



Role of JAK inhibitors and immune cells in transplantation

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ABSTRACT

Immunosuppressive challenge after transplantation has dual objectives, namely, to efficiently inhibit immune populations involved in acute, chronic, humoral or cellular transplant rejection while minimizing the effect on immune integrity toward pathogens. The current immunosuppressive strategies show limited efficacy and remain associated with strong side effects, and thus, it is essential to develop new strategies. The use of Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitors is one of the new strategies focusing on cytokine pathways. Specifically, the first-generation JAK inhibitors (JAKis) showed low specificity toward the four known JAK molecules and did not exhibit better effects than calcineurin inhibitors, which constitute the standard treatment posttransplantation. However, because the new generation of JAKis present higher specificity, we are gaining further insights on the response of cells to these inhibitions. This review focuses on the impact of JAKis on different immune cell subsets, focusing on their role in transplantation.

1. Drug development in transplantation.

Kidney transplantation is followed by years of immunosuppressive treatments to prevent transplant rejection, but the currently used strategies induce notable toxicity or secondary disorders [1,2]. At present, calcineurin inhibitors are the most common drug used posttransplantation. However, cyclosporine can affect the cardiovascular, renal, endocrine and metabolic systems and increase the risk of developing skin and lymphoproliferative malignancies [3]. The challenge associated with the development of immunosuppressive therapies is thus clear: in addition to the life-long treatments required for the prevention of graft rejection, we need to introduce new immunosuppressive strategies that exhibit improved efficacy with minimal side effects.

Decreased side effects can be achieved by combining different drugs that inhibit different pathways, which would allow us to reduce the dosage of each drug. A second strategy is to focus on new drugs whose effects are strictly limited to immune cells. Over the last decade, new strategies have emerged, and the first commercialized molecules are already available in the market [1]. These strategies focus on cytokine pathways, which are major components of immune cell communication.

2. JAK family and pathways.

Cytokine signal transduction is mediated by different kinase

pathways, and the main one is the Janus kinase (JAK)/signal transducer and activators of transcription (STAT) pathway [4]. The JAK family comprises four tyrosine kinases (JAK1, JAK2, JAK3 and TYK2), which are composed of a kinase domain with enzymatic activity, a pseudo-kinase domain that regulates the kinase activity and two binding domains, namely, SH2-like and 4.1 ezrin radixin moesin (FERM), which associate with the intracellular domains of 60 cytokine or hematopoietic growth factor receptors [5,6] (Fig. 1). In the JAK/STAT pathway, two or three JAKs form a complex, which results in the autophosphorylation of the JAK molecules and in turn the phosphorylation of their substrate; subsequently, the intracellular domain of the receptor undergoes a conformational change to provide access to the docking site for STATs, which are then phosphorylated upon binding [7,8]. Once activated, STATs dimerize and translocate to the nucleus, where they act as transcription factors to shape the immune response [8] (Fig. 2). However, the JAK-STAT pathway is not the only signal transduction pathway downstream of JAK. Through its SH2 domain, a JAK protein also binds to proteins that recruit MAP kinases or PI3K-AKT through pathways that do not interact with JAK/STAT signaling to induce a different transcriptional profile [9,10]. JAK inhibitors (JAKis) are designed as selective ATP competitive inhibitors that prevent the phosphorylation of STAT without altering its binding abilities [11].

Numerous studies have characterized the JAK-STAT pathways. JAK1 is associated with interferons [12], the IL-6 family (IL-6, IL-11,

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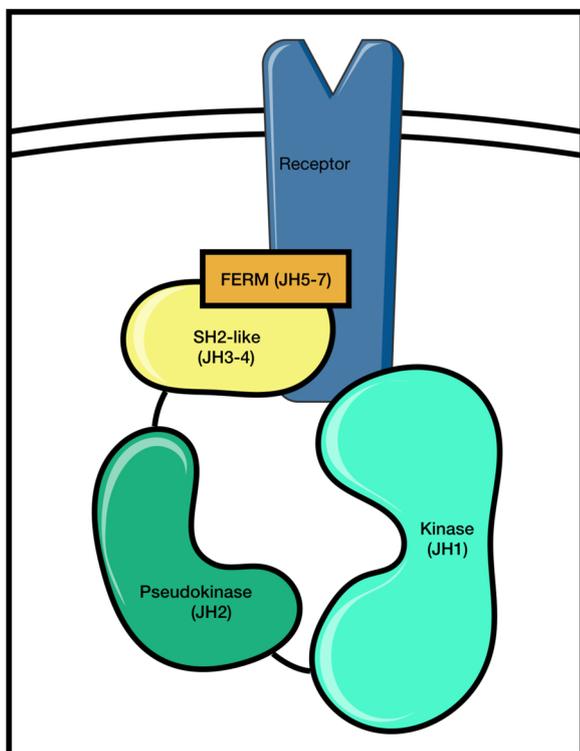


Fig. 1. Structure of the JAK.

Janus kinases are composed of 7 JAK homology domains (JH1-7) associated with the different functions of the molecule: The carboxyl-terminal kinase domain (JH1) carry the enzymatic activity together with the catalytic sites for ATP and substrates. Most JAK inhibitors are competitive inhibitors of ATP. The pseudokinase domain (JH2) has an autoregulatory activity through the phosphorylation of the kinase domain. SH2-like domain (JH3-4) has a similar structure with SH2 domains but does not interact with phosphotyrosines. Associated with the 4.1 Ezrin Radixin Moesin (FERM) domain (JH 5–7), the two N-terminal domains are the receptors binding sites.

ciliary neurotrophic factor (CNTF), leukemia inhibitory factor (LIF), oncostatin M (OSM), cardiotrophin 1 (CT-1), cardiotrophin-like cytokine (CLC), and IL-27) [13], the IL-2 family (IL- 2, IL-4, IL-7, IL-9, IL-15, and IL-21) [14] and the IL-10 family (IL-10, IL-19, IL-20, IL-22, IL-24, and IL-26) [15]. JAK2 is associated with growth factors and hormones (i.e., erythropoietin, thrombopoietin, growth hormone, prolactin,

epidermal growth factor, G-CSF, GM-CSF), interferon (IFN) γ , IL-3, IL-5, the IL-6 family and the IL-12 family (IL-12, IL-23, and IL-27) [16–19]. In contrast, JAK3 is only associated with the γ c chain in lymphoid cells and is thus specific to the IL-2 family [20], and TYK2 is associated with type I interferons (IFN α and IFN β) and the IL-6, IL-10 and IL-12 families [19,21–23,15].

