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**The TB vaccine H56+IC31 dose-response curve is peaked not saturating: data generation for new mathematical modelling methods to inform vaccine dose decisions**

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**Abstract**

Introduction: In vaccine development, dose-response curves are commonly assumed to be saturating. Evidence from tuberculosis (TB) vaccine, H56+IC31 shows this may be incorrect. Mathematical modelling techniques may be useful in efficiently identifying the most immunogenic dose, but model calibration requires longitudinal data across multiple doses and time points.

Aims: We aimed to (i) generate longitudinal response data in mice for a wide range of H56+IC31 doses for use in future mathematical modelling and (ii) test whether a ‘saturating’ or ‘peaked’ dose-response curve, better fit the empirical data.

Methods: We measured IFN-γ secretion using an ELISPOT assay in the splenocytes of mice who had received doses of 0, 0.1, 0.5, 1, 5 or 15 μg H56+IC31. Mice were vaccinated twice (at day 0 and 15) and responses measured for each dose at 8 time points over a 56-day period following first vaccination. Summary measures Area Under the Curve (AUC), peak and day 56 responses were compared between dose groups. Bayesian Information Criteria was used to test which dose-response curve best fitted empirical data, at different time ranges.

Results: (i) All summary measures for dose groups 0.1 and 0.5 μg were higher than the control group (p<0.05). The AUC was higher for 0.1 than 15 μg dose. (ii) There was strong evidence (p<0.05) that the dose-response curve was peaked for post second-vaccination time points, and the best dose is likely to be lower than previous empirical experiments have evaluated.

Conclusion: These results suggest that the highest, safe dose may not always optimal in terms of immunogenicity, as the dose-response curve may not saturate. Detailed longitudinal dose range data for TB vaccine H56+IC31 reveals response dynamics in mice that should now be used to identify optimal doses for humans using clinical data, using new data collection and mathematical modelling.

**Introduction**

Vaccines are one of the most important and cost-effective interventions in public health [1]. However, development from vaccine discovery to licensure is costly; in the region of US$0.8 billion [2]. Mistakes in vaccine development may cause not only a waste of resources (both financial and experimental) but also ultimately, delay licensure of an effective vaccine. A key decision in development is vaccine dose amount (hereafter dose), which, if chosen optimally would achieve maximum vaccine efficacy, with minimal side effects.

It is common practise in pre-clinical and clinical trials that vaccine dose is increased incrementally until a maximum safe dose that promotes an effective response (usually an antibody response) is achieved; it is assumed that this response will then saturate [3]. This saturating relationship between dose and host response has been the standard assumption in vaccine development and many vaccines have proceeded through to the late stages of development with this method as a basis for dose choice [4, 5].

However, in tuberculosis (TB) vaccine development, early preclinical studies in mice with the IC31 adjuvanted fusion protein TB10.4 /Ag85B (H4) revealed that low antigen doses were both more immunogenic and provided increased protection relative to high doses [6]. In accordance, a clinical study showed that responses after vaccination with the same H4+IC31 vaccine were not different between the 5 and 15 μg doses, decreased at 50 μg and were minimal for the 150 μg dose (Norrby 2016, in press, [7]). In a latently infected target population, vaccination with an analogous vaccine H56 (an ESAT-6/Ag85B/Rv2620 fusion protein vaccine) also adjuvanted with IC31 (H56+IC31) showed that out of two doses tested in Quantiferon-postive (QTF+) individuals, the lowest dose (15 μg H56+IC31) was more effective at inducing polyfunctional CD4+ T cell responses than the higher dose (50 μg H56+IC31) [8]. Of note, the higher dose (50 μg) of the related first-generation Hybrid vaccine H1+IC31 was taken forward to a First-in-man study, which may have led to suboptimal vaccine evaluation [9] . Although immunogenicity not only depends on antigen dose, but indeed also on the type and nature of the adjuvant employed, the incorrect assumption that a higher dose is preferred per se for protein vaccines (or other platforms) has further been brought into question by vaccines using other types of adjuvants [10].

