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The adhesion G protein-coupled receptor GPR56/*ADGRG1* in cytotoxic lymphocytes

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Abstract

GPR56/*ADGRG1* is an adhesion G protein-coupled receptor connected to brain development, haematopoiesis, male fertility, and tumorigenesis. Nevertheless, expression of GPR56 is not restricted to developmental processes. Studies over the last years have demonstrated a marked presence of GPR56 in human cytotoxic NK and T cells. Expression of GPR56 in these cells is driven by the transcription factor HOBIT, corresponds with the production of cytolytic mediators and the presence of CX₃CR1 and CD57, indicates a state of terminal differentiation and cellular exhaustion, and disappears upon cellular activation. Functional studies indicate that GPR56 regulates cell migration and effector functions and thereby acts as an inhibitory immune checkpoint. We here discuss the current state of knowledge regarding GPR56 in cytotoxic lymphocytes.

KEYWORDS

adhesion G protein-coupled receptor, cytotoxic lymphocytes, immune checkpoint

1 | INTRODUCTION

The adhesion family of G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) comprises 32 molecules on the cell surface of human cells.¹ Adhesion GPCRs consist of a seven-transmembrane C-terminal fragment (CTF) that, through a juxtamembranous GPCR-autoproteolysis-inducing (GAIN) domain, couples to an extended extracellular N-terminal fragment (NTF).² Central in the GAIN domain poses a GPCR-proteolysis site (GPS), which enables autocatalytic processing in some but not all

adhesion GPCRs. Notably, the separated NTF and CTF remain non-covalently attached, thereby increasing structural flexibility of the receptor.³ The NTFs of adhesion GPCRs possess various molecular folds involved in matrix-cellular interactions⁴ and the perception of mechanical forces.⁵ Key to the signalling of adhesion GPCRs is the N-terminus of the CTF underneath the GPS, also known as *Stachel* sequence, that as a tethered agonist enables intracellular G protein-dependent signalling.^{6,7} Recently, a quartet of cryogenic electron microscopy studies resolved the structure of adhesion GPCRs in their active

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state and thereby provided insight into the mechanism by which contact between the *Stachel* sequence and the transmembrane domain activates the receptors.^{8–11}

Like canonical GPCRs, adhesion GPCRs have a wide cellular distribution and regulate a range of (patho)physiological functions. GPR56, encoded by *ADGRG1*, is a prototypical adhesion GPCR implicated in developmental processes in the central nervous system, the immune system, and the male reproductive system as well as in tumorigenesis.^{12–16} GPR56 is well known for its causative role in the severe human brain malformation bilateral frontoparietal polymicrogyria (BFPP).^{12,17} Moreover, the involvement of GPR56 in oligodendrocyte development^{18,19} and haematopoietic stem cell formation^{14,20} has been studied in detail. Given the link of GPR56 with developmental processes, the finding of abundant GPR56 expression on terminally differentiated NK and T cells^{21,22} was unexpected and has become a focus of research.²³ We here discuss the current knowledge on the role of GPR56 in cytotoxic lymphocytes.

2 | CYTOLYTIC LYMPHOCYTES EXPRESS GPR56/*ADGRG1*

The initial finding that human NK cells express GPR56 dates from 2010. In search for novel human NK-cell markers, Della Chiesa et al. generated two monoclonal antibodies against a hitherto unknown transmembrane molecule on CD56^{dim}CD16⁺ mature NK cells, which they identified as GPR56.²¹ Independently, the laboratory of Hsi-Hsien Lin raised a panel of monoclonal antibodies against GPR56 that we showed to bind CD56^{dim} cytotoxic NK cells.²² GPR56 staining is inversely correlated with the presence of CD94, indicating that GPR56 expression increases during NK-cell maturation.²² Another marker distinguishing mature NK cells is CD57, corresponding with high cytotoxicity. Indeed, CD56^{dim}CD57⁺ NK cells express the highest levels of GPR56 as well as CX₃CR1, a marker defining migratory lymphocytes with high cytotoxic activity.²⁴

