

TCR transgenic clone selection guided by immune receptor analysis and single cell RNA expression of polyclonal responders

Reviewed Preprint

v2 • November 29, 2024

Revised by authors

Reviewed Preprint

v1 • June 11, 2024

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The paper illustrates a **valuable** approach to generating TCR transgenic mice specific for known epitopes. **Solid** evidence validates the described pipeline for identification of TCRs from single-cell datasets for the generation of TCR transgenic mice, while obviating the need for generation of T-cell lines and hybridomas.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.98344.2.sa3>

Abstract

Since the precursor frequency of naïve T cells is extremely low, investigating the early steps of antigen-specific T cell activation is challenging. To overcome this detection problem, adoptive transfer of a cohort of T cells purified from T cell receptor (TCR) transgenic donors has been extensively used but is not readily available for emerging pathogens. Constructing TCR transgenic mice from T cell hybridomas is a labor-intensive and sometimes erratic process, since the best clones are selected based on antigen-induced CD69 upregulation or IL-2 production *in vitro*, and TCR chains are PCR-cloned into expression vectors. Here, we exploited the rapid advances in single cell sequencing and TCR repertoire analysis to select the best clones without hybridoma selection, and generated CORSET8 mice (**COR**ona **S**pike **E**pitope specific CD8 **T** cell), carrying a TCR specific for the Spike protein of SARS-CoV-2. Implementing newly created DALI software for TCR repertoire analysis in single cell analysis enabled the rapid selection of the ideal responder CD8 T cell clone, based on antigen reactivity, proliferation and immunophenotype *in vivo*. Identified TCR sequences were inserted as synthetic DNA into an expression vector and transgenic CORSET8 donor mice were created. After immunization with Spike/CpG-motifs, mRNA vaccination or SARS-CoV2

infection, CORSET8 T cells strongly proliferated and showed signs of T cell activation. Thus, a combination of TCR repertoire analysis and scRNA immunophenotyping allowed rapid selection of antigen-specific TCR sequences that can be used to generate TCR transgenic mice.

Introduction

One of the key features of adaptive immunity is the enormous receptor diversity of lymphocytes, which is estimated to cover over 10^{10} unique sequences for T cells alone ((Cho et al., 2020 [↗](#); Lythe et al., 2016 [↗](#)). This empowers the adaptive immune system to tackle an infinite number of invaders. Every single clone cannot expand before antigen encounter because of space constraints and therefore circulates at extremely low precursor frequency. This low precursor frequency has impeded the detailed study of early antigen-specific T cell responses *in vivo*, despite the advent of peptide-MHC tetramers that can detect rare antigen-specific cells after whole body enrichment (Altman and Davis, 2016 [↗](#); Chu et al., 2009 [↗](#); Dileepan et al., 2021 [↗](#); Moon et al., 2009 [↗](#), 2007 [↗](#); Shin et al., 2023 [↗](#)). To overcome this detection problem, adoptive transfer of a cohort of naive T cells derived from T cell receptor transgenic mice (TCR Tg), which harbour high numbers of a single clonotypic T-cell population, has been extensively used. This technique allowed the tracking of clonal activation, expansion, differentiation and migration to many model antigens and pathogens, even in early phases of the adaptive immune response, which has greatly contributed to answering key questions in T cell biology in vaccinology, infectious models, cancer, autoimmunity and allergy (Attridge and Walker, 2014 [↗](#); Coquet et al., 2015 [↗](#); Kisielow et al., 1988 [↗](#); Miura et al., 2020 [↗](#); Oxenius et al., 1998 [↗](#)).

Although many TCR transgenic mouse models are now commercially available and are extensively used in many fields, it is sometimes still needed to rapidly generate a new TCR transgenic mouse. This is certainly the case for emerging pathogens like SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus, for which no research tools were readily available in 2019. The generation of TCR Tg mice necessitates the selection of a functionally relevant TCR clone whose TCR V α - and V β -chains are subsequently expressed in a vector that is highly expressed in thymocytes, causing an effective skewing from a polyclonal to a monoclonal repertoire due to allelic exclusion (Irving et al., 1998 [↗](#); Wang et al., 2001 [↗](#)). To obtain clonotypic information, the coding sequence for the TCR α - and β -chains are extracted from antigen-reactive T cell clones. The most often used method to find rare antigen-reactive clones relies on immunization of mice with relevant antigen, and the *ex vivo* generation of easily expandable immortal T hybridoma cells from splenocytes. Hybridomas are then selected for reactivity to immunodominant peptides, often independent of cellular phenotype or function, but merely based on upregulation of CD69 or production of IL-2 as a sign for antigen sensitivity. From these hybridomas, the coding regions for the V α - and V β -chain can be amplified by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and PCR-cloned into a CD4 expression vector (Vanheerswynghels et al., 2018 [↗](#)).

The successful selection of a TCR clone that can be used for transgenesis and ultimately as a T cell donor to study antiviral responses depends on two key factors: first, the T cell epitope needs to be antigenic, immunogenic, and stable across pathogenic variants. Second, the TCR clone needs sufficient affinity to the epitope presented on an MHC molecule, as this determines the strength and kinetics of the immune response. In other words, affinity of the TCR determines the proliferative advantage of an effector cell or the tendency to form long-term memory (Kavazović et al., 2018 [↗](#)). Often, the selection process based on hybridoma selection yields multiple epitope specific clones that upregulate CD69 or IL-2, and only minimal functional parameters are checked before prioritizing one clone to proceed with. This can result in the generation of TCR Tg mice whose T cells do not respond optimally in a biological setting, fail to compete with endogenous polyclonal T cells upon adoptive transfer, or fail to form memory responses (Bartleson et al., 2020 [↗](#); Milam et al., 2018 [↗](#); Weber et al., 2012 [↗](#)).

Here, we provide an optimized approach for TCR clone selection that capitalizes on recent technological advances in the single cell sequencing field that combine analysis of cellular heterogeneity of responding T cells with immune receptor profiling (VDJseq). We have recently developed the interactive DALI software tool, which is an R software package which allows for fast identification and analysis of T- and B cell receptor diversity in high-throughput single-cell sequencing data using command line or a graphical user interface (GUI) (Verstaen et al., 2022 [DOI](#)). Owing to the browser-based interactive GUI, immunologists having limited coding experience can effectively analyze these complex datasets. The DALI tool facilitates linking TCR clonotype information to functional properties, immunophenotype and precursor frequency of individual T cells within a polyclonal response to vaccination or infection *in vivo*. Information like clonotype diversity, clonotype expansion and differentially expressed genes between clonotypes allows for rationalized TCR sequence selection, and for generation of TCR Tg mice.

As a proof of concept that this strategy is helpful, we generated CD8 TCR Tg mice carrying a TCR specific for a Spike Epitope of the SARS-CoV-2 Coronavirus. We first generated a (**CORona Spike Epitope specific CD8 T cell**) **CORSET8** line based on traditional T cell hybridoma technology and selection, which eventually yielded a poorly reactive TCR transgenic line. As an alternative, rationalized approach, we applied scRNA and TCR sequencing and subsequent analysis of the T cell clones via the DALI tool. This latter approach allowed us to a priori evaluate key characteristics required for the development of TCR Tg T cells, including cytokine production, cellular phenotype, and physiologically relevant clonal expansion. Importantly, the generation of fully functional TCR transgenic mice took only a fraction of the workload and time in comparison to the classical approach. CORSET8 mice and the resulting transgenic T cells were thoroughly evaluated by *ex vivo* and *in vivo* methods following vaccination and SARS-CoV-2 infection. The streamlined method for generating TCR Tg mice, as presented here, offers an attractive approach for future TCR Tg mouse development.

Results

Generation of CORSET8 mice based on hybridoma technology

Designing a TCR transgenic mouse starts with the selection of the antigen epitope to which the TCR is addressed using peptide libraries (Zhuang et al., 2021 [DOI](#)) and/or computational scanning combined with a cellular activity assay (Erez et al., 2023 [DOI](#); Vandersarren et al., 2017 [DOI](#); Vanheerswynghels et al., 2018 [DOI](#)). In a first approach to generate CORSET8 Tg mice, we used the IEDB database (Vita et al., 2018 [DOI](#)) to predict the most promising MHC I binding Spike epitopes and made use of the classical, well-established hybridoma technology to create the transgenic mice. To induce Spike reactive T cells, we immunized C57BL/6 mice by intraperitoneal injection of a mixture of Spike protein and CpG adjuvant every 14 days for a total of three immunisations (**Fig. 1** [DOI](#) II and **Suppl. Fig. 1** [DOI](#)). After fusion of these reactive T cells to the BW5147 lymphoma, the obtained T-cell hybridoma clones were scored for their IL-2 production upon stimulation with a Spike peptide pool (INITRFQTL, IWLGFIAGL, GNYNYLYRL, VVFLHVITYV, FQFCNDPFL). Compared to medium control, clone 47 had the strongest fold increase in IL-2 (**Suppl. Fig. 1A** [DOI](#)). This clone also upregulated CD69 and IFN- γ in the presence of the Spike peptide pool (**Suppl. Fig. 1B** [DOI](#)) or individual Spike peptides. After comparing the clones in three co-culture experiments, clone 47 was prioritized and used for the generation of a TCR Tg mouse. However, CD8 T cells from the newly generated CORSET8 mice did not respond to Spike peptide or Spike protein in a BM-DC co-culture experiment (**Suppl. Fig. 1C** [DOI](#)). To check whether CORSET8 mice had transgenic T cells with a functioning TCR at all, we crossed these mice with *Rag2*-deficient mice that are unable to generate polyclonal T cells. We readily detected CD8 T cells even on the *Rag2*^{-/-} background (**Suppl. Fig. 1D** [DOI](#)), demonstrating that the TCR was expressed and was of high enough affinity to cause

positive selection of CD8 T cells, and therefore functional. Due to the lack of responsiveness, we discontinued this mouse line immediately after it was generated, illustrating that the design of a useful TCR Tg mouse model is an erratic process that can be optimized.

