Conditionally active CD28xVISTA bispecific antibodies induce myeloid-driven tumor-specific T-cell co-stimulation for improved cancer immunotherapy

Thomas Thisted, Zhi-Gang Jiang, Zuzana Biesova, Adejumoke Onumajuru, Yuliya Kleschenko, Kanam Malhotra, Vikas Saxena, Arnab Mukherjee, F. Donelson Smith, Edward H. van der Horst

Sensei Biotherapeutics Inc., 1405 Research Blvd., Suite 125, Rockville MD 20850

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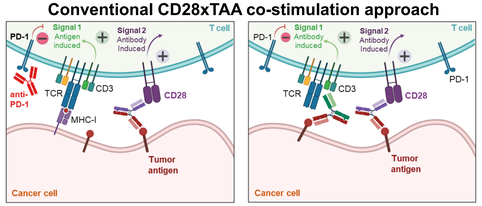
BACKGROUND

Tumor-specific recruitment of co-stimulatory bispecific antibodies (bsAbs) is emerging as a promising therapeutic strategy. We developed pH-selective CD28xVISTA bsAbs to act within the acidic tumor microenvironment (TME). These bsAbs are designed for selective tripartite "*trans*-activation" of CD28 in the TME, aiming for enhanced T-cell-mediated cancer cell killing while minimizing systemic T-cell activation and Cytokine Release Syndrome (CRS) risk.

The *trans*-activation mechanism relies on engagement of VISTA on myeloid cells, where this immune checkpoint acts to suppress T-cell activation in the low pH environment (~pH 6) found in many tumors[1]. We and others previously developed pH-selective monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) to inhibit this checkpoint[1,2]. Here we exploit these findings to develop CD28xVISTA bsAbs for tumor-targeted CD28 agonism and T-cell co-stimulation.

Conventional CD28xTAA co-stimulation approach



CD28xVISTA co-stimulation approach

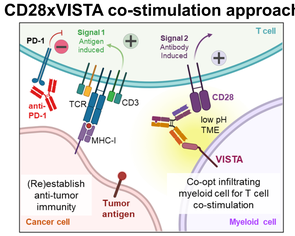


Figure 1. CD28xVISTA bsAb mechanism of action

- Takes advantage of the abundant tumor infiltration by VISTA⁺ myeloid cells
- pH-selective VISTA binding of bsAb ensures CD28 clustering on T-cells in the low pH tumor microenvironment with minimal risk of systemic CRS
- Bypasses the requirement for specific tumor associated antigen (TAA)
- A similar *trans*-activation concept has been utilized for 4-1BB agonists in the form of tumor stroma antigen FAPx4-1BB bispecific constructs[3]

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

CD28xVISTA bsAbs were generated containing mutations silencing FcγR interactions. BsAbs were tested for induction of luciferase expression from Jurkat-IL-2-luciferase reporter cells (Promega) in the presence of HEK293 cells expressing membrane bound OKT3-scFv (anti-CD3) or OKT3-scFv+VISTA and CHO cells expressing human VISTA. xCelligence-based human T-cell mediated killing of LNCaP prostate cancer cells was analyzed by co-culturing LNCaP cells with PBMCs and VISTA⁺ Kasumi-3 cells, in the presence of bsAb alone or in combination with a CD3xPSMA bispecific T-cell engager (BPS Bioscience). T-cell activation and proliferation were measured using flow cytometry with CD3, CD4, CD8 and CD25 markers. Tumor growth inhibition (TGI) of a MC38 cell population overexpressing VISTA was tested in a humanized CD28 mouse model (genOway) in combination with anti-murine PD-1 (anti-mPD-1; n=10/group). Cytokine release from human PBMCs, co-cultured with human umbilical vein endothelial cells (HUVECs; n=6) and treated with the indicated bsAbs (or TGN1412 as a positive control; n=3) was examined. *Ex vivo* cytokine release in human whole blood from 6 healthy donors was tested using the ID Flow circulating blood platform (Immuneed) with the controls anti-CD28 (ANC.28.1; 1 µg/ml), Alemtuzumab (3 µg/ml) or Cetuximab (250 µg/ml). In all experiments cytokines were measured using bead-based multiplex immune assays.