In our initial paper, we reported that next to NK cells, also CD8⁺ and CD4⁺ effector memory T cells re-expressing CD45RA (T_{EMRA}) upregulate GPR56.²² T_{EMRA} cells are circulating, terminally differentiated memory T cells that expand in response to viruses, such as human cytomegalovirus (CMV), and hitherto vary in frequency between individuals depending on their infection history. A hallmark of anti-CMV CD8⁺ T-cell responses is the maintenance of large populations of CMV-specific T_{EMRA} cells as a result of their gradual accumulation during life.²⁵ In line herewith, GPR56 was the second-most upregulated gene associated with

chronological age in a whole-blood gene expression meta-analysis in 14,983 individuals of European ancestry.²⁶

CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T_{EMRA} cells expressing GPR56 show clonal expansion, cytotoxic capacity, and killer-like receptor expression.^{27–29} Like mature circulating NK cells, they jointly express CX₃CR1, GPR56, and CD57,^{30,31} which also indicated as C–G–C signature. Recent single-cell RNA sequencing data illuminate gene co-expression of this signature with genes encoding cytotoxic mediators, in particular *GZMB* encoding granzyme B, across human lymphocytes (Figure 1).³² The close association between expressions of GPR56 and granzyme B is supported by their co-expression at protein level in human peripheral blood lymphocytes.²²

In line with the ability of circulating cytotoxic lymphocytes to survey non-lymphoid tissues, GPR56-expressing NK cells were detected not only in peripheral blood but also in mucosal biopsies obtained from patients with oral lesions.²¹ Likewise, adipose tissue and coronary plaques contain CD4⁺ T_{EMRA} cells expressing GPR56.^{33,34} The number of these cells is increased in people with auto-inflammatory conditions, such as children progressing rapidly to type 1 diabetes³⁵ and seropositive rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patients.³⁶ Moreover, in a wide range of tumour types, infiltrating T cells express GPR56.³⁷ While human CD56^{dim}CD16⁺ NK and T_{EMRA} cells have the ability to retain granzyme B protein expression into the memory phase, mice may not have an exact correlate of these cells. Accordingly, mice lack circulating NK and T cells expressing GPR56 (www.immgen.org) (Figure 2A).

Next to circulating T_{EMRA} cells, non-circulating CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ tissue-resident memory T cells (T_{RM}) with a CCR7[−]CD69⁺CD103^{+/-} phenotype survey non-lymphoid tissues. A subset of CD4⁺ PD-1^{hi}CXCR5[−] T_{RM} cells, known as peripheral helper T (T_{PH}) cells, is enriched in the synovial fluid of seropositive RA patients. These cells display a cytotoxic profile and express GPR56.³⁶ In the brain, CD8⁺ T_{RM} cells express GPR56,⁴¹ and CD8⁺ CD103⁺ T_{RM} cells in multiple sclerosis (MS) lesions upregulate GPR56.⁴² Finally, breast cancer CD8⁺ T_{RM} cells express GPR56, and the expression is increased in the CD103⁺ fraction of T_{RM} cells.⁴³ Similarly in mice, CD8⁺ T-cell populations responding to viral infections express GPR56. In particular, GPR56 is upregulated in herpes simplex virus (HSV)-specific T_{RM} cells of the skin and in lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV)-specific T_{RM} cells across several organs (Figure 2A).^{40,44,45}

Cellular exhaustion is a characteristic feature of T cells arising in persistent viral infections and in tumours.⁴⁶ The dysfunctional state of these antiviral or anti-tumour T cells corresponds with the expression of a multitude of