Generation of CORSET8 mice based on single cell and TCR repertoire analysis

Given the unsuccessful generation of CORSET8 mice using the classical hybridoma approach, we decided to rationalize clone selection (**Fig. 1** [1](#)). To this end, we immunized mice as described in the previous section (**Fig. 1** [1](#) II). From these mice, we sorted splenic T cells and used an MHC class I tetramer to discriminate Spike-reactive and non-reactive T cells (**Suppl. Fig. 2** [2](#)). The tetramer identifies CD8 T cells directed to a conserved and highly immunogenic epitope (VNFNFNGL) of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein. The latter has been confirmed by multiple studies ([Carmen et al., 2021](#) [1](#); [Erez et al., 2023](#) [1](#); [Zhuang et al., 2021](#) [1](#)). A naïve mouse was taken along as a backdrop for the cellular phenotypes. Ultimately, we subjected 3 samples for single cell sequencing: Tetramer positive T cells originating from the immunised mice, Tetramer negative T cells originating from the immunized mice, and tetramer negative T cells originating from the naïve control mouse. Clustering of these cells revealed different cellular clusters among sorted CD8 T cells (**Fig. 2A** [2](#)). Tetramer+ cells formed a distinct cluster on the UMAP reduced dimensional space (**Fig. 2B** [2](#)). The highest differentially expressed genes of the different clusters are plotted in **Figure 2C** [2](#). A subgroup of Tetramer+ cells had a distinct phenotype, marked by increased expression of proliferation and activation markers such as *Mki67* and *Gzmb* and transcription factors regulating CD8 effector differentiation such as *Tbet* and *Bhlhe40* ([Li et al., 2019](#) [1](#); [Sullivan et al., 2003](#) [1](#)), highlighting their activated T effector state (**Fig. 2A-C** [2](#)). Next, TCRseq data was linked to the Seurat object using our DALI tool ([Verstaen et al., 2022](#) [1](#)), which allows for command line or GUI analysis of TCR data (**Fig. 2D** [2](#)). Upon subsetting and reclustering of the Tetramer+ cells from immunized mice, 3 clusters were defined, of which cluster 1 showed high expression of *Mki67*, while both cluster 0 and 1 showed high expression of *Ifng* and activation markers *Cd69* and *Nr4a1* (**Fig. 2E-F** [2](#)). Assessing clonal expansion, we found that cluster 0 and 1 contained highly expanded clones (**Fig. 2G** [2](#)). When assessing clonal expansion in more detail, we found clonotype1 to be highly expanded in cluster 0 and 1 (**Fig. 2H-I** [2](#)). Given that clonotype 1 expressed proliferation markers (*Mki67*⁺), produced cytokines (*Ifng*⁺), had the potential to become a memory cell (*Cd69*⁺, *Tcf7*⁺, *Sell*) and the observed clonal expansion, we decided to continue using this clonotype for the generation of TCR Tg mice (**Fig. 1** [1](#); **Fig. 2J** [2](#)). The selected Va and Vβ TCR sequences were ordered as gBlocks (IDT) and subsequently cloned into the CD4 expression vector p428 via SalI ([Vanheerswynghe et al., 2018](#) [1](#)). Injection fragments we excised from the p428 backbone by NotI digestion, gel purified and injected into fertilized C57BL/6 oocytes.

CORSET8 mice exhibit skewing to CD8 T cells and TCR Tg cells recognize target peptide *ex vivo*

In the newly generated (*Rag2*-sufficient) CORSET8 mice, the distribution of splenic CD4 T and CD8 T cells shows a skewing towards CD8 T cells, compared to wildtype mice (**Fig. 3A** [3](#)). Both CD4 T and CD8 T cells displayed normal frequencies of T cell subsets with a significant loss of naïve (CD62L⁺CD44⁻) and increase of effector (CD62L⁻CD44⁺) T cell populations in the CD8 compartment, as expected based on the phenotype of the cells harboring clonotype 1 (**Fig. 3B** [3](#), **Fig. 2F** [2](#)). Staining of the splenocytes with the Spike Tetramer that was initially used to identify target epitope directed T cells, revealed that about 70% of total CD8 T cells of the CORSET mice on a *Rag2* sufficient background were transgenic cells (**Fig. 3C** [3](#)). Next, we aimed to functionally evaluate the generated CORSET8 TCR Tg T cells. Therefore, we co-cultured BM-DCs and Cell Tracer Violet (CTV)-labelled CORSET8 T cells in the presence of increasing doses of Spike peptide (VNFNFNGL, 0-10 µg/ml) for 4 days. The dilution of the cell proliferation dye CTV reflects the augmented proliferation of the CORSET8 cells in correspondence with the antigenic dose (**Fig. 3D** [3](#)). Notably,

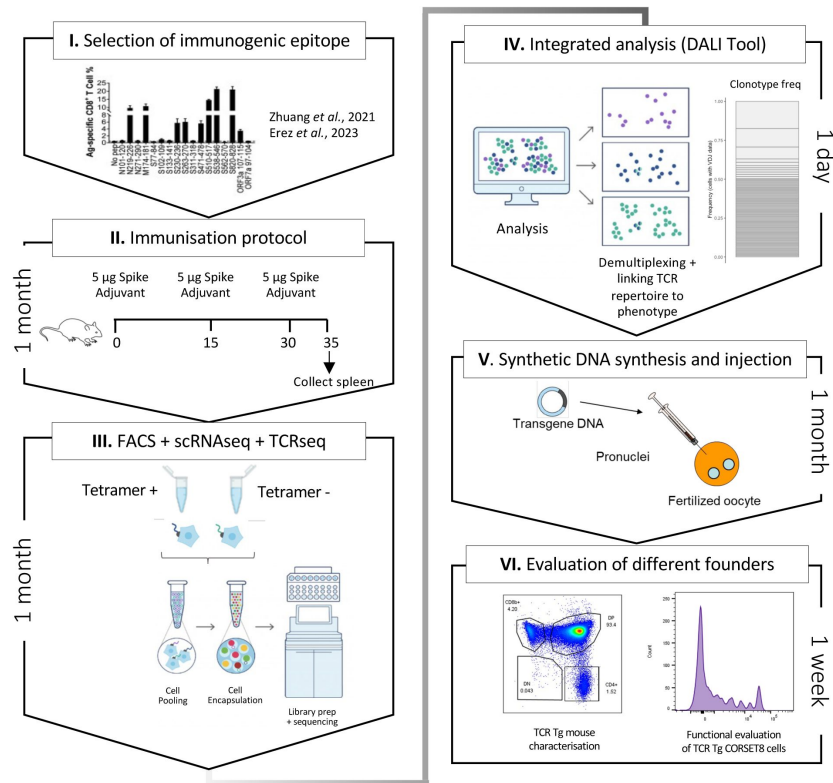


Figure 1

Schematic overview of the generation of rationalized CORSET8 transgenic mice.

I) Selection of the immunogenic epitope: here based on T cell epitope mapping results of Zhuang *et al.* (2021) [\[1\]](#), which were confirmed by Erez *et al.* (2023) [\[2\]](#) (Erez *et al.*, 2023 [\[2\]](#); Zhuang *et al.*, 2021 [\[1\]](#)). II) Immunisation protocol to render Spike reactive T cells (for more information see Material and Methods section). III) Fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) followed by single cell RNA and TCR sequencing. IV) Linking the single cell RNA and TCR sequencing data allows an integrated analysis to identify clonotypes and compare functional characteristics. V) Injection of the synthetic DNA into a fertilized oocyte followed by transfer into recipient females for gestation, resulting into the birth of transgenic founder offspring. VI) Dual evaluation of the different founders by phenotypical characterisation of the transgenic mouse and functional testing of the TCR Tg T cells. Parts of the figure adapted from 10xGenomics.

