Melanoma Phenotype: Inflammation-Dependent Gene Expression Profiling Test and Immunoscoring

- Metastatic relapse and the likelihood of death among patients with early stage melanoma vary depending on key prognostic variables (Breslow depth, ulceration, mitotic rate, and lymph node involvement), which make up the current AJCC system (1). While patients with resected melanoma are carefully monitored for recurrence by physical examinations, blood tests, and imaging studies (2), we have no means of determining within each staging group who and when they will relapse.

- PBM's scientists reported that endogenous inflammatory factors such as interleukin (IL)-1beta and IL-18 promote experimental melanoma metastasis via vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF)-induced VLA-4 integrin (3-6) and that IL-18 regulates human melanoma VLA-4 integrin activation through a hierarchized sequence of inflammatory mediators (7). Next they determined signature genes from human melanoma cell lines given soluble soluble VCAM-1 and IL-18, which in turn allowed the identification of primary and metastatic lesions from melanoma patients with inflammation-dependent and –independent phenotypes (8).

- VCAM-1/IL-18-dependent melanoma genes represent a panel of clinically-verified genes of help for sorting melanoma lesions with inflammation-dependent and independent phenotypes. In addition, distinct melanoma stem cell gene expression patterns were detected for metastatic lesion with and without inflammatory phenotype (recent unpublished data), suggesting that different cancer stem-like cells are operating in these melanoma subtypes. Furthermore, immune checkpoint modulator genes also showed distinct expression patterns in melanoma lesions with inflammation-dependent and independent phenotypes, suggesting their potential interest as biomarkers for better identifying patients responding to immune checkpoint inhibitors.

- Because inflammation promotes metastatic melanoma progression (9) and upregulates the immunosuppressive microenvironment associated to immune checkpoint pathway activation in effector T cells (10), PBM's scientists have developed novel and sensitive laboratory tests for the detection of primary and metastatic melanoma lesions using inflammation-dependent metastasis and immunosuppressant molecular pathways.

- Laboratory tests are based on TaqMan Low Density Arrays allowing a relative quantitation of target genes. Next, the expression level and transcriptional association pattern of gene subsets are studied in the array to accurately determining inflammation-dependent and independent melanoma phenotypes with the help of the following gene categories: 1) Genes defining melanoma lesions with and without IL-18/VEGF/VLA-4 phenotype; 2) Genes whose expression changes only occurred during melanoma cell response to proinflammatory mediators; 3) Cancer stem cell genes from melanoma lesions with and without IL-18/VEGF/VLA-4 phenotype.

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- Further verification of transcriptional results can be obtained with the help of the **Inflammation-Dependent Melanoma-immunoscore™**. This is a combined immuno-dermato-pathologic approach to determine clinically-validated biomarkers of inflammation-dependent and independent melanoma cells. Detection kits characterize the number, density, and distribution of biomarker-positive melanoma cells in the core of the primary and metastatic and in the invasive margin using a combination of immunohistochemistry testing and automated digital pathology.

- Altogether, the scoring results of the test provide a scientific basis for:

    o Identification and functional sub-classification of inflammation-dependent and independent melanoma, their prometastatic activation pathways and associated cancer stem cells.
    o Selection of treatments for patients that improve patient outcomes based on an understanding of the inflammation-dependent and independent prometastatic activation pathways and their associated cancer stem cell phenotypes in early and advanced stage cutaneous and visceral melanomas. Results may also predict response level to immunotherapy.

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