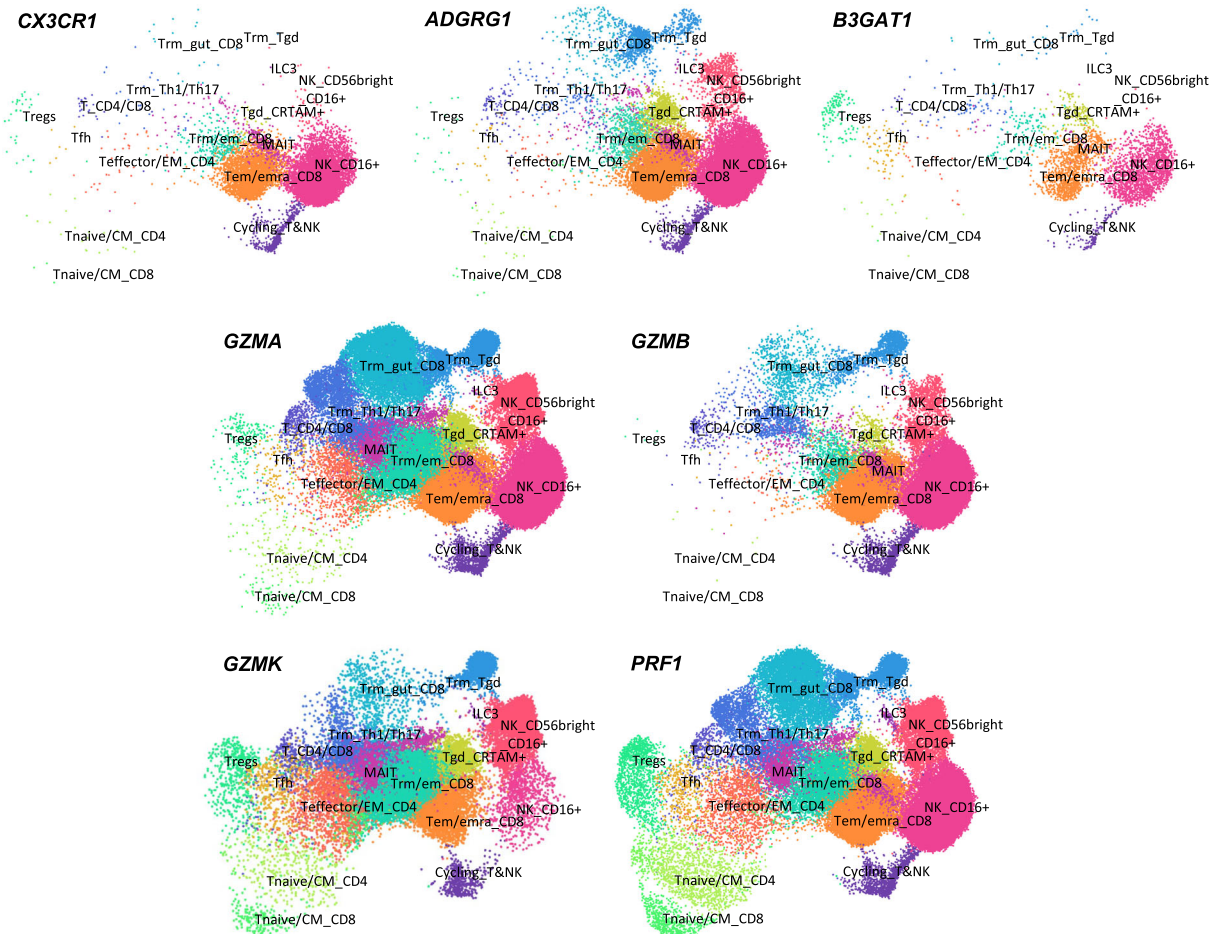


FIGURE 1 Expression of GPR56 in tissue-resident immune cells. UMAP (uniform manifold approximation and projection) visualization of *CX3CR1/CX3CR1*, *GPR56/ADGRG1*, *CD57/B3GAT1*, granzyme A/*GZMA*, granzyme B/*GZMB*, granzyme K/*GZMK*, and perforin/*PRF1* expression in T cells and innate lymphoid cells, including NK cells. Single-cell RNA sequencing data³² were processed using www.tissueimmunecellatlas.org.

inhibitory receptors, including PD-1, TIM-3, and LAG-3, and prevents them from clearing the infection or combating the tumour. Different studies revealed that during chronic LCMV infection, *Adgrg1* is expressed much higher in T cells possessing an advanced state of exhaustion (Figure 2B).^{44,45,47} In line herewith, *ADGRG1* expression is upregulated in terminally exhausted CD8⁺ tumour-infiltrating lymphocytes in human.³⁷ Thus, in sum, T_{EMRA} and T_{RM} cells express GPR56 and further upregulate the receptor when entering a state of exhaustion.

