Identification of a New Epitope in uPAR as a Target for the Cancer Therapeutic Monoclonal Antibody ATN-658, a Structural Homolog of the uPAR Binding Integrin CD11b (αM)

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Abstract

The urokinase plasminogen activator receptor (uPAR) plays a role in tumor progression and has been proposed as a target for the treatment of cancer. We recently described the development of a novel humanized monoclonal antibody that targets uPAR and has anti-tumor activity in multiple xenograft animal tumor models. This antibody, ATN-658, does not inhibit ligand binding (i.e. uPA and vitronectin) to uPAR and its mechanism of action remains unclear. As a first step in understanding the anti-tumor activity of ATN-658, we set out to identify the epitope on uPAR to which ATN-658 binds. Guided by comparisons between primate and human uPAR, epitope mapping studies were performed using several orthogonal techniques. Systematic site directed and alanine scanning mutagenesis identified the region of aa 268–275 of uPAR as the epitope for ATN-658. No known function has previously been attributed to this epitope Structural insights into epitope recognition were obtained from structural studies of the Fab fragment of ATN-658 bound to uPAR. The structure shows that the ATN-658 binds to the DIII domain of uPAR, close to the C-terminus of the receptor, corroborating the epitope mapping results. Intriguingly, when bound to uPAR, the complementarity determining region (CDR) regions of ATN-658 closely mimic the binding regions of the integrin CD11b (αM), a previously identified uPAR ligand thought to be involved in leukocyte rolling, migration and complement fixation with no known role in tumor progression of solid tumors. These studies reveal a new functional epitope on uPAR involved in tumor progression and demonstrate a previously unrecognized strategy for the therapeutic targeting of uPAR.


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Competing Interests: The authors have the following interests. Fernando Donate, Jose Juarez, Graham Parry and Andrew P. Mazar were employed by Attenuon at the time of the study. Andrew Mazar and Thomas O’Halloran have equity interest and Andrew Mazar receives consulting fees from Tactic Pharma, a start-up company that now owns the rights to ATN-658. Andrew Mazar is an inventor on the issued patent for ATN-658. Several US patents have issued covering ATN-658 as well as the epitope. These patents are US# 8,101,726 “Ligands binding the complex of urokinase type plasminogen activator (uPA) and its receptor (uPAR) that inhibit downstream uPAR interactions: identification and use in diagnosis or therapy” (Parry and Mazar) and US# 8,105,602 “Urokinase type plasminogen activator receptor epitope, monoclonal antibodies derived therefrom and methods of use thereof” (Parry and Mazar). There are no further patents, products in development or marketed products to declare. This does not alter the authors’ adherence to all the PLOS ONE policies on sharing data and materials, as detailed online in the guide for authors.

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Introduction

Metastasis and angiogenesis share many common phenotypic features that lead to the invasion and migration of tumor and endothelial cells. These include the up-regulation of protease and integrin expression, the loss of cell-cell and cell-matrix contacts, an increase in responsiveness to growth and differentiation factors, and the remodeling of extracellular matrix (ECM) and basement
ATN-658 Fab binds to the DIII of uPAR, consistent with the epitope mapping results. The epitope on uPAR for ATN-658 is close to the C-terminus, and has no overlap with the urokinase and vitronectin binding sites. This study also revealed structural homology between the ATN-658 CDR loops and the uPAR binding region of integrin αM. Moreover, we showed that ATN-658 binding blocks the association of another integrin, α5β1, to uPAR and thus impairs integrin α5β1-mediated adhesion to extracellular matrix. These results suggest a previously unrecognized mechanism by which uPAR may function in tumor progression and a novel epitope for the therapeutic targeting of this receptor.

Materials and Methods

Cell Lines

Human tumor lines PC-3 (prostate adenocarcinoma), HeLa (cervical carcinoma), and human lung cancer cell line H1299 were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (Manassas, VA). Both cell lines were cultured in Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum and penicillin-streptomycin. Mouse tumor cell line B-16 (melanoma), dog osteosarcoma (D-17) and immunized African green monkey (AGM) kidney cells (COS-1) were verified to express uPAR by RT-PCR and western blot using a rabbit polyclonal uPAR antiserum (dD2D3) known to cross-react with uPAR from multiple species as previously described [29], uPAR expressing cells were then used to evaluate the ability of ATN-658 to cross-react with various non-human uPAR. Both recombinant soluble uPAR (suPAR, residues 1–277) and ATF (amino acid residues 1–143 of uPA) were produced in Drosophila S2 cells as secreted proteins E.Coli [31].

