

CAR-T cell therapy for central nervous system lymphomas: blood and cerebrospinal fluid biology, and outcomes

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Received: Feb 23, 2023.

Accepted: June 14, 2023.

Citation: Claire Lacan, Jonathan Caron, Nadine Tarantino, Baptiste Fouquet, Mustapha Cherai, Christophe Parizot, Veronique Morel, Laetitia Souchet, Madalina Uzunov, Guy Gorochov, Stephanie Nguyen-Quoc, Elise Sourdeau, Vincent Vieillard, Makoto Miyara, Angelique Vinit, Silvia Solorzano, Carole Soussain, Caroline Houillier, Carole Metz, Brigitte Autran, Elena Litvinova, Magali Le Garff-Tavernier, Françoise Norol, Damien Roos-Weil, Sylvain Choquet, Amelie Guihot, and Marine Baron. CAR-T cell therapy for central nervous system lymphomas: blood and cerebrospinal fluid biology, and outcomes.

Haematologica. 2023 June 22. doi: 10.3324/haematol.2023.282875 [Epub ahead of print]

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CAR-T cell therapy for central nervous system lymphomas: blood and cerebrospinal fluid biology, and outcomes

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Running heads: CAR-T cells for CNS lymphomas: biology and outcomes.

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Authorship Contributions: A.G., B.A., V.V., F.N., D.R-W. and M.B. designed the study, C.M. collected and preserved CAR-T cell products, M.C. performed the cells banking, B.F. performed the PCR analysis, C.L., N.T, M.B., E.L., A.V., G.G, M.M. and J.C. performed the immunological analysis, E.S and M.LG-T performed the cytokine dosage in the CSF, C.P. monitored the flow analysis, D.R-W., S.C., F.N., V.M., L.S., M.U., S.N-Q., C.L, M.B. and C.S. took care of the patients, C.L and M.B collected the clinical data, M.B. wrote the manuscript, all the authors reviewed the manuscript.

Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest: No disclosure

Data sharing statement: All biological data were linked and shared at Department of Immunology, and of Haematology, Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris, France. External users with a formal analysis plan can request access to these data.

Word count: 1649

Acknowledgements: We acknowledge all the patients included in the study. We acknowledge the French national expert network for oculo-cerebral lymphomas (LOC) for the recruitment of the patients and the treatment decisions. This study was supported by grants

from INCA-DGOS-Inserm_12560 (SiRIC CURAMUS is financially supported by the French National Cancer Institute, the French Ministry of Solidarity and Health and Inserm with financial support from ITMO Cancer AVIESAN), by Association Capucine and SFGM-TC, prix Force Hémato 2020 and by the Fondation ARC pour la recherche sur le cancer (to DRW). Jonathan Caron was financially supported by SiRIC CURAMUS.

Therapeutic options are limited for R/R central nervous system lymphomas (CNSL), including primary CNSL (PCNSL) and secondary CNSL (SCNSL)¹⁻³. Chimeric antigen receptor (CAR)-T cells has been one of the most promising novel cancer therapies. Given that almost all CNSL express the CD19 antigen and that T cells are known to pass the blood brain barrier, there is a strong biological rationale for treating them with CAR-T cells but they have been excluded from most clinical trials. Recent data have shown that CAR-T cells could be efficient in R/R PCNSL and we recently reported an overall response rate (ORR) of 67% in 9 patients⁴⁻⁷. However, the dynamics of CAR-T cells and their trafficking and persistence in cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) have been rarely described. Identification of biomarkers associated with increased disease control could enhance understanding of the biological basis for efficiency and enables more effective treatment interventions. We investigated the clinical outcomes and the CAR-T cell expansion and phenotype in the peripheral blood and CSF within 21 patients with CD19⁺-R/R CNSL.

Patients with isolated R/R CD19⁺-PCNSL or SCNSL and treated with tisagenlecleucel (n=19) or axicabtagene ciloleucel (n = 2) from January 2020 to January 2022 at Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital (France) were retrospectively selected. The disease response was assessed at D28 by brain MRI and then every 2 months. Clinical results of 8 PCNSL patients were previously reported with shorter follow-up and without any biological data⁴. All patients gave written informed consent, the study was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by national (CNIL 913611) and local (CPP Ile-De-France PP 13-022) ethics committees. Fresh blood samples were collected for real-time quantitative polymerase chain reaction (RT-qPCR) every 3 days the first 2 weeks, every week the following 2 weeks and then monthly. PMBC were collected and used for mass and flow cytometry at the peak of expansion. For detection of integrated CAR-expressing vectors, DNA was extracted from blood using a QIAamp DNA Blood Mini Kit. RT-qPCR was performed on 100 ng of

