chapter 2**, I looked into the behavior of one of the early responders during inflammation in an evolutionary perspective. Here I try to answer the question, how and more importantly why did nature come up with the optimized percentage of necrotic and apoptotic neutrophil population that we see in data. This is investigated under the assumption that the percentages of apoptotic and necrotic population observed in contemporary data is the result of years of evolution, and that these percentages of neutrophils have been optimized to be able to neutralize the corresponding level of insult.

By using a simple model with concepts that are based on evolutionary game theory, I was able to pinpoint that the cost of the remaining ITMs in the system, that is, the threat of the current concentration of ITMs that has not yet been resolved by the remaining immune cells, is the sole driving force that dictates the optimal concentrations of apoptotic and necrotic cells in the system. Correspondingly, by using cellular automata, I was able to numerically show that neutrophils need a sufficient amount of information regarding the scale of insult in order to pick a death pathway. It seems, therefore, that each entity in the system only decides to pick a strategy when this strategy increases the overall payoff of the system. That is, the choice for apoptosis or necrosis are only made when it benefits the entire organism.

This further invites another question: when does this global cooperation crumble? Entities that choose strategies for the overall good is comparable to a society that is managed by a central government, having its subordinates act only when the said action is not detrimental or better yet beneficial to the system, thus increasing the overall payoff of the system. In this line of work, I show that indeed, having enough information about the payoff of the system leads to a global cooperation, hence survival of the organism. This global scheme, where all entities choose strategies that turn out to be beneficial to the entire organism, collapses when these entities are made to migrate to other locations in a random fashion. This is comparable to having neutrophils displaced to other locations in such a way that the chosen strategy would have been detrimental to the system. For instance, an activated neutrophil would aggravate the inflammation by being displaced to an area of tissue that contains mostly necrotic entities.

Patients who have undergone cardiac surgery needed to be monitored closely for signs of post-surgery complications, which might easily escalate to serious clinical conditions. After all, at this stage, the human innate immune system has exhausted its resources and thus needed time to recuperate and reestablish stability. Developing complications at such a frail state could threaten the homeostasis of the system, which can sometimes lead to serious clinical consequences, with the worst-case being death. In

Chapter 3, I explored how the human innate immune system react to complications post-surgery by perturbing the human innate immune system with ITMs in various regimes. These regimes are designed to mimic recurring episodes as well as highly persistent post-surgery complications. I was able to pinpoint the critical concentrations of ITMs that was able to shift the system's state from health to disease by using early warning signals. This shift of system state between alternate regimes is the so-called *critical transition*. Critical transitions have been shown to be exhibited by numerous dynamical systems such as financial markets, biological systems, complex diseases and even in dynamics of clinical depression in humans. This line of work in particular is by far the first attempt at detecting critical transitions in the human innate immune system and is nowhere else found in literature. I was able to detect the critical concentration of ITMs that was capable of toppling the state of the system from health to disease. By using early warning signals, it was pinpointed in the HIIS model that concentrations of ITMs and alkaline phosphatase are key markers where the onset of a critical transition from health to disease are significantly detected. Using the same methods on the clinical trials data of patients undergoing cardiac surgery reveals a significant detection of critical transitions as well as non-criticalities in platelet count, that turns out to be a documented significant indicator for post-surgery bleeding. The difference in detected "death markers," or blood parameter indicators of death lies in the fact that the HIIS model is only composed of key immune cells and molecules, while the clinical trial data has a wider range of blood parameters. Secondly, the HIIS model was calibrated on the median of the population, thus neglected any other dynamics that can be observed in individual patients. A stronger conclusion can, however, be made with additional data.

There is still a need to solidify the claim that alkaline phosphatase indeed has beneficial effects on the human innate immune system's fight against insult. Moreover, the HIIS model needs further refinement. First off, there is a need to extend the model so that HIIS incorporates the maturation cycle of neutrophils, which starts at the bone marrow, up until they are released

into circulation. Incorporating this mechanism warrants that HIIS goes back into homeostasis, providing a complete and more robust model that is ideal for exploring new avenues in HIIS.

Although I have shown, through a series of sensitivity tests, that several parameters in HIIS are highly sensitive to AP, the rest of the parameters seem to be insensitive not only to AP but also to ITMs. This implies that the number of parameters used in the model can still be further reduced through a thorough investigation of the model's sensitivity. This is because fewer parameters offer a better manageability of the model. More so, it could greatly reduce the computational efforts required to optimize the parameters during model calibration.

Another interesting direction to look into is exploring and assessing the possibility of using another dataset to calibrate and validate the HIIS model. This new dataset could be about a totally different trigger for systemic inflammation, such as that experienced by burn patients, where complications post-burn injuries often occur not only days, or weeks, and even months after the incident. This, however, requires that the HIIS model has all of its immune cells going back into homeostasis, a feature that the current model lacks.

Incorporating heat into HIIS is another attractive venue to explore especially after the emergence of recent discoveries where HIIS in fact reacts to changes in core temperature. However, it remains unclear at which temperatures does heat become detrimental to the human body.

Lastly, although evolutionary game theory appears to be a good choice in understanding the tradeoff between apoptosis and necrosis, it would be closer to reality if I adopt as system that involves the movement of neutrophils. However, at this point, there is no available spatial data that could help validate these results.

This thesis provides preliminary results that contributes to the advancement of the fundamental knowledge on the human innate immune response.

Samenvatting

Het aangeboren immuunsysteem van de mens is trots een essentiële partner van de adaptieve immuunrespons. In feite hebben alleen gewervelde dieren het extra voordeel van de adaptieve immuunrespons, terwijl de meeste organismen die op de planeet gedijen alleen op het aangeboren immuunsysteem kunnen overleven 6.

