Staphylococcus aureus Isolates Associated with Necrotizing Pneumonia Bind to Basement Membrane Type I and IV Collagens and Laminin

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To investigate how Panton-Valentine leukocidin (PVL)–positive Staphylococcus aureus (PPSA) strains associate with specific bronchial lesions during community-acquired necrotizing pneumonia, we examined PPSA strains and PVL-negative S. aureus (PNSA) strains for their binding behavior to extracellular matrix (ECM) proteins, primary human airway epithelial cell (HAEC) cultures, and human airway mucosa damaged ex vivo. Compared with PNSA strains, PPSA strains exhibited increased affinity for damaged airway epithelium and especially for exposed basement membrane. PPSA strains, compared with PNSA strains, showed stronger affinity for type I and IV collagens and laminin, a property associated with the presence of the cna gene. PPSA and PNSA culture supernatants similarly damaged HAEC layers, whereas recombinant PVL had no effect, suggesting that an S. aureus exoprotein other than PVL might contribute to the observed airway epithelial damage. These results suggest that epithelial damage, possibly due to viral infection (which usually precedes necrotizing pneumonia) and/or to a non–PVL S. aureus exoproduct action, may permit binding of PPSA to exposed type I and IV collagens and laminin—the PVL cytotoxin being involved later during necrotizing pneumonia.

Staphylococcus aureus possesses a variety of virulence factors that can be divided into 3 functional categories. Factors mediating adherence to tissue and extracellular matrix (ECM) components are grouped together in a single family named “microbial surface components recognizing adhesive matrix molecules” (MSCRAMMs) [1], whose ligands include fibrinogen, fibronectin, collagen, laminin, elastin, and bone sialoprotein. Other factors, such as cytotoxins (hemolysins and leukocidins), promote tissue damage and bacterial spread. Finally, factors such as capsular polysaccharide and superantigenic toxins protect S. aureus from the host immune system. The precise roles that most individual staphylococcal factors play in invasive infections are difficult to determine [2].

The synergohymenotropic toxin family is composed of γ-hemolysin, LukE-LukD leukocidin, and Panton-Valentine leukocidin (PVL) [3, 4]. PVL has been epidemiologically correlated to specific human diseases caused by S. aureus, such as primary skin infections and severe necrotizing pneumonia [5, 6]. Necrotizing pneumonia was first described in France in 2002 [6], and other cases have since been reported worldwide [7–11]. Contrary to PVL-negative S. aureus (PNSA) pneumonia, PVL-positive S. aureus (PPSA) pneumonia is preceded by influenza-like symptoms (with or without isolation of influenza virus), hemoptysis, pleural effusion, rapid onset of acute respiratory distress, leukopenia, and high mortality [6]. Moreover, histopathological examination of lung tissue from patients who died of PPSA pneumonia showed specific lesions with
extensive necrotic ulceration of the tracheal and bronchial mucosa (covered with numerous gram-positive cocci) and massive hemorrhagic necrosis of the interalveolar septa [6].

To investigate why PPSA strains were systematically associated with bronchial lesions in necrotizing pneumonia, we examined PPSA and PNSA isolates for their affinity for ECM proteins, primary human airway epithelial cell (HAEC) cultures, and human airway mucosa damaged ex vivo. We also examined the effects of PPSA and PNSA culture supernatants and recombinant PVL on HAECs, to determine the role of PVL itself. Our results indicate that recombinant PVL alone does not affect the integrity of the airway epithelium, whereas PPSA affinity for type I and IV collagens, laminin, and damaged airway epithelium is greatly enhanced, compared with PNSA affinity.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Bacterial Strains and Culture Conditions**

