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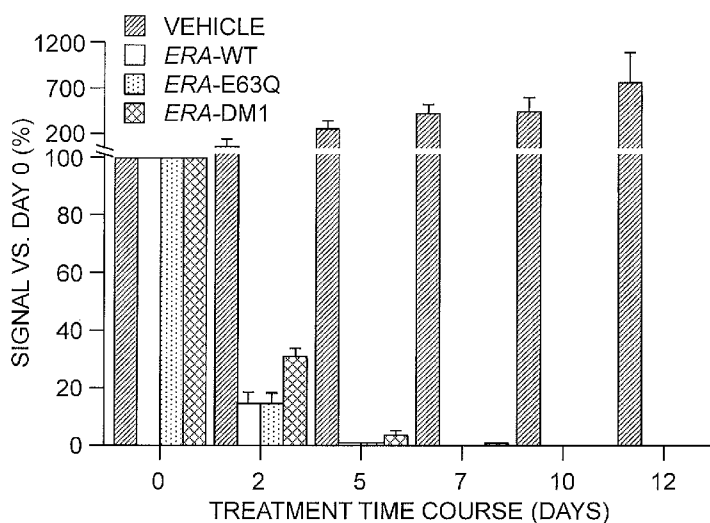


FIG. 1A

(57) Abstract: Variant Erwinia chrysanthemi L-asparaginases with reduced L-glutaminase activity and enhanced in vivo circulation are described as are fusion proteins containing an L-asparaginase and three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL for use in the treatment of cancers such as acute lymphoblastic leukemia and acute myeloid leukemia.

WO 2017/151707 A1

**L-Asparaginase Variants and Fusion Proteins With Reduced
L-Glutaminase Activity and Enhanced Stability**

Introduction

[0001] This application claims the benefit of priority of U.S. Provisional Application Nos. 62/301,806, filed March 1, 2016; 62/347,376, filed June 8, 2016; and 62/446,026, filed January 13, 2017, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entireties.

[0002] This invention was made with government support under Grant Number R01 EB013685 awarded by the National Institutes of Health and Grant Number I01BX001919 awarded by the Veteran's Administration. The government has certain rights in the invention.

Background

[0003] Certain cancers, such as acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), are dependent upon scavenging Asn from blood, a factor most commonly attributed to the lack/low expression of asparagine synthetase in such cancers. Accordingly, L-asparaginases have been identified as critical components in the treatment of these cancers. L-asparaginases are enzymes that have dual activities. The predominant one, the L-asparaginase activity, hydrolyzes the amino acid L-asparagine (Asn) into L-aspartic acid (Asp) and ammonia. The secondary activity is an L-glutaminase activity, which hydrolyze L-glutamine (Gln) to L-glutamic acid (Glu) and ammonia. For FDA-approved enzymes, e.g., ELSPAR® (enzyme obtained from *Escherichia coli*) and ERWINAZE® (enzyme obtained from *Erwinia chrysanthemi*), the L-glutaminase activity ranges from 2 to 10% of the primary L-asparaginase activity. Whereas the importance of the L-asparaginase activity of these drugs is

accepted, there are conflicting reports as to the importance of L-glutaminase activity in killing leukemic cells. Moreover, the L-glutaminase activity has been associated with much of the clinical toxicity of L-asparaginases. In fact, toxic side effects of L-asparaginase treatment severely limit the use of this anti-cancer drug.

[0004] Given the therapeutic advantage of using L-asparaginases in treatment of ALL, more effective variants of these enzymes are sought. Toward this end, the crystal structure of *Erwinia chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase in complex with Asp or Glu has been solved. This analysis indicates that the position of most active site residues (Glu63, Thr95, Asp96, and Lys168) is insensitive to the nature of the ligand (Asp versus Glu). In contrast, the conformation of Thr15 is sensitive to the type of ligand (Nguyen, et al. (2016) *Biochemistry* 55(8):1246-53). In earlier work, two active-site residues, Glu63 and Ser254, of *Erwinia chrysanthemi* (*ErA*) have been postulated to correlate with glutaminase activity, wherein their substitution by Gln and Asn, respectively, was suggested to lead to minimal L-glutaminase activity (Aghaiypour, et al. (2001) *Biochemistry* 40(19):5655-5664).

[0005] Mutational analysis indicates that replacement of Asp133 with Valine or Leucine confers thermostability to the *ErA* L-asparaginase (Kotzia & Labrou (2009) *FEBS J.* 276(6):1750-61). Mutation of Asn133 and Val143 of *Bacillus subtilis* L-asparaginase has also been shown to increase L-asparaginase activity (CN 104371993). Further, an asparagine endopeptidase-resistant mutant of *Escherichia coli* L-asparaginase (Asn24Ala), when combined with an interface mutation (Tyr250Leu), provides an enzyme with minimal L-glutaminase activity, reduced cytotoxicity, and

an overall IC₅₀ of 243% compared with wild-type enzyme (Offman, et al. (2011) *Blood* 117:1614-21). Moreover, Parmentier, et al. ((2015) *Leuk. Res.* 39(7):757-62) describe a *Helicobacter pylori* L-asparaginase double mutant (Met121Cys/Thr169Met) with wild-type L-asparaginase activity and diminished L-glutaminase activity, which exhibited reduced activity against human leukemia cell lines. In addition, WO 2015/038639 discloses a modified L-asparaginase enzyme from *E. coli* with substitutions at positions 58 and 59, which exhibit reduced L-glutaminase activity. US 2013/0330316 describes a mutant of L-asparaginase from *Pyrococcus furiosus*, which includes the substitutions Lys274Glu, Thr53Gln, and Thr53Gln/Lys274Glu, and has high thermostability, pH stability and no L-glutaminase activity.