3 | REGULATION OF GPR56/*ADGRG1* EXPRESSION

The specific expression of GPR56 by circulating human cytotoxic lymphocytes and mouse T_{RM} cells raises questions regarding the underpinning transcriptional mechanisms. Transcription factors figuring prominently in the

terminal differentiation of cytotoxic lymphocytes are HOBIT/*ZNF683*, BLIMP1/*PRDM1*, and RUNX3. We showed that expression of GPR56 in human NK cells is driven by HOBIT, which also is expressed in circulating cytotoxic CD8⁺ and CD4⁺ T cells.⁴⁸ Knockdown of *ZNF683* largely prevented GPR56 induction in NK-92 cells, which upregulate GPR56 when cultured without IL-2. Reciprocally, ectopic expression of HOBIT in Jurkat cells, which express neither GPR56 nor HOBIT, induced expression of GPR56. HOBIT might actually not be the only transcription factor driving the expression of GPR56. Mature NK and CD8⁺ T_{EMRA} cells, next to HOBIT, express BLIMP1 and RUNX3, and indeed, ectopic expression of RUNX3 in mouse CD4⁺ T cells upregulates GPR56.⁴⁹

As HOBIT and BLIMP1 collaborate in the transcriptional regulation of T_{RM} cells,⁵⁰ we analysed *Adgrg1* expression in T_{RM} cells of *Znf683*-deficient and *Prdm1*-deficient mice. We found a reduction of *Adgrg1*

(A)

Source	Cell type	Species	
		Human	Mouse
B	Stem and progenitor cells		
	Platelets		
	Basophils		
	Eosinophils		
	Neutrophils		
	Classical monocytes		
	Non-classical monocytes		
	Myeloid DCs		
	Plasmacytoid DCs		
	Naive B cells		
	Plasmablasts		
	Plasma cells		
	Mucosal-associated invariant T cell		
	Naive CD4 ⁺ T cells		
	CD4 ⁺ T helper 1/2/17 cells		
	Regulatory T cells		
	Follicular T helper cells		
	Central memory CD4 ⁺ T cells		
	Effector memory CD4 ⁺ T cells		
	RA ⁺ effector memory CD4 ⁺ T cells		
	Naive CD8 ⁺ T cells		
	Central memory CD8 ⁺ T cells		
	Effector memory CD8 ⁺ T cells		
RA ⁺ effector memory CD8 ⁺ T cells			
$\gamma\delta$ T cells			
CD16 ⁻ NK cells			
CD16 ⁺ NK cells			
Tissue	Mast cells		
	Macrophages		
	Microglia		
	Tissue-resident memory T cells		
	Exhausted T cells		
	Tissue-resident NK cells		