*S. aureus* reference strains ATCC 49775 (LukS-PV LukF-PV+), 8325-4 (FnBPs+), and DU5883 (FnBPs+) were a gift from Tim Foster (Department of Microbiology, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland) [12]. Centre National de Référence des Staphylocoques (Lyon, France) provided isolates from patients described by Gillet et al. [6]: (1) 16 PPSA strains were from patients with community-acquired necrotizing pneumonia (only 1 strain was methicillin resistant), and (2) 16 PNSA strains were from 9 patients with nonnecrotizing community-acquired pneumonia (2 strains were methicillin resistant) and 7 patients with nonnecrotizing hospital-acquired pneumonia (4 strains were methicillin resistant). The strains were stored at −20°C in trypticase soy broth (TSB; Institut Pasteur) containing 20% (vol/vol) glycerol. Bacteria were cultured in TSB overnight at 37°C, were harvested by centrifugation, and were resuspended in PBS (0.1 mol/L) or RPMI 1640 culture medium (Seromed; Biochrom KG) containing 20 mmol/L HEPES (Sigma). The bacterial suspension was adjusted to a final density of 10⁶ cfu/mL.

**Preparation of Bacterial Supernatant**

The strains were grown in brain-heart medium for 17 h at 37°C with vigorous shaking [4]. After centrifugation, culture supernatants were sterilized by filtration through 0.25-μm filters and were stored at −20°C until use.

**Production and Purification of Recombinant LukS-PV and LukF-PV**

The pIVEX2.4d vector (Roche Applied Science) was used to produce recombinant His-tagged LukS-PV and LukF-PV proteins (the 2 components of PVL). Primers were designed after identification of suitable hybridization sites in the lukS-PV and lukF-PV genes. The 5′ primers (ruluks-1, 5′-ACC CT TAT AAT AGA ATC TAA AGC TGA TAA CAA TAT TGA GAA TAT TG-3′ and rulkF-1, 5′-ACC CT TAT AAT AGC TCA ACA TAT CAC ACC TGT AAG-3′) were chosen within the coding region of each gene (GenBank accession number X72700), omitting the region predicted to encode the signal peptide, as verified by hydrophobicity analysis, as described by Kyte and Doolittle [13], and the SignalP V1.1 World Wide Web Prediction Server (http://www.cbs.dtu.dk/services/SignalP/). The 3′ primers (ruluks-2, 5′-ACG CGG AGC TCT CTC AAT TGT GCT TTA TTA TTA CAT GAG-3′ and rulkF-2, 5′-ACG CGG ATC CT TAA TT TTA CAT GAG-3′) were chosen to encompass the stop codon of each gene. Restriction sites (PacI for ruluks-1 and rulkF-1 and BamH1 for ruluks-2 and rulkF-2) were included in each primer. DNA was extracted from *S. aureus* reference strain ATCC 49775 and used as a template for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification. PCR products and plasmid DNA were prepared by use of the Qiagen plasmid kit (Qiagen). PCR fragments were digested with PacI (Ozyme) and BamH1 (Promega) and ligated (T4 DNA ligase; Promega) with the pIVEX2.4d expression vector, which was digested with the same restriction enzymes. The resulting plasmids were transformed in *Escherichia coli* DH5α (Stratagene) before transformation in *E. coli* BL21star (DE3) pLysS (Invitrogen) for gene expression. The integrity of the open-reading frame of each construct was verified by DNA sequencing. The fusion proteins (LukS-PV and LukF-PV) were purified from lysates of transfected *E. coli* cells by affinity chromatography on Ni-NTA columns, in accordance with the supplier’s instructions (Qiagen). The purity of the fusion proteins was controlled by 7.5% SDS-PAGE. The leukotoxic activity of recombinant LukS-PV and LukF-PV proteins on human leukocyte preparations was verified by fluorescence-activated cell sorter analysis of cellular ethidium-bromide incorporation, as described elsewhere [14]. Fusion proteins were lyophilized and stored at 4°C before use.