[0006] Post-translationally modified versions of L-asparaginases have also been described. For example, L-asparaginase has been linked to polyethylene glycol (PEG-asparaginase) in order to reduce the immune side effects of the L-asparaginase treatment and prolong the half-life of the enzyme during the therapy. See US 2010/0143324 and US 2012/0100121. Fusion of an albumin binding peptide to L-asparaginase has been also suggested for use in increasing the half-life of this enzyme. See US 2012/0009123 and US 2016/0213759.

[0007] Other approaches for treating cancer using L-asparaginase have included co-administration of the L-asparaginase with a TNF-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (TRAIL) agonist or TRAIL receptor agonist, e.g., three soluble TRAIL domains and an additional functional domain such as an antibody fragment. See US 2015/0337027; US 2009/0131317 and WO 2012/170640. In this respect, L-asparaginase has been shown to overcome resistance to both

intrinsic apoptosis induced by the Bcl-2/Bcl-xL inhibitor, ABT263, and extrinsic apoptosis mediated by TRAIL in glioma cells that are resistant toward L-asparaginase single treatment (Karpel-Massler, et al. (2016) *Oncotarget* 7(23):33512-28).

Summary of the Invention

[0008] This invention provides *Erwinia chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase (*ErA*) variants having an amino acid substitution at one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1. In some embodiments, the amino acid substitution at position 31 includes an isoleucine, valine, leucine, or threonine; the amino acid substitution at position 63 includes a glutamine, asparagine, or aspartate; and the amino acid substitution at position 254 includes an asparagine or glutamine. In certain embodiments, the *ErA* variant has an amino acid sequence as set forth in SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 or SEQ ID NO:7. Ideally, the *ErA* variant exhibits: an L-asparaginase reaction rate (k_{cat}) of least 75% of wild-type *ErA* enzyme; exhibits a K_m for Asn of less than 250 μ M; a L-glutaminase reaction rate (k_{cat}) of less than 60% of wild-type *ErA* enzyme; and/or a K_m for Gln of greater than 3 mM. In further embodiments, the *ErA* variant further includes: a histidine tag, a SUMO tag, an albumin-binding domain, PEGylation, and/or three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL. In particular embodiments, the soluble domains of TRAIL include residues 115-281 of human TRAIL; the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to one another via a peptide linking group including one to eight amino acid residues, e.g., selected from glycine and serine; and/or the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to the *ErA* variant via a peptide linking group including one to

twenty amino acid residues, e.g., selected from glycine and serine. In some embodiments, PEGylation is achieved with an *ErA* variant having a cysteine residue at position 72, 76, 79, 84, 85, 206, 210, 215, 216, 235, 239, 240, 261, 264, 265, 268, 269, 318, 322, or a combination thereof.

[0009] The invention also provides a fusion protein composed of an L-asparaginase linked to three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL. In some embodiments, the soluble domains of TRAIL include residues 115-281 of human TRAIL; the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to one another via a peptide linking group including one to eight amino acid residues, e.g., selected from glycine and serine; and/or the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to the *ErA* variant via a peptide linking group including one to twenty amino acid residues, e.g., selected from glycine and serine. In other embodiments, the L-asparaginase of the fusion protein is an L-asparaginase from *Erwinia chrysanthemi* or *Escherichia coli*. In certain embodiments, the *E. chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase (*ErA*) is a variant having an amino acid substitution at one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1. Additionally, the fusion protein further includes: a histidine tag, a SUMO tag, an albumin-binding domain, and/or PEGylation. In some embodiments, the PEGylated L-asparaginase is an L-asparaginase from *Erwinia chrysanthemi* having a cysteine residue at position 72, 76, 79, 84, 85, 206, 210, 215, 216, 235, 239, 240, 261, 264, 265, 268, 269, 318, 322, or a combination thereof.

[0010] Nucleic acid molecules, expression vectors, host cells and pharmaceutical compositions containing the *ErA* variant or fusion proteins are also provided, as are methods of treating cancer by administering to a subject in need of treatment an effective amount of the *ErA* variant or

fusion proteins, optionally in combination with a stable form of TRAIL.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0011] Figures 1A and 1B show that L-asparaginases with reduced L-glutaminase activity rapidly decrease the number of cancer cells in an animal of ALL using luciferase-expressing LOUCY (human T-ALL; Figure 1A) and SUP-B15 (human B-ALL; Figure 1B) cell lines.

[0012] Figure 2 shows that weight loss of animals inoculated with LOUCY (human T-ALL) cells and administered wild-type and *ErA* variants (*ErA*-E63Q and *ErA*-E63Q-S254N (*ErA*-DM1)) correlated with the L-glutaminase activity, wherein higher L-glutaminase activity resulted in more weight loss. Similar results were obtained for animals inoculated with SUP-B15 (human B-ALL) cells. Since weight loss is an indicator of toxicity, the reduced weight loss of animals treated with the low L-glutaminase *ErA* variants indicates that these enzymes possess reduced toxicity.

[0013] Figure 3 shows a sequence alignment of L-asparaginases from *Erwinia chrysanthemi* (A; UniProt entry P06608; SEQ ID NO:1), *E. carotovora* (B; UniProt entry Q6Q4F4; SEQ ID NO:8), *Escherichia coli* (C; UniProt entry P00805; SEQ ID NO:9), *Helicobacter pylori* (D; UniProt entry O25424; SEQ ID NO:10), *Wolinella succinogenes* (E; UniProt entry P50286; SEQ ID NO:11), and *Cavia porcellus* (guinea pig) (F; UniProt entry HOW0T5; SEQ ID NO:12). Strictly conserved residues are indicated with underlining. The four sites selected for mutagenesis for the goal of reducing the L-glutaminase activity are indicated. The *E. chrysanthemi*, *E. carotovora* and *E. coli* enzymes contain an N-terminal signal peptide, which is not included in the alignment. For

the guinea pig enzyme, only residues in its N-terminal L-asparaginase domain are shown.