Characterization of monoclonal antibody ATN-658

ATN-658 was raised against a chymotryptic fragment of soluble uPAR (suPAR) comprising DIIDIII (aa 99–283 of mature uPAR) expressed in Drosophila S2 cells, using standard techniques. Briefly, Balb/c mice were immunized with suPARDIIDIII fragments conjugated to KLH and the magnitude of the immune response monitored by ELISA. Based on these data, hybridomas were generated and five were purified as described [30]. The SMB domain protein (amino acid residues 1–50 of human vitronectin) was a kind gift of Dr. Aiwu Zhou, expressed in of the hybridomas subjected to limited dilution. Tissue culture supernatants from these monoclonal antibodies were then assayed for activity in ELISA assays and the isotype of each antibody determined using ISOStrips (Roche). ATN-658, isotype IgG1k, bound suPAR immobilized to plastic with a Kd of ~1 nM and iodinated ATN-658 specifically bound uPAR on the surface of HeLa cells with a Kd of ~5 nM. The Kd of ATN-658 for suPAR was also confirmed using surface plasmon resonance (BLAcore). Western blot analysis demonstrated that ATN-658 was specific for human uPAR and did not cross-react with mouse uPAR. ATN-658 was purified from tissue culture supernatant by column chromatography using protein-A Sepharose, typical yields ranged from 60–120 mg/L of tissue culture supernatant and the purity of the final material was >95% as determined by HPLC. Biotin-ATN-658 was prepared for whole cell binding assays and for flow cytometry as previously described [27].
Preparation of ATN-658 Fab fragments

ATN-658 Fab fragments were prepared by extensive proteolytic digestion of the purified antibody (5 h, 37°C) with immobilized Papain (Pierce). ATN-658 Fab fragments were separated from the antibody Fc domains by protein-A affinity chromatography and the purified Fab fragments characterized by SDS-PAGE. To confirm that the purified ATN-658 Fab fragments retained the ability to bind uPAR with high affinity we performed competition assays using biotinylated ATN-658 [27] and immobilized suPAR. The protein was concentrated to 5 mg/mL using Millipore Ultrafree centrifugal filters for protein crystallization.

Evaluation of binding of ATN-658 to cells in vitro

The specificity of ATN-658 binding was evaluated by whole cell binding assays or flow cytometry as previously described [27]. Whole cell binding assays were performed on cells (300,000/well) plated on gelatin coated 12-well plates (Costar #3516) and allowed to attach overnight. After extensive washing with Hank’s buffered salt solution (HBSS; Invitrogen, Inc.) containing 0.1% bovine serum albumin (BSA; Sigma) adherent cells were incubated with varying concentrations of biotin-labeled ATN-658 in HBSS/0.1% BSA for 1 h at room temperature. After washing 3-times with HBSS/0.1% BSA cells were incubated with HRP-conjugated streptavidin for a further 0.5 h at RT, wells washed as described above and bound antibody detected by incubation with OPD substrate (Sigma). After color development 0.1 mL of substrate was transferred from each well to a 96 well plate, the reaction stopped by the addition of 20 μL 1M H2SO4 and the absorbance at OD-490 nm recorded. Prior to flow cytometry adherent cells were harvested with trypsin and resuspended in FACS buffer (2% fetal bovine serum in PBS). Cells (2×10^6 cells in 200 μL FACS buffer) were incubated with ATN-658 (final concentration 10 μg/mL), control mouse IgG, a rabbit polyclonal antibody (1:100 dilution) against uPAR that cross-reacted with AGM suPAR. Plates were coated with V5 antibody (1 mg/mL) in PBS (100 μL well in a 96 well ELISA/RIA high binding plate). After 3 h incubation at RT, wells were washed and then incubated with 1× casein/water (200 μL/well) for 2 h at RT to block non-specific binding. Wells were washed and 100 μL of culture supernatant was added to each well and incubated O/N at 4°C. Culture supernatants were estimated to contain ~9 μg/mL of suPAR. Biotin ATN-658 or biotin-ATN-617 (1 μg/mL) was then added to the wells and incubated for a further 0.5 h at room temperature followed by extensive washing. Finally, Streptavidin-HRP was added and after additional incubation and washing, color was developed using OPD and bound ATN-658 or bound ATN-617 was detected by absorbance measured at 490 nm, as previously described [27].

Epitope mapping of ATN-658 by H/D-exchange mass spectrometry (H/D-Ex)

1.5 mg of ATN-658 Fab fragment was immobilized onto 200 mg POROS AL resin (Applied Biosystems) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Pull-down experiments were performed using suPAR-DIIDIII to confirm the specificity and binding capacity of the affinity column. ATN-658 Fab conjugated beads (353 μL) were resuspended in 700 μL of deuterated phosphate buffer (50 mM KH2PO4, 50 mM NaCl, pH 7.4) and allowed to equilibrate at 4°C. suPAR-DIIDIII was resuspended in 40 μL D2O pH 7.4 (Cambridge Isotopes) for 1500 or 5000 seconds to allow complete deuteration of surface amides. Labeled suPAR-DIIDIII and affinity resin were then mixed together for 10 min at 4°C. Back exchange of solvent exposed amides was carried out by replacing the H phosphate buffer with H2O and incubating at 4°C for a time equal to the labeling step. A control experiment was carried out by binding unlabeled suPAR-DIIDIII to ATN-658 Fab conjugated beads and labeling the bound material by incubation with 700 μL of deuterated phosphate buffer for the times listed above. Back exchange was then performed as described. The reactions were quenched and suPAR-DIIDIII eluted from the affinity column using 40 μL 0.8% formic acid. Following the addition of 20 μL 8 M urea, 1 M TCEP, pH 3.0 the eluted material was injected into the Hydrogen/Deuterium Exchange Mass Spectrometry (H/D-Ex) platform (ExSAR, Monmouth Junction, NJ) consisting of tandem immobilized pepstatin and C18 separation columns. The digested fragments were separated and analyzed by mass spectrometry and the identities of each peak identified by comparison with data obtained in control experiments using deuterium-labeled and unlabeled suPAR-DIIDIII digested with pepstatin.