extracted DNA using the 2X TaqMan Universal PCR Master Mix. The specific primers and TaqMan probes detected the CD28-CD3 ζ (Yescarta) and the 41BB- CD3 ζ (Kymriah) junctions of the CAR-T transgene (**Supplementary Fig.1**). For CAR-T immune profiling by mass cytometry, thawed PBMCs were stained with the CD19 CAR Detection Reagent, Biotin (Miltenyi), washed, and stained with an anti-biotin-¹⁰⁶⁻¹¹⁶Cd antibody for 20 min as previously described⁸. They were then incubated with the MDIPA panel (Fluidigm), plus 5 antibodies (anti-PD-1-¹⁷⁵Lu, anti-TIGIT-²⁰⁹Bi, anti-TIM-3-¹⁶⁹Tm, anti-CD69-¹⁶²Dy and anti-CXCR4-¹⁶⁵Ho). Samples were acquired on a Helios machine and analyzed with Maxpar Pathsetter, FlowJo, and OMIQ. For CAR-T functionality assessment by flow cytometry, 1×10^6 thawed PBMC were stimulated 5 hours with a CD19⁺ B lymphocyte cell line immortalized by Epstein-Barr Virus (Raji cell line), then incubated with biotin-labelled CD19 for 30 minutes and stained with Live/Dead, anti-biotin-PE, CD107a-APC-R700, CD3-APC780, CD8-BV605, CCR5-BV650, CCR6-BV700, CD69-PE-CF594, interleukin (IL) 17-BV421, interferon- γ (IFN- γ)-FITC, tumor necrosis factor- α (TNF- α)-PE-Cy7, and IL22-AF647. Fresh CSF samples were collected every 2 weeks the first month and then monthly, and tested after incubation with biotin-labelled CD19 for 30 minutes, with anti-CD3-APC-H7, CD4-PercPCy5.5, CD8-APC-Alexa700 and anti-biotin-PE. IL-6 levels were measured by Cytometric Bead Array technique in freshly thawed CSF samples, on a FACSCanto II cytometer.

Twenty-one R/R patients (13 PCNSL, 8 SCNSL) were selected, all but one patients with brain parenchymal or meningeal involvement and 9 with CSF involvement (**Supplementary Table 1**). The median age was 67 years and the median number of prior therapies 3 (range, 2–5), including ASCT in 16 patients. At the time of CAR-T cell infusion, 62% had progressive disease (PD), 29% partial response (PR), 5% stable disease and 5% complete response (CR). The median follow-up was 12 months (range, 1–29). At D28, ORR was observed in 67%

cases, including 29% CR and 38% PR. At month 3 (M3), ORR and CR without new treatment were observed in 9 (43%) (6/13 PCNSL, and 3/8 SCNSL) and 6 (29%) (5/13 PCNSL, and 1/8 SCNSL) patients, respectively. Among the 9 patients with response at M3, the median response duration was 19 (range, 8–29) months. On final follow-up, 8 (38%) patients had persistent response: 6 CR (4/13 PCNSL and 2/8 SCNSL) and 2 PR (1 PCNSL and 1 SCNSL), and all the 13 remaining patients died because of R/R disease. The median overall survival was 15 months and tended to be higher in PCNSL than in SCNSL (20 vs 12 months, $p=0.63$) (**Fig.1**), and the median progression free survival was 3 months. For subsequent biological analysis, patients with response ≥ 6 months without new systemic treatment were defined as responders (R, $n=8$), and the others as non-responders (NR, $n=13$). CRS and ICANS occurred in 16 (1 grade 3) and 7 (2 grades ≥ 3) patients respectively, all having been resolute using tocilizumab and corticosteroids for 14 and 5 patients.

We first assessed the expansion of CAR-T cells in the CSF for sixteen patients. All tested patients demonstrated CSF positivity for CAR-T cells regardless of clinical outcome with an initial phase of rapid expansion followed by a slow decrease with long-term persistence (**Fig.2**). On D30, the median number of CAR-T cells in the CSF was $0.17/\text{mm}^3$, reflecting 19% (range, 4–45) of CD3^+ T cells, and the median CD4/CD8 CAR-T cells ratio was 4.2.. The later CSF analysis assessed 17 months after the infusion in one R patient still demonstrated the presence of CAR-T cells (41% of CD3). We demonstrated, focusing on the first month, that the expansion peak in the CSF was significantly higher in R than in NR patients ($0.50/\text{mm}^3$ versus $0.19/\text{mm}^3$ ($p=0.01$)) (**Fig.2**). Finally, a transient increase in IL-6 dosage was detectable during the first month for 76% cases regardless of their outcomes.