[0014] Figure 4 shows that the ultra-low L-glutaminase *ErA*-TM2 variant eliminates T-ALL LOUCY cells as effectively as the high L-glutaminase *ErA*-WT. Female mice tail vein-injected with luciferase-expressing LOUCY cells four weeks prior were treated daily with vehicle (n=3); *ErA*-WT (n=4); and *ErA*-TM (n=4) for 14 days (drug dose 50 IU/mouse/day; i.p.). For each group, the representative animal shown had the highest bioluminescence imaging signal at day 0 of treatment.

[0015] Figure 5 shows the anticancer activity of the TRAIL_{trimer}-*ErA*-TM2 fusion protein in a mouse model of acute myeloid leukemia (AML).

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0016] It has now been found that the toxic side effects attributed to the L-glutaminase activity of *Erwinia chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase (*ErA*) can be diminished by mutation of one or more of amino acid residues 31, 63 and 254 of the *ErA* enzyme. In addition, *in vivo* circulation time of L-asparaginase can be increased by the N- or C-terminal addition of a histidine tag, SUMO tag, and/or albumin binding domain. Moreover, fusion of a L-asparaginase to three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL has now been demonstrated to facilitate cell death by both providing the necessary signals for apoptosis (L-asparaginase) and inducing the process of apoptosis (TRAIL). Accordingly, this invention provides variant L-asparaginases and fusion proteins containing L-asparaginases, as well as combinations thereof, for use in the treatment of cancers such as lymphomas and leukemias, which are dependent upon the presence of an external supply

of Asn. The improved safety of the instant L-asparaginases will provide benefit to current patient populations (e.g., those with pediatric ALL), and extended use in other patient populations (e.g., adult ALL, AML, and other cancers).

[0017] As is known in the art, L-asparaginases (L-asparagine aminohydrolase, E.C. 3.5.1.1) are amidases that hydrolyses the amide bond in Asn to Asp and ammonia (Kumar & Verma (2012) *Asian J. Biochem. Pharma Res.* 3:197-205). An L-asparaginase of use in this invention can be obtained from any suitable organism including an animal, microbe, or plant. Ideally, the L-asparaginase is obtained from a microorganism such as a bacterium, fungus, yeast, actinomycete or alga. Bacterial species from which the present L-asparaginase can be obtained include, but are not limited to, *E. coli* (Cedar & Schwartz (1968) *J. Bacteriol.* 96:2043-8; see also UniProt entry P00805), *Erwinia carotovora* (Kotzia & Labrou (2005) *J. Bacteriol.* 119:309-323), *Pseudomonas stutzeri* (Manna, et al. (1995) *Curr. Microbiol.* 30:291-8), *Pseudomonas acidovorans* (Davis, et al. (1977) *J. Bacteriol.* 129:1379-86), *Erwinia aroideae* (Peterson & Ciegler (1969) *Appl. Microbiol.* 18:64-7), *Thermus thermophilus* (Pritsa, et al. (2001) *Anticancer Drugs* 12:137-42), *Thermus aquaticus* (Curran, et al. (1985) *Arch. Biochem. Biophys.* 241:571-6), *Staphylococcus aureus* (Rozalska & Mikucki (1992) *Acta Microbiol. Pol.* 41:145-50), *Vibrio succinogenes* (Kafkewitz & Goodman (1974) *Appl. Microbiol.* 27:206-9), *Citrobacter freundii* (Davison, et al. (1977) *Biochim. Biophys. Acta* 480:282-94), *Proteus vulgaris* (Tosa, et al. (1972) *J. Biochem.* 11:217-22), *Zymomonas mobilis* (Pinheiro, et al. (2001) *Biomater. Diagn.* 6:243-4), *Bacillus subtilis* (Fisher & Wray (2002) *J. Bacteriol.* 184:2148-54), *Bacillus licheniformis* (Golden & Bernlohr

(1985) *J. Bacteriol.* 164:938-40), *Bacillus circulans* MTCC 8574 (Hymavathi, et al. (2009) *Appl. Biochem. Biotechnol.* 159:191-98), *Enterobacter aerogenes* (Mukherjee, et al. (2000) *Appl. Microbiol. Biotechnol.* 53:180-4), *Serratia marcescens* (Khan, et al. (1970) *Biochem. Biophys. Res. Commun.* 41:525-33), *Wolinella succinogenes* (see UniProt entry P50286), *Helicobacter pylori* (see UniProt entry O25424), and *Cavia porcellus* (guinea pig) (see UniProt entry H0W0T5). Fungal and yeast species such as *Aspergillus tamari*, *Aspergillus terreus*, *Aspergillus awamori*, *Cylindrocarpon obtusisporum*, *Fusarium roseum*, *Fusarium saloni*, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, *Candida utilis*, *Candida guilliermondii* and *Rhodospodium toruloids* can also be sources of the present L-asparaginase.

[0018] The most widely used and commercially available L-asparaginases are derived from *E. coli* or from *Erwinia* sp. Within the *Erwinia* species, *E. chrysanthemi*- and *E. carotovora*-derived enzymes are known and include, but are not limited to enzymes isolated from *E. chrysanthemi* NCPPB 1066 (see UniProtKB Accession No. P06608), *E. chrysanthemi* 3937 (see GENBANK Accession No. AAS67028), *E. chrysanthemi* NCPPB 1125 (see GENBANK Accession No. CAA31239), *E. carotovora* subsp. *atroseptica* (see GENBANK Accession No. AAS67027 or UniProtKB Accession No. Q6Q4F4) and *E. carotovora* (see GENBANK Accession No. AAP92666). Accordingly, it is preferred that the L-asparaginase used herein is derived from *E. coli*, *E. chrysanthemi* or *E. carotovora*. In particular, it is preferable that the L-asparaginase is obtained from *E. chrysanthemi*. In certain embodiments, an L-asparaginase used herein lacks an N-terminal leader sequence and has an N-terminal methionine residue. An exemplary *E. chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase has the amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:1.