3. Clinical relevance of JAK inhibitor development.

JAKis are small molecules marketed or in development for the treatment of bowel or skin autoimmune diseases (Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis, psoriasis, rheumatoid arthritis), hematological malignancies and graft loss prevention [24]. These molecules are designed to act as ATP competitive inhibitors and show different types of inhibition toward JAKs with more or less stringent specificities. Although treatment with JAKis, such as tofacitinib or baricitinib, has shown efficacy in disease-modifying antirheumatic drug (DMRAD)-unresponsive rheumatoid arthritis [25,26], clinical trials with the low-specificity JAKi tofacitinib have shown a high frequency of infections due to the broad immunosuppressive state [27]. Thus, this JAKi is not superior to cyclosporine in the context of transplantation. After development of the first-generation JAKis, studies have identified new drugs with a more specific profile toward JAKs and a response with the desire to limit the effects to the deficient cells.

JAK1- or JAK2-knockout (KO) mice are perinatally lethal, and JAK3 or TYK2 KO leads to important immune defects [28–30,8]. The role of JAKs in cell signaling makes these kinases important for the biology of several cell types [31]. The administration of therapeutic doses of tofacitinib (approximately 3 μ M) to high-fat diet-fed C57BL/6 mice exerts limited effects and does not alter the body weight or composition (muscle mass and body fat mass), whereas the administration of this JAKi to JAK2-KO, high-fat diet-fed mice results in glucose intolerance and insulin resistance [31]. The administration of tofacitinib to patients with rheumatoid arthritis does not affect the muscle mass but significantly increases the body fat mass [32]. The effects of tofacitinib or another JAKi on another nonhematopoietic disorder have not been described [27].

Different transplant dysfunctions do not present the same immune profile, and the immune profile depends on not only the grafted organ but also the initiation of inflammation, which leads to graft loss. In this paper, we review the effects of JAK/STAT inhibition on different immune cells and their involvement in graft loss prevention. All JAKis reviewed in this paper are listed in Fig. 3 (Fig. 3).

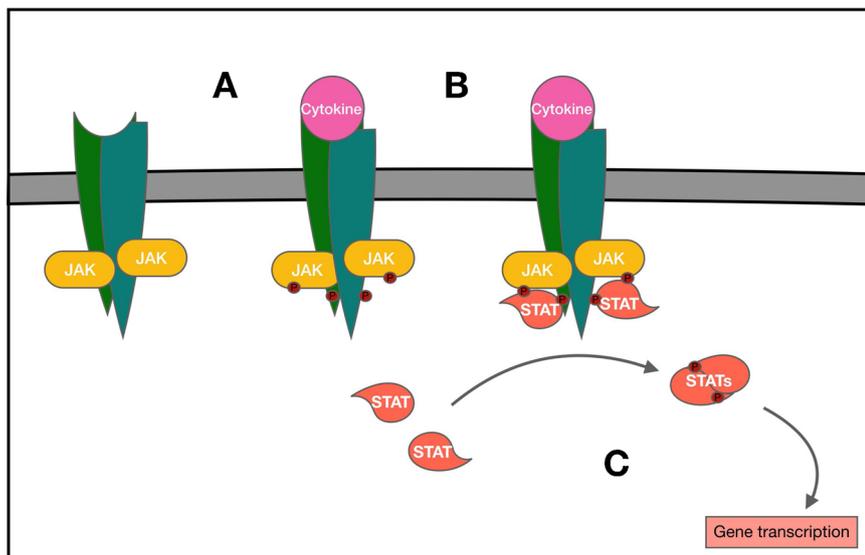


Fig. 2. Cytokine signal transduction through JAK/STAT pathway.

A- Cytokine binding to the receptor results in the autophosphorylation of the Janus Kinases (JAK) which subsequently phosphorylate the intracellular regions of the receptor. B- These phosphorylations reveal docking sites for Signal Transducers and Activators of Transcription (STATs) both on the JAKs and on the receptor subunits. C- STATs are then phosphorylated upon binding. Phosphorylated STATs dimerize and translocate to the nucleus where they act as transcription factors to shape the immune response.

