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Perspective

Development of Vaccines through Engineered Immunity

John Wilson*

Department of Immunology, Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, USA

DESCRIPTION

Bioengineering, when combined with immunology, presents a likely pathway to the discovery and development of an effective Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) vaccine. The goal is to create novel strategies for vaccine development that focus on engineered immunity, which aims to regulate and enhance the immune system's response. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for tackling the ongoing HIV pandemic, which continues to be a significant global health challenge despite decades of research and progress. The development of a vaccine is further complicated by the virus's ability to evade immune responses and its remarkable genetic diversity, even within a single infected individual.

The global burden of HIV is substantial, with millions of people living with the virus and a high number of deaths from Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) related illnesses each year. While significant advances have been made in HIV research, the quest for a safe and effective vaccine remains elusive. Unlike vaccines for other viral diseases, such as influenza or hepatitis B, where the immune system can generate antibodies that effectively clear the infection, HIV-1 presents numerous complexities that make its prevention particularly challenging.

Of the six major HIV vaccine trials conducted to date, only one has shown moderate success. This particular trial demonstrated an initial protective effect with 60% efficacy at 12 months and 31% efficacy at 42 months, a result attributed to a transient, early vaccine-induced immune response. Although this outcome was modest, it provided valuable insights into the potential of HIV vaccine development. Additionally, the identification and isolation of broadly neutralizing antibodies from individuals who naturally developed them during HIV infection has opened up new possibilities for vaccine strategies. These antibodies are effective at neutralizing a wide array of HIV strains and current research efforts are focused on developing vaccines that can trigger similar responses.

Bioengineering approaches aimed at modulating immune responses are emerging as a key strategy for advancing HIV vaccine development. Techniques that regulate the immune system using engineered nucleic acids, proteins, cells and tissues have shown ability in other biomedical areas, such as cancer immunotherapy and autoimmune diseases. By applying these approaches to HIV, there is significant potential to develop a vaccine that can effectively control the virus.

In 2018, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIBIB) convened a workshop to promote collaboration among experts in various disciplines. The workshop focused on exploring how bioengineering principles could be applied to improve HIV vaccine design and delivery. Key areas of discussion included optimizing immunogen design, enhancing the co-delivery of immunogens and adjuvants, understanding host immune responses and using computational tools to predict vaccine efficacy.

Optimizing the design of immunogens is a critical aspect of HIV vaccine development. The virus's extensive genetic diversity and the complex structure of its envelope glycoprotein present significant challenges in creating a universal immunogen. Current vaccine efforts have struggled to produce broadly neutralizing antibodies that can protect against the wide range of HIV strains. Improving the design of immunogens to activate both naïve and memory B cells could lead to more effective immune responses against HIV, though significant challenges remain in achieving this goal.

Computational tools are also transforming the way immunogens are designed. By leveraging bioinformatics, researchers can analyze large datasets of HIV viral sequences to develop vaccines that can recognize a broad spectrum of HIV strains. These computational tools also help predict which immunogens are most likely to induce effective immune responses, streamlining the design and testing process.

CONCLUSION

As we move forward, it is evident that traditional vaccine development strategies have not been sufficient to overcome the unique challenges posed by HIV. The integration of bioengineering and immunology provides new tools and methodologies that can significantly enhance vaccine design,

Correspondence to: John Wilson, Department of Immunology, Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, USA, E-mail: johnwilson@stanford.edu

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delivery and testing. By fostering collaboration among bioengineers, immunologists and HIV researchers, innovative solutions can be developed, bringing us closer to an effective HIV vaccine. With continued advancements in these fields, the goal of ending the HIV pandemic may one day become a reality.