[0019] An "ErA variant" refers to any non-naturally occurring form of an ErA enzyme that displays L-asparaginase activity and includes at least one mutation or modification that reduces or diminishes L-glutaminase activity, increases stability, and/or increases *in vivo* circulation time of the ErA as compared to a wild-type ErA enzyme. By comparison, a "wild-type" L-asparaginase refers to the typical form of L-asparaginase when isolated from a naturally occurring source. A wild-type is that which is most frequently observed in a natural population and is thus arbitrarily designated the normal or wild-type form.

[0020] As demonstrated herein, mutation of one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of *E. chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase (ErA; SEQ ID NO:1) provides an enzyme with reduced or diminished L-glutaminase activity (see Table 7). In particular, L-glutaminase activity of an ErA variant is reduced to between 0 and 65%, 0 and 50%, 0 and 35%, 0 and 25%, 0 and 20%, 0 and 15%, or 0 and 10% of wild-type ErA activity. Ideally, the ErA variant of the invention exhibits a L-glutaminase reaction rate (k_{cat}) of less than 60%, 50%, 40%, 30% or 20% of the k_{cat} of a wild-type ErA enzyme. Moreover, it is preferred that the ErA variant exhibits a K_m for Gln of greater than 2, 3, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70, 75 or 80 mM. In particular, the invention includes an ErA variant exhibiting a K_m for Gln in the range of 2 to 100 mM, 3 to 100 mM, 10 to 100 mM, or 20 to 100 mM.

[0021] ErA variants include proteins having a mutation at position 31, 63 and/or 254 of SEQ ID NO:1. Accordingly, ErA variants include mutation of position 31; position 63; position 254; positions 31 and 63; positions 31 and 254; positions 63 and 254; and positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1. Mutations in ErA variant proteins include the

substitution of Ala31 with an isoleucine, valine, leucine, or threonine; substitution of Glu63 with glutamine, asparagine, or aspartate; and/or substitution of Ser254 with an asparagine or glutamine. Exemplary *ErA* variant proteins having a mutation at one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1 are provided under SEQ ID NO:2 (E63Q), SEQ ID NO:3 (E63Q-S254N), SEQ ID NO:4 (A31I-E63Q), SEQ ID NO:5 (E63Q-S254Q), SEQ ID NO:6 (A31I-E63Q-S254Q), and SEQ ID NO:7 (A31I-E63Q-S254N).

[0022] In addition to *ErA*, mutations at a corresponding position in other L-asparaginases can also be made. The term "corresponding," when used in the context of comparing, aligning, or identifying equivalent amino acids in one polypeptide sequence with another polypeptide sequence, refers to the comparison or alignment that will yield the highest percent identity when aligned with the other polypeptide sequence. For example, the corresponding position of residues 31, 63 and 254 of *ErA* in L-asparaginases from *E. carotovora* (UniProt entry Q6Q4F4) are located at positions 29, 61 and 252 of SEQ ID NO:8.

[0023] Advantageously, the *ErA* variant of this invention has an L-asparaginase activity comparable to that of wild-type *ErA*. In particular, the *ErA* variant exhibits an L-asparaginase reaction rate (k_{cat}) of least 70% of wild-type *ErA* enzyme. Ideally, the *ErA* variant exhibits an L-asparaginase k_{cat} in the range of 50 to 150%, 60 to 140%, 70 to 130%, or 80 to 125% of the k_{cat} of a wild-type *ErA* enzyme. Moreover, it is preferred that the *ErA* variant exhibits a K_m for Asn of less than 250, 200, 150, 140, 130, 120, 110, 100, 90, 80, 70, 60, 50, or 40 μM . In particular, the invention includes an *ErA* variant exhibiting a K_m for Asn in the range of 10 to 250 μM , 20 to 200 μM , 30 to 190 μM , or 50 to 150 μM .

[0024] To increase the *in vivo* circulation time of L-asparaginases disclosed herein (including wild-type asparaginases and fusion proteins), this invention also provides the variants, in particular *ErA* variants, having a histidine tag (His), a SUMO tag (SUMO), an albumin-binding domain (ABD), or a combination thereof. The L-asparaginase variant can include the histidine tag, SUMO tag and/or an albumin-binding domain at its C-terminus and/or N-terminus. By way of illustration, the L-asparaginase variant can have the N->C-terminal structure of SUMO-Asparaginase-ABD, His-SUMO-ABD-Asparaginase, His-SUMO-Asparaginase-ABD, His-SUMO-Asparaginase, His-ABD-Asparaginase, ABD-Asparaginase, ABD-SUMO-Asparaginase, and the like. Nucleic acids encoding the His, SUMO or ABD can be inserted in-frame either 5' or 3' of the nucleic acids encoding the L-asparaginase thereby creating a fusion protein.

