Preeclampsia-related increase of interleukin-11 expression in human decidual cells

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M Basar and C-F Yen contributed equally to this work

Abstract

Preeclampsia is associated with increased systemic inflammation and superficial trophoblast invasion, which leads to insufficient uteroplacental blood flow. Interleukin (IL)-11 mediates pro- and anti-inflammatory processes and facilitates decidualization. To identify IL11 expression in vivo at the maternal–placental interface in preeclampsia and control specimens and to evaluate the regulatory effects of tumor necrosis factor-α (TNF) and IL1B, cytokines elevated in preeclampsia, on IL11 levels in first trimester decidual cells in vitro, placental sections were immunostained for IL11. Leukocyte-free first trimester decidual cells were incubated with estradiol (E2) + 10−7 mol/l medroxyprogesterone acetate ± TNF or IL1B ± inhibitors of the p38 MAP kinase (p38 MAPK), nuclear factor-κ B (NFkB), or protein kinase C (PKC) signaling pathways. An ELISA assessed secreted IL11 levels, and quantitative RT-PCR measured IL11 mRNA. IL11 immunoreactivity in placental sections was significantly higher in the cytoplasm of preeclamptic decidual cells versus gestational age-matched controls. Compared to decidual cells, IL11 immunostaining in neighboring trophoblast is lower, perivascular, and not different between control and preeclamptic specimens. TNF and IL1B enhanced levels of IL11 mRNA and secreted IL11 in cultured decidual cells. Specific inhibitors of the p38 MAPK and NFkB, but not PKC signaling pathways, reduced the stimulatory effect of IL1B. Expression of decidual IL11 is increased in preeclampsia and suggests a role for IL11 in the pathogenesis of preeclampsia.

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Introduction

The concerted actions of estradiol (E2) and progesterone transform human endometrial stromal cells into decidual cells during the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle and maintain the decidua throughout gestation (Tabanelli et al. 1992). During implantation, blastocyst-derived extravillous trophoblasts (EVTs) invade the decidua and remodel spiral arteries into low-resistance, high-capacity vessels that markedly increase uteroplacental blood flow (Pijnenborg et al. 2006). The decidua normally constrains trophoblast invasion, which involves sequential attachment to and proteolysis of basement membrane proteins in the peri-decidual extracellular matrix (ECM; Damsky et al. 1994, Cohen et al. 2006). Shallow EVT invasion leads to incomplete vascular transformation and reduced blood flow to the developing fetal-placental unit (Caniggia et al. 2000, Pijnenborg et al. 2006). Impaired decidual invasion is the primary placental defect of preeclampsia, a leading cause of fetal and maternal morbidity and mortality and a primary contributor to preterm delivery (reviewed in Sibai et al. (2005)). Preeclampsia is associated with systemic inflammation (Sibai et al. 2005) and a decidual influx of macrophages (Reister et al. 2001, Abrahams et al. 2004, Lockwood et al. 2006) and dendritic cells (Huang et al. 2008) that promote immune maladaption at the implantation site.

Interleukin-11 (IL11) belongs to the IL6 family of cytokines that exert diverse biological effects by binding to surface receptor complexes comprised of a ligand-specific α chain with at least one subunit of the GP130 signal transducer (Heinrich et al. 2003). Initially identified as a hematopoiesis-promoting factor capable
of enhancing growth of myeloid, erythroid, and megakaryocytic progenitor cells, IL11 was later found to mediate a complex array of pro- and anti-inflammatory effects (Trepicchio & Dorner 1998). In normal mice, uterine IL11 synthesis peaks during decidualization. Transgenic IL11 receptor α (I11ra) gene knockout mice are infertile because of defective decidualization, which leads to dysregulated trophoblast invasion and proliferation and ends in necrotic loss of the fetus (Robb et al. 1998). Microarray results from control and pseudopregnant Ill1ra knockout mice suggest that IL11 regulates changes in the uterine ECM required for decidualization (White et al. 2004). The decidua exhibits the most prominent immunostaining for IL11 and IL11RA at the implantation site of humans and other primates (Dimitriadis et al. 2003). In women, abnormal decidual and villous trophoblast IL11 expression leads to early pregnancy loss (Chen et al. 2002). Both IL11 and IL11RA mRNA and protein are localized in decidualized stromal cells during the luteal phase of cycling human endometrium (von Rango et al. 2004). In stromal cell monolayers from predecidualized human endometrium, IL11 has been shown to advance progesterin-induced morphological and biochemical decidualization markers (Dimitriadis et al. 2002).