Mijn scriptie is gewijd aan het begrijpen van de complexiteit, ingewikkelde details en onderliggende mechanismen van hoe het menselijke aangeboren immuunsysteem (HIIS) functioneert, vooral wanneer het wordt uitgelokt met verschillende soorten en niveaus van belediging.

In hoofdstuk 1 presenteerde ik een model van de menselijke aangeboren immuunrespons op systemische ontsteking waarin alle fundamentele spelers zijn opgenomen. Het HIIS-model is gevalideerd en gekalibreerd op basis van gegevens uit klinische onderzoeken van patiënten die een hartoperatie ondergaan met een bypassfilter. Het model toont de dynamiek van verschillende belangrijke parameters in de menselijke aangeboren immuunrespons bij het begin van de operatie en tot 36 uur na de operatie.

Een inductiemechanisme van endogene alkalische fosfatase (AP) werd waargenomen bij het begin van de operatie voor die patiënten die continu worden geïnfuseerd met alkalische fosfatase van runderen (bIAP) of aangevuld alkalische fosfatase. De hypothese was dat het bestaan van dit geïnduceerde endogene AP de manier van het lichaam zou kunnen zijn om HIIS te helpen een dergelijke uitgebreide mate van belediging tegen te gaan. De gekalibreerde en gevalideerde HIIS bevat ook een vergelijking die dit inductiemechanisme beschrijft. In-silico-experimenten die zijn ontworpen om verschillende regimes van alkalische fosfatase-suppletie weer te geven, onthullen het positieve effect dat AP heeft bij het neutraliseren van de huidige ontsteking. Aanvullende fase III klinische onderzoeken zijn

momenteel op weg om dit gunstige effect van AP bij patiënten die een hartoperatie ondergaan te bevestigen.

Het model heeft echter verschillende nadelen. Door gewone differentiaalvergelijkingen te negeren, verwaarloost het de ruimtelijke dynamiek van cellulaire en moleculaire entiteiten, wat mogelijk zou helpen meer van de onderliggende mechanismen van HIIS te ontrafelen. Meer nog, de kalibratie en validatie van het model gebeurt alleen tegen de mediaan van de populatie per behandeling. Ondanks zijn nadelen biedt het HIIS-model in zijn huidige vorm voorlopige inzichten in wat er in het lichaam aan de hand is tijdens systemische ontsteking.

De aangeboren immuunrespons van de mens is diep gegrift in de kiemlijn van de mens die het werk van de evolutie zelf is geweest. Bijgevolg is wat de rest van de hedendaagse versie van HIIS is wat de natuur heeft besloten de meest bruikbare te zijn, die in de loop van de evolutionaire tijd inferieure mechanismen aflegt. In hoofdstuk 2 onderzoek ik het gedrag van een van de eerste responders tijdens ontstekingen in een evolutionair perspectief. Hier probeer ik de vraag te beantwoorden, hoe en nog belangrijker, waarom heeft de natuur het geoptimaliseerde percentage necrotische en apoptotische neutrofielenpopulatie gevonden dat we in gegevens zien. Dit is onderzocht in de veronderstelling dat de percentages apoptotische en necrotische populatie die worden waargenomen in hedendaagse gegevens het resultaat zijn van jaren van evolutie, en dat deze percentages neutrofielen zijn geoptimaliseerd om het overeenkomstige niveau van belediging te kunnen neutraliseren.

Door een eenvoudig model te gebruiken met concepten die zijn gebaseerd op evolutionaire speltheorie, kon ik vaststellen dat de kosten van de resterende ITM's in het systeem, dat wil zeggen de dreiging van de huidige concentratie van ITM's die nog niet is opgelost door de resterende immuuncellen, is de enige drijvende kracht die de optimale concentraties van apoptotische en necrotische cellen in het systeem dicteert. Dienovereenkomstig kon ik door het gebruik van cellulaire automaten

numeriek aantonen dat neutrofielen voldoende informatie nodig hebben over de omvang van de belediging om een doodstraject te kiezen. Het lijkt er daarom op dat elke entiteit in het systeem alleen besluit om een strategie te kiezen wanneer deze strategie de totale uitbetaling van het systeem verhoogt. Dat wil zeggen dat de keuze voor apoptose of necrose alleen wordt gemaakt als het het hele organisme ten goede komt.

Dit roept nog een andere vraag op: wanneer brokkelt deze wereldwijde samenwerking af? Entiteiten die strategieën voor het algemeen belang kiezen, zijn vergelijkbaar met een samenleving die wordt beheerd door een centrale overheid, waarbij haar ondergeschikten alleen handelen wanneer de genoemde actie niet schadelijk of beter maar toch gunstig is voor het systeem, waardoor de totale uitbetaling van het systeem wordt verhoogd. In dit werk laat ik zien dat het hebben van voldoende informatie over de uitbetaling van het systeem inderdaad leidt tot een wereldwijde samenwerking, en dus tot overleving van het organisme. Dit wereldwijde schema, waarbij alle entiteiten strategieën kiezen die gunstig blijken te zijn voor het hele organisme, stort in wanneer deze entiteiten op willekeurige wijze naar andere locaties worden gemigreerd. Dit is vergelijkbaar met het zodanig verplaatsen van neutrofielen naar andere locaties dat de gekozen strategie schadelijk zou zijn voor het systeem. Een geactiveerde neutrofiel zou bijvoorbeeld de ontsteking verergeren door zich te verplaatsen.