[0025] Ideally, the inclusion of one or more of a histidine tag, a SUMO tag, an albumin-binding domain, or a combination thereof significantly increases the *in vivo* circulation time of an L-asparaginase. Alternatively stated, the variant has a longer $t_{1/2}$ than wild-type L-asparaginase administered at an equivalent protein dose. As used herein, the term " $t_{1/2}$ " or "half life" refers to the time that would be required for the concentration of an L-asparaginase or a variant or fusion protein thereof to fall by half *in vitro* or *in vivo*, for example, after injection in a mammal. In particular, the variant has a $t_{1/2}$ of at least about 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, or 65 hours at a dose of about 50 $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}$ (protein content basis). Alternatively, the variant has a $t_{1/2}$ of at least about 30, 32, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, or 40 hours at a dose of about 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}$ (protein content basis). In another embodiment, the variant has a $t_{1/2}$ of at least about 100 to

about 200 hours at a dose ranging from about 10,000 to about 15,000 IU/m² (about 20-30 mg protein/m²). Given that efficacy of L-asparaginases is related to the *in vivo* half-life of the drug, the variants of this invention are particularly useful in the treatment of cancers, such as leukemias and lymphomas.

[0026] As used herein, a "histidine tag" refers to an amino acid motif composed of at least six histidine (His) residues. The histidine tag includes a polyhistidine of 6 (hexa histidine tag, 6xHis tag, or His₆ tag), 7, 8, 9, 10, or up to 20 histidine residues.

[0027] A "SUMO tag" refers to the fusion of a SUMO (small ubiquitin-related modifier) protein to a protein of interest to enhance the solubility/stability of the protein of interest. The inclusion of a SUMO tag can be achieved using known expression systems such as the CHAMPION pET SUMO expression system (Invitrogen), the EXPRESSO T7 SUMO cloning and expression system (Lucigen), or pET His₆ SUMO TEV LIC cloning vector (Addgene). In addition to SUMO tag, it is contemplated that other Ubl proteins can be used including, but not limited to, Ub, Rub1, Hub1, ISG15, Ubi-L (MNSF), FAT10, Apg12, Apg8 and Urm1 (Larsen & Wang (2002) *J. Proteome Res.* 1(5):411-9). See also US 7,655,413, incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

[0028] An "albumin-binding domain" refers to a polypeptide that binds albumin *in vivo* or *in vitro* and enhances the serum half-life and biodistribution of a therapeutic agent. Albumin may be derived from any animal species, for example human, monkey, or rodent. Albumin-binding domains are described, for example, in US 6,267,964, WO 1991/19741, WO 2005/097202, WO 2001/45746, WO 2013/043071 and US 2004/0001827. Further, US 9,156,887 discloses non-natural albumin-binding domains, which may be used in this

invention. In some embodiments, the albumin-binding domain has the amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:13, SEQ ID NO:14 or SEQ ID NO:15.

[0029] PEGylation of the L-asparaginases disclosed herein (including wild-type L-asparaginases, *ErA* variants and fusion proteins) can also be used to increase *in vivo* circulation time. The term "PEGylated" or "PEGylation" refers to conjugation of an L-asparaginase with polyethylene glycol (PEG). PEG can be coupled (e.g., covalently linked) to active agents through the hydroxy groups at the end of the PEG chain via chemical methods. Methods of PEGylation that can be used to PEGylate an L-asparaginase of the invention are provided, for example, in US 4,179,337, US 5,766,897, US 2002/0065397, and US 2009/0054590. Alternatively, as disclosed herein, an L-asparaginase can be PEGylated by site-specific PEGylation of between 1 and 5 cysteine residues introduced into the amino acid sequence of the L-asparaginase by amino acid substitution. See Example 6. In some embodiments, the L-asparaginase is an L-asparaginase from *E. chrysanthemi* (wild-type, variant or fusion protein) having a cysteine residue at position 72, 76, 79, 84, 85, 206, 210, 215, 216, 235, 239, 240, 261, 264, 265, 268, 269, 318, 322, or a combination thereof. In particular embodiments, PEGylation of a L-asparaginase of this invention is achieved by replacing Asp84 of a wild-type L-asparaginase (e.g., *ErA* of SEQ ID NO:1), a variant L-asparaginase (e.g., variants of SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 or SEQ ID NO:7) or a fusion protein thereof with cysteine thereby providing a specific site for maleimide-based PEGylation of the L-asparaginase.

[0030] Enhanced cytotoxic activity of the L-asparaginases disclosed herein (*i.e.*, wild-type and *Era* variants) can be

achieved by conjugating or fusing the L-asparaginase to three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL or co-administering the L-asparaginase with a stable form of TRAIL. As demonstrated herein, the resulting fusion protein was found to provide at least a 25-fold decrease in IC₅₀ value compared to an L-asparaginase lacking the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL. Accordingly, a fusion protein disclosed herein is particularly useful in the treatment of cancer, in particular, L-asparaginase-insensitive cancers.

[0031] A "fusion protein" refers to a chimeric protein containing proteins or protein fragments (e.g., L-asparaginase or variants thereof) operably linked in a non-native way. In accordance with the fusion protein of this invention, three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL (TRAIL_{trimer}) are fused, in-frame, with an L-asparaginase (e.g., an *Erwinia chrysanthemi* or *Escherichia coli* L-asparaginase), or variant thereof (e.g. an *ErA* variant). The fusion protein can include TRAIL at its C-terminus or N-terminus. By way of illustration, the fusion protein can have the N->C-terminal structure of TRAIL-Asparaginase or Asparaginase-TRAIL. When used in combination with a tag or modification, the fusion protein can have the structure of: SUMO-TRAIL-Asparaginase-ABD, His-SUMO-ABD-TRAIL-Asparaginase, His-SUMO-TRAIL-Asparaginase-ABD, His-SUMO-Asparaginase-TRAIL, His-ABD-TRAIL-Asparaginase, ABD-Asparaginase-TRAIL, ABD-SUMO-TRAIL-Asparaginase, and the like. Nucleic acids encoding TRAIL in particular TRAIL_{trimer} can be inserted in-frame either 5' or 3' of the nucleic acids encoding the L-asparaginase thereby creating the fusion protein.