Site-directed mutagenesis studies of ATN-658 binding to primate uPAR

African green monkey (AGM) suPAR was cloned from COS-1 cells by PCR, sequenced and the protein expressed as previously described for human suPAR [30,32]. Site-directed mutagenesis of the AGM suPAR plasmid template was carried out using a Quikchange site-directed mutagenesis kit (Stratagene, Inc.) according to the manufacturer’s instructions, to generate nine mutants in which each amino acid unique to AGM suPAR was replaced by the corresponding human suPAR sequence. Sequencing and restriction digestion of the each mutated plasmid was used to confirm the sequence change and that the remaining sequence remained intact. AGM mutant suPAR cDNA was then subcloned into a Drosophila expression vector (pMT/Bip/V5-HisA) containing the V5 epitope flag and used to transfect S2 cells. Small scale (500 mL) shaker cultures were established to produce protein for experiments and protein expression was confirmed by western blot using a pAb [29] against uPAR that cross-reacted with primate suPAR. Culture supernatants (CS) for each clone were clarified by centrifugation and aliquots immune-precipitated using ATN-658 and protein-G Sepharose. Bound proteins were detected by western blot using the cross-reacting rabbit anti-DIIDIII polyclonal antibody described above. Another uPAR MAb, ATN-615, which is also species specific for human uPAR and for which the epitope was already known from x-ray crystallography studies [33,34], was used as a control to validate this IP method.

Alternatively, culture supernatants were analyzed by capture ELISA using an anti-V5 antibody and biotinylated anti-uPAR antibodies ATN-658 and ATN-617. ATN-617 [27] is a monoclonal antibody that binds to a different epitope on uPAR and cross-reacts with AGM suPAR. Plates were coated with V5 antibody (1 mg/mL) in PBS (100 μL well in a 96 well ELISA/RIA high binding plate). After 3 h incubation at RT, wells were washed and then incubated with ATN-658 Fab and the ternary complex ATN-658-uPAR-ATF was purified again on a Superdex 200 gel filtration column. Prior to the
crystallization, SMB was added to the ternary complex at a 2:1 molar ratio, and then concentrated to 10 mg/mL without any further purification. Crystallization was carried out using the sitting drop vapor diffusion method at 22°C. The diffracting quality ATN-658 Fab crystals were generated using 20–22% PEG 3350, 0.1 M Tris pH 8.0–8.5. For crystallization of the ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB quaternary complex, the protein at 10 mg/mL was mixed with an equal volume of reservoir solution containing 0.1 M HEPES pH 7.5, 55% (v/v) Tacsimate, and 2% (v/v) 2-methyl-1,3-propanediol. Triangle crystals were typically appeared after a couple months and grew to a final size of 0.15 nm x 0.15 nm x 0.15 nm.

The ATN-658 Fab crystals were cryo-protected with the addition of 20% glycerol to the mother liquor. Diffraction data was collected at 100 K on the Advanced Photon Sources (beamline 22-ID, SER-CAT).X-ray diffraction data collection for the complex was carried out at 100 K on the NSLS Brookhaven National Laboratory (beam line 629). Most ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB quaternary crystals diffracted very weakly, usually less than 6 Å. This is presumably due to high solvent content (76% solvent) and the presence of a long axis of the crystals (c = 391.58 Å). After numerous trials with different crystals, different data collection strategies and the exploration of different cryo-protectant solutions. Diffraction data was collected from a flash-cooled crystal which was cryo-protected by a sequential soaking into mother liquid with increased concentration of ethylene glycol to the final concentration of 10% (v/v) to 4.6 Å resolution. The diffraction data were indexed and processed using the HKL-2000 program [35]. The data collection and final structural refinement statistics for both structures are integrated in Table 1.

### Structure determination and refinement

The structures of the ATN-658 Fab was solved by molecular replacement method (MOLREP [36]of the CCP4 program suite [37]) using an antibody structure (PDB entry 2DDQ) as a search model. The model was then subjected to several rounds of manual building using Coot [38] alternated with restrained refinement using Refmac5 [39]. In the final cycles of refinement, TLS with twenty TLS groups for each chain (generated by the TLS motion determination (TLSMD) server [40] was included in the refinement.