**HAEC and Tissue Culture Models**

**Analysis of the effect of bacterial extracellular products on the integrity of the airway epithelium.** The transformed, immortalized human bronchial epithelial cell line 16HBE14o−[15] was cultured in modified Eagle's medium (MEM; Gibco) supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (Gibco), L-glutamine (Gibco), and antibiotics (Sigma), at 37°C with 5% CO₂, to obtain highly confluent cell layers. Cells were placed in non-supplemented MEM before use. Confluent cultures were exposed to *S. aureus* supernatants for 10 min to 4 h and to recombinant LukS-PV and LukF-PV proteins, alone and in combination (final concentration, 200 nmol/L), for 10 min to 24 h. Changes in confluence because of the effect of bacterial supernatants or PVL itself were monitored in comparison with control cell layers exposed to cell culture medium alone. In parallel, the cytotoxic effect of LukS-PV and LukF-PV proteins...
both alone and in combination was monitored by use of the lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) activity detection kit (Roche).

**Interaction of S. aureus with human bronchi damaged ex vivo.** Bronchi were collected from patients undergoing surgery for bronchial carcinoma, from areas that were found to be normal by microscopy and were distant from the tumor. Pieces of bronchial tissue were damaged ex vivo, as described elsewhere [16], by use of a metallic probe (diameter, 2 mm) cooled by immersion in liquid nitrogen and applied at a pressure of 33 kPa for 10 s. This treatment damaged a zone of \( \sim 15 \) mm\(^2\) in which only cells of the surface epithelium were damaged and desquamated immediately. Within a few hours, cells edging the wound began to migrate. The tissue was then rinsed with RPMI 1640 culture medium at 37\( ^{\circ} \)C, and the tissues were fixed with paraformaldehyde before being embedded in paraffin. Paraffin sections were counterstained with hematoxylin for bronchial carcinoma, from areas that were found to be normal by microscopy and were distant from the tumor.

**Interaction of S. aureus with primary HAEC cultures.** Fresh human airway tissues collected from nasal polyps were immersed in RPMI 1640 culture medium supplemented with 20 mmol/L HEPES containing antibiotics (200 U/mL penicillin and 200 \( \mu \)g/mL streptomycin; Sigma). The tissues were cut into small explants (width, 2 mm\(^2\)) and seeded onto a type I collagen matrix in 24-well plates, in defined culture medium composed of RPMI 1640 supplemented with insulin (1 \( \mu \)g/mL; Sigma), apotransferrin (1 \( \mu \)g/mL; Serva), epidermal growth factor (10 ng/mL; Serva), hydrocortisone (0.5 \( \mu \)g/mL; Sigma), retinoic acid (10 ng/mL; Sigma), penicillin (100 U/mL), and streptomycin (100 \( \mu \)g/mL) and were cultured for 3–4 days at 37\( ^{\circ} \)C with 5% CO\(_2\). The purity and integrity of 15 \( \mu \)L of these ECM components were assessed on appropriate

**Table 1. Adherence of Panton-Valentine leukocidin (PVL)–positive Staphylococcus aureus (PPSA) and PVL-negative S. aureus (PNSA) strains to extracellular matrix (ECM) components.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECM component used for preincubation of wells, concentration</th>
<th>PPSA strains ((n = 16))</th>
<th>PNSA strains ((n = 16))</th>
<th>( P^b )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cFN, 5 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.67 (0.48–0.84)</td>
<td>0.28 (0.04–0.69)</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cFN, 50 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.81 (0.66–0.95)</td>
<td>0.63 (0.31–0.85)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pFN, 5 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.76 (0.57–0.88)</td>
<td>0.74 (0.44–0.86)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pFN, 50 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.92 (0.67–1.00)</td>
<td>0.88 (0.64–1.02)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type I collagen, 5 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>1.13 (0.95–1.27)</td>
<td>0.01 (0–0.04)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type I collagen, 50 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.97 (0.75–1.19)</td>
<td>0.005 (0–0.006)</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type IV collagen, 5 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.31 (0.11–0.45)</td>
<td>0.004 (0–0.03)</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type IV collagen, 50 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.77 (0.49–0.93)</td>
<td>0.007 (0–0.02)</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laminin, 5 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.60 (0.34–0.78)</td>
<td>0.02 (0–0.03)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laminin, 50 ( \mu )g/mL</td>
<td>0.76 (0.47–1.02)</td>
<td>0.02 (0–0.03)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE.** cFN, human cellular fibronectin; IQR, interquartile range; pFN, human plasma fibronectin; NS, not significant.