[0032] Preferably, the soluble domains of TRAIL are derived from a mammalian, particularly human TRAIL including allelic variants and/or derivatives thereof. The soluble

domains include the extracellular portion of TRAIL including the receptor binding domain without membrane localized domains. Like other proteins of the TNF superfamily, TRAIL is anchored to the membrane via an N-terminal portion of 15-30 amino acids, the so-called stalk-region. The stalk region contributes to trimerization and provides a certain distance to the cell membrane. However, the stalk region is not part of the receptor binding domain (RBD). Accordingly, it is preferred that the soluble TRAIL domains include the receptor binding domain of the TRAIL lacking any amino acids from the stalk region (see US 2015/0337027).

[0033] The soluble TRAIL domain may be derived from human TRAIL as set forth in SEQ ID NO:16. Preferably, the soluble TRAIL domains are derived from human TRAIL, particularly starting from amino acids 115-122, and include amino acid residues 115-281, 120-281, 121-281 or 122-281 of SEQ ID NO:16. In certain embodiments, each of the soluble domains of TRAIL_{trimer} are composed of residues 115-281 of human TRAIL (SEQ ID NO:16). Residues 115-281 of human TRAIL are set forth herein in SEQ ID NO:17.

[0034] Derivatives and variants of the death receptor binding TRAIL domains are all contemplated and can be made by altering their amino acid sequences by substitutions, additions, and/or deletions/truncations or by introducing chemical modifications that result in functionally equivalent polypeptides. It will be understood by one of ordinary skill in the art that certain amino acids in a sequence of any polypeptide may be substituted for other amino acids without adversely affecting the activity of the polypeptides.

[0035] The TRAIL domains disclosed herein include substitutions of one or more of the amino acids in the

disclosed sequences. A skilled artisan will be able to determine using well-known techniques suitable sequence variants of the peptides set forth herein. In certain embodiments, one skilled in the art may identify suitable areas of the molecule that may be changed without destroying activity by targeting regions not believed to be important for activity. In other embodiments, the skilled artisan can identify residues and portions of the molecules that are conserved among similar polypeptides. In further embodiments, even amino acid residues important for biological activity or for structure may be subject to conservative amino acid substitutions without destroying the biological activity thereof or without adversely affecting the peptide structure.

[0036] The three soluble domains of TRAIL are preferably linked to one another via peptide linking group composed of one to eight amino acid residues. Likewise, it is preferable that TRAIL_{trimer} is linked to the L-asparaginase via a peptide linking group composed of one to twenty amino acid residues. The term "peptide linking group" or "linker" is meant to refer to a peptide moiety that acts as a molecular bridge to operably link two different molecules together. Desirably, the linkers of this invention are composed of glycine or serine, or a combination thereof. In particular embodiments, each of the soluble domains of TRAIL_{trimer} are preferably linked to one another by a single glycine or single serine residue. An exemplary TRAIL_{trimer} including a single glycine residue between the three soluble TRAIL domains is set forth herein in SEQ ID NO:18. Regarding the peptide linking group located between the TRAIL_{trimer} and L-asparaginase, it is desirable that this linker is a flexible linker. The flexible linker preferably has a length of one to 20 amino acid residues, particularly

a length of 6, 9, 12, 15 or 18 amino residues. The flexible linker is preferably a glycine/serine linker, *i.e.*, a peptide linker composed primarily of the amino acids glycine and serine. In a particular embodiment, the linker between the TRAIL_{trimer} and L-asparaginase is a (GGGS)_n linker (SEQ ID NO:19), wherein n is 1 to 4, or a permutation thereof including, *e.g.*, GGGS(GGGGS)_n (SEQ ID NO:20), herein n is 1 to 4. In certain embodiments, the linker between the TRAIL_{trimer} and L-asparaginase has the amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:21. An exemplary TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA variant (TM2) fusion protein having a TRAIL_{trimer} including a single glycine residue between the three soluble TRAIL domains and a glycine/serine linker between the TRAIL_{trimer} and L-asparaginase is set forth herein in SEQ ID NO:22.

[0037] A stable form of TRAIL is intended to refer to a form of TRAIL that promotes trimerization. In particular, to promote trimerization of TRAIL, the FOLDON sequence (GYIPEAPRDGQAYVRKDGWVLLSTFL; SEQ ID NO:31), a small trimerization domain, has been shown to maintain TRAIL stability and biological activity at 37°C for at least 48 hours (Kouno, et al. (2013) *J. Invest. Dermatol.* 133(9):2212-2220). Accordingly, the FOLDON peptide was inserted between a His-SUMO tag and the N-terminus of TRAIL to result in a His-SUMO-FOLDON-TRAIL fusion protein. The fusion protein was expressed and a yield of >10 mg/L of the fusion protein was obtained in the bacterial culture. The protein was very stable, showing that the inclusion of FOLDON results in a stable form of TRAIL. Accordingly, a stable form of TRAIL can be co-administered and/or combined in a pharmaceutical composition with L-asparaginase to enhance cytotoxic activity of the L-asparaginase.

[0038] The stable form of TRAIL and TRAIL-asparaginase fusion protein can be further modified to include a

histidine tag, a SUMO tag, an albumin-binding domain, PEGylation, or a combination thereof. An exemplary TRAIL-*ErA* variant (TM2) fusion protein further including a polyhistidine tag and SUMO tag at the N-terminus is set forth herein in SEQ ID NO:23. Further an exemplary stable form of TRAIL can have the structure: His-SUMO-FOLDON-TRAIL.