Translational quantitative analysis methods to inform dose decision-making already exist in the drug development world. Pharmacokinetic/Pharmacodynamic (PK/PD) modelling uses mechanistic mathematical methods to describe how dose influences drug dynamics over time [11, 12]. Translational modelling to predict human PK/PD parameters based on animal data is a key stage in model-based drug dose decision-making [12-14], and is often required by regulators during development. Although pharmacokinetic data is often not available for vaccines, pharmacokinetics is dependent on dose and regimen, and thus analogies to dose finding for vaccines are relevant. No translational quantitative methods are applied in vaccine development, as the chosen vaccine dose to be tested in a clinical environment is usually based on qualitative assessment of the pre-clinical data [15], which has the potential to ignore or underutilise dose-response information.

To address this gap, we are proposing the new field of *Immunostimulation/Immunodynamic (IS/ID) modelling*, analogous to that of PK/PD modelling*,* to make more informed human vaccine dosing decisions based on animal response data. In this field, models will be created to describe the underlying mechanisms that determine the immune response dynamics (immunodynamics) following vaccination, e.g. the influence of the innate and regulatory systems for T cell expansion and contraction (immunostimulation). These models will then be calibrated to dose ranging data from animals and model parameters “mapped” to known human response data. Subsequently, dose-response curve in humans can be predicted, providing information on the most effective range of doses to be first evaluated in clinical trials. In this larger body of work, we will apply these methods on the aforementioned TB vaccine, H56+IC31 by measuring IFN-γ after vaccination over time. IFN-γ is a cytokine shown to be associated with control of infection or decreased risk of TB disease [16].

As in model-based drug development, extensive longitudinal data are required. Published data on a wide dynamic range of doses and time points do not exist for H56+IC31, where dose-ranging studies have only ever been conducted on minimal pre-specified time points [6]. As such, we conducted and report here an experiment in which we vaccinated mice with a wide range of doses of H56+IC31 and measured responses extensively over time. These data outlined in this paper will be used in future IS/ID modelling to further our knowledge in mice, non-human primates and humans. In this paper, we aim to (i) generate longitudinal response data in mice for a wide range of H56+IC31 doses for use in future mathematical modelling and (ii) test whether a ‘saturating’ or ‘peaked’ dose-response curve, better fit the empirical data.

**Materials and Methods**

**Ethics Statement**

All animal work was carried out in accordance with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 under a license granted by the UK Home Office (PPL 70/8043), and approved by the LSHTM Animal Welfare and Ethics Review Body.

**Animals**

Female CB6F1 mice were acquired from Charles River UK at 6-8 weeks of age. Animals were housed in specific pathogen-free individually vented cages, were fed ad libitum, and were allowed to acclimatize for at least 5 days before the start of any experimental procedure.

**Vaccination**

The experimental vaccine H56 (comprising *Mycobacteria tuberculosis* antigens Ag85B-ESAT-6-Rv2660c [17], provided by Statens Serum Institute (SSI), Copenhagen, Denmark) was formulated in IC31® adjuvant (provided by SSI on behalf of Valneva Technologies) and 10 mM Tris-HCL buffer (pH 7.4) as described in [18] to obtain a final volume of 200 μl/mouse. The adjuvant IC31®consists of a mixture of the cationic peptide KLK (NH2-KLKL5KLK-COOH) and the oligodeoxynucleotide ODN1a (oligo-(dIdC)13). Adjuvant doses were 100 nmol peptide and 4 nmol oligonucleotide for every vaccine (H56) dose.Antigendoses of 0.1, 0.5, 1, 5 or 15 µg of H56 + 100/4 nmol IC31 (hereafter, H56+IC31) were administered per animal at day 0 and 15, the same dose was used at both vaccination times within a group. Control animals received no vaccination. The vaccine was administered subcutaneously into the left or right leg flap.