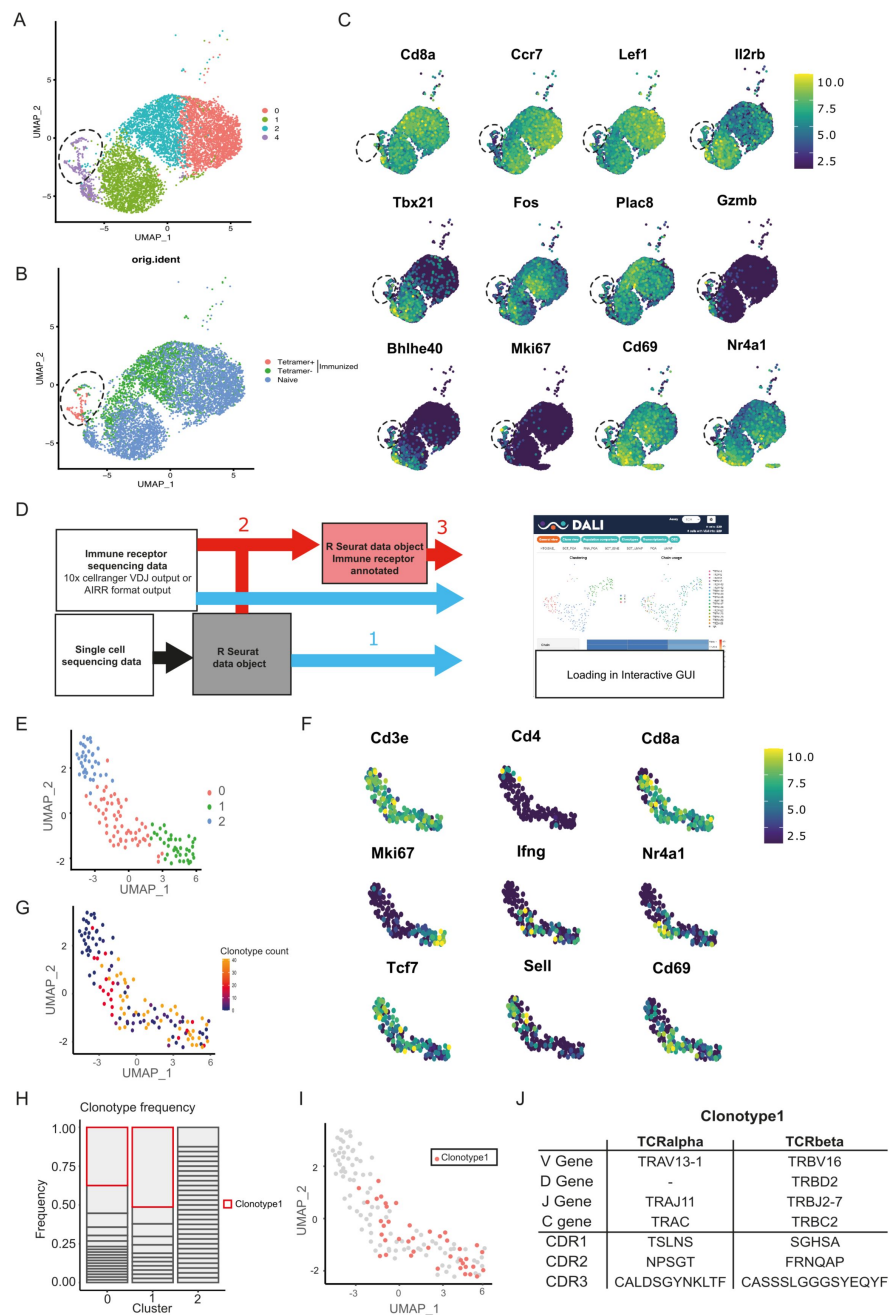


Figure 2

Clone identification using DALI assisted combined single cell and TCR analysis

A) Uniform manifold approximation and projection (UMAP) of splenic CD8 T cell single-cell RNA sequencing visualizing four different clusters based on single cell analysis. B) Projection of the three sequenced samples on the UMAP: CD8+ Tetramer positive cells of an immunized mouse (sample 1), CD8+ Tetramer negative cells of an immunized mice (sample 2) and total CD8 T cells from a naive mouse (sample 3). See **Supplemental Figure 2** for detailed gating strategy of above-mentioned samples. C) Gene RNA expression in splenic CD8 T cells. Hallmark genes among the top differentially expressed genes are depicted. D) Overview of DALI pipelines using either -1-loading of the R Seurat object and immune profiling data directly into the interactive Shiny app or -2-generation of an extended R Seurat object containing immune receptor profiling data, which can be loaded into the interactive Shiny app -3-. E) UMAP of subsetted and reclustered Tetramer+ CD8 T cells showing three different clusters. F) RNA expression in Tetramer+ CD8 T cells of curated activation markers. G) UMAP of Tetramer+ CD8 T cells highlighting clonotype expansion. H) Clonotype frequency in the three different clusters of Tetramer+ CD8 T cells. I) Projection of clonotype1 on the UMAP of Tetramer+ CD8 T cells. J) TCRα and TCRβ sequence information of clonotype 1.

the CORSET8 cells responded to minute doses of Spike peptide (10 pg/ml), illustrating that the CORSET8 cells express a strong affinity TCR. Furthermore, the CD4 and CD8 T cell distribution in the thymus of the CORSET8 Tg animals shows significant skewing to the CD8⁺ T cell subset, which also hints towards successful transgene expression and confirms the splenic data in panel 3A (**Fig. 3E** [↗](#)).

CORSET8 cells divide *in vivo* upon immunization with recombinant spike antigen or with Pfizer BNT162b2 mRNA vaccine

After demonstrating *ex vivo* CORSET8 T cell proliferation, we aimed to assess this phenomenon in an *in vivo* context. CORSET8 T cells were isolated and CTV-labelled to track cellular divisions. Next, 1×10^6 CORSET8 cells were adoptively transferred into C57BL/6 mice that were immunized intratracheally with Spike protein in presence of CpG adjuvant (**Fig. 4A** [↗](#)). Four days after T cell transfer, 95.17% (± 1.61) of CORSET8 cells underwent division in the draining mediastinal lymph node, as demonstrated by the CTV dilution profile (**Fig. 4C** [↗](#)). Both upon Spike/CpG and Pfizer BNT162b2 vaccine immunization, CORSET8 T cells were displaying an activation profile, as shown by increased expression of activation markers such as CD44, IFN- γ , T-Bet and CD69 compared to endogenous CD45.2 cells (**Fig. 4D** [↗](#)). Also Ki-67 expression, as alternative readout to CTV for assessing proliferation, was strongly induced in the CORSET8 T cells. Interestingly, a small population of endogenous CD45.2 cells was Spike Tetramer positive, and these cells had a slightly increased activation profile compared to their Tetramer negative counterparts. However, this increase was still very mild in comparison with the strong activation in CORSET8 T cells. Thus, the phenotypical characteristics for which clonotype 1 was chosen for during single cell analysis, could be confirmed in the newly generated CORSET8 mice *in vivo*.

CORSET8 cells proliferate in response to SARS-CoV-2 infection

As a final validation of our mouse model, we used the CORSET8 cells in a SARS-CoV-2 infection model, conducted under BSL3 conditions (**Fig. 4E** [↗](#)). As wildtype mice are not susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 infection, we made use of K18-hACE2 Tg mice, the standard mouse model for SARS-CoV-2 research (Moreau et al., 2020 [↗](#); Rathnasinghe et al., 2020 [↗](#); Winkler et al., 2020 [↗](#); Yinda et al., 2021 [↗](#)). hACE2^{Tg/wt} mice and their control wildtype littermates were infected with 450 pfu SARS-CoV-2 or mock. Two days after infection, isolated and CTV-labelled CORSET8 T cells were adoptively transferred. Upon analyzing the mediastinal lymph nodes four days post-adoptive transfer, CORSET8 T cells were exclusively detected in the infected hACE2^{Tg/wt} mice, with no presence observed in mock conditions or hACE2^{wt/wt} infected mice (**Fig. 4E** [↗](#), **Fig. 4G** [↗](#)). After four days, 99.28 $\pm$ 0.12% of CORSET8 T wells divided and upregulated activation markers such as CD44 in the draining mediastinal lymph node (**Fig. 4F** [↗](#)). Endogenous CD8 T cells from the recipient SARS-CoV-2 infected mice (CD45.2) did not upregulate CD44, demonstrating that only the transgenic T cells were engaged (**Fig. 4H** [↗](#)). Furthermore, Spike Tetramer staining revealed that CORSET8 T cells had a higher affinity for the Tetramer than Tetramer⁺ endogenous CD8 T cells (**Fig. 4I** [↗](#)), which again confirms that the generated CORSET8 mice have a high affinity TCR, a phenotype we selected for.

Discussion

Adoptive transfer models using TCR transgenic mice as donors of antigen reactive T cells have made it possible to study early T cell responses at clonal level, which is otherwise very strenuous given the extensive variety of polyclonal T cell clones. This broad variety causes low progenitor frequency of any given clone in the pre-immune repertoire, rendering the tracking of early responses exceedingly difficult. In addition, these models confer a significant advantage to T cell

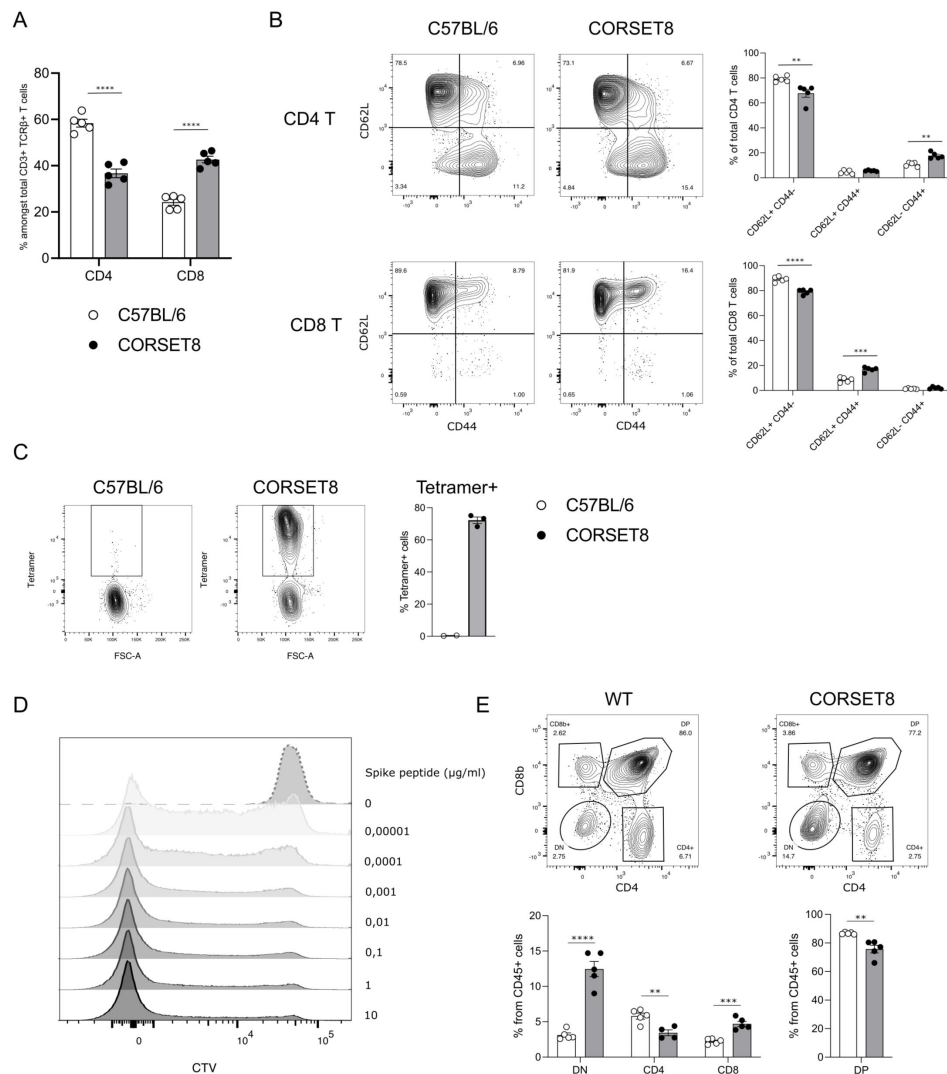


Figure 3

CORSET8 mice exhibit skewing to CD8 T cells and TCR Tg cells recognize target peptide *ex vivo*

A) Proportion of CD4 T and CD8 T cells among CD3⁺ TCRβ⁺ T cells in the spleen of CORSET8 mice and wildtype C57BL/6 littermates. B) Proportion of CD62L⁺ CD44⁻, CD62L⁺ CD44⁺ and CD62⁻ CD44⁺ T cells among splenic CD4 T and CD8 T cells. C) Spike Tetramer staining on splenic CD8 T cells of CORSET8 mice or wildtype littermates. D) CTV proliferation profile of CORSET8 T cells in co-culture with BM-DCs in presence of increasing doses of Spike peptide. E) Visualization of CD4 and CD8 T cells in the thymus of CORSET8 mice and wildtype littermates. Data information: data are shown as means $\pm$ SEM. After assessing normality by a Shapiro-Wilk normality test, parametric data were analysed with a *t*-test, whereas non-parametric data were analysed with a Mann-Whitney test. **p*<0.05, ***p*<0.01, ****p*<0.001, *****p*<0.0001. Data are representative of three independent experiments.