This ATN-658 Fab structure was then used as a molecular replacement model to solve the structure of the quaternary complex (ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB) by molecular replacement method using programs MOLREP [36] and CNS [41]. A suPAR-ATF model (PDB entry 1fd6 [33]) was then positioned into the crystals of the quaternary complexes by molecular replacement (molrep [36]). Despite the low resolution of this crystal (4.5 Å), very strong molecular replacement solutions for both models were obtained. After refinement using the CNS program [41], the Fo-Fc difference electron density showed the electron density for SMB domain of vitronectin, further confirming the correct molecular replacement solutions. The resulting models with all four protein components were further refined using CNS v1.3 [41] and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crystals</th>
<th>ATN 658 Fab</th>
<th>ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>APS SER-CAT beamline 22-ID</td>
<td>BNL 629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperature (K)</td>
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<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution range</td>
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<td>2.69-4.50 (4.66-4.50)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wavelength (Å)</td>
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<td>1.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Space group</td>
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<td>H32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell parameters (Å)</td>
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<td>164.65, 164.659, 391.582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique reflections</td>
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<td>124511 (1221)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rmerge (%)</td>
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<td>0.139 (0.841)</td>
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<td>Completeness (%)</td>
<td>85.7(70.0)</td>
<td>99.7(100.0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average I/σ</td>
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<td>16.14 (2.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data redundancy</td>
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<td>Model refinement:</td>
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<tr>
<td>R-factor/Rfree (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>R.m.s.d. from ideal bond length (Å)</td>
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<td>0.013</td>
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<tr>
<td>R.m.s.d. from ideal bond angles (°)</td>
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<td>2.018</td>
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</table>

Ramachandran plot, % residues in regions:

- favored: 93.8%
- allowed: 5.7%
- outlier: 0.5%

PDB ID

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0085349.t001

*Numbers in the parentheses are for the highest resolution shells;  
Rmerge = SΣhΣi|I(h) - <I(h)>>/ΣΣhΣi|I(h)|, where <I(h)> is the mean intensity of reflection h.
REFMAC [39], and manually adjusted by program O [42] or Coot [38].

All final structures were analyzed and validated by PRO-CHECK [43], PYMOL [44] and MOLSOFT ICM [45]. The coordinates of the reported structure have been deposited in the Protein Data Bank (PDB). The final statistics, validation, and stereochemical quality for the structure are reported in Table 1.

Co-immunoprecipitation

HT1099 cells were lysed in Triton lysis buffer (50 mM Hepes, pH 7.5, 150 mM NaCl, and 1% Triton X-100) supplemented with protease inhibitors and 1 mM PMSF. Clarified lysates were immunoprecipitated with antibodies ATN-615 and ATN-658. The immunoprecipitates were blotted for uPAR (R2) or integrin αv (pAb).

Cell adhesion assay

The cell adhesion assay was performed as described previously [46]. In brief, H1299 cells were incubated in DME/0.1% BSA with 500 μM RGD or RAD peptides for 1 h at 37°C and were then seeded onto fibronectin (5 μg/ml, Sigma)–coated plates with or without ATN-615. After washing, attached cells were fixed and stained with Giemsa. The data were quantified by measuring absorbance at 550 nm.

Results

ATN-658 does not bind to non-human uPAR

Initial studies evaluated the binding of ATN-658 to cells from various species that expressed uPAR. uPAR expression was confirmed in all cell lines initially by RT-PCR followed by western blot using a rabbit anti-human uPAR pAb (rD2D3) that cross-reacts with uPAR from rodent and dog. This study was undertaken to identify possible animal species that could be used for future toxicology studies of ATN-658. Biotin-ATN-658, which retained the full binding activity of unmodified ATN-658 [27], was used for this evaluation. Biotin-ATN-658 did not bind to mouse melanoma (B16) cells (Fig. 1A) or African green monkey (AGM) (Fig. 1B) immortalized kidney cells (COS-1) in whole cell saturation binding experiments, whereas saturable binding was observed to the uPAR expressing human prostate cancer cell line,

Figure 1. Cross reactivity of ATN-658 with uPAR from various species. A & B. The specificity of ATN-658 was measured by direct binding assays using uPAR expressing mouse melanoma (B16), human prostate carcinoma (PC-3) and African green monkey (COS-1) cells and biotin-labeled ATN-658. B. FACS analysis was performed using HeLa cells (expressing human uPAR), D-17 lung carcinoma cells (expressing canine uPAR and COS-1 cells. Each cell line was incubated with normal rabbit serum (NRS), a rabbit polyclonal antibody raised against a fragment of human uPAR (rDIDIII), mouse IgG (mIgG) or ATN-658 and the appropriate FITC labeled secondary antibody.
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0085349.g001
PC-3 (Fig. 1A&B), as previously described [27]. These results were confirmed and extended to include dog osteosarcoma cells (D-17) using non-biotinylated ATN-658 and an isotope matched IgG as a negative control and evaluated by flow cytometry (Fig. 1C).