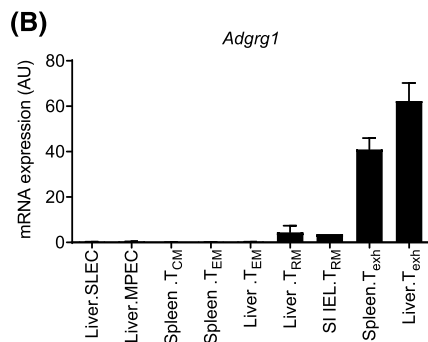


FIGURE 2 Expression of GPR56 in cytotoxic lymphocytes. (A) Profiling by flow cytometry and RNA sequencing of GPR56 expression in circulating and tissue-resident immune cells in human and mice. Data were compiled from different sources; see text,^{38,39} and www.immgen.org. B, bone marrow; DC, dendritic cell. (B) Expression of *Adgrg1*, determined by RT-qPCR, in mouse lymphocyte populations in liver, spleen, and intestine. Short-lived effector cells (SLECs) and memory precursors effector cells (MPECs) were isolated at Day 8, and memory and exhausted T cells were obtained at Day 30+ after chronic infection with LCMV. The latter included central memory (T_{CM}), effector memory (T_{EM}), tissue-resident memory (T_{RM}), and exhausted (T_{exh}) T cells. Data were adapted from Hsiao et al.⁴⁰

expression in mouse T_{RM} cells lacking HOBIT and, to a lesser extent, in those lacking BLIMP1 and a further reduction in *Znf683* and *Prdm1* double-deficient T_{RM} cells.⁴⁰ TGF- β establishes part of the residency-specific transcriptional profile of T_{RM} cells in various tissues. TGF- β strongly upregulates expression of *Adgrg1*, and reciprocally, expression of *Adgrg1* is reduced in skin T_{RM} cells of mice lacking a functional TGF- β receptor II.⁴⁰ Thus, the transcription factors HOBIT and the T_{RM} cell-inducing cytokine TGF- β contribute to the expression of *Adgrg1* in cytotoxic lymphocytes.

Proliferative arrest of the NK-92 cell line by IL-2 withdrawal correlates with an upregulation of GPR56.⁴⁸ In line herewith, Della Chiesa et al. showed that activation of NK cells by the cytokines IL-2, IL-12, IL-15, and IL-18 or monocyte-derived dendritic cells leads to a downregulation of GPR56.²¹ The downregulation of GPR56 on NK cells by inflammatory cytokines is fast and caused by a combination of shedding of the NTF and inhibition of gene transcription.⁴⁸ Thus, expression of GPR56 is restricted to terminally differentiated, non-proliferating cells and rapidly lost upon their cellular activation.

4 | FUNCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF GPR56/ADGRG1 EXPRESSION

Previous reports have linked GPR56 with the regulation of neural progenitor and melanoma cell migration.^{51,52} In line herewith, ectopic expression of GPR56 reduces spontaneous and SDF-1-driven trans-well migration of NK-92 cells,²² a finding that recently has been confirmed also for primary T cells overexpressing GPR56.³⁷ A further role of GPR56 in cytotoxic lymphocytes was elucidated when studying BFPP patients with a GPR56 mutation that prevents surface expression of the receptor. NK and T cells developed fairly normally and had no obvious changes in their surface marker profile. Nevertheless, they produced enhanced amounts of TNF and IFN γ upon contact with K562 target cells, resulting in more efficient killing.⁴⁸ NK-92 cells overexpressing GPR56 showed an opposite behaviour. They possessed less killing activity against K562 cells, as indicated by reduced target cell apoptosis, NK-cell degranulation, and production of TNF and IFN γ .⁴⁸ Thus, lack of GPR56 did not hamper normal NK-cell development but appeared to enhance their functional capacity, indicating that the physiological role of GPR56 in cytotoxic lymphocytes may be to limit the potentially harmful cytotoxic effects of granzyme B and pro-inflammatory cytokines under homeostatic conditions.

Notably, the presence of GPR56 in immune cells is not confined to cytotoxic lymphocytes. Also, a distinct myeloid cell population expresses GPR56. Others and we

