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Low Antibody Levels against Cell Wall–Attached Proteins of Streptococcus pyogenes Predispose for Severe Invasive Disease

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Acute-phase serum samples from 70 patients with group A streptococcal (GAS) invasive disease were analyzed for IgG antibodies against 6 recently characterized GAS virulence factors (SclA, SclB, GRAB, MtsA, EndoS, and IdeS) and SpeB. Antibody levels against the cell wall–attached GAS antigens SclA, SclB, and GRAB were significantly lower in patients with severe invasive disease (streptococcal toxic shock syndrome [STSS] and/or necrotizing fasciitis [NF]; n = 35), compared with levels in patients with nonsevere GAS bacteremia (n = 35). Among patients with severe invasive disease, significantly lower antibody levels against GRAB were found in patients with STSS (n = 10) than in patients with NF (n = 17). Antibody levels against SpeB in patients with severe bacteremia were similar to those in patients with nonsevere bacteremia, and levels in patients with STSS were similar to those in patients with NF. The data indicate that immunity to cell wall–attached proteins may play a role in the protection against severe invasive disease and that antibodies against GRAB may be of importance in the pathogenesis of STSS.

Human infections due to Streptococcus pyogenes, or group A streptococcus (GAS), may vary from relatively harmless infections, such as impetigo or pharyngotonsillitis, to severe invasive disease complicated by shock and multiorgan failure, such as streptococcal toxic shock syndrome (STSS) or necrotizing fasciitis (NF). During the late 1980s, there was a marked worldwide increase in the prevalence of serious invasive GAS disease, and the higher incidence has persisted [1–5]. The reason for the resurgence of invasive GAS infections is still unknown. However, it is likely due to a combination of the emergence of more-virulent strains and the lack of protective immunity in the population.

Recently, a number of novel potential GAS virulence factors have been characterized. The cell wall–attached GRAB has been shown to bind the human proteinase inhibitor α2-macroglobulin [6]. By protecting bacterial surface components from proteolytic attack, GRAB might act as a virulence factor. SclA and SclB are 2 related cell wall–attached proteins that contain large regions similar to human collagen [7–11]. The NH2-termini of both SclA and SclB are hypervariable, whereas the collagen-like regions are more conserved between proteins from different strains. Both SclA [7] and SclB [10] have been shown to increase streptococcal adherence to human cells. For the transmembrane influx of metal ions—such as Zn, Fe, and Cu—GAS is dependent on a membrane-associated protein complex. The lipoprotein component of the complex, MtsA, is needed for a sufficient uptake of metal ions [12] and for the normal growth of the bacteria in vitro [13]. EndoS and IdeS represent 2 secreted GAS enzymes that have specific effects on IgG [14–16]. EndoS removes the glycan moi-
ety from IgG and is thus able to alter the functionality of an opsonizing antibody. This leads to increased survival of bacteria in human blood ex vivo, because of impaired binding of Fc receptor [17]. IdeS is a secreted cysteine proteinase that cleaves IgG in the hinge region with a high degree of specificity. IdeS has been shown to cleave opsonizing IgG antibodies bound to streptococcal surface structures, thereby inhibiting Fc-mediated killing of GAS by phagocytic cells [16, 18].

The described novel GAS proteins all have functions that could influence virulence, and experimental data have shown that they affect bacterial adherence, multiplication, and survival. In the present study, the specific immunity to these antigens, and also to the well-characterized GAS cysteine proteinase (SpeB), was investigated in patients with invasive GAS disease.