[0039] The variants and fusion proteins disclosed herein can be readily prepared by conventional recombinant protein techniques, wherein recombinant host cells are transformed or transduced with an expression construct or vector harboring a nucleic acid molecule encoding the variant or fusion protein, the recombinant host cells are grown under suitable conditions to provide for expression of the variant or fusion protein, and the variant or fusion protein is subsequently isolated and optionally purified. Accordingly, this invention also provides a nucleic acid molecule encoding an *ErA* variant (*i.e.*, an *ErA* with an amino acid substitution at one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1 and/or including a histidine tag, a SUMO tag, an albumin-binding domain, or a combination thereof) or a fusion protein (*i.e.*, an L-asparaginase linked to three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL), as well as a expression cassette and/or expression vector containing the same. Ideally, the expression cassette and expression vector contain the necessary regulatory sequences (*e.g.*, promoter, terminator, and the like) to facilitate expression in the host cell of interest. Host cells including a nucleic acid molecule encoding an *ErA* variant or fusion protein are also included within the scope of this invention. Host cells can include eukaryotic cells (*e.g.*, mammalian, fungal or yeast cells) or prokaryotic cells (*e.g.*, *E. coli*).

[0040] Once produced and isolated/purified, the *ErA* variant and/or fusion protein of the invention can be used as is or formulated in a pharmaceutical composition containing a pharmaceutically acceptable excipient. Pharmaceutical compositions provided herein can be specially formulated for intravenous administration in solid or liquid form or for intravenous injection. Optimal pharmaceutical compositions can be determined by one skilled in the art depending upon, for example, the intended route of administration, delivery format and desired dosage. See, for example, Remington's Pharmaceutical Sciences (19th edition, 1995).

[0041] *ErA* variant and/or fusion protein can be incorporated in a conventional systemic dosage form, such as an injectable formulation. The dosage forms may also include the necessary physiologically acceptable carrier material, excipient, lubricant, buffer, surfactant, antibacterial, bulking agent (such as mannitol), antioxidants (ascorbic acid or sodium bisulfite) or the like.

[0042] The primary carrier or excipient in a pharmaceutical composition may be either aqueous or non-aqueous in nature. For example, a suitable carrier or excipient may be water for injection, physiological saline solution or artificial cerebrospinal fluid, possibly supplemented with other materials common in compositions for parenteral administration. Neutral-buffered saline or saline mixed with serum albumin are further exemplary vehicles. Pharmaceutical compositions can include Tris buffer of about pH 7.0-8.5, or acetate buffer of about pH 4.0-5.5, which may further include sorbitol or a suitable substitute therefor. Pharmaceutical compositions of the invention may be prepared for storage by mixing the selected composition

having the desired degree of purity with optional formulation agents (Remington's Pharmaceutical Sciences, *Id.*) in the form of a lyophilized cake or an aqueous solution. Further, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein of the invention may be formulated as a lyophilizate using appropriate excipients such as sucrose or glycine.

[0043] Administration routes for the *ErA* variant, fusion protein, or pharmaceutical compositions of the invention include injection by intravenous, intraperitoneal, intracerebral (intra-parenchymal), intracerebroventricular, intramuscular, intra-ocular, intraarterial, intraportal, or intralesional routes; by sustained release systems or by implantation devices. Compositions may be administered by bolus injection or continuously by infusion, or by implantation device. Compositions also can be administered locally via implantation of a membrane, sponge or another appropriate material onto which the desired molecule has been absorbed or encapsulated. Where an implantation device is used, the device may be implanted into any suitable tissue or organ, and delivery of the desired molecule may be via diffusion, timed-release bolus, or continuous administration.

[0044] The compositions of the invention can be delivered parenterally. When parenteral administration is contemplated, the therapeutic compositions for use in this invention may be in the form of a pyrogen-free, parenterally acceptable aqueous solution comprising the desired compound identified in a screening method of the invention in a pharmaceutically acceptable vehicle. A particularly suitable vehicle for parenteral injection is sterile distilled water in which the compound identified in a screening method of the invention is formulated as a sterile, isotonic solution, appropriately preserved.

Preparation can involve the formulation of the desired molecule with an agent, such as injectable microspheres, bio-erodible particles, polymeric compounds (such as polylactic acid or polyglycolic acid), beads or liposomes, that may provide controlled or sustained release of the product which may then be delivered via a depot injection. Formulation with hyaluronic acid has the effect of promoting sustained duration in the circulation. Implantable drug delivery devices may be used to introduce the desired molecule.

[0045] The compositions may also be formulated for inhalation. In these embodiments, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is formulated as a dry powder for inhalation, or inhalation solutions may also be formulated with a propellant for aerosol delivery, such as by nebulization. Pulmonary administration is further described in WO 1994/020069, which describes pulmonary delivery of chemically modified proteins.

[0046] The compositions of the invention can be delivered through the digestive tract, such as orally. The preparation of such pharmaceutically acceptable compositions is within the skill of the art. The *ErA* variant or fusion protein of the invention that is administered in this fashion may be formulated with or without those carriers customarily used in the compounding of solid dosage forms such as tablets and capsules. A capsule may be designed to release the active portion of the formulation at the point in the gastrointestinal tract when bioavailability is maximized and pre-systemic degradation is minimized. Additional agents can be included to facilitate absorption of the peptides of the invention disclosed herein. Diluents, flavorings, low melting point waxes, vegetable oils, lubricants, suspending agents,

tablet disintegrating agents, and binders may also be employed.

[0047] These compositions may also contain adjuvants such as preservative, wetting agents, emulsifying agents and dispersing agents. Prevention of the action of microorganisms can be ensured by the inclusion of various antibacterial and antifungal agents, for example, paraben, chlorobutanol, phenol sorbic acid and the like. It may also be desirable to include isotonic agents such as sugars, sodium chloride and the like. Prolonged absorption of the injectable pharmaceutical form can be brought about by the inclusion of agents which delay absorption such as aluminum monostearate and gelatin.