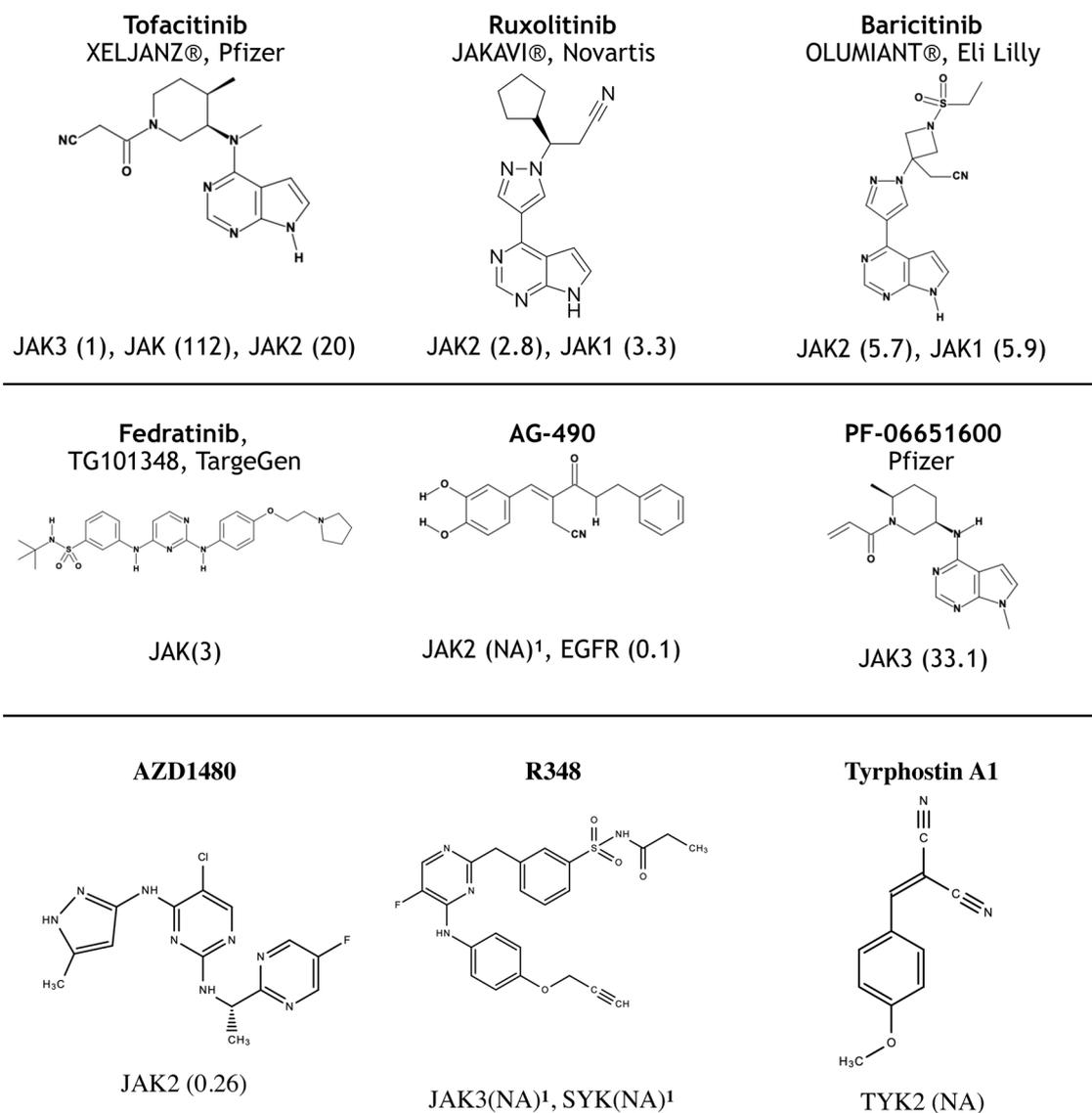


Fig. 3. List of JAK inhibitors reviewed in this paper.

JAK inhibitors as described in the literature (name, commercial name, structure and half max inhibitory concentration (IC_{50}) (nM), IC_{50} were obtained from selleck.com).⁽¹⁾: IC_{50} was not assessed (NA) in a cell-free assay.

4. Hematopoietic stem cells.

The differentiation of hematopoietic stem cells (HSCs) to immune cells is a multi-step program, and the fate of the cells at each intermediate state is tightly regulated by the levels of several cytokines in the environment (interferons and colony-stimulating factors), particularly those associated with the JAK2 pathways, which serve as both stimulatory and inhibitory factors. Therefore, the long-term action of JAKis on bone marrow resident cells impacts all immune cells with low specificity.

The JAK1/JAK2 inhibitor ruxolitinib results in 20% inhibition of JAK2 and STAT5 phosphorylation in CD34+ HSCs from chronic myeloid leukemia patients [33], and this inhibition is characterized by a slight increase in cell death and reduced cell proliferation. After 72 h without treatment, CD34+ cells exhibit an increased recovery over the baseline level (140%). In contrast, the administration of ruxolitinib at clinically relevant doses has a low impact on mesenchymal stem cell proliferation and survival in healthy patients and does not affect their clonogenicity [34]. JAKis exert a potent inhibitory effect on HSCs through the inhibition of JAK2. Ruxolitinib has been approved for the treatment of myeloproliferative neoplasms. The inhibition of HSCs or

other early-stage hematopoietic progenitors is an effective strategy for inhibiting a broad range of unspecific populations of immune cells as well as erythrocytes and platelets [35]. Thus, the blockage of these early populations is not desirable unless these progenitors are involved in the disease (i.e., myelofibrosis).

5. JAKis efficiently inhibits $IFN\gamma$ + CD40L-stimulated DCs but not LPS-stimulated DCs.

Dendritic cells (DCs) are the most potent antigen-presenting cells (in addition to B-cells and macrophages) and act as initiators of the adaptive immune response. Pathogen and danger detection through pattern recognition receptors (e.g., Toll-like receptors) or intrinsic activation (e.g., CD40 L and $IFN\gamma$) induce DC migration to lymph nodes and their functional maturation (decrease of pathogen detection, increase of costimulatory ability and secretion of inflammatory cytokines) [36]. There are two main subsets of DCs: plasmacytoid DCs (pDCs) and conventional DCs (cDCs). pDCs are involved in antiviral or intracellular bacterial responses and induce abundant secretion of type I IFN and other cytokines, such as IL-12 (Th1 activation) and IL-15 (positive feedback), whereas cDCs play important roles in T-cell activation with

higher antigen-presentation activity [37]. Monocytes can also differentiate into a specific DC subset, namely, moDCs, which can efficiently activate the proliferation, cytotoxicity and cytokine production of natural killer (NK) cells and the proliferation and cytokine secretion of Th1 cells through the secretion of IL-2 and IL-12 [37].

In the context of organ transplantation, ischemia reperfusion injury (IRI) is a leading cause of graft failure that involves the induction of alloimmune-specific responses to the graft. Ischemia upregulates several inflammatory cytokines and chemokines and enhances MCH-II and adhesion molecule expression on DCs and epithelial cells. Moreover, dying cells constitute an important source of danger-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs) [38]. In healthy kidney transplanted patients, donor resident DCs in the graft are replaced within 7 days by host DCs, which are responsible for T-cell activation. Even in healthy tissues, host DCs might present alloantigens through cross dressing with donor DCs (donor CHM-peptide presented by recipient DC) [39]. Thus, the post-transplantation graft environment favors DC activation during both the acute and chronic phases of activation, which is necessary for subsequent T-cell activation, and thus, DCs play a role at the early stage of transplant rejection. DCs also have the potential to delay allograft rejection through the secretion of IL-10 and the inhibition of allogenic T- and B-cell proliferation and effector activity when stimulated with mesenchymal stromal cells [40]. Thus, it is important to block intrinsic DC activation without perturbing the generation of naïve DCs.