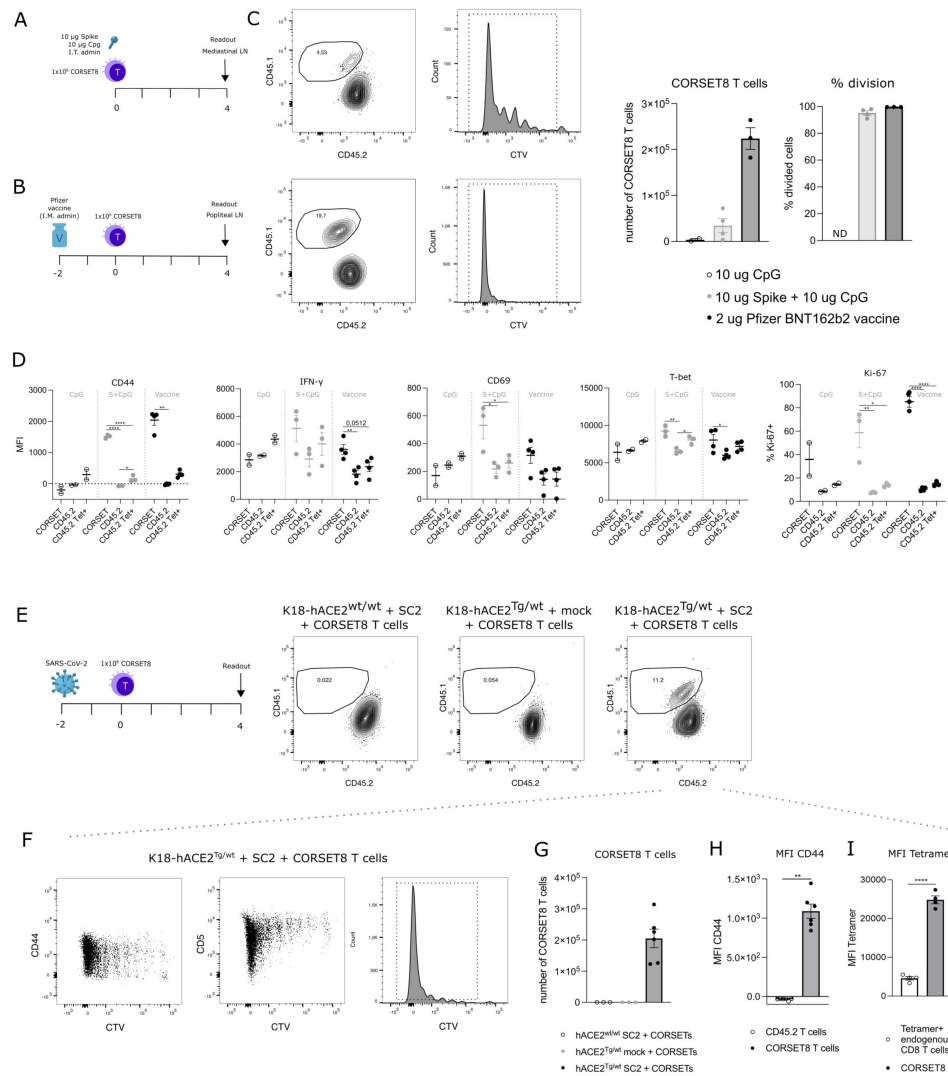


Figure 4

CORSET8 cells proliferate *in vivo* in response to Spike immunization or SARS-CoV-2 infection

A-B) Schematic set-up of the experiments. C) CTV dilution profile 4 days after intratracheal immunization with Spike/CpG or intramuscular immunization with Pfizer BNT162b2 vaccine. Quantification of the number of CORSET8 T cells and percentage of divided cells upon immunization with CpG control, Spike/CpG and Pfizer BNT162b2 vaccine. D) Mean fluorescence intensity (MFI) of several activation markers (CD44, CD69, IFN-γ, T-Bet) and percentage of Ki-67⁺ cells on both CORSET and endogenous CD45.2 T cells after i.t. and i.m. immunizations with Spike/CpG and Pfizer BNT162b2 vaccine, respectively. E) Schematic set-up of the experiment and gating on CD45.1⁺ CORSET8 cells in K18-hACE2^{wt/wt} and K18-hACE2^{Tg/wt} mice upon SARS-CoV-2 or mock infection. F) CTV dilution profile in SARS-CoV-2 infected K18-hACE2^{Tg/wt} mice. G) Number of CORSET8 T cells in K18-hACE2^{wt/wt} and K18-hACE2^{Tg/wt} mice upon SARS-CoV-2 or mock infection. H) MFI of CD44 in CD45.1⁺ CORSET8 T cells and CD45.2⁺ T cells of recipient mice. I) MFI of Tetramer staining on CD45.1⁺ CORSET8 T cells and CD45.2⁺ endogenous Tetramer⁺ T cells. Data information: data are shown as means ± SEM. In **Fig. 4D**, after assessing normality by a Shapiro-Wilk normality test, parametric data were analysed with a one-way ANOVA, whereas non-parametric data were analysed with a Kruskal-Wallis test. In **Fig. 4H**, after assessing normality by a Shapiro-Wilk normality test, non-parametric data were analysed with a Mann-Whitney test. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, ****p<0.0001. Data are representative of two independent experiments.

research, as they allow to study the functional status of antigen-specific T cells, but also cell-fate decisions to effector cells, Tfh cells or memory cells (Grayson et al., 2000 [↗](#); Mueller et al., 2010 [↗](#); Tubo et al., 2013 [↗](#); West et al., 2011 [↗](#)).

The standard method for generating TCR Tg mice comprises immunization of an animal, isolation of T cells out of lymphoid organs and examination of T cell reactivity by *in vitro* restimulation of T cell hybridoma clones. T cell receptors are then identified crudely using PCR primers and antibodies from the antigen-specific T cell clones, often without knowing the detailed sequence of the V α and V β chains (Barnden et al., 1998 [↗](#); Bosteels et al., 2020 [↗](#); Coquet et al., 2015 [↗](#); Nindl et al., 2012 [↗](#); Oxenius et al., 1998 [↗](#); Plantinga et al., 2013 [↗](#); Vanheerswynghels et al., 2018 [↗](#)). The generation of functional TCR Tg mouse models depends on several key steps. A first essential step is the selection of the antigen epitope, which is either done by using peptide libraries (Zhuang et al., 2021 [↗](#)) or by computational scanning combined with a cellular activity assay (Erez et al., 2023 [↗](#); Vandersarren et al., 2017 [↗](#); Vanheerswynghels et al., 2018 [↗](#)). Second, the selected T cell clones need to be able to mount antigen specific responses. The only way that currently TCRs are screened for this essential characteristic is by stimulating them with antigen peptide or co-culture with antigen-pulsed BM-DCs, whereafter their proliferation, CD69 upregulation and IL-2/IFN- γ cytokine production is assessed (Bosteels et al., 2020 [↗](#); Coquet et al., 2015 [↗](#); Nindl et al., 2012 [↗](#); Oxenius et al., 1998 [↗](#)). While these assays report on the potential to activate the TCR bearing clone, it does not inform on fitness/competition of the ensuing clone in a polyclonal environment, nor is it known what the effect of the TCR will be on Tg T cell development into the cell-fate of interest. The importance of the latter has been highlighted by multiple publications. By integrating a single (TCR-transgenic) T cell clone with high- or low-affinity ligands, the impact of affinity on effector and memory potential has been examined (Knudson et al., 2013 [↗](#); Zehn et al., 2009 [↗](#)). In fact, whereas effector cells are mainly found amongst high-affinity clones, memory cells recognize antigens with lower affinity and benefit from more clonal diversity (Kavazović et al., 2018 [↗](#)). Distinct mechanisms drive effector/memory development in high- and low-affinity T cells, such as regulation of IL-12R signalling, T-bet and Eomes expression (Knudson et al., 2013 [↗](#)). It has also been shown that upon weak TCR-ligand interactions, expansion of activated naïve T cells will stop sooner than after strong TCR-ligand interactions (Zehn et al., 2009 [↗](#)). On top of that, tonic signalling also determines cell-fate decisions. For instance, using CD4 TCR-transgenic mice, it has been shown that the strength of tonic signalling determines whether the cells will become Tfh cells or not (Bartleson et al., 2020 [↗](#)). The same authors showed that the potential to react to tonic MHC signals, reflected by the potential of a clone to upregulate CD5, can also profoundly influence whether a given TCR will induce an immediate effector proliferative response, or rather give a memory response, even when the affinity of two clones for the same immunodominant epitope is nearly identical (Milam et al., 2018 [↗](#); Weber et al., 2012 [↗](#)). The affinity bias of the TCR-MHC interaction leading to long term memory and residence, particularly in tissues are still not clear. We predict that our *in vivo* immunophenotypic clone selection method could lead to selection of clones and generation of TCR Tg T cells which are biased to become either immediate effectors or long-term memory cells.

Given the costs and time investment to generate TCR Tg mice, other labs have also invested in optimizing the strenuous process. For example, Holst. *et al.* (2006) introduced a new model called a retrogenic ('retro' from retrovirus and 'genic' from transgenic) mouse which significantly speeds up the process by using retrovirus-mediated stem cell gene transfer of the TCR alpha and beta sequence (Holst et al., 2006 [↗](#)). Guo et al. (2016) [↗](#) described an efficient system for antigen-specific $\alpha\beta$ TCR cloning and CDR3 substitution (Guo et al., 2016 [↗](#)). Furthermore, they introduced a novel reporter cell line (Nur77-GFP Jurkat 76 TCR α^{β}) to characterize functional activity of these $\alpha\beta$ and $\gamma\delta$ TCRs. More recently, a CRISPR-mediated TCR replacement technique was introduced by Legut *et al.* (2018) [↗](#) where the endogenous TCR β sequence gets replaced (Legut et al., 2018 [↗](#)). In this way, issues like competition with the endogenous TCRs for surface expression or mispairing between endogenous and transgenic TCRs (mixed dimer formation) are excluded. T cell receptor exchange (TRex) mice, where the TCR sequence is integrated in the T-cell receptor α constant

(TRAC) locus, results in the expression steered by the endogenous promoter and regulatory flanking regions and circumvents the problem of random integration of the construct in the mouse genome. [Rollins et al. \(2023\)](#) [↗](#) extended the TRex-method by disrupting the expression of the gene to which their Tg TCR was directed to, thereby circumventing T cell tolerance ([Rollins et al., 2023](#) [↗](#)).