REFERENCES

1. Johnston *et al.* Nature (2019) 574:656-570
2. Thisted *et al.* Nature Comm. (2024) (accepted)
3. Claus *et al.* Sci. Transl. Med. (2019) 11, 496-507

RESULTS

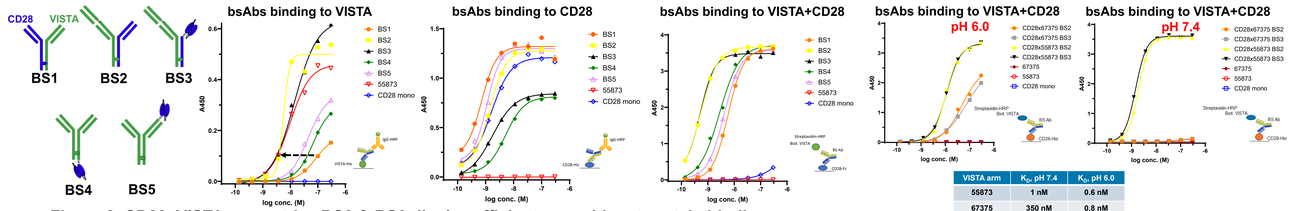


Figure 2. CD28xVISTA geometries BS2 & BS3 display efficient recombinant protein binding

- A CD28 arm was combined with either a pH-selective VISTA binding arm or a "surrogate" arm with similar binding affinity at pH 6.0 and 7.4 for *in vitro* assays
- BS2 & BS3 formats with bivalent VISTA engagement shows efficient simultaneous target binding in ELISA assays
- BS2 & BS3 formats with the pH-selective VISTA arm shows pH-dependent simultaneous binding to both targets

Figure 3. CD28xVISTA bsAb induces IL-2–luciferase reporter expression both in *cis* and in *trans*

- CD28xVISTA bsAb with monovalent CD28 binding does not display superagonism (A; TGN1412 pos. ctrl.; VISTA mAb 55873 neg. ctrl.)
- CD28xVISTA BS1 provides dose dependent stimulation of IL-2-luc expression in *cis* (B) and in *trans* (C)

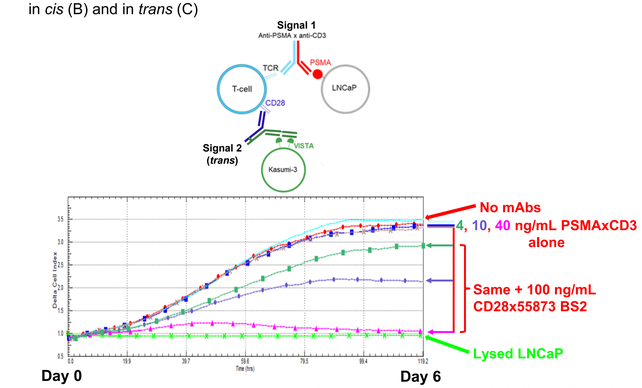


Figure 5. *In vitro* human T-cell co-stimulation in *trans* by CD28xVISTA BS2 potentiates LNCaP killing by a CD3xPSMA T-cell engager

- Enhanced killing was accompanied by increased T-cell activation, cytokine release and proliferation
- No effect in the absence of CD3xPSMA ("Signal 1"), i.e. no superagonistic properties of this CD28xVISTA bsAb