\( ^a \) Values represent absorption at 570 nm.

\( ^b \) Kruskal-Wallis test.
Figure 1. Staphylococcus aureus isolates from necrotizing pneumonia (Panton-Valentine leukocidin [PVL]–positive S. aureus [PPSA]) and from nonnecrotizing community-acquired pneumonia (PVL-negative S. aureus [PNSA]), examined for their binding capacity (Y-axis) to type I collagen from rat tail (A), to type IV collagen (B), and to laminin, coated on 96-well plates, at concentrations of 5 μg/mL (white bars) and 50 μg/mL (black bars).
Table 2. Distribution of microbial surface components recognizing adhesive matrix molecules (MSCRAMMs) genes among 32 Panton-Valentine leukocidin (PVL)-positive Staphylococcus aureus (PPSA) and PVL-negative S. aureus (PNSA) clinical isolates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>PPSA isolates (n = 16)</th>
<th>PNSA isolates (n = 16)</th>
<th>P*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cna</td>
<td>14 (87)</td>
<td>4 (25)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eno</td>
<td>16 (100)</td>
<td>16 (100)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE. NS, not significant.

* The χ² test was used to simultaneously analyze the distribution of 9 MSCRAMM genes among 32 S. aureus isolates from patients with necrotizing pneumonia and from patients with nonnecrotizing community-acquired pneumonia.

Statistical Analysis
Continuous variables were summarized by use of medians and interquartile ranges, and categorical variables were summarized by use of frequencies and percentages. Nonparametric tests were used to compare distributions. The χ² test was used to analyze the presence of adhesin genes and the source of clinical strains, and analysis of variance was used to correlate gene detection and binding capacity to ECM components. Two-tailed P < .05 was considered to be significant. Statistical analyses were performed with SPSS software (version 11.5; SPSS).

RESULTS

Adherence of S. aureus to ECM components in vitro. ECM-binding capacities, according to the median values for the PPSA and PNSA strains, are presented in table 1. Most of the tested strains showed significant binding capacity to 5 and 50 μg/mL cFN and pFN, compared with the FnBPs− mutant used as a reference. Adherence to cFN, but not to pFN, differed significantly between PPSA and PNSA strains, specifically on preincubation of wells with cFN at a concentration of 5 μg/mL (table 1). PPSA strains significantly differed from PNSA strains with respect to their type I (P < .001 and P < .01, for 5 and 50 μg/mL, respectively) and type IV (P < .01 and P < .001, for 5 and 50 μg/mL, respectively) collagen- and laminin-binding capacities (P < .01 and P < .01, for 5 and 50 μg/mL, respectively). Fifteen of the 16 PPSA strains bound avidly to type I and IV collagens and laminin (P < .05), compared with only 3 of the 16 PNSA strains (figure 1A–C). The binding capacities of PPSA strains to type IV collagen and laminin were, in general, concentration dependent, although they were already maximal with 5 μg/mL type I collagen. Binding capacities of the strains to type I and IV collagens and laminin were similar and independent of their membership in the PPSA group. After adjusting for PVL, no significant difference was observed between methicillin-sensitive or -resistant isolates and community- or hospital-acquired isolates, in multivariate analysis (P = .4 and P = .9, respectively).