Given the complex involvement of IL11 expression with inflammation, decidualization, and trophoblast invasion, we posited an association between decidual IL11 expression and preeclampsia. To test this hypothesis, IL11 immunohistochemical levels were compared in the decidua of preeclamptic versus gestational age-matched normal placentas. Tumor necrosis factor-α (TNF) and IL1B have been implicated in the early pathogenesis of preeclampsia (Rinehart et al. 1999, Heller et al. 2001, Bauer et al. 2004, Lockwood et al. 2006), and the previous studies have implicated that the major sources of TNF and IL1B are secreted from macrophages in preeclamptic decidua (as paracrine interaction) (Rinehart et al. 1999, Heller et al. 2001, Reister et al. 2001, Bauer et al. 2004).

**Figure 1** Immunohistochemical analysis of IL11 expression in control and preeclamptic decidua. Representative micrographs of serial sections from control (A–C) and preeclamptic (D–F) specimens are shown. Vimentin immunostaining (red) identifies decidual cells in control (A) and preeclamptic (D) tissues. Cytokeratin immunostaining (red) identifies trophoblastic cells in control (C) and preeclamptic (F) tissues. IL11 immunostaining (brown) in decidual cells (arrows) was cytoplasmic and more intense than in interstitial trophoblast (arrowheads), where IL11 localization was mostly perimembranous (E inset). Between groups, IL11 immunostaining was greater in preeclamptic (E) versus control (B) decidual cells, while there was no significant difference among interstitial trophoblast. IL11 intensity HSCOREs in control and preeclamptic specimens (mean ± S.E.M.) are shown (K); *, versus control decidual cells; †, versus group-respective decidual cells; P<0.05. Additionally, no statistical significance for IL11 HSCOREs was observed between chorionic villi of preeclamptic and control tissues (G and H). On the other hand, no significant difference was found for the IL11R expression between preeclamptic (J) versus control interstitial cytotrophoblasts (I). Parallel staining with a mouse isotype was used as a negative control for IL11 MAB (C and G; inset). Note that IL11 immunoreactivity in interstitial trophoblast was mostly perimembranous, especially in preeclampsia specimens (E, inset). The scale bar in panel F represents 50 μm for all panels, except the panel E inset, where it represents 20 μm.
Therefore, the effects of these classic pro-inflammatory cytokines were assessed on IL11 mRNA and protein expression in first trimester decidual cells, the predominant cell type encountered by invading EVTs at the implantation site (Dunn et al. 2003). The integral role that progesterone plays in inducing and maintaining decidualization (Tabanelli et al. 1992, Dunn et al. 2003) prompted evaluation of effects of a progestin with and without TNF or IL1B on IL11 expression in the cultured decidual cells. Incubations were extended to include specific inhibitors of the nuclear factor-κB (NFκB), p38 MAP kinase (p38 MAPK), or protein kinase C (PKC) pathways since each has been shown to act as intracellular mediators of cytokine effects on IL11 expression in many cell types (Lacroix et al. 1998, Bamba et al. 2003, Scicchitano et al. 2008).