We next addressed the phenotypic characterization of blood CAR-T cells at the expansion peak with mass cytometry for 20 patients. We first demonstrated that R patients had a higher frequency of CD8 T cells with a terminal effector phenotype (CD8 TE, mean=24% vs 11% of

cells; $p < 0.05$) and a lower frequency of regulatory T cells (Tregs, 0.5% vs 1.8%, $p < 0.05$) compared to NR. We next performed a data-driven non-supervised analysis using the Phenograph clustering algorithm which identified 68 distinct cells subtypes (**Fig.3.A**). Among them, PG-4 which presented a phenotype similar to T cells CD8 TE, confirming our previous observation, and PG-34 corresponding to $CD4^+$ CAR T cells expressing high levels of IL7R and IL3 were particularly over-represented in the R group (**Fig.3.B**). Conversely, 3 clusters were less present among the responders: PG-31, phenotypically comparable to TIGIT-expressing Tregs, which refines the above findings; PG-8, $CD4^+$ T cells positive for IL7R; and PG-13 which fits the description of NK cells. We further applied Phenograph specifically to CAR-T cells and we confirmed the over-representation of $CD4^+$ $IL7R^+$ CAR T cells (PG-CAR13) among the responders (**Fig.3.C and D**). In addition, PD1 showed a weaker expression among responders, and this was particularly striking regarding the CAR T cells (**Fig.3.E**). This reduction of PD1 was paralleled by a CAR T cells-specific reduction of CXCR4 expression, especially among $CD4^+$ CARs.

Finally, we analyzed the CAR-T cells functionality and the expression of chemokine receptors at the peak of expansion by using thawed PBMC (n=16) after 5 hours of stimulation with tumor B- cells in order to replicate the *in vivo* interaction with the CAR-T cell target. We showed that the IFN- γ expression by $CD4^+$ CAR-T cells was higher in R than in NR patients ($p=0.03$), and that the expression of CD107a and IFN- γ by $CD8^+$ CAR-T cells tended to be higher in R patients ($p=0.08$) (**Supplementary Fig.2**). In addition, the expression of CCR5 and CCR6 on $CD8^+$ CAR-T cells was higher (54% and 47%, respectively) than that on the $CD8^+$ non-CAR-T cells (6% and 4%, respectively) ($p < 0.0001$) after the stimulation with tumor B cells. This up-regulation on CAR-T cells seemed to be the result of the specific co-stimulation since their expression on the $CD8^+$ CAR-T cells cultured without target B cells (negative control) was significantly lower (22% for CCR5 and 14% for CCR6) ($p=0.0096$).

We first reported persistent response in 38% cases with highly R/R disease, and it is very encouraging in view of the very poor prognosis of CNSL. CNS CAR-T cell trafficking was reported in all of our patients, confirming their ability to migrate into the CNS and persist there despite the low level of target antigen in the blood. Of note, the R patients demonstrated higher CAR-T cell peaks in the CSF, reinforcing the recently published data⁶ but these results should be interpreted with caution due to far apart time points. We next suggested that a strong cytotoxic TE CD8⁺ T cell response, and a diminished suppressive mechanism mediated by Tregs may be crucial for the efficacy of CAR T cells reinforcing that non-CAR-T cells are also critical for the responses⁹. We further demonstrated that a subset of CD4⁺IL3R⁺ILR7⁺ CAR- T cells are associated with a better clinical response. Indeed, IL-7 prolongs the survival time of tumor-specific T cells and the effector pool generation, and CAR-T cells engineered for IL7-R constitutive activation had a higher anti-tumor activity and persistence in preclinical models¹⁰⁻¹⁴. On the other hand, the expression of PD-1 and CXCR4 paralleled with a poorer outcome, probably reflecting an impaired capacity to migrate to the target tissue and then to kill the tumor cells. Our results strongly support that engineered CAR-T cells might increase the level of response. Finally, we showed for the first time that the production of IFN- γ was associated with clinical outcomes, suggesting that the peripheral immunological invigoration of CAR-T reflects the activity at the tumor site. In conclusion, the use of CAR-T cells therapy in CNSL patients answers an unmet medical need, and we suggest that the CSF expansion as well as the functionality and phenotype of CAR-T cells are implicated in the clinical outcome, paving the way for the development of novel CAR-T cells with higher anti-tumor activity.

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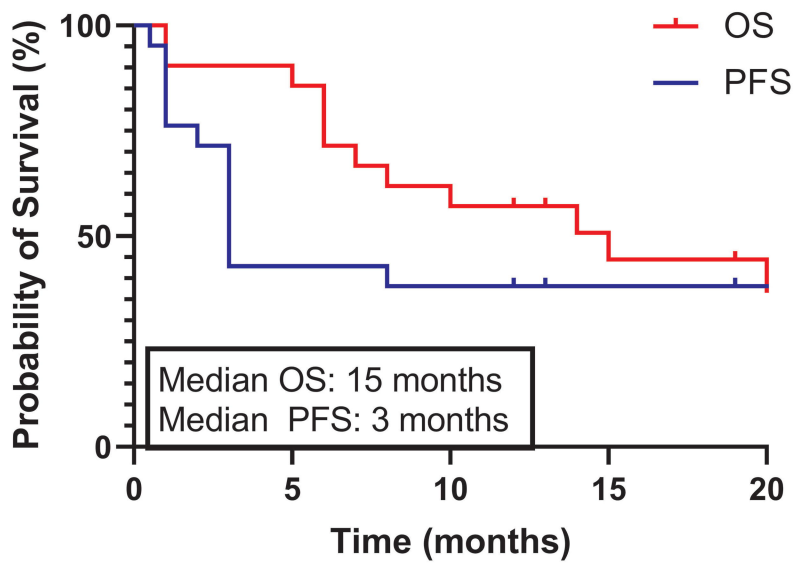
FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. Overall survival and progression free survival. **A.** In all the patients. **B.** In PCNSL patients (n=13). **C.** In SCNSL patients (n=8). PFS, progression free survival; OS, overall survival.