Detection of Adhesin Genes by Use of PCR
To identify the eno (laminin-binding protein) and cna (collagen-binding protein) genes, genomic DNA was extracted from staphylococcal cultures [18] and used as an amplification template for multiplex PCR with primers 5′-ACGTGCAGCAGCT-3′ (ENO-1) and 5′-CAACAGCATYCTTCAGTACCTTCGCACTT-3′ (ENO-2) and 5′-GTAAGCCGATTTAAACCCAGAC-3′ (CNA-1) and 5′-AATCGATATTGTCACCTTGTCCACCTT-3′ (CNA-2), as described elsewhere [19]. The thermal-cycling conditions consisted of an initial denaturation step (5 min at 94°C) followed by 25 cycles of amplification (denaturation for 1 min at 94°C, annealing for 1 min at 55°C, and extension for 1 min at 72°C). The reaction ended with a 10-min incubation step at 72°C. PCR products were analyzed by electrophoresis through 1% agarose gels (Sigma).
Panton-Valentine leukocidin (PVL)-positive *Staphylococcus aureus* (PPSA) and PVL-negative *S. aureus* (PNSA) strains, tested ex vivo and in vitro for their interaction with damaged human airway tissue (A and B) and with primary human airway epithelial cell (HAEC) cultures (C–F). Human bronchi damaged ex vivo were infected with PPSA strain A980557 (A) and PNSA strain LY19990333 (B), and cocci (arrow) were detected by Gram staining. PPSA strains A980557 (C) and LY19990053 (F) and PNSA strains LY19990604 (D) and LY19990084 (E) were further examined in a primary culture model of HAECs, for adherence to both HAECs (asterisk) and the underlying type I collagen matrix on which cells were seeded (double arrow).

Interaction of *S. aureus* clinical isolates with human airway tissue and primary HAEC cultures damaged ex vivo and in vitro. One randomly selected strain from each group (PPSA strain A980557 and PNSA strain LY19990333) was first tested for behavior toward human bronchial tissue damaged ex vivo. Abundant gram-positive cocci were detected on damaged bronchial tissue infected with strain A980557 (figure 2A), especially on areas of exposed basement membrane, whereas few cocci were seen on damaged bronchial tissue infected with strain LY19990333 (figure 2B).

Four PPSA and 5 PNSA strains were then tested for adherence (semiquantified by count of bacteria by microscopy) to HAECs and to the collagen matrix on which the cells were seeded. As summarized in table 3, adherence of PPSA and PNSA strains to HAECs was similar. PPSA strains, compared with PNSA strains, displayed higher affinity for the type I collagen matrix. However, in accordance with ECM-binding experiments performed in 96-well microtiter plates coated with ECM components, PPSA strain A980557 (figure 2C) adhered strongly to the type I collagen matrix, whereas strain LY19990053 (figure
Necrotizing pneumonia isolates (PPSA) LY19990025 + +++ LY19990053 +/- +/- A980557 ++ +++ LY19991509 ++ +++ Non-necrotizing community-acquired pneumonia isolates (PNSA) LY19990004 ++ +++ LY19990084 + +/- LY19990033 ++ +/- LY19990045 + + LY19990096 +/- +/-

NOTE. Four Panton-Valentine leukocidin (PVL)-positive Staphylococcus aureus (PPSA) strains and 5 PVL-negative S. aureus (PNSA) strains, selected for their in vitro affinity for extracellular matrix proteins, were further examined for their adherence phenotype, in an HAEC culture model, by semi-quantified count of bacteria by microscopy. Scanning electron microscopy determined affinity for HAECs and the underlying type I collagen matrix. +++ , very strong affinity; ++, strong affinity; +, medium affinity; +/-, very low affinity.

2F) did not. PNSA strain LY19990064 adhered strongly to type I collagen matrix (figure 2D), whereas strain LY19990084 (figure 2E) adhered weakly.