Identification of the epitope for ATN-658 on human suPAR

Sequence alignment of primate DIIDIII uPAR sequences revealed that human and AGM uPAR only differed at nine amino acid positions (Table 2). These nine amino acid differences were sufficient to completely abrogate the binding of ATN-658 to AGM uPAR. Thus, we cloned and expressed AGM suPAR in S2 cells and supernatants incubated with either ATN-615 or ATN-658 followed by immunoprecipitation as described in Materials and Methods. suPAR was then detected by western blot using a rabbit polyclonal antiserum raised against human suPAR. B. Capture ELISA assays were used to measure the binding affinity of ATN-658 for the various suPAR clones described in (A). Capture on the ELISA plate was through the V5 tag and detection used biotin-ATN-658. C. Biotin-ATN-617 was used in a similar ELISA format as described in (B) to confirm that introduction of the single point mutation did not have a global effect on suPAR conformation.ATN-617 cross-reacts with monkey suPAR and all clones appeared to retain this reactivity after introduction of the mutation.

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0085349.g002

Figure 2. Immunoprecipitation of AGM suPAR clones using ATN-615 and ATN-658. A. Single point mutants were introduced into AGM suPAR such that a single amino acid was changed from the AGM sequence to the human uPAR sequence and the proteins expressed and purified as described in the Materials and Methods. Each clone is identified by number (1–9) with the point mutation identified below the number using the single letter amino acid code. Except for the single point mutation, the rest of the suPAR sequence is that of AGM. suPAR mutants were expressed in S2 cells and supernatants incubated with either ATN-615 or ATN-658 followed by immunoprecipitation as described in Materials and Methods. suPAR was then detected by western blot using a rabbit polyclonal antiserum raised against human suPAR. B. Capture ELISA assays were used to measure the binding affinity of ATN-658 for the various suPAR clones described in (A). Capture on the ELISA plate was through the V5 tag and detection used biotin-ATN-658. C. Biotin-ATN-617 was used in a similar ELISA format as described in (B) to confirm that introduction of the single point mutation did not have a global effect on suPAR conformation.

Novel uPAR Epitope Involved in Tumor Progression

Sequence alignment of primate DIIDIII uPAR sequences revealed that human and AGM uPAR only differed at nine amino acid positions (Table 2). These nine amino acid differences were sufficient to completely abrogate the binding of ATN-658 to AGM uPAR. Thus, we cloned and expressed AGM suPAR in S2 cells and made nine different mutants that sequentially replaced one amino acid from the AGM sequence in each mutant with the corresponding human amino acid (Fig. 2A). The initial evaluation of these mutants was qualitative where the ability of ATN-658 to immunoprecipitate (IP) a particular mutant from the culture supernatant (CS) from cells expressing that mutant was assessed. ATN-615, which is also human uPAR specific but for which we had already identified the epitope [33,34], was used to confirm the utility of this approach. ATN-615 was only able to IP the H192R suPAR mutant (clone 2; Fig. 2A). This is consistent with the described epitope for ATN-615, which is comprised of aa 187–192 (Fig. 2A). In fact, the only amino acid difference between AGM and human uPAR in this epitope is at aa 192. Similarly, ATN-658 was only able to IP the E268K (clone 8) suPAR mutant implicating this residue as part of the ATN-658 epitope. Alanine scanning mutagenesis around this amino acid maps out the sequence from aa 268–275 as the epitope for ATN-658 (S1). Since IP is a qualitative assessment of binding, capture ELISA assays were set up to measure the actual affinity of ATN-658 for the various AGM suPAR mutants as it was possible that perhaps more than aa 268 was required in order to restore full binding activity for ATN-658.
when the AGM suPAR sequence was mutated to the human sequence. Since the AGM suPAR mutants were expressed with an incorporated V5 flag, an anti-V5 flag antibody was used to capture AGM suPAR on solid phase. The binding affinity could then be determined for each AGM mutant using saturation binding studies as previously described for ATN-658 [27]. Using this approach, the binding of ATN-658 was only observed to clone 8 with a $K_d$, 2 nM, similar to the $K_d$ of ATN-658 for human suPAR and for human uPAR expressing cells indicating that this single amino acid change was responsible for complete abrogation of ATN-658 binding to AGM suPAR (Fig. 2B). This single amino acid change did not abrogate ATN-658 binding through a global effect on suPAR conformation since the binding of ATN-617, which binds to DIIDIII and does cross-react with AGM suPAR, was not altered (Fig. 2C). Alignment of this epitope across multiple species of uPAR helps explain the species specificity of ATN-658 binding [3]. The old world primates (apes, chimpanzees) are evolutionarily nearer to man and have homologous uPAR to human in the epitope for ATN-658. ATN-658 binding has been observed by immunohistochemistry to chimpanzee tissues consistent with this observation. In contrast, new world primate (macaques, AGM) uPAR differs in most cases at a single residue, aa 268, and this is sufficient to completely abrogate the binding of ATN-658. The uPAR of lower order mammals also differs at this position as well as others consistent with the lack of binding of ATN-658 to uPAR or cells expressing uPAR from these species as well (Table 3).