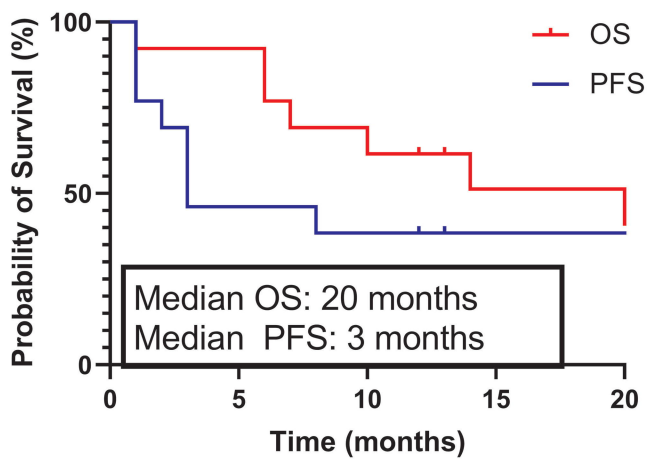
Figure 2. CSF CAR-T cell expansion. **A.** Individual profiles of CAR-T cells expansion (% of CD3) in CSF for each patient. Red color denotes R patients, circle plots denote the patients with PCNSL and triangle plots the patients with SCNSL. **B.** Number of CAR-T cells (/mm³) in CSF on the best expansion peak during the first month. **C.** IL-6 dosage (pg/mL) in CSF. The timing scale has not been respected for the first 30 days in order to better see all the dots. Red color denotes R patients, circle plots denote the patients with PCNSL and triangle plots the patients with SCNSL. R: responder patients, NR: non responder patients. *Mann-Whitney test*

Figure 3. Immune profiling of PBMCs in CNS lymphoma patients treated with CAR-T cells. **A.** t-SNE representation of single-cell CyTOF data for all patients (n = 20). , depicting 68 cell clusters after Phenograph unsupervised clustering based on the expression of each of the 35 markers. Numbers within colored boxes correspond to the respective cluster number. **B.** Abundances of selected clusters identified in (B) and comparison of their frequencies between responders (red) and non-responders (black) patients. **C.** t-SNE representation depicting specific 34 CAR-T cell clusters after Phenograph unsupervised clustering based on the expression of each of the 35 markers. Numbers within colored boxes correspond to the respective cluster number. **D.** Abundances of selected clusters identified in (C) and comparison of their frequencies between responders (red) and non-responders (black) patients. **E.** Overlaid histograms comparing expression of PD-1 (left) or CXCR4 (right) of gated total CAR-T cells, and specific CD8+ or CD4+ CARs between responder (red) and non-responder (black) patients. R: responder patients, NR: non responder patients.