Effect of PVL on human airway epithelium. Confluent 16HBE140 cell layers exposed to PPSA and PNSA strain supernatants were damaged to equal degrees after 3 h of contact (figure 3A and 3B, respectively), whereas diluted sterile bacterial growth medium had no effect (figure 3C). The presence of PVL in PPSA strain supernatants and its absence in PPSA strain supernatants were verified by Western blot, by use of monoclonal antibodies against LukF-PV (data not shown). Dose kinetic analysis of PPSA or PNSA strain supernatants was performed and did not identify different possible thresholds of concentrations of bacterial overnight-culture supernatant causing epithelial disruption (data not shown). Cells layers exposed to PPSA or PNSA strain supernatants lost their cell-cell contacts, and the cell layers showed exposed basement membrane areas. Such alterations were not observed after the cells were exposed to recombinant LukF (figure 3D) or LukS alone (figure 3E) or in combination (figure 3F), compared with control cells (figure 3G), even after 24 h of exposure, suggesting that PVL itself was not responsible for damaging airway mucosa or exposing basement membrane. Last, we investigated a possible cytotoxic effect of staphylococcal supernatant by measurement of release of LDH by 16HBE140 cells exposed to PPSA and PNSA strain supernatants. No cytotoxic activity was observed when HAECs were exposed to PPSA and PNSA strain supernatants and to recombinant PVL.

DISCUSSION

In the absence of an appropriate animal model of necrotizing pneumonia, we used ex vivo and in vitro models based on HAECs and tissues to investigate how PVL-producing strains associate with the specific bronchial lesions observed during S. aureus necrotizing pneumonia. Our results show ex vivo that PPSA strains are strongly adherent to denuded areas of basement membrane in damaged bronchi and that this behavior can be attributed to strong specific binding to type I and IV collagens and laminin. The presence of the cna gene was significantly associated with collagen binding and, therefore, with PPSA strains, whereas the presence of the ento gene did not correlate with high binding of PPSA strains to laminin. Interestingly, staphylococcal supernatants disrupted the integrity of the airway epithelium, even though recombinant PVL alone did not seem to be directly responsible for this damage. It appears that, compared with PNSA strains, PPSA strains possess additional genetic material, including the lukS-PV lukF-PV and cna genes, that contributes to high virulence during necrotizing pneumonia; however, PVL itself is not responsible for damaging airway mucosa and exposing basement membrane.

Necrotizing pneumonia is preceded by an influenza-like syndrome [6, 9, 10], possibly due to viral infection associated with desquamation of bronchial ciliated cells [20]. Since S. aureus does not adhere to intact airway epithelium but only to damaged or remodelled epithelium [21], viral infection could be a key step in necrotizing pneumonia. We mimicked such bronchial injury by physical damage of human bronchi explants before incubation with S. aureus strains [22]. Both PPSA and PNSA strains adhered, but only PPSA strains adhered to histological lesions in a manner similar to that observed on necropsy specimens from patients with necrotizing pneumonia [6], in particular in areas of denuded basement membrane.

To investigate the molecular mechanisms of adherence of PPSA strains to damaged bronchial tissue, we used SEM to study the binding affinity for primary HAEC cultures seeded on type I collagen. Adherence of PPSA and PNSA strains to epithelial cells was not clearly different, but PPSA strains differed from PNSA strains by their strong binding to denuded areas of type I collagen.