**IFN-γ ELISPOT**

IFN-γ secreting CD4+ T cells were measured using the ELISPOT assay. Single cell suspensions of mouse splenocytes were prepared by mechanical disruption of spleens through a 100μm cell strainer on the day of sacrifice. After lysis of red blood cells, single cell suspensions were made up in antibiotic-free media [RPMI-1640 (Sigma-Aldrich, Dorset, UK) + 10% heat-inactivated FBS (Labtech International Ltd, Uckfield, UK) + 2 mM L-Glutamine (Fisher Scientific, Loughborough, UK)]. 96-well microtiter ELISPOT plates (MAIPS4510, Millipore, Watford, UK) were coated with 10 µg/ml rat anti-mouse IFN-γ (clone AN18, Mabtech, Nacka Strand, Sweden). Free binding sites were blocked with RMPI 1640 supplemented as described above. 2.5x105 of total splenocytes were added and incubated in duplicate with H56 (10 µg/ml), supplemented RPMI as a negative control, or Phorbol myristate acetate (PMA) (50 µg/ml, Sigma-Aldrich) and Phytohemagglutinin (PHA) (10 µg/ml, Sigma-Aldrich) as a positive control. After 24 or 48 hrs of incubation at 37°C in 5% CO2, IFN-γ was detected with 1 µg/ml biotin labelled rat anti-mouse antibody (clone R4-6A2, Mabtech) and 1 µg/ml alkaline phosphatase-conjugated streptavidin (Mabtech). The enzyme reaction was developed with BCIP/NBT substrate (5-Bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl phosphate/Nitro blue tetrazolium) (MP Biochemicals, UK) and stopped by washing the plates with tap water when individual spots could be visually detected (up to 5min). ELISPOT plates were analysed using an automatic plate reader. IFN-γ-specific cells are expressed as number of spot-forming units (SFU) per million spleen cells after non-specific background was subtracted using negative control wells.

**Experimental Schedule**

ELISPOTs were carried out at 2, 7, 9, 14, 16, 21, 28, and 56 days after the first vaccination for all doses. Five mice were used per time point per dose group (equating to 40 mice in a dose group from initiation to conclusion of the experiment). This schedule was designed to reflect the H56+IC31 phase I clinical trial schedule [8] and previous experimental schedules in mice using the H-series vaccines by SSI in CB6F1 mice [6, 17, 19, 20].

**Statistical methods**

**(i) Summary of IFN-γ response data after two vaccinations with TB vaccine H56+IC31 for future mathematical modelling**

The Wilcoxon test was used to test for differences in IFN-γ responses generated as a result of the two ELISPOT incubation times (on data pooled across dose groups and time points). The following summary measures were used to quantify responses over time: Area Under the Curve (AUC), day 56 response, peak response between first and second vaccination and peak response post-second vaccination (peaks may occur at different times as they were defined as the highest median response measured in the respective time period). As IFN-γ responses over time within a dose group were not dependent (each taken from an individual mouse spleen), AUC was calculated using 200 samples of the possible combinations of the five mice per dose group over time. Full details of this method are outlined in the supplementary material and Figure S1. The non-parametric Dunn test was used to compare the summary measures between the dose groups and a Bonferroni correction applied to account for comparisons across multiple groups. A *p*-value < 0.05 was considered significant.

**(ii) Determine the shape of dose-response curve when examined at varying sample times and the best dose predicted by fitted curves**

To assess the shape of the dose-response curve (IFN-γ SFU per million splenocytes versus dose), a saturating (sigmoidal) or peaked (gamma pdf distribution) curve was fitted to all IFN-γ responses against the (log10 transformed) doses. To assess how the dose-response curve changed with time, the response data was pooled into three time ranges: between the first and second vaccination (day 2, 7, 9, 14 aggregated), post-second vaccination (day 21, 28 and 56 aggregated) and day 56 responses. Curve fitting utilised the nonlinear squares fitting function (*nls*) in the software *R* [21] (curve equations and nls configuration details can be found in Table S1). To establish which of the shapes best described the dose-response curves the goodness-of-fit measure, Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC) was compared, where a lower BIC indicates a better fit. A difference in BIC value between curve fits of greater than six was considered strong evidence of a better fit, which is analogous to a *p*-value < 0.05, and a difference in BIC of between zero and six was considered positive, but not strong evidence [22]. The best dose was defined as the dose that produced the maximum IFN-γ response as predicted by the fitted curves.