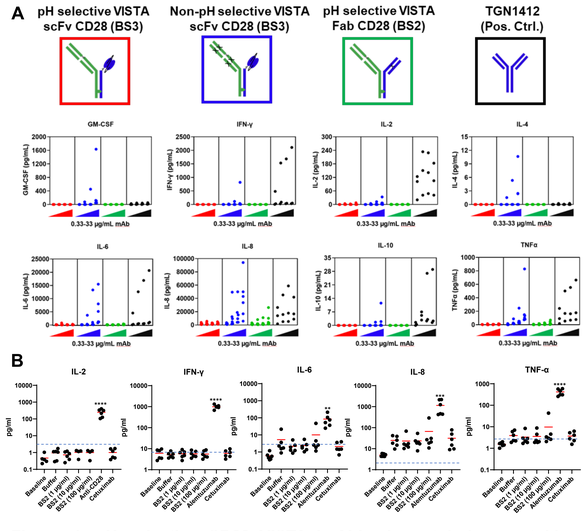
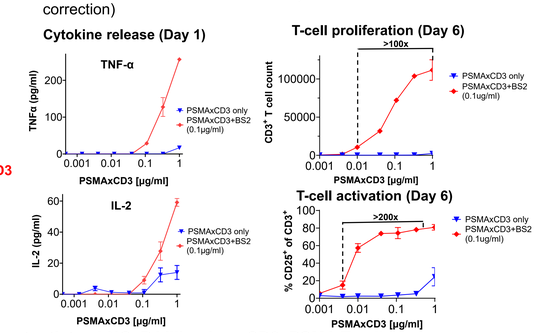
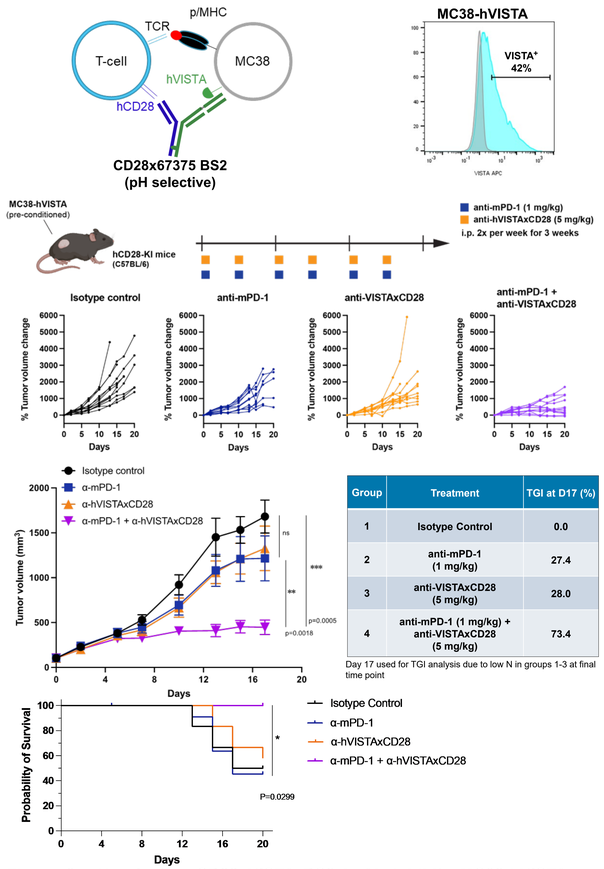


Figure 4. pH selective CD28xVISTA bsAb's do not induce cytokine responses

- Favorable safety profile in HUVEC:PBMC co-culture due to pH-selective VISTA engagement (A). Each point represents the results from one donor
- Cytokine release by CD28x67375 BS2 not significantly different from formulation buffer in sensitive *ex vivo* whole blood ID.Flow assay (B; Immuneed; LLOQ in dotted lines; mean values in red line; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; ****p<0.0001 comparison to buffer by Paired Student's t-test with Holm-Sidak correction)





Group	Treatment	TGI at D17 (%)
1	Isotype Control	0.0
2	anti-mPD-1 (1 mg/kg)	27.4
3	anti-VISTAxCD28 (5 mg/kg)	28.0
4	anti-mPD-1 (1 mg/kg) + anti-VISTAxCD28 (5 mg/kg)	73.4

Day 17 used for TGI analysis due to low N in groups 1-3 at final time point

Figure 6. pH selective CD28xVISTA BS2 bsAb inhibits MC38-hVISTA tumor growth in hCD28 KI mice in combination with anti-PD-1

- CD28xVISTA BS2 with pH-selective VISTA engagement
- Natural "Signal 1" enhanced by CD28 co-stimulation in *cis*
- Significant tumor growth inhibition and enhanced survival despite highly heterogeneous tumor cell population (only 42% hVISTA⁺ cells)

CONCLUSION

- Selected CD28xVISTA bsAb formats show dual engagement of target proteins and CD28 activation in Jurkat-reporter assays
- pH selective BS2 format with FcγR null mutations minimizes CRS risk
- CD28xVISTA bsAb (BS2 format) potentiates LNCaP cancer cell killing by a CD3xPSMA T-cell engager *in vitro*
- In hCD28 KI mice, BS2 with pH-selective VISTA binding arm significantly inhibits MC38-hVISTA tumor growth inhibition in combination with anti-PD-1
- Developing of a hCD28xhVISTA double knock-in mouse model for *in vivo trans*-activation testing
- A CD28xVISTA bsAb could complement PD-1/PD-L1 inhibitors or enhance bispecific T-cell engagers' selectivity and efficacy by targeting dual/orthogonal antigens on tumor and myeloid cells

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