In an attempt to further rationalize and streamline the selection of functional T cell clones, with high fitness and phenotype of interest, we combined single cell gene expression and TCR analysis. To generate our CORSET8 mice, we selected a T cell clone that expressed proliferation markers (*Mki67*⁺), produced cytokines (*Ifng*⁺), and had the potential to become a memory cell (*Cd69*⁺, *Tcf7*⁺, *Sell*⁺). This approach, in which we rationalize every step of TCR Tg mouse generation, can be used to any antigen of interest. Of note, the newly generated DALI tool is user-friendly and free to use, even for immunologists with limited bioinformatics background. We found this approach to be highly time efficient compared to classical methods (see **Fig. 1** [↗](#) for timelines), albeit with increased reagent costs for single cell sequencing. Nonetheless, the rationalized selection of TCR clones might circumvent the expensive generation of poorly functional TCR Tg mouse lines, which additionally conflicts with the reduction arm of the 3R principle.

Materials & methods

Mice

Female wild type (WT) C57BL/6 mice were purchased from Janvier Labs (Saint-Berthevin, France) for the immunization experiments. K18-hACE2 transgenic mice were purchased from The Jackson Laboratory (strain ID 034860). Mice were housed under specific pathogen-free conditions and used between 6 and 12 weeks of age. All experiments were approved by the animal ethics committee at Ghent University (EC2023-097) and were in accordance with Belgian animal protection law.

Generation of CORSET8 mice via classical hybridoma technology

A detailed description of the protocol can be found in [Vanheerswynghels et al. \(2018\)](#) [↗](#) ([Vanheerswynghels et al., 2018](#) [↗](#)). Briefly, C57BL/6 mice were immunized with Spike protein (5 µg, Bio-Techne) in presence of CpG adjuvant (10 µg, ODN1826, Invivogen) according to the immunization protocol in **Figure 1** [↗](#). Isolated spleen cells were *in vitro* restimulated with an MHC I peptide pool, based on *in silico* prediction by the IEDB database. After four days of culture, CD8 T cells were positively selected by a CD8 T MojoSort® enrichment kit according to manufacturer instructions and immortalized by fusion with BW5147 T lymphoma cells. From specificity-selected monoclonal T cell clones (IL2⁺CD69⁺ in DC-T cell co-culture), the Vα and Vβ of the CD8⁺ TCR were subcloned in a p428 expression vector. The TCR constructs were then micro-injected in fertilized oocytes.

Immunization, infection, and *in vivo* treatments

For the primary immunizations to generate Spike reactive T cells, wildtype C57BL/6 were immunized by intraperitoneal injection of 5 µg Spike protein (5 µg, Bio-Techne) in presence of 10 µg CpG adjuvant (10 µg, ODN1826, Invivogen), followed by two reimmunization steps of 5 µg Spike protein in 10 µg CpG adjuvant every 15 days for a total of three immunizations.

For the adoptive transfer experiments, CORSET8 T cells were purified from the TCR Tg donor mice with the MojoSort® Mouse CD8 T Cell Isolation Kit (Biolegend) and labelled with Cell Proliferation Dye eFluor 450 (0.01 mM; Thermo Fisher Scientific) for 10 min in the dark at 37 °C. Next, 1×10⁶ of these labelled cells (in 100 µl of PBS) were intravenously injected into wildtype or K18-hACE2 Tg C57BL/6 mice. In case of immunizations with Spike protein, C57BL/6 mice were subsequently injected intratracheally with 80µL containing 10 µg Spike protein and 10 µg CpG as adjuvant. In

the vaccine immunisation strategy, 2 µg of the COMIRNATY (BNT162b2) vaccine was intramuscularly administered in the thigh muscles of the hind limb (final concentration of 40 µg/ml). To analyse the CORSET8 response to SARS-CoV-2 infection, K18-hACE2 Tg mice were intratracheally infected with a sublethal dose of SARS-CoV-2 virus (450 pfu, SARS-CoV-2 D614G strain SARS-CoV-2/human/FRA/702/2020, obtained from the European Virus Archive (EVAG)). These experiments were performed in Biosafety Level 3 conditions at the VIB-UGent Center for Medical Biotechnology. All intratracheal treatments were given after mice were anesthetized with isoflurane (2 liters/min, 2 to 3%; Abbott Laboratories).

DC – CD8 T cell co-culture

A detailed description of the generation of bone marrow-derived dendritic cells (BM-DCs) can be found in Vanheerswynghe *et al.* (2018) [\[1\]](#) (Vanheerswynghe *et al.*, 2018 [\[1\]](#)). Lymph node cells were harvested from TCR Tg donor mice and CD8⁺ T cells were purified with MojoSort® Mouse CD8 T Cell Isolation Kit (Biolegend) and labelled with Cell Proliferation Dye eFluor 450 (0.01 mM; Thermo Fisher Scientific) for 10 min in the dark at 37 °C. 20.000 BMDCs were co-cultured with purified T cells in a 1:5 DC:T cell ratio in sterile tissue culture medium (TCM; RPMI (GIBCO) containing 10% fetal calf serum (Bodinco), 1.1 mg/ml β-Mercaptoethanol (Sigma-Aldrich), 2 mM L-alanyl-L-glutamine dipeptide (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and 56 µg/ml Gentamicin (Thermo Fisher Scientific)) on ice. A serial dilution of antigen was added to the cells, starting from 10 µg/mL of Spike peptide (GNYNYLYRL). CTV dilution and T cell activation were evaluated by flow cytometry after 4 days of incubation at 37°C and 5% CO₂.

Tissue sampling and processing

Mice were euthanized by cervical dislocation or an overdose of pentobarbital (KELA Laboratoria) and organs were collected. To obtain mediastinal lymph node, splenic or thymic single-cell suspensions for flow cytometry, organs were smashed through a 70 µm filter in PBS. Prior to staining for flow cytometry, splenic single-cell suspensions were depleted of red blood cells (RBCs) by using RBC lysis buffer [0.15 M NH₄Cl (Merck), 1 mM KHCO₃ (Merck), and 0.1 mM Na₂-EDTA (Merck) in MilliQ H₂O] produced in-house.

Flow cytometry and cell sorting

For all flow experiments, single cell suspensions were incubated with a mix of fluorescently labelled monoclonal antibodies (Ab) in the dark for 30 minutes at 4°C. To reduce non-specific binding, 2.4G2 Fc receptor Ab (Bioceros) was added. Dead cells were removed from analysis, using fixable viability dye eFluor506 or eFluor780 (Thermo Fisher Scientific). 123count eBeads Counting Beads (Thermo Fisher Scientific) were added to each sample to determine absolute cell numbers. Before acquisition, photomultiplier tube voltages were adjusted to minimize fluorescence spillover. Single-stain controls were prepared with UltraComp eBeads (Thermo Fisher Scientific) following the manufacturer's instructions and were used to calculate a compensation matrix. Sample acquisition was performed on a LSR Fortessa cytometer equipped with FACSDiva software (BD Biosciences) or on a NovoCyte Quanteon flow cytometer (Agilent) equipped with NovoExpress software. Final analysis and graphical output were performed using FlowJo software (Tree Star, Inc.) and GraphPad Prism 10 (GraphPad Software, Inc.).

The following antibodies were used: anti-CD62L (FITC, eBioscience), anti-Vβ11 (FITC, BD Biosciences, clone RR3-15), anti-CD45.2 (PerCP-Cy5.5, BD Biosciences), anti-TCRβ (BV510, BioLegend), anti-CD45.1 (BV605, BioLegend), anti-CD44 (BV650, BioLegend), anti-CD8 (BV750, BD Biosciences), anti-CD5 (BV786, BD Biosciences), anti-CD44 (RedFluor710, VWR International), anti-CD45 (AF700, BioLegend), anti-CD62L (PE, BD Biosciences), anti-CD8 (PE-Cy7, BioLegend), anti-CD4 (BUV395, BD Biosciences) and anti-CD3 (BUV737, BD Biosciences), anti-Ki-67 (BV786, BD Biosciences), anti-CD69 (PE, BD Biosciences), anti-IFN-γ (PE-Cy7, Life Technologies) and anti-T-bet (PE-Cy7, Life Technologies).

Single cell RNA seq and downstream DALI analysis

Splenocytes of the immunized mice (and naïve control mouse) were stained with an MHC I tetramer recognising our target T cells (H-2K(b) SARS-CoV-2 S 539-546 VNFNFNGL, provided by the NIH Tetramer Core Facility) for 1 hour at 37°C. The cells were washed and stained for surface markers (anti-CD8 (PerCP-eFluor710), Viability dye (eFluor506), anti-CD44 (RedFluor710) and anti-TCR β (APC-eFluor780)) and a unique TotalSeq-C hashing antibody (BioLegend) for 30 min at 4°C. Afterwards cells were washed and resuspended in PBS + 0,04% BSA. Sorted single-cell suspensions were resuspended at an estimated final concentration of 270, 1150 and 1450 cells/ μ L and loaded on a Chromium GemCode Single Cell Instrument (10x Genomics) to generate single-cell gel beads-in-emulsion (GEM). The scRNA/Feature Barcoding/BCR/TCR libraries were prepared using the GemCode Single Cell 5' Gel Bead and Library kit, version Next GEM 2 (10x Genomics) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The cDNA content of pre-fragmentation and post-sample index PCR samples was analyzed using the 2100 BioAnalyzer (Agilent). Sequencing libraries were loaded on an Illumina NovaSeq flow cell at VIB Nucleomics core with sequencing settings according to the recommendations of 10x Genomics, pooled in a 75:10:10:5 ratio for the gene expression, TCR, BCR and antibody-derived libraries, respectively.