In IFN γ + CD40L-stimulated moDCs, JAK1 inhibition (using siRNA or ruxolitinib) leads to the downregulation of IL-12 production, whereas in cells stimulated with LPS (TLR4) + IL-1 β , JAK1 inhibition leads to increased expression of IL-12 [41]. On the one hand, JAK1 directly transduces IFN γ signaling through JAK1/JAK2-mediated STAT1 phosphorylation, and this signaling results in the induction of IRF1 and IRF8 transcription and thereby in the induction of IL-12p35 and IL-12p40 transcription. On the other hand, IL-2-stimulated DCs induce STAT3 phosphorylation through the JAK1/JAK3 pathway. STAT3 forms a complex with the transcription factor RELA, and this complex inhibits the transcription of RELA-dependent genes, including IL-12p35 [41] (Fig. 4). Other studies have described tofacitinib as a potent inhibitor of the IFN α pathways because it inhibits its production by single-stranded RNA (TLR7)-stimulated pDCs and the action of IFN α on effector cells [42,43]. These data highlight the potential of JAK1 inhibitors to inhibit DC subsets in the context of transplantation, in

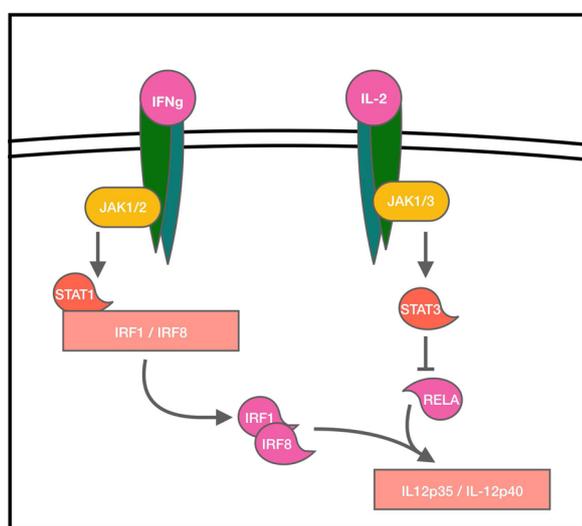


Fig. 4. JAK inhibition may impact opposite pathways.

JAK are overused kinases for cytokine signal transduction. The redundancy between JAK and STAT association led to the implication of the same JAK in both activation and inhibition of a gene transcription. In dendritic cells, JAK1 inhibitors may downregulate IFN γ mediated IL-12 transcription and upregulate its transcription in presence of IL-2.

which DCs are activated by the release of DAMPs combined with proinflammatory cytokines in the graft environment.

6. JAKis mainly affect T-cells through γ C signaling.

T-cells are a wide and heterogeneous population involved in adaptive immunity and play an important role in graft rejection. Moreover, upon activation, T-cells secrete numerous proinflammatory cytokines and chemokines, and these activate other effector cells, thereby amplifying the immune response to the graft.

6.1. Important role of JAK in CD8 + T-cell activation with only minor implications on cell survivability.

CD8 + T-cells are an effector population involved in adaptive cellular immunity. CD8 + T-cell cytotoxicity is mediated through the interaction of FAS with FASL in combination with perforin and granzyme secretion.

The specificity of T-cells is not absolute, and a single TCR can recognize both different peptides and MHC molecules. In the context of transplantation, this cross-reactivity leads to the interaction of TCRs with allogenic cells in a manner similar to that observed with syngeneic cells. EBV- or CMV-specific memory CD8 + T-cells frequently exhibit cross-reactivity toward allogenic MHC class I complexes [44]. IRI induces a massive infiltration of the graft environment by effector-memory CD8 + T-cells that mediate direct and severe injuries [45]. Thus, memory T-cells are a high-priority target of immunosuppressive treatments after transplantation.

A JAK2 inhibitor (AZD1480) has been shown to prevent the IFN γ -induced upregulation of MHC class I in mice and humans and thus reduces the probability of donor cells stimulating alloreactive CD8 + T-cells. In a murine model of autoimmune insulinitis, this inhibition leads to reduced accumulation of CD8 + T-cells in islets [46]. Clinical studies on the effect of tofacitinib in renal allograft recipients observed that this drug has a low impact on the CD8 + cell count and strongly inhibits IL-2 and IL-15 signaling [47,48]. Tofacitinib-induced JAK1/JAK3 inhibition strongly affects γ C cytokine-induced STAT5 phosphorylation in CD8 + cells, an effect that is highly reversed after the treatment is stopped, whereas JAK2 inhibition blocks interferon responses. These data suggest an important role for JAK in CD8 + cell activation with only minor implications on cell survivability.

6.2. JAKi efficiently inhibits effector CD4 + T-cells but not regulatory CD4 + T-cells.

CD4 + T-cells are a highly heterogeneous population that includes Th1, Th2, Th9, Th17, Th22 cells, regulatory CD4 + T-cells (Tregs) and follicular helper T-cells (Tfh cells) differentiated from TCR-activated naïve CD4 + T-cells (Th0 cells). The characteristics of the activated cells depend on the cytokine environment after TCR engagement. CD4 + T-cells play a central role in adaptive immunity, leading to the activation of effector cells depending on the recognized pathogens [49].

6.2.1. Implication of all four JAKs in Th1 functions.

Th1 cells are stimulated by IL-12 and IFN γ produced by innate cells (NK cells, DCs and macrophages) [49]. This cytokine stimulation leads to the activation of STAT1, which in turn activates a second transcription factor, T-bet [50]. Th1 cells are a source of IFN γ and IL-2, which serve as diverse mediators of inflammation by increasing IgG production [51] and the proliferation and activation of cytotoxic lymphoid cells [52,53], macrophages [54] and DCs [55]. All four JAKs play important roles in the development of Th1 cells in a nonredundant manner through the IL-2, IL-12 or IFN γ pathways.

The implication of Th1 cells in transplant rejection has been widely assessed [56–58]. Alloreactive Th1 cells produce IL-2 to enhance the proliferation of primed cytotoxic CD8 + T cells, which in turn induce

positive feedback through the production of IFN γ . Different types of JAKis efficiently block CD4⁺ IFN γ ⁺ (Th1) cell differentiation. Tofacitinib reduces IFN γ mRNA production in human CD4⁺ T-cells stimulated in vitro with anti-CD3/anti-CD28 antibodies and IL-2 [59]. Tofacitinib also significantly reduces Th1 differentiation in the spleen of arthritis rats [60]. The JAK1/2 inhibitor ruxolitinib reduces the expression of the Th1-related cytokines IFN γ and IL-12 in a rheumatoid arthritis rat model by 55–80% [61]. The more selective JAK3 inhibition obtained with PF-06651600 or R348 has also been shown to block Th1-mediated IFN γ production in healthy human volunteers [62] and in a murine cardiac allograft model [63].