Results

Immunostaining of IL11 and IL11R in decidua of control and preeclamptic specimens

Control and preeclamptic decidua were immunostained for IL11, vimentin, and cytokeratin (Fig. 1). Decidual cells and interstitial cytotrophoblasts were identified by positive (red) vimentin and cytokeratin staining respectively in control (Fig. 1A and C) and preeclamptic (Fig. 1D and F) specimens. HSCORE analysis revealed that immunoreactivity for IL11 (brown) was significantly greater in the cytoplasm of decidual cells from preeclamptic tissues (Fig. 1E) compared with control (Fig. 1B) specimens (mean ± s.e.m. HSCORE: 186 ± 13 versus 121 ± 15 respectively, P < 0.05; Fig. 1E). However, IL11 HSCOREs in the cytoplasm of interstitial trophoblasts were not significantly different between preeclamptic (Fig. 1E) and control (Fig. 1B) tissues (71 ± 15 versus 52 ± 10 respectively; Fig. 1K). Additionally, no statistical significance for IL11 HSCOREs was observed between chorionic villi of preeclamptic and control tissues (Fig. 1G and H). Within both groups, decidual cells had significantly greater IL11 HSCOREs than interstitial trophoblasts (186 ± 13 versus 71 ± 15 in preeclamptic tissues (Fig. 1E) and 121 ± 15 versus 52 ± 10 in control tissues (Fig. 1B) respectively; P < 0.05). Notably, while IL11 immunostaining in vimentin-positive decidual cells was homogenous and cytoplasmic, the immunoreactivity in interstitial trophoblasts (Fig. 1E, inset) was mostly perimembranous.

Normal and preeclamptic deciduous tissues were immunostained for IL11R expression, which is predominantly found in the interstitial cytotrophoblasts, while decidual cells have a weak IL11R immunoreactivity. No significant difference was found for the IL11R expression between preeclamptic (Fig. 1J) versus control interstitial cytotrophoblasts (Fig. 1I).

IL11 protein secretion in cultured decidual cells

Individual and interactive effects of medroxyprogesterone acetate (MPA) and cytokines were assessed on levels of IL11 secreted by leukocyte-free first trimester decidual cells. Figure 2 indicates that secreted basal IL11 levels were not significantly different between incubations with E2 (0.38 ± 0.20 pg/ml per µg protein) and E2 + MPA (0.17 ± 0.07 pg/ml per µg protein). In the E2-treated cells, TNF and IL1B significantly increased IL11 output by 5.6 ± 1.6- and 385.4 ± 191.6-fold respectively (P < 0.05). The addition of MPA reduced the response to each cytokine by half for both TNF and IL1B (P < 0.05). This inhibition by MPA virtually eliminated the response to TNF as secreted IL11 levels did not differ significantly between parallel incubations with E2 + MPA and E2 + MPA + TNF. However, the IL1B-mediated increase in IL11 output in incubations with E2 + MPA was still greater than baseline E2 + MPA (P < 0.05) and was reduced compared with E2 + IL1B. Both IL1B- and TNF-enhanced IL11 expression was dose dependent over a concentration range of 0.01-10.0 ng/ml (Fig. 3).

IL11 mRNA expression in cultured decidual cells

The effects of IL1B and TNF on steady-state IL11 mRNA levels in first trimester decidual cell monolayers were determined by quantitative real-time RT-PCR (Fig. 4). In E2 cultures, TNF and IL1B enhanced IL11 mRNA levels by 1.55 ± 0.65- and 18.8 ± 5.1-fold respectively, although only the effects of IL1B were statistically significant. A similar IL1B-stimulated enhancement of IL11 mRNA levels was noted in incubations with E2 + MPA, with an increase in IL11 mRNA levels by 7.6 ± 1.3-fold (P < 0.05). Consistent with the IL11 protein results presented above, IL1B was more effective...
specimens, mean in 10 leukocyte-free first trimester decidual cells were incubated for 7 days in 10^{-8} M E2 + 10^{-7} M MPA, and then switched to DM with the steroids ± the indicated amount of IL1B (0.01–10.0 ng/ml) or TNF (0.01–10.0 ng/ml). IL11 levels were measured by ELISA in conditioned DM and normalized to cell protein. Bars represent mean ± S.E.M. of IL11 levels as pg/ml per µg cell protein (n=3 separate patients’ decidual specimens), mean ± S.E.M. * versus E2 + MPA; P<0.05.