Demultiplexing of the raw sequencing data was done using bcl2fastq2 (v2.20). Mapping of the gene expression data to the mouse genome (GRCm38; ensembl release 99), barcode processing, unique molecular identifiers (UMI) filtering and gene counting was performed using the Cell Ranger suite (version 6.1.1). TCR data was also processed using the CellRanger suite, using the cellranger vdj subcommand. The contig annotation was done with the GRCm38 vdj references provided by 10X Genomics (version 5.0.0).

Preprocessing of the data was done by the scanr and scater R package according to workflow proposed by the Marioni lab (Lun et al., 2016). Outlier cells were identified based on 3 metrics (library size, number of expressed genes and mitochondrial proportion) and cells were tagged as outliers when they were 5 median absolute deviation (MADs) away from the median value of each metric across all cells. Normalization, detecting highly variable genes, finding clusters, and creating UMAP plots and marker gene identification was done using the Seurat pipeline (v3.1.5). Potential doublets were removed from the analysis. TCR data was integrated into the Seurat object using DALI 2.0.0 for downstream analysis.

Generation of CORSET8 mice starting from DALI derived TCR sequences

The selected Va and V β TCR sequences were ordered as gBlocks (IDT) and subsequently cloned into the CD4 expression vector p428 via SalI (Vanheerswynghels et al., 2018 [\[link\]](#)). Injection fragments we excised from the p428 backbone by NotI digestion, gel purified and injected in an equimolar solution of 1 ng/ μ L into fertilized C57BL/6 oocytes.

Statistical analysis

Data information: Data are shown as means $\pm$ SEM. All data were analysed with a Shapiro-Wilk normality test to assess whether the data was normally distributed. Parametric data were analysed with a t-test, whereas non-parametric data were analysed with a Mann-Whitney test. *p<0.05, **p<0.01.

Acknowledgements

We thank the VIB single cell core, VIB flow core and VIB transgenic core facility for their expert advice and service in this project. We thank Wendy Toussaint, Leen Vanhoutte and Tino Hochepped for their help in the generation of TCR Tg mice. We thank Koen Sedeyn for providing training and service in the BSL3 facility at the VIB-UGent Center for Medical Biotechnology. We wish to thank the NIH Tetramer Core Facility for providing (H-2K(b) SARS-CoV-2 S 539-546 VNFNFNGL tetramer. The MR1 tetramer technology was developed jointly by Dr. James McCluskey, Dr. Jamie Rossjohn, and Dr. David Fairlie, and the material was produced by the NIH Tetramer Core Facility as permitted to be distributed by the University of Melbourne. This publication was supported by the European Virus Archive GLOBAL (EVA-GLOBAL) project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 871029.

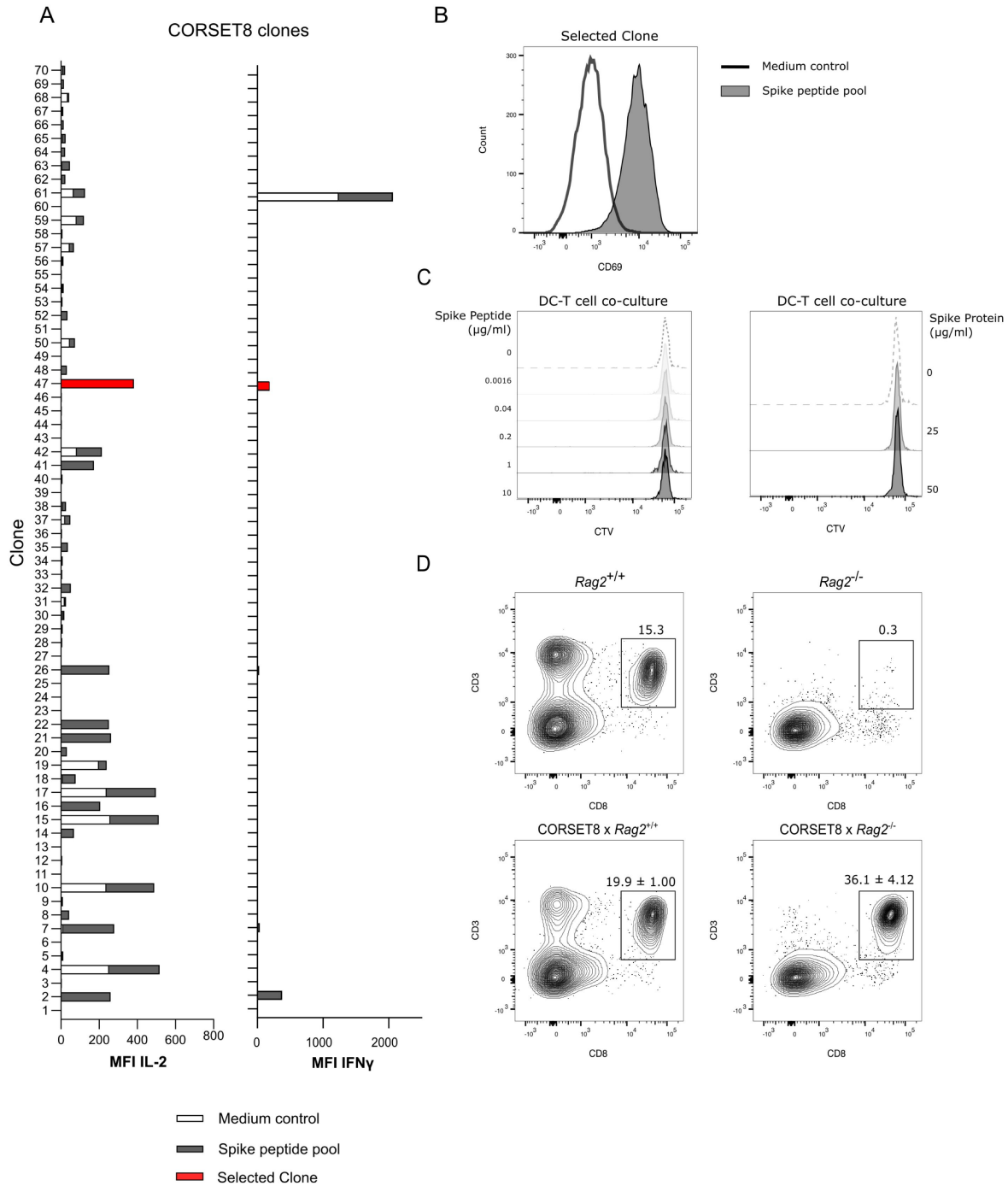
Funding

N.D. acknowledges support from an FWO Postdoctoral Fellowship - junior grant (1258921N).

R.V. is a postdoctoral fellow of the Research Foundation-Flanders, Belgium (FWO-Vlaanderen; grant No. 1275023N).

S.V. was a postdoctoral fellow of the Research Foundation-Flanders, Belgium (FWO-Vlaanderen; grant No. 1244321N) while working on this project and acknowledges support from FWO Vlaanderen senior research project grant No. G0A7422N.

B.N.L. acknowledges support from FWO Methusalem grant (01M01521), FWO EOS research grant (3G0H1222), IBOF grant (01M01521), and the Flanders Institute of Biotechnology (VIB).

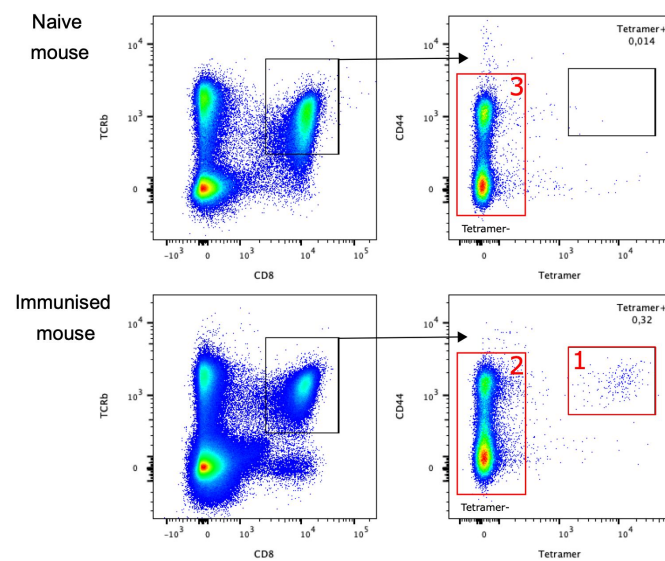


Supplemental Figure 1

Screening of CD8 T cell hybridoma clones and validation of first generation CORSET8 mice

A) MFI of IL-2 and IFN γ for individual CD8 T cell hybridoma clones. Based on the fold increase of IL-2 and IFN γ between medium control and Spike peptide pool stimulation, clone 47 was selected to proceed with. B) CD69 expression in hybridoma clone 47 in medium control and upon Spike peptide pool stimulation. C) BM-DC – CORSET8 T cell co-culture in presence of increasing dose of Spike peptide and Spike protein. D) Representative FlowJo plots gating on CD8 T cells in *Rag2*^{+/+}, *Rag2*^{-/-}, CORSET8 *Rag2*^{+/+} and CORSET8 *Rag2*^{-/-} mice. Plotted cells are non-debris, single cells, viable and CD45+.

Gating strategy: Non debris -> Single cells -> Viable cells



Supplemental Figure 2

Gating strategy used to sort Spike Tetramer positive and Tetramer negative splenic CD8 T cells. Flow cytometry plots from a naïve and a representative immunized mouse are shown. In total, three samples were subjected for single cell analysis; 1: Tetramer positive, CD44+ cells pooled from two immunized mice, 2: Tetramer negative cells pooled from two immunized mice, 3: Tetramer negative cells from one naïve mouse.

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Reviewer #1 (Public review):

Summary:

Debeuf et al. introduce a new, fast method for the selection of suitable T cell clones to generate TCR transgenic mice, a method claimed to outperform traditional hybridoma-based approaches. Clone selection is based on the assessment of the expansion and phenotype of cells specific for a known epitope following immune stimulation. The analysis is facilitated by a new software tool for TCR repertoire and function analysis termed DALI. This work also introduces a potentially invaluable TCR transgenic mouse line specific for SARS-CoV-2.

Strengths:

The newly introduced method proved successful in the quick generation of a TCR transgenic mouse line. Clone selection is based on more comprehensive phenotypical information than traditional methods, providing the opportunity for a more rational T-cell clone selection.

The study provides a software tool for TCR repertoire analysis and its linkage with function.

The findings entail general practical implications in the preclinical study of a potentially very broad range of infectious diseases or vaccination.