**SUBJECTS, MATERIALS, AND METHODS**

**Patients and serum samples.** Serum samples were obtained from patients and from healthy individuals in Sweden and The Netherlands. The Swedish patients (n = 34) were treated for GAS bacteremia at the Clinic for Infectious Diseases, Lund University Hospital, Lund, Sweden, from 1990 to 2002. Patients from The Netherlands (n = 36) were part of a nationwide surveillance program conducted from 1994 to 1997 and have been described elsewhere [19]. The median and mean ages of the patients were both 50 years, (range, 0–82 years), and the male:female ratio was 34:36; all values were similar for Swedish and Dutch patients. Four individuals were <15 years old. GAS was isolated from a normally sterile site in all patients; 64 isolates were obtained from blood cultures, and 6 were obtained from a deep tissue infection. Patients were subdivided on the basis of their having either severe or nonsevere invasive infections, which was determined on the basis of the clinical course [20]. Severe infection, defined as bacteremia complicated by STSS (n = 10), NF (n = 17), or STSS with NF (n = 8), was present in 35 patients. Patients with nonsevere infection (n = 35) had no signs of hypotension, organ failure, or deep tissue involvement. The median ages were 49 and 51 years, and the male:female ratios were 16:19 and 18:17, in the groups of patients with severe and nonsevere infection, respectively. An extensive history of disease was available from 58 of the patients. Fifteen of these were considered to have an underlying chronic disease likely to affect their immune status. These included diabetes mellitus (n = 4), rheumatoid arthritis (n = 3), ongoing malignant disease (n = 3), intravenous drug use (n = 3), and chronic use of corticosteroids (n = 2). Serum samples were obtained up to day 10 (mean and median, day 3.6) after onset of disease symptoms and were stored at −70°C until analysis. Additionally, control serum samples from healthy individuals were obtained from 40 Dutch and from 40 Swedish blood donors. The median and mean ages of the blood donors were 41 and 42 years, respectively (range, 19–69 years), and the male:female ratio was 42:38. The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Lund University.

**Microbiology.** The M serotype of Swedish streptococcal strains was determined by sequencing of *emm* gene–specific polymerase chain reaction (PCR) products (*emm* typing). For PCR amplification of *emm* genes, template DNA was prepared by boiling *S. pyogenes* bacteria in sterile water. The cell debris were removed by centrifugation, and 5 μL of the boiled lysate was used with *emm*-specific primers (primer 1, 5′-TATT(C/G)GCTTAGAAAATTAA-3′; primer 2, 5′-GCAAGTTCTTCA-GCTTGGTTT-3′), as described elsewhere [21]. Sequences obtained from *emm*-specific PCR products were subjected to homology searches in the *emm* sequence database at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (available at: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/biotech/strep/strepindex.html). Isolates from The Netherlands were analyzed for M serotype, as described elsewhere [19].

**Proteins and peptides.** The proteins used in the present study are briefly described in table 1. The predicted mature GRAB was produced by cloning of *grab* from the GAS serotype M1 strain KTL3 [6] into the pET11d vector (Amersham-Phar-macia Biotech). The resulting plasmid was introduced into *Escherichia coli* (BL21; Amersham-Pharmacia Biotech), and trans...
formants were grown at 37°C, to an OD600nm of 0.5, followed by induction with 0.5 mmol/L isopropyl-β-D-thiogalactopyranoside. Bacteria were harvested by centrifugation after 3 h, were resuspended in 20 mmol/L Tris-HCl (pH 8.0), were sonicated, and were recentrifuged at 8000 g. The lysate was subjected to ion-exchange chromatography, by use of a monoQ column (Amersham-Pharmacia Biotech) in a fast-protein liquid chromatography system (Amersham-Pharmacia Biotech). The cloning and recombinant expression of IdeS have been described elsewhere [16]. To produce an IdeS that lacks enzymatic activity, the catalytic cysteine residue was replaced by a glycine by use of the Transformer Site-Directed Mutagenesis Kit (Clontech), in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions [18]. The fusion protein glutathione S-transferase (GST)–IdeS was purified on Glutathione-Sepharose (Amersham-Pharmacia Biotech), in accordance with standard protocols. Full-length mature EndoS and a large fragment of SclB were expressed and purified as described elsewhere [10, 15]. MtsA was expressed and purified by the same technique but was modified to lack the N-terminal cysteine of the mature protein and, thus, also the lipid moiety [12]. SpeB was purified from the culture supernatant of an M1 S. pyogenes strain grown in C-medium [22] supplemented with 0.5 mmol/L dithiothreitol, as described elsewhere [23]. The purity of the proteins in the present study was >95%, as assayed by SDS-PAGE. The SclA antigen was produced as a 21-aa long synthetic peptide (GDRGETGQAOPVGPGKGETG). This sequence spans a region in the COOH-terminal half of the collagen-like repeats that is highly similar between SclA proteins derived from different S. pyogenes isolates [8]. Peptide synthesis was performed at the Biomolecular Resource Facility (Lund University, Lund, Sweden).