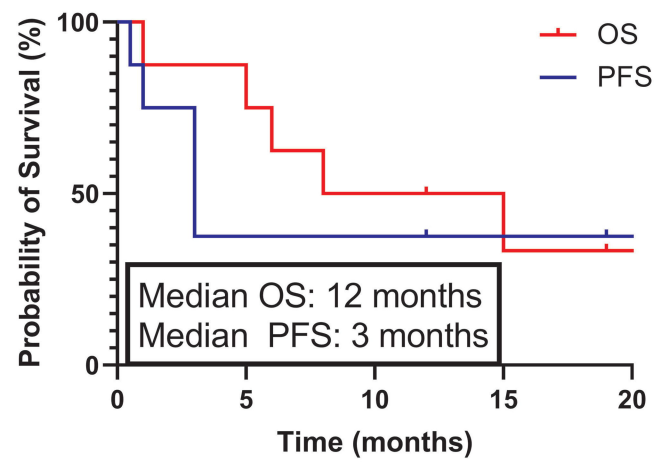
A All patients

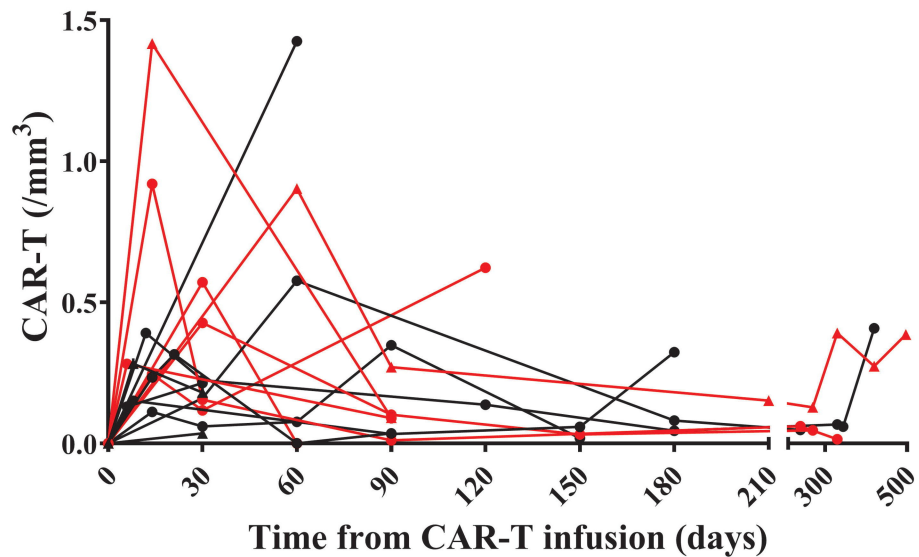
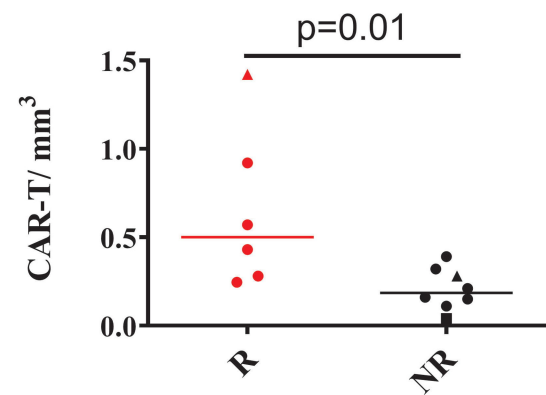
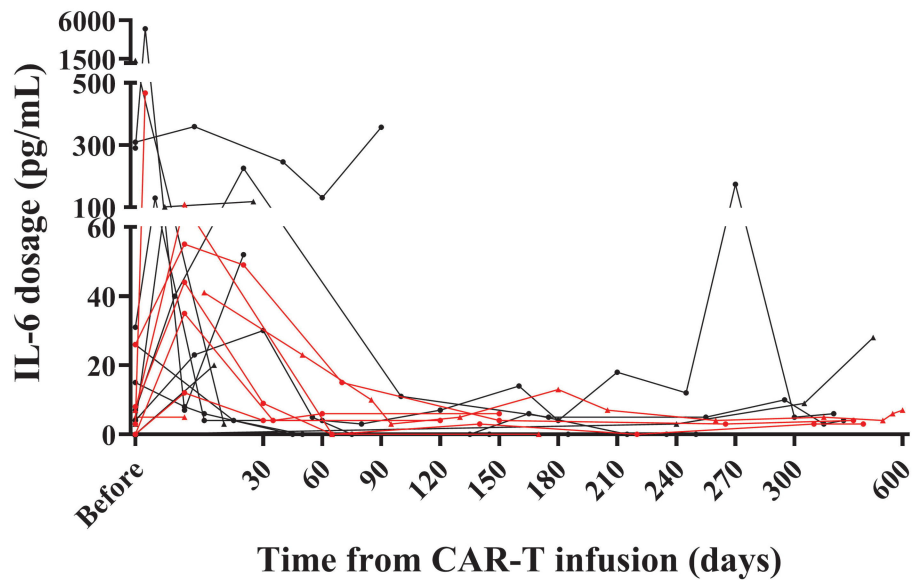