6.2.2. Pan-JAKi, but not JAK3i, inhibits Th2 cell generation.

Th2 cells are stimulated in the presence of IL-2 and IL-4 and are an important source of IL-4, IL-5 and IL-13, which are mediators of humoral immunity (immunoglobulin (Ig) class switch to IgM, IgA, and IgE, eosinophil activation, and T-cell proliferation) [64]. Th2 stimulation is also dependent on different JAKs: both IL-2R and IL-4R activation engage JAK1 and JAK3, whereas IL-5 activation is dependent on JAK2 [65]. In addition, the IL-13 receptor is associated with JAK1, JAK2 and TYK2, but only JAK1-specific inhibition leads to the downregulation of STAT6 phosphorylation [66]. Clinical studies in kidney transplantation have shown that during acute rejection, only 2% of CD4⁺ T-cells that invaded the graft show a Th2 secretion profile [67], indicating a minimal role for Th2 cells in acute rejection compared with that of Th1 cells. However, an analysis of mRNA collected from kidney biopsies exhibiting chronic rejection reveals a preference toward a Th2 over a Th1 profile [68]. Because the differentiation to Th2 cells is mediated by IL-2 and IL-4, which requires the γ c chain and the JAK1/JAK3 dimer, their inhibition with tofacitinib efficiently modulates the generation of Th2 cells in healthy individuals [69]. However, the specific inhibition of JAK3 by R348 fails to significantly inhibit IL-4 secretion in a murine cardiac allograft model [63]. These data highlight the dominant role of JAK1 over JAK3 in γ c cytokine signal transduction, as described by Haan [70].

JAK3is reduce FoxP3 expression, resulting in cells with still a regulatory phenotype and JAK2is enhance regulatory functions.

Tregs are suppressive cells characterized by the transcription factor forkhead box P3 (FoxP3) [71] that act as a negative feedback for immune responses through the production of IL-10 and TGF β (i.e., FoxP3) [71], an antiproliferative effect, and the downregulation of proinflammatory cytokines, chemokines, MHC II and costimulatory molecules) [72]. Tregs constitute a heterogeneous population. Natural (n) Tregs acquire their regulatory phenotype through thymic development, whereas adaptive Tregs are generated in the periphery from Th0 cells in the presence of TGF β [73]. IL-2 reinforces this signal through pSTAT5 induction, which in turn enhances FoxP3 production, and IL-10 is known to induce STAT3 phosphorylation and regulate Th17 proinflammatory responses [74,75]. The specific in vitro inhibition of JAK2 achieved with TG101348 increases the ratio of Tregs to effector T-cells in healthy human donors [76]. An in vitro assay of mouse autoimmune arthritis revealed that AG-490, a JAK2 inhibitor, enhances FoxP3 expression under inflammatory conditions (anti-CD3, anti-CD-28, anti-IFN γ , anti-IL-4, TGF β and IL-6) [77]. JAK2 mediates STAT3 phosphorylation, which negatively regulates STAT5 phosphorylation. JAK2 inhibitors have been shown to eliminate STAT3 activity mediated by inflammatory cytokines (IL-6) [77,78] to potentially increase IL-2 and subsequent Treg activity. In type 1 diabetic NOD mice, specific inhibitors of JAK3 efficiently inhibit IL-2 signaling and significantly reduce the nTreg (CD25⁺ FoxP3⁺) population, confirming the essential role of the IL-2/JAK3/STAT5 pathway in Treg activation [79]. However, the cells generated in the absence of IL-2 signaling in pro-Treg conditions (IL-10 and TGF β) secrete elevated levels of TGF β and IL-10, which are two common Treg cytokines [79]. Overall, JAKis do not affect the in vivo activity of Tregs, which show active production of their signature cytokines.

6.2.3. JAKi preferentially inhibits pathogenic IL-23, IL-6 and IL-1 β -induced Th17.

Th17 cells can be stimulated by TGF β and IL-6 but can also be produced in the presence of IL-23, IL-6 and IL-1 β [80]. The cells can secrete IL-2, IL-17A-F and IL-22, but more than 2000 genes are differentially expressed. This difference shows that IL-23-, IL-6- and IL-1 β -generated Th17 cells show increased pathogenicity. In both conditions, IL-23 is required for the secretion of IL-17 and IL-22 by Th17 cells [80]. Th17 cells participate in acute transplant rejection by recruiting neutrophils into the graft through the secretion of IL-17 via a JAK-independent pathway [81]. TGF β -induced Th17 cells show less dependency on Tregs upon JAK activation. Experimental results from mice administered tofacitinib revealed an increased proliferation of TGF β - and IL-17-producing cells after stimulation with both TGF β and IL-6. This increase in Th17 differentiation is explained by the inhibition of the IL-2 pathway, which effects a negative feedback effect on this population. In contrast, tofacitinib suppresses the generation of Th17 cells generated in the presence of IL-23, IL-6 and IL-1 β [50]. A high concentration of the Tyk2 inhibitor tyrphostin A1 (50 mg/kg) in a mouse model significantly reduces IL-23 and IL-17 production [82].

6.2.4. IL-22 and IL-9 inhibit JAK dependent proinflammatory cytokines.

Th22 cells are a less-known T-cell population defined as CD4⁺ T-cells that produce IL-22 and TNF α but not IL-17, IL-4 or IFN γ and exhibit skin-homing properties [83]. Naïve CD4⁺ T-cells differentiate into Th22 cells in the presence of IL-6 and TNF α [83,84]. There is little information on the importance of Th22 cells compared with other IL-22-producing cells in transplant rejection. Th22 cells are dependent on TNF α , which has been implicated in the pathogenesis of acute and chronic transplant rejection [85,86], but no Th22 cells have been shown to infiltrate transplanted organs. IL-22 is secreted by many cell types, including Th22 cells and other helper T-cells (Th1, Th2, and Th17), innate lymphoid cells (ILCs), monocytes and macrophages. IL-22-knockdown mice show accelerated rejection of heart allografts, revealing the anti-inflammatory role of this cytokine in transplantation [87]. The anti-inflammatory properties of IL-22 have been described in an autoimmune myocarditis rat model [88]. IL-22 inhibits the IL-1-mediated upregulation of prostaglandin synthetases, IL-6, COX2, MIP-2, MCP-1 and CINC-2. The inhibition of IL-22 signaling by JAKis reinforces the action of IL-1 but does not induce direct damage to the graft [89–92]. The information associated with Th9 cells is similar to that associated with Th22 cells. Few studies have focused on Th9 cells in the context of transplantation, and their role is thus uncertain. Th9 cells are one of many IL-9-secreting cells, similarly to Th2 and Th17 cells, Tregs, NKT cells and mast cells [93]. Similar to IL-22, IL-9 inhibition during IRI significantly augments the structural damage in the kidneys of transplanted mice [94]. IL-9 is a member of the IL-2 family of cytokines that share the γ c chain and requires JAK1/JAK3 signaling [93]. IL-9 and IL-22 are thus tolerogenic cytokines through the inhibition of several pro-inflammatory factors whose activation is also dependent on JAKs. Thus, the overall activator or inhibitory role of JAKis in these factors should be investigated.