Fibronectin-binding proteins, but not collagen-binding proteins, are thought to account for the ability of S. aureus to adhere to human airway epithelium [23]. Interestingly, we found that the fibronectin-binding capacities of the 2 groups of strains were similar, suggesting that, in necrotizing pneumonia, this FnB-dependent binding capacity does not account for specific traits of the pathological abnormality. PPSA strains showed a higher affinity for type I and IV collagens and laminin than did PNSA strains. Moreover, the cna gene was significantly associated with PPSA strains, and its presence correlated with avid binding to type I and IV collagens. The collagen-binding
Figure 3. Contribution of extracellular products (including Panton-Valentine leukocidin [PVL]) from strains of both groups (PVL-positive *Staphylococcus aureus* [PPSA] and PVL-negative *S. aureus* [PNSA]) to airway epithelial injury. 16HBE140 confluent cell layers were incubated with PPSA (A) and PNSA (B) strain supernatants, compared with control cell cultures (C) exposed to diluted sterile bacterial growth medium after 3 h, and with LukF (D) and LukS alone (E) and in combination (F), compared with control cells (G) exposed for up to 24 h. Loss of the integrity of the airway epithelium (appearance of holes in the cell layer) (arrows) was monitored visually.
activity of *S. aureus* isolates and the presence of the *cna* gene have been associated with only osteomyelitis and arthritis [19, 24]. In addition to the common *S. aureus* core genome, necrotizing pneumonia–associated *S. aureus* appear to have acquired specific pathogenic and epidemic traits, among which the *lukS-PV lukF-PV* and *cna* genes may play an important role. Other PPSA strains associated with furunculosis exhibited neither such ECM binding nor the *cna* gene (data not shown). Conversely, the specific binding of PPSA strains to laminin did not correlate with the presence of the *eno* gene, although the *eno* gene may be differentially regulated in PPSA strains, compared with PNSA strains. From our results, it appears that the *eno* gene is specifically switched on during necrotizing pneumonia. For other MSCRAMM genes, we observed several discrepancies between ECM-binding behavior and the presence of the corresponding MSCRAMM gene (nondetection of the MSCRAMM gene but ECM-binding ability) (data not shown), suggesting that these genes, including the *fnbp* genes, are sufficiently genetically divergent to not be detected by PCR or that other, not-yet-identified MSCRAMM genes account for these ECM-binding properties.

Finally, we examined the possibility that PVL itself contributes to human airway epithelium damage, with which PPSA strains are clearly associated. Although our recombinant PVL was previously shown to be cytotoxic for human leukocytes [14], no PVL-dependent cytotoxicity or alteration in cell confluence was observed on a human bronchial cell line, independent of the concentration or contact time applied. This is in agreement with our hypothesis that the initial lesions in *S. aureus* necrotizing pneumonia are caused by viral infection [6, 9, 10]. In contrast, crude supernatants from both PPSA and PNSA strains induced alteration of cell-cell contact in confluent layers of our human bronchial cell line, pointing to a role for other, non-PVL exoproteins. For instance, protease and α-toxin, which is cytotoxic for epithelial cells [25, 26] and is produced by most *S. aureus* isolates ([27] and data not shown), could be responsible for the airway epithelial alteration observed. Expression of these proteins, like that of most *S. aureus* exoproteins (including toxins such as PVL and exoenzymes), is controlled by a quorum-sensing system called *agr* (accessory gene regulator), which induces their gene expression at high cell density [28]. In necrotizing pneumonia, the high affinity of PPSA strains for type I and IV collagens and laminin may contribute to adherence of numerous cocci to damaged airway epithelium, thereby triggering *agr* activation through the quorum-sensing mechanism and induction of toxin production. Among these toxins, PVL may play a role in extending tissue damage and altering PMN, both of which constitute a key element of the immune response. Finally, host susceptibility is certainly involved in the outcome of PPSA infection, and polymorphism in Toll-like receptor 2 and MyD88 are putative candidates, since they clearly contribute to host susceptibility to *S. aureus* infection in experimental models [29].

In conclusion, our results strongly suggest that necrotizing pneumonia–associated *S. aureus* strains possess a strong ability for formation of biofilm to ECM components, in particular to type I and IV collagens and laminin, which either previous viral infection or non-PVL exoproducts may expose. These properties may lead, via *agr*-dependent production of PVL, to a dramatically altered immune response resulting in the patient’s rapid deterioration and death, as is generally observed for PPSA infection, although not for PNSA infection [6].

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**References**