### Table 2. Amino acid sequence differences in DIIDIII of uPAR from human, African green monkey (AGM) and cynomolgus monkey (crab eating macaque).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>suPAR Amino Acid #</th>
<th>Human</th>
<th>Cercopithecus aethiops (African Green monkey COS-1)</th>
<th>Macaca fascicularis (Crab eating or Long tailed Macaque)</th>
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<td>125</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>V</td>
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<tr>
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<td>G</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>S</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>268</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>E</td>
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<tr>
<td>278</td>
<td>V</td>
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<tr>
<td>282</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>K</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0085349.t002

### Table 3. Sequence alignment of the ATN-658 epitope in primates and lower order mammals.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Human</th>
<th>Bonobo</th>
<th>Chimpanzee</th>
<th>Gorilla</th>
<th>Orangutan</th>
<th>Pigtailed Macaque</th>
<th>Rhesus Macaque</th>
<th>Long-tailed Macaque</th>
<th>African Green Monkey</th>
<th>Ring-tailed LEmur</th>
<th>Northern Owl Monkey</th>
<th>Dog</th>
<th>Mouse</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>KSGCNHPDLD</td>
<td>KSGCNHPDLD</td>
<td>KSGCNHPDLD</td>
<td>ESGCNHPDLD</td>
<td>ESGCNHPDLD</td>
<td>ESGCNHPDLD</td>
<td>ESGCNHPDLD</td>
<td>GSGCNHPARD</td>
<td>ENDCNPADA</td>
<td>TGNCSNHPAD</td>
<td>HGSGCNSP TGG</td>
<td>NGSGCNP TGG</td>
<td>DGDGCGNP RSG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A single amino acid change in this epitope is sufficient to confer species specificity of ATN-658 for human uPAR.

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### Confirmation of ATN-658 epitope by Hydrogen/Deuterium Exchange Mass Spectrometry (H/D-Ex)

Hydrogen-deuterium ($^1$H-D) exchange is a useful tool for identifying protein binding sites or interfaces. Following transfer from water to a deuterium-based solvent system (heavy water) a protein will experience an increase in mass as the protein hydrogen atoms are gradually replaced with deuterons. The likelihood of a hydrogen-deuterium exchange event is largely determined by protein structure and solvent accessibility. Differences in the rate of amide hydrogen exchange identify the location of an epitope. When an antibody binds to a protein target, surface regions that exclude solvent upon complex formation exchange much more slowly. Thus, solvent excluded regions are useful for deducing the location of a binding site. Using this approach, $^1$H-D exchange was measured for DIIDIII suPAR with and without ATN-658 bound as described in Methods and a difference map determined (Fig. 3). Differences in $^1$H-D exchange in blue demonstrated no difference between bound and unbound DIIDIII suPAR whereas differences in green suggested at least a 40% difference in exchange and identified the epitope of ATN-658 on suPAR. The only sequence where this difference was observed in the presence of ATN-658 was between aa 268-277 (Fig. 3), confirming the epitope identified using site directed mutagenesis.
Crystal structures of the ATN-658 Fab and its complex with uPAR, ATF and SMB reveal the binding epitope of ATN-658

To further evaluate the binding epitope of ATN-658, we determined the crystal structure of ATN-658 and its complex with human soluble uPAR. We crystallized the quaternary complex of ATN-658, suPAR, ATF, and somatomedin B domain (SMB) of vitronectin. The presence of the SMB was absolutely necessary to obtain the protein crystals. The crystals diffracted to only 4.5 Å, despite numerous optimization efforts on protein crystallization and X-ray data collection strategies. This is presumably due to high solvent content (76% solvent) and the presence of a long axis in the crystals (c = 391.5 Å). In order to solve this low resolution structure using molecular replacement, we also crystallized the free Fab fragment of ATN-658, and determined its structure to a high resolution (1.6 Å, Table 1). This structure of ATN-658 Fab fragment, together with the structures of uPAR-ATF-SMB [47], allowed us to unambiguously solve the quaternary structure of ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB using molecular replacement methods (Table 1).

The 1.6 Å crystal structure of the ATN-658 Fab alone consists of residues 1–127 and 134–212 of the heavy chain and residues 1–213 of the light chain. The antigen-binding site located at the end of the variable domains, comprised of six CDRs, is clearly defined in this antigen-free structure. The H3 loop lies in the center of the pocket surrounded by the light-chain CDRs L1, L2, and L3 and the heavy-chain CDRs H1 and H2, with both hydrophobic and hydrophilic interactions with the other CDRs. The six CDRs form a relatively flat but undulating surface, a feature of anti-protein antibodies. In addition, the conformations of the 6 CDRs in the free form are quite similar to the conformations in the antigen-bound form (RMSD of 0.49 Å for Cα atoms in 427 residues). These results indicate that ATN-658 has structurally rigid CDRs.

Despite the limited resolution of 4.5 Å, the ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB quaternary complex has high quality. The inherent glycans of uPAR at amino acid residue 52, 172, and 200 were clearly visible in the 2Fo-Fc electron density map. Three N-acetylglucosamine glycan residues were built into a large piece of electron density around the uPAR glycosylation site at residue 52. This is the largest glycan structure observed so far among all the published uPAR-ligand structures at this position. Besides the antibody, the other three components in the quaternary complex, uPAR-ATF-SMB, adopt the same conformation as previous published structures (3BT1 and 3BT2) [47] with an overall RMSD of 0.8 Å. ATF binds in the central pocket of the receptor comprised of all of three domains [33]. The SMB binds to the outer side of the DI β sheet, and also to part of the DII domain [47]. Both the ATF and SMB are located on the top of the receptor (Fig. 4), but without direct overlap between them. Crystal packing shows that ATF and SMB from one complex intertwined into the cleft formed by the ATF and SMB from another symmetry-related ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB complex with hydrophilic and hydrophobic interactions. The buried area between these two complexes is quite large (3033 Å²). This extensive crystal contact of the SMB explains the requirement for the SMB to generate the current crystal form.