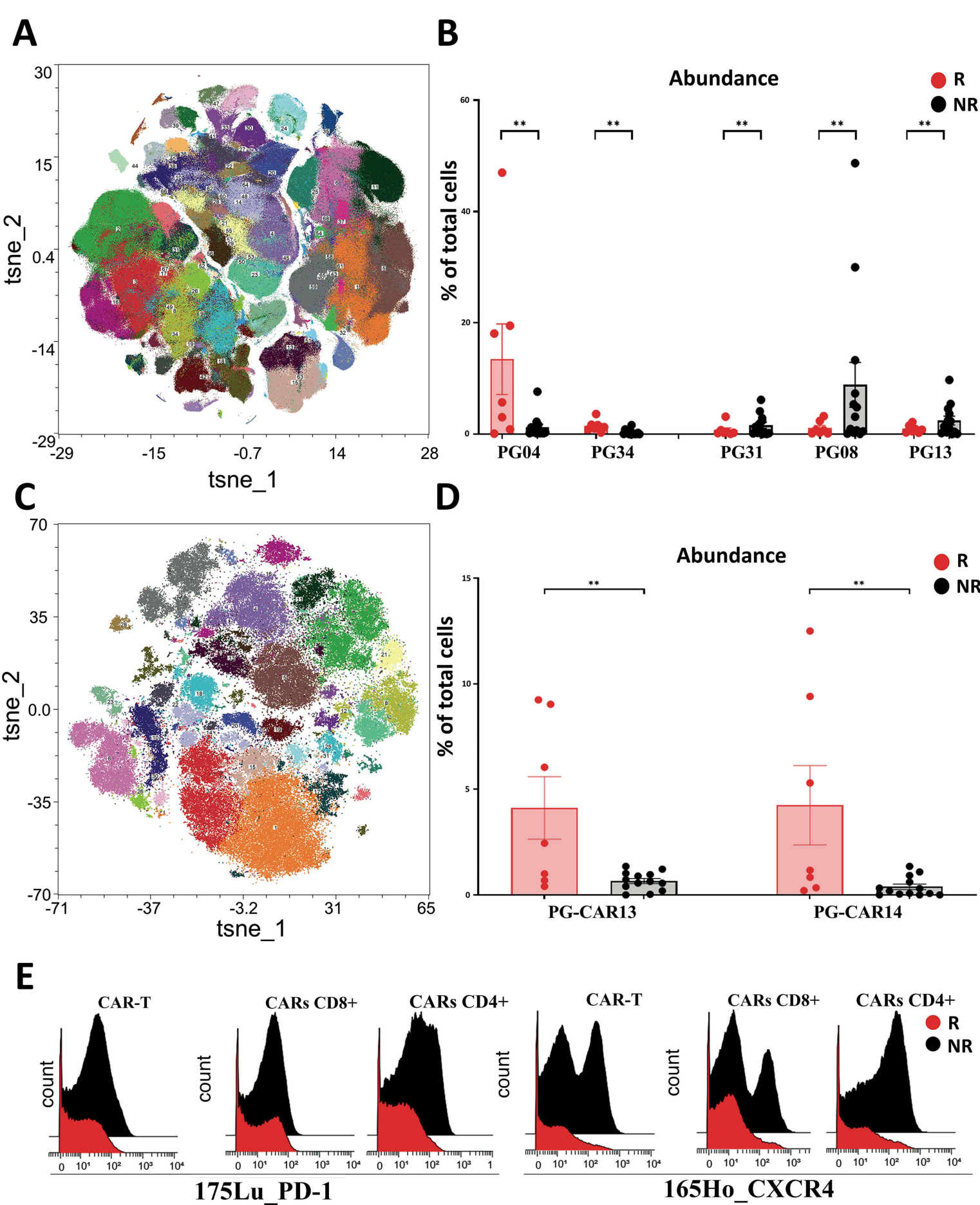
B PCNSL



C SCNSL



A**B****C**



SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary Table

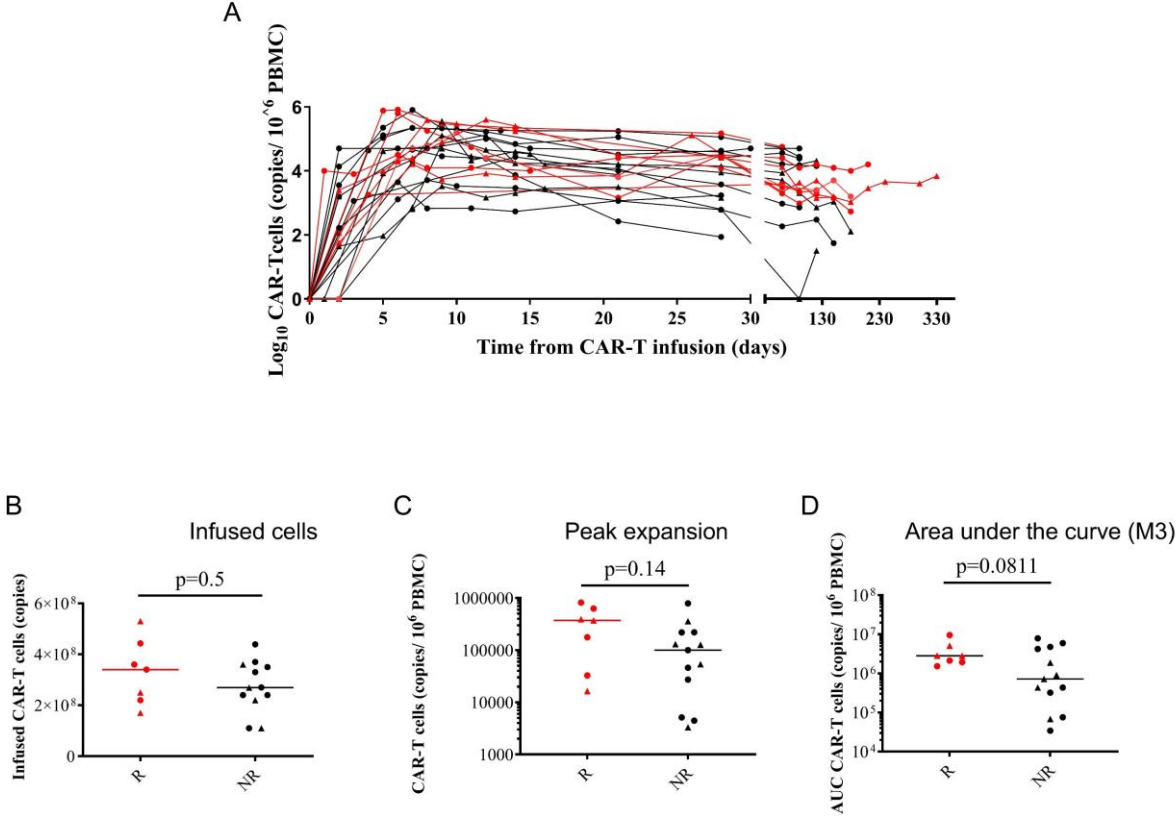
Table 1. Clinical characteristics, responses and outcomes.