Figure 3 Concentration-dependent effects of IL1B and TNF on IL11 output by decidual cell monolayers maintained in E2 + MPA. Confluent, leukocyte-free first trimester decidual cells were incubated for 7 days in 10^{-8} M E2 + 10^{-7} M MPA, and then switched to DM with the steroid(s) ± the indicated amount of IL1B (0.01–10.0 ng/ml) or TNF (0.01–10.0 ng/ml). IL11 levels were measured by ELISA in conditioned DM and normalized to cell protein. Bars represent mean ± S.E.M. of IL11 levels as pg/ml per µg cell protein (n=3 separate patients’ decidual specimens), mean ± S.E.M. * versus E2 + MPA; P<0.05.

Figure 4 Effects of E2, MPA, TNF, and IL1B on IL11 mRNA levels in decidual cell monolayers. Confluent leukocyte-free first trimester decidual cells were incubated for 7 days in 10^{-8} E2 or 10^{-7} M E2 + 10^{-7} M MPA, and then switched to DM with corresponding steroid(s) ± 1 ng/ml of TNF or IL1B for 6 h. Aliquots of extracted total RNA were used to measure IL11 mRNA levels by quantitative real-time RT-PCR. Bars represent mean ± S.E.M. of IL11 mRNA/ACTB mRNA levels (n=5 separate patients’ decidual specimens), * versus E2; E2 + MPA; ** versus E2 + IL1B; P<0.05.

Discussion

Shallow EVT invasion of the basement membrane (BM) protein-enriched decidualized ECM is the primary placental insult leading to preeclampsia (Sibai et al. 2005). In view of abundant evidence linking local IL11 expression to decidualization of human endometrium (Dimitriadis et al. 2002, von Rango et al. 2004), IL11 immunostaining was compared in the decidua of preeclamptic versus gestational age-matched preterm controls. Immunoreactive IL11 in decidual cells was primarily localized in the cytoplasm, which suggests in vivo production of IL11 in decidual cells. Significant increases in intensity and numbers of IL11-positive decidual cells as indicated by HSCOREs in preeclamptic versus control women suggest a role for IL11 in the inflammatory process of preeclampsia. Although IL11 immunostaining in adjacent interstitial cytotrophoblasts was not significantly greater in the preeclamptic specimens, this staining was much less prominent than that observed in the decidual cells and was primarily perimembranous. This differential localization of IL11 between the two cell types suggests a potential, previously undisclosed, paracrine interaction in which IL11 is synthesized and secreted by decidual cells, and then bound to receptors in adjacent interstitial trophoblasts.