The structure of ATN-658-uPAR-ATF-SMB quaternary complex corroborates the biochemical mapping studies but also reveals several unexpected features of both the epitope and ATN-658 itself. The epitope of ATN-658 is restricted to the DIII domain at the bottom (near the C-terminus) of the receptor (Fig. 4), and consists of three segments of the uPAR DIII domain: 1) the C-terminal segment of uPAR (residues Gly270, His273, and Asp275); 2) uPAR DIII domain β strand IIIA (residues Gln193 and Tyr195); and 3) uPAR DIII domain β strand IIIB (residues Phe211, Leu212 and Asp214). Among these three segments, the C-terminal segment of uPAR has direct interaction to CDR H3 loop of ATN-658 and appears to be the most important epitope for antibody recognition. These results are consistent with the alanine scanning mutagenesis results (Fig. 2) and the alignment of non-primates of uPAR sequence (Table 3). On the ATN-658 side, both the heavy and light chains of ATN-658 are involved in antigen binding. However, the heavy chain CDR are the primary structural determinants that recognize uPAR. The light chain CDR play a minor role in the binding, recognizing only the last C-terminal residue of uPAR, Asp275. Such recognition modes...
relying on the heavy chain have been observed in other antibody-antigen complexes [48,49].

**ATN-658 has structural and sequence homology to the uPAR binding region of CD11b(αM) and inhibits binding to α5β1 and RGD mediated adhesion to fibronectin**

We found that short stretches of the ATN-658 CDR sequences (H2, H3, L1, L3) align and have a high degree of homology with the β-propeller domain of the integrin, CD11b (αM) (loops 1, 2, and 3, Fig. 5A). In addition, the spatial arrangements of these loops also superimpose well in three-dimensions, based on the current ATN-658 crystal structure and a homology structure model of αMβ2 (Fig. 5B). It would have been very difficult to detect this homology based on the alignment of linear amino acid sequences since these short stretches of amino acids assemble from the various CDR loops only in the three-dimensional structure of ATN-658 bound to suPAR. This suggests that ATN-658 may be an antagonist of the αMβ2-uPAR interaction. Further experimental verification is currently underway.

We also found that ATN-658 blocks the interaction of uPAR with another integrin, α5β1. ATN-658 and a control anti-uPAR antibody, ATN-615, both in IgG and Fab forms, were used to immunoprecipitate (IP) uPAR from cell lysates of H1299, a human non-small lung carcinoma cell line that expresses high levels of uPAR. The resulting immunoprecipitates were analyzed by Western blot for uPAR and α5 integrin subunits. ATN-615 was able to IP both uPAR and α5 integrin (Fig. 6A). However, ATN-658 was only able to IP uPAR, but not α5, and thus appears to block the interaction of uPAR with α5 integrin. To validate this result, a fibronectin adhesion assay was carried out. Adhesion of H1299 cells to fibronectin is mediated to a large extent by the α5β1 integrin and this adhesion can be completely blocked by an α5β1-blocking antibody (5H10-27) [29,50]. This α5β1-mediated fibronectin adhesion can also be abrogated by an integrin binding RGD peptide. However, we observed that uPAR over-expression in H1299 cells can antagonize the effect of the RGD peptide, and increase cell adhesion to fibronectin in the presence of RGD-containing peptides [30]. Based on this uPAR-enhanced adhesion and other observations, uPAR was proposed to interact with the bent conformation of integrin α5β1 and render it capable of
engaging fibronectin adhesion [29]. This effect of uPAR-enhanced adhesion is completely inhibited by ATN-658, but not by control IgG or ATN-615 (Fig. 6B). This suggests that ATN-658 can also block the uPAR-α5β1 interaction which was unexpected since the region of uPAR that has been implicated in the α5β1 interaction resides between aa 240–248 [15] whereas ATN-658 binds to aa 268–275. However, previous studies using a peptide derived from αM (M25) that inhibited the uPAR-αM interaction [51] demonstrated that inhibiting the uPAR-αM interaction on leukocytes also blocked the uPAR-α5β1 interaction, which suggests that ATN-658 may broadly impact uPAR-integrin interactions.