Sex	Age (years)	Disease localization at time of CAR-T infusion	CSF involvement at time of CAR-T infusion	Number of lines of prior therapy	Previous ASCT	Bridging therapy	Status of disease after bridging therapy	Infused CAR-T cells product	CRS	ICANS	Response at M1	Response at M3	Subsequent status	Follow-up (mo)
F	73	PCNSL	No	4	Yes	Yes	PD	Axicabtagene ciloleucel	Grade 2	Grade 4o	PR	PR	Persistent PR	26
F	71	SCNSL	Yes	2	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	No	PR	PR	Persistent PR	29
F	67	PCNSL	Yes	2	Yes	Yes	PR	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 3	No	CR	CR	Persistent CR	21
F	49	PCNSL	No	3	Yes	Yes	PR	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 1	No	CR	CR	Persistent CR	22
M	75	SCNSL	No	3	No	Yes	PR	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	Grade 2	PR	PR	Persistent CR	19
M	68	PCNSL	Yes	4	Yes	Yes	PR	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	No	CR	CR	Persistent CR	12
F	72	PCNSL	Yes	2	No	Yes	PR	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 1	No	CR	CR	Persistent CR	13
F	67	SCNSL	No	3	No	Yes	CR	Tisagenlecleucel	No	No	CR	CR	Persistent CR	12
F	62	PCNSL	Yes	4	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	No	Grade 3o	CR	CR	IL-10 increase at M4; start of lenalidomide. Relapse at M8 Death.	21
M	46	SCNSL	No	2	Yes	Yes	PR	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	No	PR	Relapse	Death	15
F	69	PCNSL	No	3	Yes	No	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	No	0	PR	Relapse	Death	10
F	44	SCNSL	Yes	4	No	Yes	PD	Axicabtagene ciloleucel	Grade 2	No	PR	Relapse	Death	8
M	70	PCNSL	Yes	4	No	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	No	PR	Relapse	Death	7
M	48	SCNSL	No	5	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	No	Grade 1	PR	Relapse	Death	6
M	50	PCNSL	No	4	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	Grade 1	PD	PD	Death	20