By contrast, IL11 attenuates macrophage-associated inflammation by inhibiting NFKB-mediated effector function, as reflected in reduced expression of IL12, IL6, IL1B, and TNF as well as nitric oxide production from activated macrophages (Trepicchio & Dorner 1998). Therefore, unlike the chronic inflammatory action of IL6, augmented IL11 expression in decidual cells in response to IL1B or TNF appears to exert an anti-inflammatory effect. Not only is the action of IL11 inconsistent with macrophage-impaired trophoblast invasion of the decidua, but also IL11 has now been shown to enhance migration of primary EVTs by a mechanism that involves STAT signaling (Paiva et al. 2007). Such increase in EVT migration was observed even at very high IL11 concentrations (100 ng/ml), arguing strongly against a direct role for IL11 in impaired EVT invasion that leads to preeclampsia.
In humans and mice, the expression of IL11 and its receptor IL11RA is tightly coupled to the induction and maintenance of decidualization (Robb et al. 1998, Dimitriadi et al. 2002, von Rango et al. 2004, White et al. 2004). The integral role that decidualization plays in restraining the intrinsically invasive EVTs is evident in the uncontrolled invasion with often life-threatening consequences, which stems from implantation at sites where the decidua is absent as in ectopic pregnancies including cesarean scar pregnancies or deficient as in placenta accreta (Norwitz 2006, Rosen 2008). Invasion of the decidua involves sequential attachment of EVT-expressed adhesion molecules, particularly integrins, which recognize basement membrane-type proteins in the decidual ECM, followed by their degradation (Damsky et al. 1994, Cohen et al. 2006, Pijnenborg et al. 2006). Several studies have evaluated the role of trophoblast-expressed matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs 2 and 9), which preferentially degrade basement membrane proteins, in promoting EVT invasion of the decidua (Cohen et al. 2006). Recently, we found that IL1B and TNF markedly enhanced MMP9 expression in leukocyte-free first trimester decidual cell cultures by about 100- and 1000-fold respectively, and that decidual cells in placental sections from cases of preeclampsia displayed significantly higher immunohistochemical MMP9 levels compared with controls (Lockwood et al. 2008a). Preferential degradation of basement membrane proteins in the decidual ECM by this aberrantly large increase in MMP9 expression in decidual cells is expected to dysregulate the sequential invasion of the decidua by EVTs and interfere with remodeling of the spiral arteries and arterioles required to increase uteroplacental blood flow to the developing fetal-placental unit (Damsky et al. 1994, Pijnenborg et al. 2006).

The absence of a direct inhibitory effect on EVT migration (Paiva et al. 2007), taken together with the crucial role that IL11 plays in decidualization, suggests that excess IL11 indirectly impedes EVT invasion by augmenting decidual cell-expressed basement membrane protein synthesis and/or degradation or by alternative as yet unidentified mechanism(s). One study by Paiva et al. (2009) reported that IL11 inhibits the EVT invasion resulting in shallow placentation, which supports our hypothesis that IL11 may be involved in pathogenesis of preeclampsia by regulating trophoblast invasion. Preeclampsia is associated with placental oxidative stress and activation of NFKB and p38 MAPK pathways in placental villi. The observations in this study that both the NFKB and p38 MAPK signaling pathways are involved in inflammatory cytokine-enhanced IL11 expression in first trimester human decidual cells suggest that one or both pathways may be involved in mediating preeclampsia-related pathogenic changes in decidual cells in vivo.

In conclusion, our observations that decidual expression of IL11 is increased in preeclamptic in vivo and that IL11 is regulated by inflammatory cytokines IL1B and TNF in cultured decidual cells implicate IL11 in the pathophysiology of preeclampsia. One possibility is that elevated IL11 expression may be resultant of the earlier insults leading to preeclampsia and not causative of them. Further studies investigating the mechanistic role of IL11 in normal and preeclamptic decidual cells are needed to explore these possibilities and to hopefully shed new light on our understanding of the pathogenesis of preeclampsia.

Materials and Methods

Patients and tissue

For immunohistochemistry, placental biopsies from the decidual basalis were obtained from preeclamptic (n=9) and gestational age-matched idiopathic preterm labor control (n=8) placentas, under approval of the Yale University School of Medicine Human Investigation Committee. Table 1 provides relevant clinical details of the patients and controls. Preeclampsia was diagnosed according to standard criteria (ACOG Committee on Practice Bulletins–Obstetrics 2002) as systolic and diastolic blood pressure ≥140 and ≥90 mmHg respectively and proteinuria (≥0.3 g protein in a 24 h urine collection), occurring after 20 weeks of gestation in a woman who previously had normal blood pressure. Seven out of the nine preeclampsia patients had severe preeclampsia, defined as systolic blood pressure ≥160 mmHg or diastolic blood pressure ≥110 mmHg on two occasions at least 6 h apart, with proteinuria >5 g in a 24 h urine collection. All preeclamptic placental specimens were obtained from cesarean delivery without labor. Control specimens were placentas from idiopathic preterm labor without clinical or histological evidence of chorioamnionitis or chronic villitis, and were obtained after either cesarean or vaginal delivery.