A novel SARS-CoV-2 spike-specific TCR transgenic mouse line was generated.

Weaknesses:

The authors present a novel method to develop TCR transgenic mice and overcome the limitations of the more traditional method based on hybridomas.

The authors indicate that they did not intend to directly compare their new method with the traditional hybridoma-based approach. However, such comparison becomes inevitable when the classical method is presented as suboptimal and an alternative approach is introduced to address its limitations. Nevertheless, the explanations provided in their rebuttal have helped clarify their position. The intention behind supplementary figure 1 is to illustrate that a clone that appears suitable using traditional assays may fail to produce a successful TCR transgenic line. This is a valid point that I think should be emphasized more clearly in the manuscript, as it highlights the limitations of the traditional method.

However, the main question that remains is whether the proposed new method will reliably resolve this issue. As previously noted, only one mouse line was generated (successfully) from

a single candidate, and the method presented to generate their new TCR transgenic line starts from a more advanced point (a well characterized epitope is already known, and tetramers are available to preselect specific clones). Although this approach likely increases the chances of success, it also limits applicability.

The authors suggest that tetramers are not absolutely necessary to select a clone of interest. Testing this hypothesis would have added value to this manuscript, demonstrating the ability to rapidly generate new TCR transgenic lines in response to emerging pathogens, as outlined in the introduction. They propose that, in such cases, mice could be immunised and expanded clones retested for reactivity. However, it is unclear how this strategy differs from the classic method in increasing the chances of selecting an optimal clone.

Regarding the practical value and cost-effectiveness of extensive expression profiling for T cell clone selection, it remains unclear how well a clone chosen for specific traits will retain these features when developed into a TCR transgenic line, or what traits are ideal for different applications. T cell fate is plastic, and various parameters could influence marker expression.

Issues remain concerning the statistical analysis. Data are said to have been analyzed using both parametric and non-parametric tests. The described approach of performing a normality test followed by either parametric or non-parametric tests is not a correct method for statistical data analysis.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.98344.2.sa2>

Reviewer #2 (Public review):

Summary:

The authors seek to use single-cell sequencing approaches to identify TCRs specific for the SARS CoV2 spike protein, select a candidate TCR for cloning and use it to construct a TCR transgenic mouse. The argument is that this process is less cumbersome than the classical approach, which involves the identification of antigen-reactive T cells in vitro and the construction of T cell hybridomas prior to TCR cloning. TCRs identified by single-cell sequencing that is already paired to transcriptomic data would more rapidly identify TCRs that are likely to contribute to a functional response. The authors successfully identify TCRs that have expanded in response to SARS CoV2 spike protein immunization, bind to MHC tetramers and express genes associated with functional response. They then select a TCR for cloning and construction of a transgenic mouse in order to test the response of resulting T cells in vivo following immunization with spike protein of coronavirus infection.

Strengths:

- (1) The study provides proof of principle for the identification and characterization of TCRs based on single-cell sequencing data.
- (2) The authors employ a recently developed software tool (DALI) that assists in linking transcriptomic data to individual clones.
- (3) The authors successfully generate a TCR transgenic animal derived from the most promising T cell clone (CORSET8) using the TCR sequencing approach.
- (4) The authors provide initial evidence that CORSET8 T cells undergo activation and proliferation in vivo in response to immunization or infection.
- (5) Procedures are well-described and readily reproducible.

Weaknesses:

(1) The purpose of presenting a failed attempt to generate TCR transgenic mice using a traditional TCR hybridoma method is unclear. The reasons for the failure are uncertain, and the inclusion of this data does not really provide information on the likely success rate of the hybridoma vs single cell approach for TCR identification, as only a single example is provided for either.

(2) There is little information provided regarding the functional differentiation of the CORSET8 T cells following challenge in vivo, including expression of molecules associated with effector function, cytokine production, killing activity and formation of memory. The study would be strengthened by some evidence that CORSET8 T cells are successfully recapitulating the functional features of the endogenous immune response (beyond simply proliferating and expressing CD44). This information is important to evaluate whether the presented sequencing-based identification and selection of TCRs is likely to result in T-cell responses that replicate the criteria for selecting the TCR in the first place.

(3) While I find the argument reasonable that the approach presented here has a lot of likely advantages over traditional approaches for generating TCR transgenic animals, the use of TCR sequencing data to identify TCRs for study in variety of areas, including cancer immunotherapy and autoimmunity, is in broad use. While much of this work opts for alternative methods of TCR expression in primary T cells (i.e. CRISPR or retroviral approaches), the process of generating a TCR transgenic mouse from a cloned TCR is not in itself novel. It would be helpful if the authors could provide a more extensive discussion explaining the novelty of their approach for TCR identification in comparison to other more modern approaches, rather than only hybridoma generation.

Comments on revisions:

The authors have provided additional clarification on the comparisons between the presented method for TCR transgenic generation and the hybridoma method that is more commonly used and added additional verification of the functional response in vivo of T cells expressing the selected TCR. Overall, these additions enhance the evidence that the proposed methods are likely to identify TCRs with a strong immune activation profile and are a reasonable response to the first round of review.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.98344.2.sa1>

Author response:

The following is the authors' response to the original reviews.

Public Reviews:

Reviewer #1 (Public Review):

Summary:

Debeuf et al. introduce a new, fast method for the selection of suitable T cell clones to generate TCR transgenic mice, a method claimed to outperform traditional hybridoma-based approaches. Clone selection is based on the assessment of the expansion and phenotype of cells specific for a known epitope following immune stimulation. The analysis is facilitated by a new software tool for TCR repertoire and function analysis termed DALI. This work also introduces a potentially invaluable TCR transgenic mouse line specific for SARS-CoV-2.

Strengths:

The newly introduced method proved successful in the quick generation of a TCR transgenic mouse line. Clone selection is based on more comprehensive phenotypical information than traditional methods, providing the opportunity for a more rational T cell clone selection.

The study provides a software tool for TCR repertoire analysis and its linkage with function.

The findings entail general practical implications in the preclinical study of a potentially very broad range of infectious diseases or vaccination.

A novel SARS-CoV-2 spike-specific TCR transgenic mouse line was generated.

Weaknesses:

The authors attempt to compare their novel method with a more conventional approach to developing TCR transgenic mice. In this reviewer's opinion, this comparison appears imperfect in several ways:

(1) Work presenting the "traditional" method was inadequate to justify the selection of a suitable clone. It is therefore not surprising that it yielded negative results. More evidence would have been necessary to select clone 47 for further development of the TCR transgenic line, especially considering the significant time and investment required to create such a line.

Based on Supplementary Figure 1A only, we understand the concern of the reviewer. However, the data presented in Supplementary Figure 1A is collected during the first rough screening of clones where only the production of IL-2 and IFN- γ was measured as a readout for activation. Thereafter, a large selection of responsive clones was further grown and co-cultured with a dose-titration of the antigenic peptide pool. In this second co-culture, also flow cytometry readouts are included such as CD69 expression (as shown in Supplementary Figure 1B). Finally, a narrower selection of responder clones was co-cultured with the different individual peptides to unravel the specificity of the TCR of the clone. In conclusion, the clone was tested at least three times in three distinct set-ups with multiple different readouts.

However, a good evaluation of a clone in an in vitro setting does not necessarily translate in optimal functioning of the cells in a biological context. For instance, some clones survive better in an in vitro setting than others or have already a more activated profile before stimulation.

(2) The comparison is somewhat unfair, because the methods start at different points: while the traditional method was attempted using a pool of peptides whose immunogenicity does not appear to have been established, the new method starts by utilising tetramers to select T cells specific for a well-established epitope.

Given the costs and time involved, only a single clone could be tested for either method, intrinsically making a proper comparison unfeasible. Even for their new method, the authors' ability to demonstrate that the selected clone is ideal is limited unless they made different clones with varying profiles to show that a particular profile was superior to others.

In my view, there was no absolute need to compare this method with existing ones, as the proposed method holds intrinsic value.

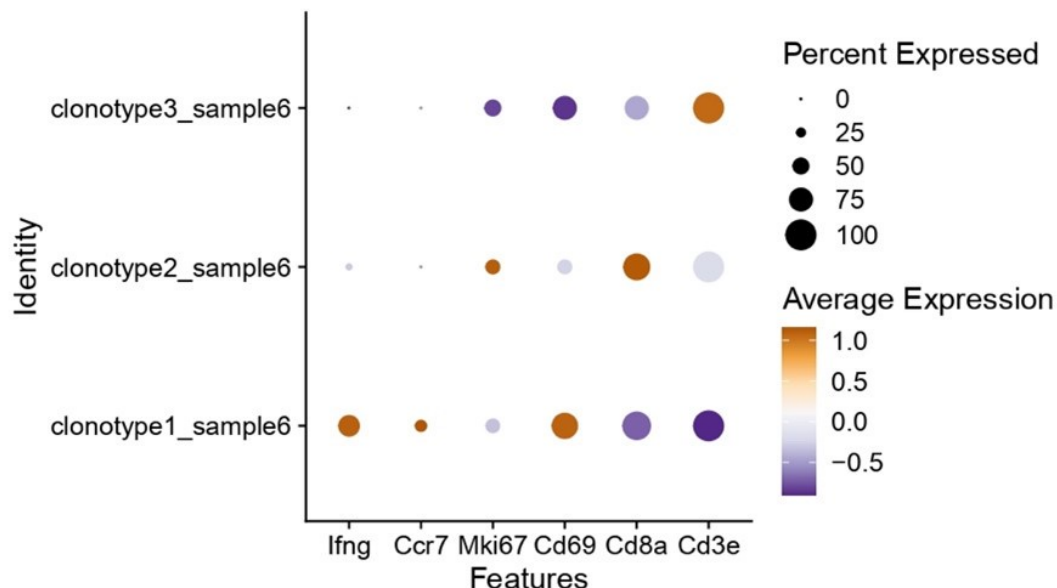
We acknowledge the importance of the well-established hydridoma technology and in no way intended to compare these methods head-to-head, nor do not want to question the validity of the classical methods. The reason why we also wanted to show the failed CORSET8 mouse was to highlight the parts of the TCR generating process which could be rationalized. We again want to emphasize that we do not want to compare methods in any way and recognise that we started from two different bases in terms of clone selection (peptide pool stimulation versus tetramer staining). While the tetramer staining that was employed in the generation of CORSET8 mice allowed to enrich the samples for specific responder clones, this enrichment step is not an absolute requirement for the implementation of the presented method or for the successful generation of a TCR Tg mouse model. An alternative approach could be to use the described method to select for activated and expanded clones upon immunisation and test their reactivity in subsequent steps using peptide stimulation before selecting a receptor. In conclusion, we merely wish to present a novel roadmap for others to use for the generation of their TCR Tg mouse to aid in the selection of the most preferable clone for their purposes.