6.2.5. Tfh cells constitute an effective strategy for inhibiting B-cell generation in germinal centers.

Tfh cells are generated from primed naïve T-cells in the presence of IL-6 and IL-21 but are negatively regulated by IL-2 and IL-7 through IL-6Ra downregulation [95]. Other cytokines, such as IL-12 and TGF- β , have been shown to potentiate Tfh differentiation [96,97]. The expression of CXCR5 induces their migration in the germinal centers (GCs) of lymphoid organs [98]. Tfh cell activation in GCs is dependent on TCR engagement and costimulatory signals provided by cognate B-cells [99]. Tfh cells are involved in B-cell-mediated immunity by activating B lymphocyte differentiation into plasmablasts and IgG and IgM production through the secretion of IL-21 and IL-4 [100,101]. Three months after kidney transplantation, the number of peripheral Tfh cells

remains stable in patients with no pre-existing donor-specific antigens (DSAs), whereas the Tfh count in sensitized patients is increased [102]. A previous study showed that B-cells require the direct binding of Tfh cells with donor antigen-presenting cells to efficiently induce IgG and IgM production in B-cells [103]. The inhibition of B-cells by CD20 inhibition does not increase the transplant survival rate of model mice [104], whereas treatments targeting Tfh cells with CD40, IL-21 or IL-21R antagonists efficiently reduce DSA production [100,102,105]. Tfh cells have regulatory equivalents (Tfr cells) derived from Tregs expressing CXCR5 [106]. These results indicate the potential of JAKis for inhibiting B-cell activation in the context of transplantation through the establishment of a tolerogenic background in lymph node GCs.

The blockade of STAT3 significantly reduces both the count and the activity of Tfh cells *in vivo*, resulting in impaired activation of B-cells and the production of Ig [107]. Thus, JAKis might act on these cells. Tofacitinib downregulates the Tfh cell count and activity without inhibiting the Tfr cell population in a rat model of experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE) [108].

Altogether, these data show the importance of JAK-dependent cytokines in the biology of T-cells. All T-cells are dependent on IL-2 to proliferate and express their defining transcription factors. Thus, JAK1 and JAK3 inhibitors efficiently block non-specific T cell activation.

7. JAKis do not affect Naïve B-cell generation.

B-cells comprise the main population of cells involved in adaptive humoral immunity by producing soluble Ig molecules, which are also known as antibodies and specifically target threatening antigens [109]. Their development from a common lymphocyte progenitor in the bone marrow requires the expression of three JAK-dependent cytokines, namely, thymic stromal lymphopoietin (TSLP), IL-7 and stem cell factor (SCF) [110–112]. The main function of B-cells is the release of antigen-specific antibodies that can activate the complement system and antibody-dependent cell cytotoxicity (ADCC) [113,114]. In addition, B-cells can also internalize pathogens recognized by their B-cell receptor (BCR) and then present peptides on MHC II to activate cognate T cells [114,115]. Once generated in the bone marrow, immature B-cells migrate to secondary lymphoid organs to form naïve marginal zone B-cells (MZB) or follicular B-cells. Despite the implication of several IL-2 family cytokines in B-cell development, JAK3 loss-of-function mutations inhibit T-cell development but do not affect B-cell compartments [29].

7.1. T-cell-independent activation is not increased in transplantation.

T-cell independent antigens activate BCR signaling in MZB cells. The signaling downstream of BCRs and TLRs/IL-1 induces strong IgM secretion independent of JAK [116,117]. Thus, JAKis should not target bacterial and viral TLR-dependent responses [118]. These T-cell-independent B-cell stimulations remain minor in allograft transplantation [119].

7.2. Follicular and memory B-cells generate plasma cells in transplantation.

T-cell-dependent antigens activate follicular B-cells [118]. In the context of transplantation, host naïve circulating B-cells recognize DSAs from graft endothelial cells [120]. Primed B-cells internalize DSAs through phagocytosis and present them via MHC class II. These cells enter the B-follicle, and through cytokinic crosstalk with Tfh cells (IL-4, IL-5, IL-6, IL-21 and BAFF) and cell-cell interactions, the cells undergo massive proliferation to form long-lived memory cells in GCs and antibody-secreting plasma cells. [121,122]. Plasma cells secrete DSA-specific Ig that cause injury to the endothelium through the complement pathway, antibody-dependent cell cytotoxicity (ADCC) and the recruitment of inflammatory cells (monocytes/macrophages, NK cells and neutrophils) by binding to the Fc portion of DSAs [123,119].

Memory B cells are long-lived quiescent cells that are generated

from activated GC cells during the primary immune response and are programmed through epigenetic mechanisms to rapidly differentiate into antibody-secreting plasma cells [118]. Donor-specific memory B-cells can be expressed by recipients after pre-graft sensitization (blood perfusion, during pregnancy or from a previous transplantation) [124,120]. Thus, it is more important to block memory B-cell activation than to block their generation. The differentiation of memory B-cells to plasma cells is restricted to the expression of Blimp1, the absence of the memory subset and the inhibition of BACH2, which repress the transcription of Blimp1 [125].

7.3. Plasma cell-determining genes are downregulated by JAKis.

Plasma cells are terminally differentiated, nondividing B-cells that arise from activated naïve or memory B-cells that produce high amounts of antibodies. The activation of both naïve and memory cells requires BCR, CD40 L and cytokine signals (IL-21) that converge to activate Blimp1 [126]. However, the cytokinic threshold is lower in the memory subset than in the naïve subset. Thus, higher concentrations of the inhibitor are required to efficiently block memory B-cell activation [127,100]. The JAKis baricitinib and tofacitinib efficiently induce dose-dependent inhibition of the transcription of plasmablast-determining genes (Blimp-1, Xbp-1 and IRF-4) downstream of STAT3 in humans and inhibit the production of IL-6 [128,129].