For cell cultures, first trimester decidual specimens from 14 uncomplicated, elective terminations between 8 and 12 weeks

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Table 1 Characteristics of the women who provided placental samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preterm control (n=8)</th>
<th>Preeclampsia (n=9)</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>29.3 ± 3.0</td>
<td>29.4 ± 3.8</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nulliparity</td>
<td>5 (50)</td>
<td>5 (50)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestational age (weeks)</td>
<td>30.5 ± 1.0</td>
<td>29.7 ± 1.2</td>
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<td>Systolic blood pressure (mmHg)</td>
<td>117 ± 6</td>
<td>172 ± 7</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diastolic blood pressure (mmHg)</td>
<td>62 ± 3</td>
<td>102 ± 2</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dipstick protein</td>
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<td>4 (2–4)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 h protein (g)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5 (0.7–7.2)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUGR</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (30)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HELLP syndrome</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (30)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPROM</td>
<td>5 (50)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth weight (g)</td>
<td>1532 ± 202</td>
<td>1077 ± 139</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesarean delivery</td>
<td>3 (30)</td>
<td>8 (80)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histological</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chorioamnionitis</td>
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<td>stages II-III</td>
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PPROM, preterm premature rupture of the membranes; IUGR, intrauterine growth restriction; HELLP syndrome, syndrome of hemolysis, elevated liver enzymes, and low platelets.

Data are represented as mean ± S.E.M. and analyzed by Student’s t-test.

Isolation of decidual cells

Decidual cell isolation was performed as described previously (Lockwood et al. 2008b). Briefly, minced tissues were digested with 0.1% collagenase type IV and 0.01% DNAase in RPMI containing 20 μg/ml penicillin/streptomycin and 1 μl/ml fungizone (Invitrogen) in a 37 °C shaking water bath for 30 min, and then washed with sterile PBS three times and subjected to consecutive filtration through 100, 70, and 40 μm Millipore filters. Cells were resuspended in RPMI and then grown to confluence on polystyrene tissue culture dishes. After harvesting with trypsin/EDTA, cells were analyzed by flow cytometric analysis with anti-CD45 and anti-CD14 MABs (BD Pharmingen, San Diego, CA, USA) to determine the presence of leukocytes after each passage. Cultures were found to be leukocyte free (<1%) after three to four passages. Cultured decidual cells were also found to be vimentin-positive and cytokeratin-negative, and displayed decidualization-related morphologic and biochemical changes during incubation with a progester. Decidualization-related biochemical changes were detected as enhanced expression of prolactin and plasminogen activator inhibitor-1 and inhibited expression of interstitial collagenase and stromelysin-1 as found previously (Lockwood et al. 2008a, 2008b, Oner et al. 2008). Cell aliquots were frozen in FCS/DMSO (9:1; Sigma–Aldrich) and kept in liquid nitrogen for future uses.

Experimental incubations

Thawed cells were seeded onto polystyrene culture-treated flasks and incubated in BMS, which consists of basal medium (a phenol red-free 1:1 v:v mix of DMEM (Invitrogen), and Ham’s F-12 (Flow Labs, Rockville, MD, USA), with 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 μg/ml streptomycin, and 0.25 μg/ml fungizone)
supplemented with 10% charcoal-stripped calf serum. After
two additional passages, confluent cultures were incubated
in parallel in BMS containing either 10⁻⁶ mol/l E₂ with or without
10⁻⁷ mol/l MPA (Sigma–Aldrich). For these incubations, MPA
was substituted for progesterone because of its greater stability
in culture (Arici et al. 1999), whereas E₂ served as the control
incubation for E₂ plus MPA. The latter was employed to mimic
elevated circulating E₂ and progesterone levels during the
first trimester of pregnancy. After 7 days, the cultures were
washed twice with HBSS to remove residual serum elements.
The cultures were switched to a defined medium (DM)
consisting of basal medium plus ITS+ (Collaborative Research,
Waltham, MA, USA), 5 μM FeSO₄, 50 μM ZnSO₄, 1 mM CuSO₄, 20 mM Na₂SeO₃, trace elements (Invitrogen), 50 μg/ml
ascorbic acid (Sigma–Aldrich), and 50 ng/ml epidermal
growth factor (Becton-Dickinson, Bedford, MA, USA) with
either vehicle or steroids or 0.01–10 ng/ml of IL1B or TNF.