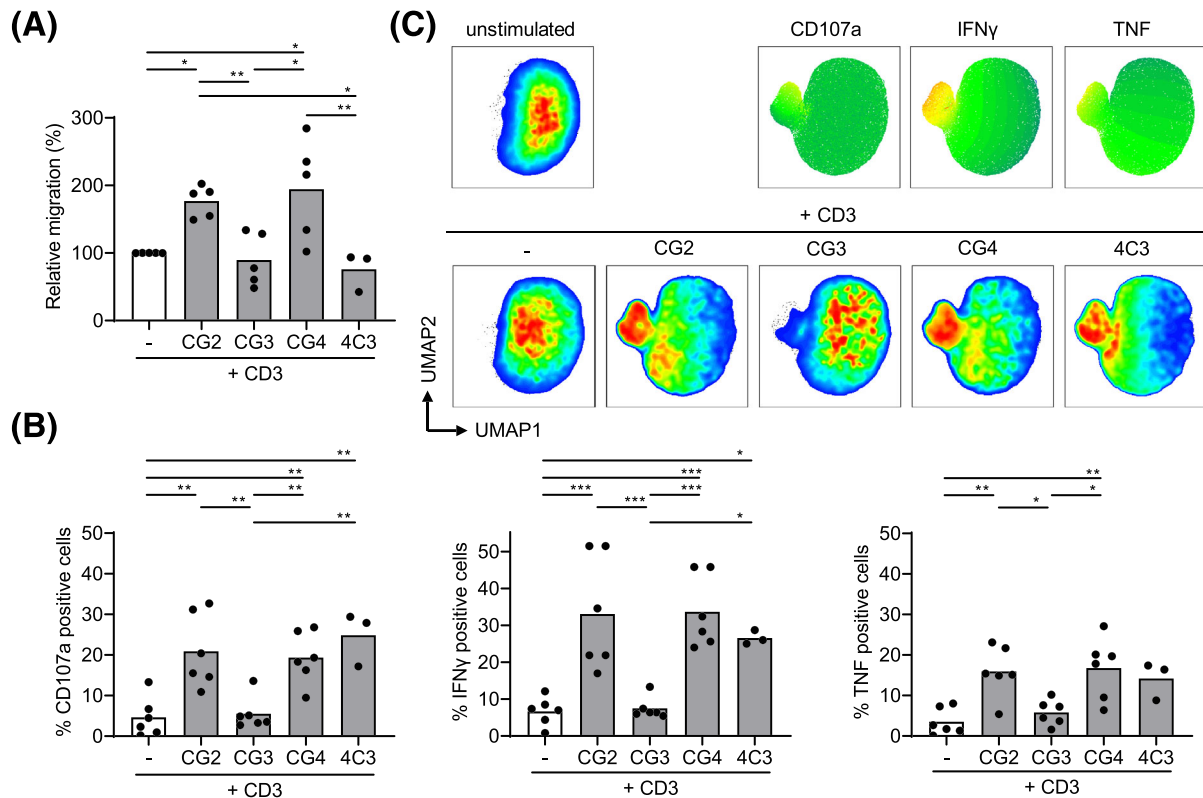


FIGURE 3 GPR56 antibodies enhance T-cell migration and effector functions. (A) Peripheral blood lymphocytes (PBLs) were exposed to plate-bound anti-CD3 monoclonal antibody (coated at a concentration of 0.1 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$; BioLegend) in the absence or presence of anti-GPR56 monoclonal antibodies (clones CG3, CG2, CG4, and 4C3 at a concentration of 2 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$) for 2 h. Subsequently, cells were left to transmigrate through 5- μm trans-well filters (corning) in the presence of 100 ng/ml SDF-1 (R&D systems) in the lower compartment for 3 h. Cells migrated through the filter were quantified by flow cytometry. (B) PBLs exposed to plate-bound anti-CD3 monoclonal antibody (coated at a concentration of 0.1 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$) in the absence or presence of anti-GPR56 monoclonal antibodies (clones CG3, CG2, CG4, and 4C3 at a concentration of 2 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$) for 5 h were analysed for the expression of CD107a, IFN γ , and TNF in granzyme B $^{+}$ CD8 $^{+}$ T cells by flow cytometry. All data are presented as means \pm S.D. of three to six independent experiments. One-way ANOVA with Tukey's range test, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Antibodies to GPR56 have kindly been provided by Dr. Lin (CG2/3/4) or purchased from BioLegend (4C3). (C) UMAP visualization of PBLs with different stimulation, based on expression of CD107a, IFN γ , and TNF (bottom). UMAP plot of CD107a, IFN γ , and TNF expression (top). UMAP was generated by FlowJo (Tree Star).