Class switching is an important feature of B-cells, which allows diversification of the effector functions of the generated antibodies (cell surface receptor binding, polymerization, and tissue diffusion). Class switching is initiated by CD40 L and/or TLR stimulation, and the isotype is determined by the cytokine background [130]. In mice, class switching to IgG or IgA is not affected by tofacitinib *in vitro* [129].

7.4. The JAK2 inhibitor suppresses the secretion of IL-10 from tolerogenic regulatory B-cells (Bregs).

Bregs are a regulatory cell population capable of producing anti-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-10 [131], granzyme B [132], IL-35 [133] and TGF- β [134]. Bregs regulate inflammation through various mechanisms, such as the induction of FoxP3 expression in CD4 + T-cells to promote the T-reg phenotype [135] and the induction of effector T- and B-cell apoptosis [136,137]. Lee et al. showed the role of Bregs in graft tolerance through the adoptive transfer of anti-CD45RB plus anti-TIM-1-treated B-cells exhibiting regulatory activity into B-cell-deficient mice, which resulted in an increased graft survival to more than 100 days, whereas the adoptive transfer of naïve B-cells had no effect [138]. Clinical evidence from human trials associates tolerance with increased frequencies of circulating Bregs [139,140]. The induction of IL-10-producing Bregs requires interaction with CD40 [141]. Among the CD40-induced signals, the JAK3-STAT3 pathway is known to induce IL-10 gene expression [142]. Autocrine IL-10-induced JAK1/JAK2-STAT3 signaling is also important for sending positive feedback signals to Bregs [143]. The JAKi AG490 suppresses the generation of CD40 + hiCD5 + Bregs [143]. TYK2 is phosphorylated in response to IL-10 stimulation, but TYK2-/- mice are responsive to IL-10 [144]. In conclusion, the use of JAKis that inhibit the JAK3-STAT3 or JAK1/JAK2-STAT3 pathways is not a good strategy in the context of transplantation because these pathways induce the generation of both effector plasma cells and tolerogenic Bregs. In contrast, the use of TYK2 inhibitors would be more appropriate to avoid impacting the secretion of IL-10 by Bregs [144].

8. JAKis block innate lymphoid cell (ILC) differentiation from progenitors and ILC1 but not ILC2 and ILC3 function.

ILCs constitute a broad lymphocyte population that can be considered an antigen-independent version of T-cells with similar transcription factors, cytokine activation and secretion profiles. NK cells are

the innate counterpart of CD8 + T-cells and the most studied ILC. Three groups of ILCs called ILC1, ILC2 and ILC3 reproduce the action of Th1, Th2 and Th17 cells because they show similar cytokine activation and secretion profiles [145]. NK cells are a subpopulation of ILC1, the innate counterpart of CD8 + T-cells and the most studied ILCs [146].

NK cells constitute the main cytotoxic population of the innate immune system that has been implicated in malignant and virus-infected cell recognition and death. NK cell cytotoxicity is dependent on the balance between numerous NK receptors (NKR), which dictate NK cell-targeted lysis. Inhibitory receptors allow the avoidance of cytotoxicity toward self-cells such that NK cells can differentiate self from nonself (increased activation of activating receptors) and missing-self (decreased activation of inhibitory receptors). These receptors are independent of JAKs, but the response of NK cells needs to be triggered by interactions with IL-12 and IL-15 from activated macrophages or DCs [147]. In addition to their cytotoxic role, NK cells are important due to their ability to produce cytokines (mainly IFN γ and TNF α) during the early phases of infections that connect innate and adaptive immunity. IFN γ production by NK cells is dependent on both IL-12 and TLR stimulation [148]. NK cells are one of the immune populations that were first associated with transplant rejection in both cell- and antibody-mediated rejection [149]. In rat models of heart transplant rejection, NK cells infiltrate the graft environment within 3 h after reperfusion [150]. In humoral rejection, NK cells are an important source of IFN γ for B-cell differentiation, and NK cell-B-cell interactions trigger Ig class switching and secretion in the absence of any other stimulation [151]. In addition to this B-cell activator role, NK cells directly induce microvascular injuries through ADCC [152].

Tofacitinib significantly reduces the peripheral NK cell number in kidney transplanted patients [153]. JAK3 KO or the use of the JAKs tofacitinib and PF-06651600 is associated with the blockade of pre-NK cell progenitors and ILC progenitor maturation in a mouse model, and this deficiency has been attributed to a loss of IL-15 signaling [154]. Experimental evidence shows that tofacitinib inhibits the ILC1 production of IFN γ and yields better results than the JAK3-specific inhibitor, indicating synergy between JAK3 and JAK1 or JAK2 inhibition. Tofacitinib exerts no effect on ILC2 and ILC3 function (i.e., IL-5 production by ILC2 and IL-22 production by ILC3) [154].

9. JAKis can efficiently block neutrophils and eosinophils but not basophils.

Neutrophils are the first population of cells to infiltrate transplanted organs, and this infiltration occurs within 30 min after reperfusion [155]. These cells are recruited by cytokines (IL-1 β and CXCL8 in humans) secreted by resident macrophages, and this recruitment combined with DAMPs induces the expression of reactive oxygen species (ROS) in neutrophils that directly participate in graft damage [155]. In addition to direct damage, neutrophils also participate in T-cell stimulation: they migrate to lymph nodes and express MHC and costimulatory signals to present antigens to CD8+ or CD4 + T-cells [156]. In murine transplantation models, neutrophil depletion induces slower cellular rejection, showing the importance of these cells in promoting alloimmune T-cell responses [157]. Another study using a murine model of transplantation revealed the same role for neutrophils in acute antibody-mediated rejection with prolonged graft survival [158]. In chronic rejection, neutrophilia might be explained by the activation of IL-17-producing cells, which are known to be potent drivers of both neutrophil recruitment and activation. Tofacitinib and ruxolitinib reduce inflammation and the neutrophil percentage in rats and humans with neutrophilic asthma [159,160].

Eosinophils are one of the ADCC effector cells that also participate in plasma cell maintenance through cytokine secretion. In transplantation, eosinophils are recruited by IL-5 secreted from Th2 cells and are associated with graft fibrosis [161], and eosinophilia has been shown to be a poor prognosis factor [162]. However, murine models of

eosinophil-depleted heart transplantation show no reduction in DSA secretion [163]. Thus, these data suggest that eosinophils have a more important role in cellular rejection than in antibody-mediated rejection. The activation and survival of eosinophils are dependent on IL-5 and IFN γ , which are JAK2-dependent cytokines that are efficiently inhibited by AG-490 or ruxolitinib in humans and mice with eosinophilic asthma [164,160].