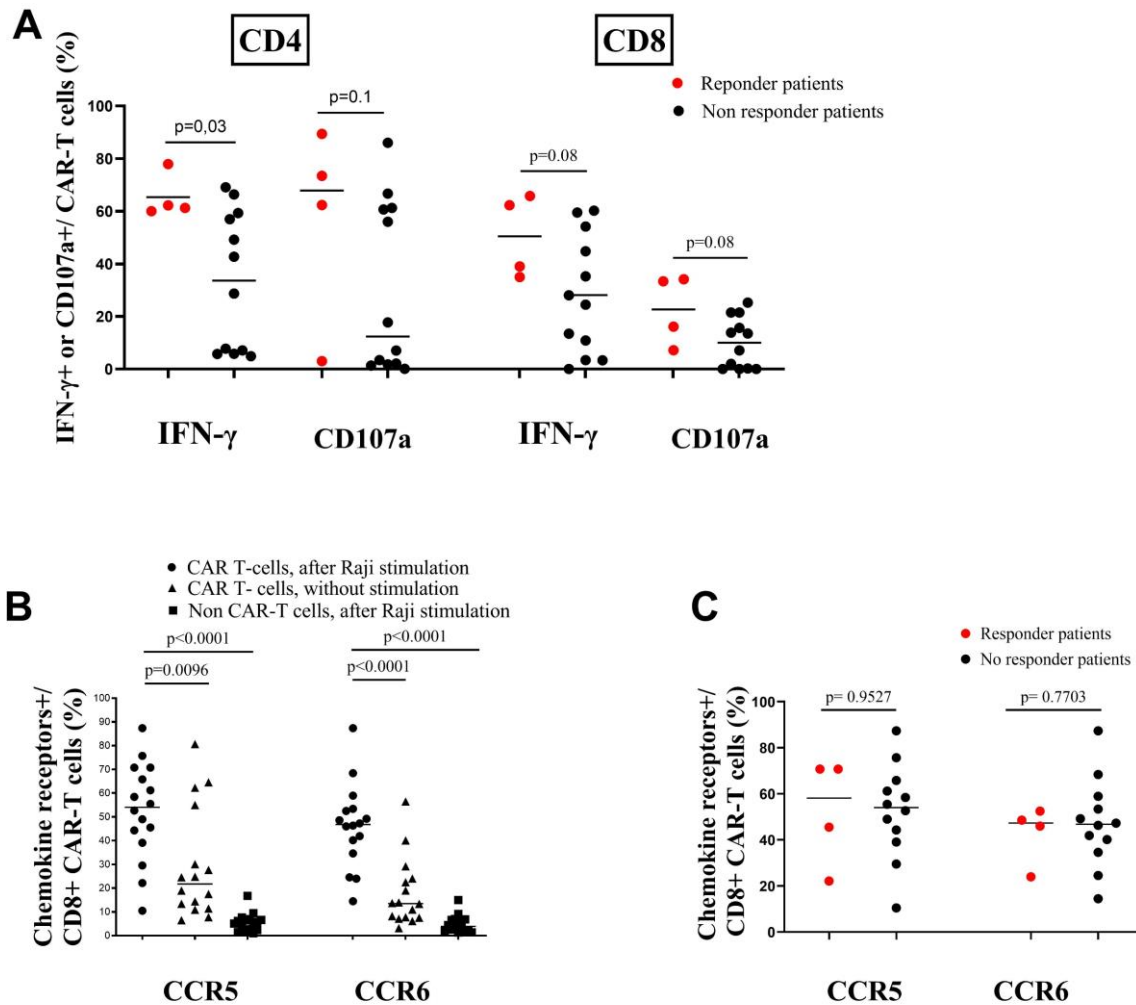
F	70	PCNSL	No	2	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	Grade 2	PD	PR* after the start of ibrutinib at M2 because of positive CSF	PD at M8	Death	14
F	33	PCNSL	Yes	2	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 1	No	PD	PD	Death	6	
M	64	SCNSL	No	3	Yes	No	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	Yes	0	PD	PD	Death	5	
M	51	PCNSL	Yes	3	Yes	Yes	SD	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	Grade 2	PD	PD	Death	6	
M	74	SCNSL	No	3	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	No	0	PD	Death	Death	1	
M	52	PCNSL	No	4	Yes	Yes	PD	Tisagenlecleucel	Grade 2	No	PD	Death	Death	1	

Abbreviations: Mo: month; M; month; CSF: cerebrospinal fluid; ASCT: autologous stem cell transplantation; CRS: cytokine release syndrome; ICAN: immune effector cell-associated neurotoxicity syndrome; M: month; PCNSL; primary central nervous system lymphoma; SCNSL: secondary central nervous system lymphoma; CR: complete response; PR: partial response; PD: progressive disease.

Supplementary Figures



Supplementary Figure 1. Peripheral CAR-T cell expansion. **A.** Individual profiles of CAR-T cells expansion (\log_{10} copies/ 10^6 PBMC) for each patient, **B.** Infused CAR-T cells copies number in R and NR patients, **C.** CAR-T cells expansion peak (copies/ 10^6 PBMC) in R and NR patients, **D.** Area under the curve (AUC) of CAR-T cells (copies/ 10^6 PBMC) during the first 3 months in R and NR patients. *Mann-Whitney test*. Red color denotes R patients, circle plots denote the patients with PCNSL and triangle plots the patients with SCNSL. R, responder patients; NR; non responder patients; AUC, area under the curve. The responder patients were defined with CR or PR at M3 without new treatment.



Supplementary Figure 2. CAR-T cell functionality and homing markers expression. The thawed PBMC of 16 patients on the day of the expansion peak were stimulated with Raji cell line during 5 hours and were then stained with anti: CD107a APC-R700, biotin-PE, CD3-APC780, CD8-BV605, CCR5-BV650, CCR6-BV700 and CD69-PE-CF594. The intracellular cytokine staining and the expression of CD107a were evaluated on CD8⁺ (gated on CD3⁺CD8⁺ cells) and CD4⁺ (gated on CD3⁺CD8⁻ cells) T cells after subtraction of the negative control. **A.** Production of IFN- γ and expression of CD107a by CD4⁺ (left panel) and CD8⁺ (right panel) CAR-T cells. **B.** Expression of CCR5 (left panel) or CCR6 (right panel) on CD8⁺ CAR-T cells after stimulation with Raji cells (circle plots), on non-CAR-T cells after stimulation with Raji cells (square plots) or on CAR-T cells without any stimulation (triangle plots). For the stimulation with Raji cells, thawed PBMC were stimulated during 5 hours.

Mann-Whitney test. C. Expression of CCR5 (left panel) and CCR6 (right panel) on CD8⁺ CAR-T cells depending on response status. Red color denotes responder patients, black color denotes non responder patients. R: responder patients, NR: non responder patients