showed that GPR56 is part of the core cellular signature of microglia, the specialized yolk sac-derived macrophages of the central nervous system (CNS).^{53,54} A recent study reported elevated TNF production in microglia in knockout mice with a conditional deletion of microglial *Adgr1*.⁵⁵ This interesting finding matches the proposed role of GPR56 as inhibitory receptor in lymphocytes. Other myeloid cells, including monocyte-derived and tissue macrophages, do not express GPR56.⁵⁶

We have recently addressed the contribution of GPR56 in the regulation of mouse pathogen-specific T_{RM} cells.⁴⁰ Analysis of pathogen-specific CD8 $^{+}$ T-cell responses in *Adgr1* knockout animals after acute infection with LCMV and *Listeria monocytogenes* did not reveal an essential inhibitory role of GPR56 in the regulation of proliferative, cytokine, or cytotoxic responses of CD8 $^{+}$ T_{RM} cells. While T_{RM} cells specifically acquire GPR56 expression, the

impact of this receptor on T_{RM} cells after acute infection does not appear essential to regulate their effector functions. Actually, the moderate expression of inhibitory receptors, like GPR56, by T_{RM} cells after acute infection in comparison with their strong upregulation on exhausted CD8 $^{+}$ T cells after chronic infection may indicate a more important function of GPR56 during persistent, chronic viral infection, which remains to be clarified.

How GPR56 exerts its inhibitory activities at the molecular level is only partly understood. Trans interactions of GPR56 with tissue transglutaminase, collagen III, and heparin have been described^{16,57,58} but not confirmed yet for GPR56 on lymphocytes. In cis, full-length GPR56 associates with the chaperone tetraspanin CD81, and while recruitment of G $\alpha_{q/11}$ has been shown,⁵⁹ this complex has not been linked yet with inhibition of effector functions of lymphocytes. Pharmacological studies