(3) While having more data to decide on clone selection is certainly beneficial, given the additional cost, it remains unclear whether knowing the expression profiles of different proteins in Figure 2 aids in selecting a candidate. Is a cell expressing more CD69 preferable to a cell expressing less of this marker? Would either have been effective? Are there any transcriptional differences between clonotype 1 and 2 (red colour in Figure 2G) that justify selecting clone 1, or was the decision to select the latter merely based on their different frequency? If all major clones (i.e. by clonotype count) present similar expression profiles, would it have been necessary to know much more about their expression profiles? Would TCR sequencing and an enumeration of clones have sufficed, and been a more cost-effective approach?

The method we present in the paper serves as a proof-of-concept, to be adapted to the researcher's own needs. We agree with the reviewer that for our intentions with the CORSET8 mice, TCRseq in combination with an enumeration of the clones could also have sufficed and would lower the cost of sequencing. However, we wish to present a roadmap for others to use for the generation of their TCR Tg mouse. Important in this, is that the cellular phenotype, and activation state can be taken into consideration, which might for some projects be essential.

Nonetheless, we do see clear interclonal differences regarding the expression of "activation" genes, where clone 1 is clearly one of the well activated and interferon producing clones (as shown in Author response image 1). As such, researchers could expand these types of analysis to probe for specific phenotypes of characteristics.

Author response image 1.



(4) Lastly, it appears that several of the experiments presented were conducted only once. This information should have been explicitly stated in the figure legends.

To control for interexperimental variation, every experiment represented in the manuscript has been performed at least two times. We have added the additional information regarding the experimental repetitions and groups in the figure legends.

Reviewer #2 (Public Review):

Summary:

The authors seek to use single-cell sequencing approaches to identify TCRs specific for the SARS CoV2 spike protein, select a candidate TCR for cloning, and use it to construct a TCR transgenic mouse. The argument is that this process is less cumbersome than the classical approach, which involves the identification of antigen-reactive T cells in vitro and the construction of T cell hybridomas prior to TCR cloning. TCRs identified by single-cell sequencing that are already paired to transcriptomic data would more rapidly identify TCRs that are likely to contribute to a functional response. The authors successfully identify TCRs that have expanded in response to SARS CoV2 spike protein immunization, bind to MHC tetramers, and express genes associated with functional response. They then select a TCR for cloning and construction of a transgenic mouse in order to test the response of resulting T cells in vivo following immunization with spike protein of coronavirus infection.

Strengths:

(1) The study provides proof of principle for the identification and characterization of TCRs based on single-cell sequencing data.

(2) The authors employ a recently developed software tool (DALI) that assists in linking transcriptomic data to individual clones.

(3) The authors successfully generate a TCR transgenic animal derived from the most promising T cell clone (CORSET8) using the TCR sequencing approach.

(4) The authors provide initial evidence that CORSET8 T cells undergo activation and proliferation in vivo in response to immunization or infection.

(5) Procedures are well-described and readily reproducible.

Weaknesses:

(1) The purpose of presenting a failed attempt to generate TCR transgenic mice using a traditional TCR hybridoma method is unclear. The reasons for the failure are uncertain, and the inclusion of this data does not really provide information on the likely success rate of the hybridoma vs single cell approach for TCR identification, as only a single example is provided for either.

We refer to comments 2 and 3 of reviewer 1 for an answer to this point.

(2) There is little information provided regarding the functional differentiation of the CORSET8 T cells following challenge in vivo, including expression of molecules associated with effector function, cytokine production, killing activity, and formation of memory. The study would be strengthened by some evidence that CORSET8 T cells are successfully recapitulating the functional features of the endogenous immune response (beyond simply proliferating and expressing CD44). This information is important to evaluate whether the presented sequencing-based identification and selection of TCRs is likely to result in T-cell responses that replicate the criteria for selecting the TCR in the first place.

We agree with the reviewer that the data in the initial manuscript included only a limited in vivo functional validation of the CORSET8 T cells. Therefore, we extended these in vivo readouts and measured IFN- γ production, CD69, T-bet expression (as measure for activation) and Ki-67 expression (as alternative readout than CTV for proliferation). In the single cell data, we saw that these markers were more pronounced in the selected clone compared to other clones. We could confirm these findings in vivo, and found a stronger induction of IFN- γ , CD69, T-bet and Ki-67 in CORSET8 T cells compared to endogenous CD45.2 cells and even Spike-Tetramer+ CD45.2 endogenous cells. We added these data in Figure 4.

(3) While I find the argument reasonable that the approach presented here has a lot of likely advantages over traditional approaches for generating TCR transgenic animals, the use of TCR sequencing data to identify TCRs for study in a variety of areas, including cancer immunotherapy and autoimmunity, is in broad use. While much of this work opts for alternative methods of TCR expression in primary T cells (i.e. CRISPR or retroviral approaches), the process of generating a TCR transgenic mouse from a cloned TCR is not in itself novel. It would be helpful if the authors could provide a more extensive discussion explaining the novelty of their approach for TCR identification in comparison to other more modern approaches, rather than only hybridoma generation.

By integrating the recent technological advances in single cell sequencing into the generation of TCR Tg mice, possibilities arise to rationalize clone selection regarding clonal size, lineage/phenotype and functional characteristics. Often, the selection process based on hybridoma selection yields multiple epitope specific clones that upregulate CD69 or IL-2, and only minimal functional and phenotypic parameters are checked before prioritizing one clone to proceed with. In our experience, transgenic clones selected in this way sometimes render TCR clones unable to compete with endogenous polyclonal T clones in vivo. Taken all these caveats into account, the novelty we present here is that the researcher is fully able to select clones based on several layers of information without the need for extensive or

repeated screening. Moreover, the selection of the TCR Tg clone can be done via the interactive and easily interpretable DALI tool. Owing to the browser-based interactive GUI, immunologists having limited coding experience can effectively analyse their complex datasets.

Recommendations for the authors:

Reviewer #1 (Recommendations For The Authors):

Regarding Supplementary Figure 1A was the experiment conducted more than once? Clone 47 seems minimally superior to the other clones. Incorporating a positive control, such as the response of the OT-I hybridoma to SIINFEKL, could have provided a benchmark to gauge the strength of the observed responses.

Also, what was the concentration of the peptide used to restimulate the T cells in vitro? High peptide concentrations can lead to non-specific responses. Ideally, a titration should have been performed, perhaps in a subsequent experiment that only tested those clones that responded well initially. Given the resources required to create and maintain a transgenic mouse line, proceeding with the chosen clone based on the data presented seems to carry considerable risk.

The experiment has been performed three times. The data presented in Supplementary Figure 1A is collected during the first rough screening of clones where only the production of IL-2 and IFN- γ was measured as a readout for activation. Thereafter, a large selection of responsive clones was further grown and co-cultured with a dose-titration of the antigenic peptide pool. In this second co-culture, also flow cytometry readouts are included such as CD69 expression (as shown in Supplementary Figure 1B). Finally, a narrower selection of responder clones was co-cultured with the different individual peptides to unravel the specificity of the TCR of the clone. In conclusion, the clone was tested at least three times in three distinct set-ups with multiple different readouts.

In Supplementary Figure 1C, no response to stimulation was detected. Ideally, this figure should have included a positive control, such as PMA/Ionomycin or α CD3/CD28 stimulation.

We agree with the reviewer that this experiment should have included a positive control to validate the non-specific responsiveness of the clone and the technical feasibility of the experiment. Unfortunately, the initial CORSET8 line is frozen and is thus not easily available to repeat the experiment.

Can the authors clarify their gating strategy in the legend of In Supplementary Figure 1D?

Plotted cells are non-debris > single cells > viable cells > CD45+. We have added the information to the legend of Supplementary Figure 1D.

In Figure 2, the figure legend should provide more detail on which cells were sorted for the single-cell RNA sequencing analysis. The materials and methods section explains that cells were stained for CD44. Were activated cells then sorted (either tetramer-positive or -negative), plus naïve CD8 T cells from a naïve mouse?

Supplementary Figure 2 contains the detailed gating strategy during the sort for the single cell experiment. We have added additional red gates to the plots to clarify which samples were sent for sequencing. This has been adapted in the figure legends of both Figure 2 and Supplementary Figure 2.

In Figure 3, Rag1 sufficient transgenic mice display similar numbers of CD4 and CD8 T cells as WT mice in the spleen. Typically, transgenic mice present skewed frequencies of T cells towards the type generated (CD8 in this case), which the authors only found in the thymus of CORSET8 mice. Could this be discussed?

The comment of the reviewer is valid as there is indeed a skewing towards CD8 T cells in the thymi of the CORSET8 mice. We looked back into the data of the experiments and noticed that poor resolution of some markers might have resulted in improper results. We have repeated this and added another T cell marker (TCRbeta) next to the already included CD3e marker. By including both markers, we were able to show that also in spleen the skewing towards the CD8 T cell phenotype is present.

How many repetitions were performed for the experiments in Figures 3D and 3E? How many mice were analyzed for Figure 3E? Please provide this information in the figure legend. Also, include a proper quantification and statistical analysis of the data shown.

New quantification graphs with statistical analysis have been added to Figure 3E. The accompanying figure legend has been adapted. The co-culture displayed in Figure 3D is a representative experiment of two repetitions.

Figure 4C includes 3-4 mice per group. This experiment should have been replicated, and this information should be indicated in the figure legend.

We apologise for omitting this data in the figure legend. The experiment presented in Figure 4A-C has been repeated twice, yielding results following the same trend. We were unable to pool the data as two different proliferation dyes were used in the separate experiments (CFSE and CTV). Furthermore, in the in vivo BSL3 experiments represented in figure 4E-H, we always took along the Spike/CpG-group as positive control. We have added the additional information regarding the experimental repetitions and groups in the figure legend.

<https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.98344.2.sa0>