Discussion

In this study, we have identified an epitope in uPAR with a previously unrecognized function that serves as the binding site for the novel therapeutic uPAR antibody, ATN-658. Over the past several decades, several uPAR antibodies have been identified that bind to human uPAR with high affinity. However, ATN-658 is the first uPAR antibody to demonstrate consistent robust antitumor effects across a variety of tumor models [22,26–28] that include not only inhibition of invasion and metastasis but also inhibition of proliferation and induction of apoptosis. The epitope for ATN-658, aa 268–277 of uPAR, resides in DIII and contains a small 6-mer disulfide loop near the glycolipid anchor of uPAR. Another anti-uPAR antibody, ATN-615, also binds to the DIII domain of uPAR [34], but does not show any antitumor effects in vitro or in vivo. This non-inhibitory antibody recognizes a different non-overlapping set of epitope residues compared to ATN-658 and emphasizes the importance of targeting the correct uPAR epitope for cancer therapy. We have also evaluated other uPAR antibodies that block uPA binding to uPAR (e.g. ATN-617) in various tumor models and these also have poor antitumor effects in vivo. Based on these observations, ATN-658 has now been humanized (huATN-658) and a first-in-man study is being planned for the near future.
Of broader significance is the mechanism of how ATN-658 exerts its antitumor effects at the molecular level. The observation that the interaction of ATN-658 with uPAR closely mimics that of CD11b (αM; Mac-1; CR3) with uPAR has broad implications for the role of uPAR in tumor progression. αM forms a heterodimer with β2 (αMβ2) and is expressed on the surface of many leukocytes involved in the innate immune system [52,53]. αMβ2 mediates inflammation by regulating leukocyte adhesion and migration [52,53]. Recently, CD11b expression has been demonstrated to define a subpopulation of bone marrow derived myeloid cells (BMDC) that seed the pre-metastatic niche and without which tumor metastasis is unable to progress [54]. The CD11b positive BMDC may actually encompass several subpopulations of cells, some of which act as suppressors to dampen cytotoxic T cell response and therefore allow tumors to progress [55]. In addition, CD11b-positive cells may secrete factors that drive tumor progression and subpopulations have also been demonstrated to be involved in tumor resistance to anti-angiogenic therapy [56].

Historically, uPAR has been implicated in the metastatic process and conceptually, this implication has focused on its role in invasion and migration prior to intravasation or during the process of extravasation but not once cells have extravasated and seeded a metastatic site. The fact that ATN-658 mimics the CD11b-uPAR interaction suggests that ATN-658 may block this interaction and suggests several hypotheses as to how uPAR may actually function to promote metastasis. When treating a patient with advanced cancer, it needs to be assumed that metastases are already present when treatment is started even if they are not detected radiographically. Thus, inhibiting the progression of established metastases may be more therapeutically relevant than trying to interfere with the metastatic process. If the uPAR-CD11b interaction is central to metastatic outgrowth, ATN-658 may be targeting the most clinically relevant and actionable aspect of metastasis.

This study leads to several hypotheses of how uPAR-CD11b may promote metastasis. One hypothesis is that uPAR on a tumor cell may interact with CD11b on a leukocyte in the pre-metastatic niche in trans and this interaction may mediate survival and outgrowth of the uPAR expressing tumor cells, possibly by dampening T cell or innate immune response at the metastatic site. An alternative hypothesis is that CD11b is expressed directly on a tumor cell so that uPAR and CD11b interact in cis. The contribution of each of these interactions to tumor progression and the molecular mechanisms that are downstream of uPAR-CD11b binding remain to be elucidated and are a major focus for future studies.

In our study, we also observe the ability of ATN-658 to inhibit the interaction of uPAR with α5β1 in H1299 tumor cells as well as antagonize RGD mediated anti-adhesive effects of tumor cells interacting with fibronectin (Fig. 6). Although we cannot rule out a steric effect of ATN-658 on the uPAR interaction with α5β1, we hypothesize that ATN-658 may alter global integrin clustering and signaling through the inhibition of the CD11b-uPAR interaction. In that regard, a peptide, M25, that blocked the uPAR-CD11b interaction was demonstrated to also inhibit the interaction of uPAR with β1 integrins (32). In addition, we also demonstrate that ATN-658 blocks CD11b mediated adhesion of U937 cells. Our previous studies using both unbiased and biased approaches demonstrated that ATN-658 inhibits integrin signaling in vitro and in vivo as well as co-localization of α5β1 and uPAR [22,27]. Our data suggest that the effects of ATN-658 on perturbing the uPAR-α5β1 interaction is indirect and direct binding of uPAR to integrin α5β1 or any other integrin using purified components has not been demonstrated [57], suggesting that these interactions require multiple components present at the cell surface. The existence of a signalosome containing uPAR has been postulated by D’Allessio and Blasi [58] and the data obtained to date supports the hypothesis that ATN-658 disrupts the signalosome leading to
global effects on integrin signaling and inhibition of tumor progression (Fig. 7). uPAR may behave as a scaffolding protein in the assembly of this signalosome. Although the exact temporal order and sets of interactions that mediate these effects remain to be elucidated, these observations strongly support uPAR as a global mediator of integrin signaling and interactions as well as a cancer target that will affect multiple tumor progression pathway [22,26–28].

Acknowledgments

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Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: YW FD GP EJM TVO MH. Performed the experiments: XX YC YW JJ AU OD LC. Analyzed the data: TVO FD GP RWA AU EJM APD OD. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: EJM MH. Wrote the paper: MH APD TVO YW FD GP.

References