An analysis of murine cardiac allografts revealed that basophils induce fibrosis in the allografts [165]. Fibrosis is associated with two features of basophils: histamine release and IL-4 secretion. Thus, the depletion in basophils induces a reduction in fibrotic organ remodeling [165,166], but a clinical trial of the pan-JAKi tofacitinib did not show a dose-dependent basophil reduction after 12 weeks of psoriasis treatment [167].

10. JAK1/STAT1 inhibition favors pro-regenerative M2 macrophages over inflammatory M1 macrophages.

Macrophages are tissue-infiltrating antigen-presenting cells derived from circulating monocytes whose main function is phagocytosis. Two different activation states have been described: M1 macrophages are induced by IFN γ , LPS and TNF α , which show pro-inflammatory and cytotoxic activity, and M2 macrophage differentiation is induced by IL-4 and IL-13, which show anti-inflammatory activity. Previous studies have implicated macrophages in both acute and chronic rejection [168,169]. Other studies [170–173] have also shown the importance of M2 macrophages in graft regeneration after IRI in both mouse models and humans. In human macrophages, ruxolitinib inhibits 61.4% of LPS-induced genes, including IL-6 and TNF α , but not IL-12B, GM-CSF, CCL20, CXCL2 and IL-1 β . This inhibition is not directly associated with LPS signaling, but IFN β autocrine secretion most likely enhances the expression of LPS-induced genes [174]. The effects of JAKis on M2 macrophages have not been described, but suppressor of cytokine signaling 1 (SOCS1)-mediated JAK1/STAT1 inhibition has been shown to favor the M2 phenotype [175].

11. Ruxolitinib inhibits proinflammatory secretion from mast cells.

Mast cells are epithelium-resident effector cells that have been implicated in bacterial and parasitic infections and allergic reactions. Mast cell activation by IgE through Fc ϵ RI or PRR triggers their degranulation in association with a massive release of immune mediators, including histamine. Mast cell responses can be positively modulated by various inflammatory mediators, including hypoxia and cytokines (SCF, IL-3, IL-4, IL-9 and, to a lesser extent, IL-5, IL-6 and GM-CSF) [176]. Mast cells can in turn secrete various cytokines depending on the immunological environment, such as the levels of IL-1 β , IL-3–6, IL-10 and IL-13, TNF α , IFN α , GM-CSF, FGF and TGF β . Thus, through their secretory profile, mast cells participate in both inflammation and regulatory processes. Mast cells show increased activation in lung transplantation than in other solid organ transplantation due to the constant exposure of the lungs to airborne antigens. Several studies have noted a role for mast cells in IRI [177,178]. The treatment of human mast cell lines with ruxolitinib in the presence of substance P or codeine efficiently inhibits their degranulation and production of IL-6, TNF α and CCL2 in a dose-dependent manner [179]; however, the researchers did not assess the impact of ruxolitinib on the anti-inflammatory profile of mast cells.

12. Conclusions

This review summarizes the role of immune cell populations in transplantation and their modulation by JAKis. The literature does not cover the impact of each specific JAK inhibition on all populations, and thus, even if JAKs form part of major signaling pathways in these cells,

it is nearly impossible to predict their role. Indeed, we have to consider the redundancy of the interactions among cytokine receptors, JAK and STAT combined with the massive interplay between all types of immune cells. JAKi-driven immunosuppression is a promising strategy for the treatment of conventional DMRAD-resistant diseases. Thus, the characterization of the immunosuppressive profiles induced by different types of JAKis is an essential step for obtaining a better understanding of the treatments and for proposing the most appropriate immunosuppressive strategies according to each pathology. To the best of our knowledge, although some families of JAK1 inhibitors have been described in the literature, there are no data on the effects of JAK1-specific inhibitors on immune cells [180,181]. JAK2 inhibition, alone or combined with the inhibition of JAK1 by ruxolitinib, mainly interacts with hematopoietic progenitors and myeloid cells (neutrophils, eosinophils, macrophages and mast cells) and mostly affects the Th1 subset and IFN pathways. JAK3 is the only tissue-specific JAK, but the effects of its inhibition are not limited to lymphoid cells. JAK3 inhibitors efficiently block helper T-cell activation through IL-2 and IL-4 and thus inhibit the subsequent production of cytokines, including IFN γ and IL-5, required by myeloid cells. Tyk2 is a less-studied JAK whose action is more limited, particularly to IL-12/IL-23 and type I interferons.

As shown in B-cells, the activation of effector and tolerogenic regulatory cells might be induced through the same JAK/STAT pathways. Under these conditions, it is impossible to select a JAKi that will act on only one subset to favor graft tolerance. Reduced JAKi doses can reduce their impact on regulatory subsets by inducing only partial direct inhibition of B-regs. In effector subsets, reduced JAKi doses combine partial direct inhibition with the inhibition of upstream signaling such as Tfh and Tfr cells.

The ultimate goal in transplantation is to achieve graft tolerance in the most effective way possible, which involves the selection and inhibition of alloimmunity without interrupting the anti-pathogen defense responses. These two mechanisms are mediated by the same cells, and higher sensitivity is associated with reduced specificity to alloimmune responses. In this review, we highlight the implication of nearly all effector subsets in cellular or humoral graft rejection. The inhibition of JAK disrupts cell communication without affecting effector functions, which results in the strong recovery of the latent immune populations after drug elimination [182]. This lack of cell communication induces apoptosis in immune cells. JAKi-mediated apoptosis is inhibited in TLR-stimulated antigen-presenting cells [42], showing that the JAK/STAT pathways and JAKis play less important roles in TLR-mediated bacterial and antiviral responses than in cytokine-stimulated cell activation.

Authorship and conflict-of-interest statements

All authors participated in the writing of this review. This review was written in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Jean-Michel Robert: is professor in medicinal chemistry and drug discovery. He leads researches based on the development of PI3K and JAK inhibitors and pro-apoptosis molecules for cancer therapy.



Carole Brosseau (PhD): joined Sophie Brouard's team to characterize B lymphocyte signature in chronic lung allograft dysfunction and to characterize CD9+ regulatory B cells induction of effector T cell apoptosis as a new therapeutic strategy for severe asthma.