**ELISA.** Microtiter plates (Maxisorb; NUNC) were coated overnight at 4°C with GAS antigens in coating buffer (0.05 mol/L NaHCO3, pH 9.6). Proteins were diluted to the following concentrations: SclA to 2 µg/mL, SclB to 0.5 µg/mL, GRAB to 0.5 µg/mL, MtsA to 0.5 µg/mL, EndoS to 0.75 µg/mL, IdeS to 0.04 µg/mL, and SpeB to 0.5 µg/mL. Plates were washed in PBST (0.05% Tween in PBS) and blocked with 2% bovine serum albumin (Sigma) in PBST (PBSTA). A fixed dilution of serum samples from patients and from healthy individuals in PBSTA was added to the wells in duplicate. The following serum dilutions were used: 1:250 for SclA, SclB, and MtsA; 1:500 for GRAB; and 1:1000 for EndoS, IdeS, and SpeB. The antigen concentrations and serum dilutions used were judged to be optimal by use of checkerboard titration. Bound antibodies were detected by incubation with a horseradish peroxide–conjugated secondary antibody against human IgG diluted 1:3000 in PBSTA (Bio-Rad). All incubations were performed for 1 h at 37°C and followed by a washing step. Substrate solution, 0.1% (wt/vol) diammonium-2,2-azino-bis-(3-ethyl-2,3-dihydrobenzthiazoline)-6-sulfonate, 0.012% (vol/vol) H2O2 in 100 mmol/L citric acid, and 100 mmol/L NaH2PO4 (pH 4.5) were added, and the optical density at 415 nm was determined after 15 min. A blank without serum was included in quadruplicate on each plate, and these optical density values were subtracted from the values obtained by use of the serum samples. An ELISA index was calculated by dividing the mean optical density value for each serum sample by the mean optical density value for a standard positive serum sample run in quadruplicate on each plate. The day-to-day variation of each ELISA was 2.2%–14.2% and was expressed as a coefficient of variation on the basis of samples run on 8 different occasions.

**Statistical evaluation.** Comparisons between groups in which the number of observations was <40 in any group were made by use of the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test. Otherwise, the 2-sample z test, assuming unequal variances, was used. P < .05 was regarded as statistically significant.

## RESULTS

### Patients and strain characteristics

Seventy patients with invasive GAS infection from 2 different geographical areas, The Netherlands and the southern part of Sweden, were evaluated. Thirty-five of the patients had a relatively benign disease course of GAS bacteremia without circulatory effects or organ failure, and 35 subjects had a severe infection that fulfilled the criteria for STSS and/or NF. A GAS strain was isolated from a normally sterile site from each of the patients. Of these, 57 strains were available for analysis. Strains of the M1, M28, and M3 serotypes were recovered from 17 (30%), 13 (23%), and 9 (16%) of the 57 patients, respectively. The distribution of M serotypes among patients with severe and nonsevere infection is presented in table 2. Of the 57 strains, 26 were isolated from patients with severe invasive infection. In this group, the M1 serotype represented 12 (46%) of the strains. The M28 and M3 serotypes were each isolated from 4 (15%) of the patients. The proportion of the various M serotypes was similar between the strains from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M serotype</th>
<th>Severe infection</th>
<th>Nonsevere infection</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other M serotypes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ND</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE.** Data are no. of patients. ND, not determined (strain not available).

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Serologic testing. IgG antibody levels against the cell wall–attached (figure 1A) and the secreted (figure 1B) streptococcal antigens were determined in serum samples from 80 healthy blood donors. All serum samples from blood donors showed detectable antibody levels against all the streptococcal antigens investigated. There were, however, considerable variations in all assays, except in the anti-SclA ELISA. No pattern with high or low antibody levels against all or several antigens could be detected on an individual basis. Furthermore, there was no difference in antibody levels against any of the antigens between the Swedish (n = 40) and the Dutch (n = 40) groups of blood donors (data not shown).

Patients with invasive GAS infection showed significantly higher acute-phase antibody levels against all antigens studied, except for EndoS, compared with blood donors (table 3). The highest antibody levels in the group of patients were observed among those with an immunocompromising condition (table 3), who showed significantly higher antibody levels against all 7 GAS antigens, compared with patients with no underlying disease.

Antibody levels against the various antigens were compared between patients with nonsevere and those with severe GAS infection. Of the 4 cell wall–attached antigens, significantly lower antibody levels (P < .05) were found against SclA, SclB, and GRAB in acute-phase serum samples from patients with severe infection (figure 2A). Anti-MtsA antibody levels were also lower in the group of patients with severe disease, although not significantly lower (P = .05). In contrast, there were no significant differences between the groups of patients when the antibodies against the secreted antigens EndoS, IdeS, and SpeB were analyzed (figure 2B).