**Results**

**(i) Summary of IFN-γ response data after two vaccinations with TB vaccine H56+IC31 for future mathematical modelling**

Splenocyte-derived IFN-γ responses did not differ for the 24 versus the 48 hour ELISPOT incubation times when responses where pooled over all dose groups and time points (*p*-value = 0.67, Figure S2). Therefore, an incubation time of 24 hours was used in the following analyses.

The IFN-γ responses over time for each dose group are shown in Figure 1 (significance of the changes in dynamics over time are in Table S2). Out of the samples taken to calculate the AUC, the common significance trend showed that dose groups 0.1, 0.5 and 1 µg had significantly higher AUC than the control group, and the dose group 0.1 µg had significantly higher AUC than dose group 15 µg (Figure 2, Table S3). Peak responses between first and second vaccination were significantly higher in the dose groups 0.1, 1, 5 µg than in the control group and for post-second vaccination, dose groups 0.1, 0.5 and 5 µg were significantly higher than the control group (Figure 1 & 2, Table 1). Similarly, day 56 responses were significantly higher for the dose groups 0.1, 0.5 and 1 µg than the control group and the dose group 0.5 µg was higher than 15 µg. However, this did not reach statistical significance (Figure 1 & 2, Table 1). For all summary measures, no other comparisons between dose groups were statistically significantly different (Figure 2, Table 1).

**(ii) Determine the shape of dose-response curve when examined at varying sample times and the best dose predicted by fitted curves**

To establish the shape of the dose-response curve (IFN-γ SFU per million splenocytes versus dose), we fitted either a saturating or peaked function for three time ranges. There was strong evidence that the peaked curve was a better fit to the post-second vaccination response data than the saturating curve with a BIC difference of 16.5 (Figure 3B, Table S4). Similarly, the BIC difference was 10.5 in favour of the peaked curve for the day 56 response data (Figure 3C, Table S4). For the time points between first and second vaccination, there was positive, but not strong evidence in favour of the peaked curve (BIC difference value = 4.8, Figure 3A, Table S4). The best dose predicted by the peaked fitted curve for the time ranges; between first and second vaccination, post-second vaccination and day 56 were 0.026, 0.11 and 0.25 µg, respectively (transformed from log10 scale, Figure 3). Due to the right-skewed nature of the responses the best saturation curve had an almost immediate increase followed by immediate plateau for all time ranges (Figure 3). As such it was not possible to obtain a best predicted dose using the saturation model as, in this case, all doses generated the same response.

**Discussion**

Our future aim is to apply the new field of Immunostimulation/immunodynamic (IS/ID) modelling to translate vaccine dose-response information between animals and humans and thus quantitatively inform vaccine dose decision-making. To begin initial examination of such methods, we conducted a longitudinal dose-ranging experiment of the novel TB vaccine H56+IC31 in mice, and a mathematical analysis of the dose-response curve over time.

We successfully generated an intensive time course of IFN-γ response data to vaccination where AUC and peak analysis showed a trend toward higher responses over time in the lower doses than in the higher doses. By using mathematical curve fitting, we showed conclusively that the IFN-γ dose-response follows a peaked shape instead of the commonly assumed saturation shape. This was most apparent post-second vaccination, and trended toward that curve shape after the first dose. Previous research into the TB vaccine H4+IC31 dose-response curves by Aagaard et al. show similar results to ours, whereby lower doses of the vaccine elicit higher IFN-γ responses [6]. In comparison to Aagaard et al’s analysis [6], we add a valuable and innovative extension by measuring the IFN-γ response at multiple time points, thus assessing trends in the dose-response curve over time.