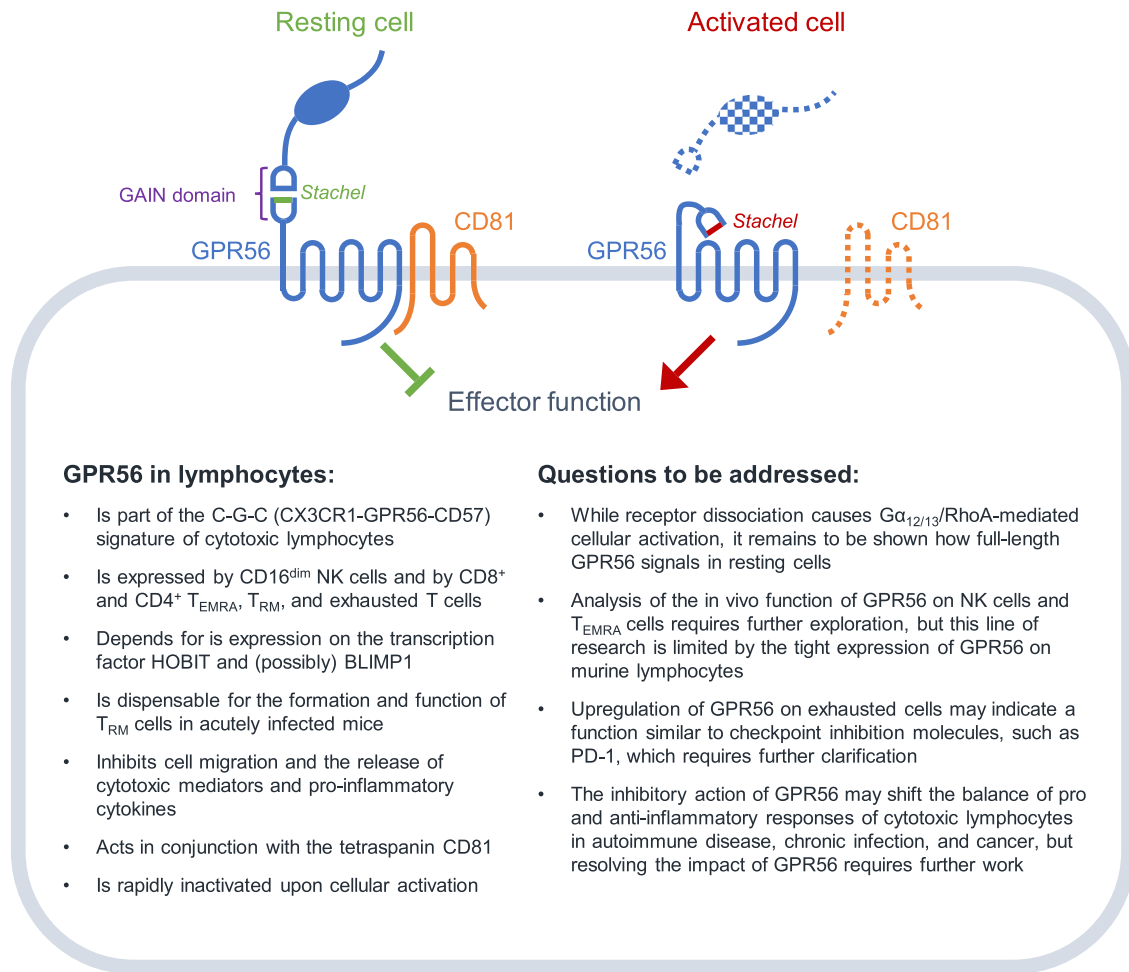


FIGURE 4 Facts and open questions regarding the presence of GPR56 in cytotoxic lymphocytes. See text for details.

revealed that truncation of the NTF causes significantly increased signalling of the CTF of the receptor via the Gα_{12/13}/RhoA pathway, commonly associated with cell activation.^{7,60,61} Several monoclonal antibodies binding to the NTF of GPR56 mimic this activity by dissociating the GPR56^{NTF}-GPR56^{CTF}-CD81 complex. The cytolytic function and cytokine secretion of NK-92 cells overexpressing GPR56 and human primary NK cells are greatly enhanced by these antibodies, and we here show that they also enhance SDF-1-stimulated migration, degranulation, and cytokine secretion of human primary T cells (Figure 3A–C). Together, dissociation of the NTF of GPR56 turns the inhibitory full-length receptor into an activating CTF.

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

This review focusses on the adhesion GPCR GPR56 in lymphocytes (Figure 4). Initiated by HOBIT in concert

with other transcription factors, GPR56 is expressed by terminally differentiated NK and T cells. In particular, three types of T cells express GPR56 – T_{EMRA}, T_{RM}, and exhausted T cells. The common denominator of the expression of GPR56 is the presence of granzyme B protein indicating that GPR56 functions in lymphocytes with direct cytotoxic potential. Functional studies in circulating NK and T cells indicate a role of GPR56 as inhibitor of cell migration and effector functions, including cytokine secretion and cell killing. Despite growing insight in the expression, regulation, and function of GPR56, key questions remain to be answered regarding its mechanism of action. Remarkably, GPR56 acts as a checkpoint inhibitor in immune cells but activates these cells upon antibody binding-mediated release of the NTF and subsequent self-activation of the CTF. These seemingly opposite activities of the receptor may indicate biased signalling, indicating that different ligands, receptor conformations, and/or cis interactions affect the signalling behaviour of a receptor.⁶² While biased signalling is a common phenomenon in canonical GPCRs, it requires closer investigation in

adhesion GPCRs. The wide presence in developing as well as in differentiated cells, the insight into the structure and pharmacology, and the availability of molecular tools and in vivo models make GPR56 an ideal molecule to address such basic questions with exciting spin-offs in disciplines, such as immunology.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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