Patients with a severe course of GAS infection developed STSS, NF, or both. Antibody levels in patients with STSS without NF (n = 10) and those in patients with NF without shock (n = 17) were compared, and, for all the investigated antigens, lower antibody levels were found in the former group. However,
1.02

against SclA do not cross-react with SclB, and vice versa, even

ecule was used. It has previously been shown that antibodies

more limited identity between different GAS isolates, a 21-mer

of SclB as antigens. In experiments with SclA, which show a

justifying the selection of the entire GRAB and a large fragment

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termini and repeated regions of different size. However, large

Antibodies (figure 3

A

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a number of recently characterized GAS proteins were chosen

for the present study. The genes encoding these proteins are

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sequence data, the secreted enzymes EndoS, IdeS, and SpeB are

in all GAS strains, and serologic data were available from other

studies [19, 24–26]. Detectable antibody levels against all GAS

antigens investigated were found in all serum samples from

healthy individuals (figure 1). This probably reflects the com-

common exposure to GAS in the general population, and it supports

a ubiquitous presence of these antigens in different GAS iso-

lates. Thus, when comparing the serum samples from healthy

Swedish individuals with those from healthy Dutch individuals,

there were no differences in antibody levels against the 7 strept-

coccal antigens studied. However, the in vivo expression of

specific streptococcal antigens and their immunogenicity is

probably variable, since, among individual blood donors, there

was a significant heterogeneity in antibody levels against the

different antigens. A similar individual variation in antibody

levels was seen among 30 adult patients with acute-phase GAS

pharyngotonsillitis, but, in general, there was no difference in

specific antibody levels between blood donors and patients with

pharyngotonsillitis (P. Åkesson and B. Christensson, unpublished

data). In all assays, the 4 children <15 years old showed antibody

levels that were similar to those showed by the adult patients

and were therefore included in the present study. The distribution

different M serotype strains among the blood culture isolates

from the Swedish and the Dutch patients was also similar. Taken

together, serum samples and bacterial strains from patients from

Sweden and those from patients from The Netherlands were

comparable, and they were, therefore, not separated in the present

study. Moreover, the higher prevalence of the M1 serotype ob-

served in patients with complicated GAS bacteremia is in ac-

cordance with data from several other studies [27, 28].

When acute-phase antibody levels in patients with severe
disease (STSS and/or NF) were compared with those in patients

with an uncomplicated course of GAS bacteremia, lower an-
tibody levels against cell wall–attached antigens were found in

the group of patients with severe disease (figure 2). ELISA

indexes for SclA, SclB, and GRAB were significantly lower
(P < .05) among the patients with severe disease, although there

was no significant difference for MtsA (P = .50). Previous

studies have shown that a low antibody response against the
cell wall–attached M1 protein was seen in patients with GAS

bacteremia, compared with that seen in healthy individuals

Table 3. Mean ELISA indexes against group A streptococcal (GAS) antigens in blood donors and in patients with invasive GAS infection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antigen</th>
<th>Blood donors (n = 80)</th>
<th>Patients with invasive GAS infection (n = 70)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SclA</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SclB</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAB</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MtsA</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EndoS</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IdeS</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SpeB</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject group</th>
<th>Patients with invasive GAS infection but otherwise healthy (n = 43)</th>
<th>Patients with invasive GAS infection with underlying chronic disease (n = 15)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SclA</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SclB</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAB</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MtsA</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EndoS</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IdeS</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SpeB</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE.** Statistical calculations were made by use of the z test or the Mann-Whitney U test.

significantly lower levels were found only for anti-GRAB anti-

bodies (figure 3A and 3B). The 8 patients who had STSS

combined with soft-tissue necrosis were excluded from these

statistical analyses.

**DISCUSSION**

A number of recently characterized GAS proteins were chosen

for the present study. The genes encoding these proteins are

present in all or almost all GAS isolates, but the expression of

the proteins in vitro has been shown to vary. According to

sequence data, the secreted enzymes EndoS, IdeS, and SpeB are

conserved between GAS isolates from different M serotypes.

Like several other cell wall–attached proteins, SclA, SclB, and

GRAB have a more heterogeneous structure, with variable NH2-

terminal and repeated regions of different size. However, large

regions of SclB and GRAB are homologous between strains,

justifying the selection of the entire GRAB and a large fragment

of SclB as antigens. In experiments with SclA, which show a

more limited identity between different GAS isolates, a 21-mer

peptide constructed from the most conserved part of the mol-

ecule was used. It has previously been shown that antibodies

against SclA do not cross-react with SclB, and vice versa, even

though both proteins contain large regions of collagen-like re-

peats [10]. MtsA, which is associated with the bacterial cell

membrane through an NH2-terminal lipid linkage, is conserved

between GAS strains and shows extensive homology to related

proteins in other species. Thus, detection of specific IgG against

this molecule may reflect cross-reactivity with other bacterial

metal permeases.