In selected experiments, after priming with E₂ plus MPA in
BMS for 7 days, the cultures were switched to DM containing
the steroids ±1 ng/ml of IL1B or TNF and ± a signaling
pathway inhibitor added at the concentration recommended
by the manufacturer. Specifically, these were NFKB inhibitor
(activation inhibitor III) at 10⁻⁷ M, p38 MAPK inhibitor
(SB203580) at 10⁻⁵ M, and PKC inhibitor (Calphostin C) at
10⁻⁷ M (all from EMD Biosciences Inc., Gibbstown, NJ, USA).
After the test period, cells were harvested by scraping in
ice-cold lysis buffer solution of TBS with 1% Triton X-100,
1 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride (Sigma), and complete
protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche), and then briefly sonicated.
Conditioned medium supernatants and cell lysates were stored
at −70 °C. Total RNA was extracted from five separate, parallel
incubations with TRIzol Reagent (Sigma–Aldrich).

**ELISA**

Total cell protein was assessed using a modified Lowry assay
(Bio-Rad Laboratories Inc.). An ELISA kit (R&D Systems) was
used to measure IL11 levels in the cell-conditioned DM
according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The sensitivity
of the ELISA is 8 pg/ml, with intra-assay and inter-assay coeffi-
cients of variation of 2.4 and 6.9% respectively. According
to the manufacturer, there is no significant cross-reactivity or
interference by other cytokines in this assay.

**Real-time quantitative RT-PCR**

To verify that the IL11 and β-actin (ACTB) probes yielded the
correct bands, RNA was extracted from experimental cultures and
subjected to semi-quantitative RT-PCR using a kit from Invitrogen, performing 35 cycles with the Eppendorf
Mastercycler (Eppendorf, Westbury, NY, USA). For quantitative
real-time RT-PCR, RT was carried out with AMV reverse
transcriptase (Invitrogen). A quantitative standard curve was
established (40 pg to 2.5 ng of cDNA) with a Roche Light
Cycler (Roche) by monitoring increasing PCR product fluor-
escence during amplification. Quantitation of the unknowns
was determined with the Roche Light Cycler and normalized to
ACTB levels from the corresponding unknowns. Melting curve
analysis confirmed the specificity of the amplified products and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Sense (5’→3’)</th>
<th>Antisense (5’→3’)</th>
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<td>ACTB</td>
<td>CGTACCACTGGCCATCTGAT</td>
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<td>IL11</td>
<td>AGATGATCCGTATGGG</td>
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the absence of primer–dimer formation. All products generated
the correct melting temperatures. Products were then run on a
1.2% agarose gel along with a 100 bp DNA ladder and visualized
with ethidium bromide. The primers (Table 2) were
synthesized and gel purified at the Yale DNA Synthesis
Laboratory, Critical Technologies (New Haven, CT, USA).

**Statistical analysis**

Gestational ages of tissue specimens were normally distributed
and analyzed by Student’s t-test. Immunohistochemistry
HSCOREs were also normally distributed (Kolmogorov–
Smirnov test) and analyzed using one-way ANOVA, with post hoc
Holm–Sidak testing. Control and treatment groups in
culture conditions were compared by the Kruskal–Wallis
ANOVA on ranks test followed by the Student–Newman–
Keuls post hoc test. In all comparisons, statistical significance
was defined as P<0.05.

**Declaration of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that
could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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