Using the peaked fitted curve, we were able to determine which dose may provide the maximal predicted IFN-γ response in mice. Our results indicate this was at a low range; between 0.02 and 0.25 µg H56+IC31. It must be noted that, there is uncertainty associated with our predictions for best dose which is apparent in Table S4, where some gamma distribution function parameters were not significantly estimated (*p*-value<0.05) for the time ranges between first and second vaccination and post-second vaccination. This is potentially due to a lack of response information between dose 0 and 0.1 μg. Despite this, as we show a definitive decline in the dose-response at the higher dose range (approximately after dose 1 μg H56+IC31), our predicted best dose range show compelling evidence that lower doses than previously explored in mice using very similar vaccines [6, 17, 19, 23, 24], would be preferential. Importantly, as previous evidence suggest the human dose-response may be of a similar shape for the H-series of vaccines from SSI [7, 8] (although higher in magnitude), this implies that previously tested clinical dose ranges may also have been too high to capture the optimal response in terms of immunogenicity.

Dose concentration feasibility and animal cost and overall numbers limited the size of our study. By testing in larger groups of mice at potentially fewer time points, we may have gained greater certainty in response differences and fitted dose-response curves. However, we chose the extensive time course to determine detailed dynamics of the vaccine response and dose-response curves over time, since this has been performed infrequently in the past. We believe a higher maximum dose may have better defined the decline in the dose-response curve. As the size of the study was limited, we concentrated efforts on the lower doses, where previous exploration is lacking; however, we found that the probable best dose is still lower than the minimum dose used here.

Additionally, to avoid complexity in response, we kept the adjuvant dose constant throughout the dose range. However, with increasing vaccine dose, it has been shown that increasing adjuvant dose may be necessary [25], but this may be most relevant at very high doses (e.g. 50 μg H56+IC31).

We have identified the following areas for further research. The mathematical curve fitting we conducted has provided the basis for further optimised studies in animals, i.e. we now know that the dose range that captures the probable best dose should be 0 to 0.3 μg H56+IC31 (based on our predicted best dose values) not the initial 0 to 15 μg H56+IC31 (a reduction of 98% in the range). Expanding the dose range in the lower end between 0 and 0.1 µg will further increase our best dose predictions, as the peaked curve parameters will be estimated with greater certainty. This warrants further animal studies to investigate in greater detail the host response to low dose vaccination.

Additionally, using IS/ID mechanistic modelling, we can simulate further data (parallel to PK/PD methods used in optimal trial design practises) to reduce the confidence interval of fitted dose-response curve parameters. As the antigen dose-response may also vary with the adjuvant dose and type of adjuvant, in order to fully characterise and optimise complete vaccine (H56+IC31) dose it would be necessary to perform a checkerboard interaction pattern, the design of which could be informed by IS/ID modelling through optimal design analysis [26]. Additionally, the effect of heterogeneity in target human populations (due to HIV status, existing latent infection, etc.) on IS/ID modelling parameters will be taken into account as the response to a particular antigen dose range may not be congruent between these different populations. These experiments can then be used to accumulate more data accumulated to identify an optimal dose with increased precision suggesting that dose finding trials should be adaptive, rather than fixed in a dose escalation paradigm.

**Conclusion**

Our results suggest that the highest, safe dose is not always optimal in terms of host response as the dose-response curve is not saturating, which may also be true for vaccines against diseases other than TB. Mathematical modelling can be used on the detailed longitudinal dose range data for TB vaccine H56+IC31 to simulate responses to optimise further experiments in mice and help to identify optimal doses for humans.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank our collaborators at Staten Serum Institute Peter Andersen and Else Marie Agger (now at Novo Nordisk) for advising the mouse experiment schedule and Steven Kern at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for facilitating experiment funding.

**Funding**

Funding for the experiment was provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. SR is supported by a LSHTM studentship funded by Aeras. GK is funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Protection Research Unit (NIHR HPRU) in Healthcare Associated Infection and Antimicrobial Resistance at Imperial College London in partnership with Public Health England (PHE). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the SSI, the NHS, the NIHR, the Department of Health or Public Health England. RGW is funded the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) under the MRC/DFID Concordat agreement that is also part of the EDCTP2 programme supported by the European Union (MR/J005088/1), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (TB Modeling and Analysis Consortium: OPP1084276) and UNITAID (4214-LSHTM-Sept15; PO #8477-0-600).

**Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

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