In the present study, acute-phase serum IgG antibody levels

against the 6 newly described GAS virulence factors were in-

vestigated. In addition, SpeB was included, since it is considered

to be an important virulence factor. This proteinase is expressed

in all GAS strains, and serologic data were available from other

studies [19, 24–26]. Detectable antibody levels against all GAS

antigens investigated were found in all serum samples from

healthy individuals (figure 1). This probably reflects the com-

mon exposure to GAS in the general population, and it supports

a ubiquitous presence of these antigens in different GAS iso-

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there were no differences in antibody levels against the 7 strept-

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When acute-phase antibody levels in patients with severe
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studies have shown that a low antibody response against the
cell wall–attached M1 protein was seen in patients with GAS

bacteremia, compared with that seen in healthy individuals.
Figure 2. Acute-phase IgG antibody levels in patients with nonsevere and severe invasive group A streptococcal (GAS) disease. Levels against cell wall–attached (A) and secreted (B) GAS proteins are expressed as ELISA indexes. White boxes represent patients with nonsevere GAS bacteremia (n = 35), and gray boxes represent patients with severe invasive infection (n = 35). The median value and the 25th and 75th percentiles are marked by boxes. Horizontal lines outside the boxes represent the 10th and 90th percentiles. Statistical calculations of P values were made by the Mann-Whitney U test.

In the previous definition of STSS, a soft-tissue necrosis including NF could be 1 sign required to fulfill the criteria for a definite case of STSS [20]. However, in the same consensus document, other invasive GAS disease could include focal infections, such as NF, with or without bacteremia but without shock. Since these patients with NF appear clinically different, it could be assumed that other pathogenic factors are involved. Thus, we separately investigated patients with STSS without NF and patients with NF without shock. When antibody levels were measured in these 2 groups, a significantly lower level against GRAB was found in patients with STSS without NF. These data indicate that low IgG antibody levels against GRAB might be a risk factor for developing STSS in patients with GAS bacteremia. The function of GRAB is intimately related to regulation of proteolysis and its control at the bacterial surface [31]. The action of GRAB in vivo could possibly lead to an alteration of proteolytic mechanisms involving the complement, the contact, and the coagulation systems, thus affecting the severity of the disease.

Contrary to most previous studies [19, 24–26], the present study found that antibody levels against all antigens investigated were significantly higher in the acute-phase serum samples from patients with invasive GAS disease than in those from the healthy blood donors (table 3). A similar result was seen in an earlier study, in which the mean IgG level against SpeB among patients with GAS bacteremia was higher than that among patients with tonsillitis [25].
ent data showed that patients with an underlying immunocompromising condition had higher antibody levels against all the studied GAS antigens, compared with patients who were healthy before the streptococcal infection (table 3). Hypothetically, this could be explained by the more prevalent occurrence of streptococcal skin and mucous membrane infections seen, for example, among diabetic patients, drug addicts, and patients with rheumatoid arthritis, although no such data on medical history were available in the present data. It might also be argued that a boosted IgG immune response could already have taken place, up to 10 days after the onset of infection. However, this possibility was not confirmed when serologic data were plotted according to time of serum sampling in relation to onset of infection (data not shown), and mean and median serum sampling were obtained only 3.6 days after onset of infection. Taken together, the results indicate that patients who develop invasive GAS disease usually have been previously exposed to GAS, as reflected by a preexisting immune response. This illustrates that not only the immune status, but also other host factors, must play a role in determining susceptibility to invasive GAS disease. For instance, a recent study has shown that STSS and NF are associated with specific HLA class II haplotypes [32].

In conclusion, significantly lower preexisting IgG antibody levels against 3 newly described cell wall–attached GAS antigens (SclA, SclB, and GRAB) were detected in patients with severe invasive GAS infection than in those with nonsevere invasive GAS infection. Additionally, patients who developed STSS without NF showed significantly lower antibody levels against GRAB, compared with patients with NF without shock. These findings underline the pathogenic significance of interactions between surface proteins of GAS and molecules of the human host.

Acknowledgment

We thank Kristina Hjelm-Bebeacua for excellent technical assistance.

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