[0048] The *ErA* variant and/or fusion protein of the invention find particular use in the treatment of a disease or condition treatable by depletion of asparagine. Accordingly, this invention also provides methods for treating a disease, in particular cancer, by administering to a subject in need of treatment and effective amount of a *ErA* variant or fusion protein. An "effective amount" is used herein to refer to an amount of an active ingredient sufficient to achieve the intended purpose of (a) reducing the severity of the disorder; (b) limiting or preventing development of symptoms characteristic of the disorder(s) being treated; (c) inhibiting worsening of symptoms characteristic of the disorder(s) being treated; (d) limiting or preventing recurrence of the disorder(s) in patients that have previously had the disorder(s); (e) limiting or preventing recurrence of symptoms in patients that were previously symptomatic for the disorder(s); (f) reduction of mortality after occurrence of a disease or a disorder; (g) healing; and (h) prophylaxis of a disease. The effective amount in each individual case may be

determined empirically by a skilled artisan according to established methods in the art. As used in the context of the invention, "administering" includes *in vivo* administration to an individual as well as administration directly to cells or tissue *in vitro* or *ex vivo*. An effective amount of an *ErA* variant or fusion protein is generally that which can induce apoptosis and reduce circulating L-asparagine in cancer cells or a tumor of the subject. A clinician may titer the dosage or route of administration to obtain the optimal therapeutic effect.

[0049] In certain embodiments, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is useful in the treatment or the manufacture of a medicament for use in the treatment of acute lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL) in both adults and children, as well as other conditions where asparagine depletion is expected to have a useful effect. Such conditions include, but are not limited to, malignancies or cancers, including but not limited to hematologic malignancies, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, NK lymphoma, pancreatic cancer, Hodgkin's disease, acute myelocytic Leukemia, acute myelomonocytic Leukemia, chronic lymphocytic Leukemia, lymphosarcoma, reticulosarcoma, and melanosarcoma. Representative non-malignant hematologic diseases which respond to asparagine depletion include immune system-mediated Blood diseases, e.g., infectious diseases such as those caused by HIV infection (*i.e.*, AIDS). Non-hematologic diseases associated with asparagine dependence include autoimmune diseases, for example rheumatoid arthritis, SLE, autoimmune, collagen vascular diseases, AIDS, etc. Other autoimmune diseases include osteo-arthritis, Issac's syndrome, psoriasis, insulin dependent diabetes mellitus, multiple sclerosis, sclerosing panencephalitis, systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatic fever, inflammatory bowel disease (e.g.,

ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease), primary billiary cirrhosis, chronic active hepatitis, glomerulonephritis, myasthenia gravis, pemphigus vulgaris, and Graves' disease. In particular embodiments, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is used in the treatment of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, leukemia, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, acute myeloid leukemia, B cell lymphoma, Burkitt's lymphoma, chronic myelocytic leukemia, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, and hairy cell leukemia.

[0050] Cells suspected of causing disease can be tested for asparagine dependence in any suitable *in vitro* or *in vivo* assay, e.g., an *in vitro* assay wherein the growth medium lacks asparagine. Thus, in one aspect, the invention is directed to a method of treating a disease treatable in a patient, the method comprising administering to the patient an effective amount of a conjugate of the invention. In a specific embodiment, the disease is ALL. In a particular embodiment, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein used in the treatment of a disease treatable by asparagine depletion includes an L-asparaginase from *Erwinia* species, more specifically *Erwinia chrysanthemi*.

[0051] The *ErA* variant or fusion protein can be administered on a schedule ranging from about 3-times a week to about once a month, typically once per week or once every other week, as a single agent (e.g., monotherapy) or as part of a combination of chemotherapy drugs, including, but not limited to glucocorticoids, corticostcroids, anticancer compounds or other agents, including, but not limited to methotrexate, dexamethasone, prednisone, prednisolone, vincristine, cyclophosphamide, and anthracycline. As an example, patients with ALL will be administered the *ErA* variant or fusion protein of the invention as a component of multi-agent chemotherapy during

3 chemotherapy phases including induction, consolidation or intensification, and maintenance. In a specific example, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is not administered with an asparagine synthetase inhibitor (e.g., see WO 2007/103290). In another specific example, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is not administered with an asparagine synthetase inhibitor, but is administered with other chemotherapy drugs. The *ErA* variant or fusion protein can be administered before, after, or simultaneously with other compounds as part of a multi-agent chemotherapy regimen.

[0052] In a specific embodiment, the method involves administering an *ErA* variant or fusion protein of the invention at an amount of about 1 U/kg to about 1000 U/kg. In a more specific embodiment, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is administered at an amount selected from the group consisting of about 20, 50, 60, 70, 100, 200, 300, 400, 500 and 600 U/kg. In another specific embodiment, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is administered at a dose ranging from about 1000 IU/m² to about 20000 IU/m² (e.g., 1000 IU/m², 2000 IU/m², 3000 IU/m², 4000 IU/m², 5000 IU/m², 6000 IU/m², 7000 IU/m², 8000 IU/m², 9000 IU/m², 10000 IU/m², 11000 IU/m², 12000 IU/m², 13000 IU/m², 14000 IU/m², 15000 IU/m², 16000 IU/m², 17000 IU/m², 18000 IU/m², 19000 IU/m², or 20000 IU/m²). In another specific embodiment, the *ErA* variant or fusion protein is administered at a dose that depletes Asn to undetectable levels for a period of about 3 days to about 10 days (e.g., 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 days) for a single dose. In another embodiment, the method involves administering a *ErA* variant or fusion protein of the invention that has a longer *in vivo* circulating half-life after a single dose compared to the wild-type L-asparaginase.

[0053] The following non-limiting examples are provided to further illustrate the present invention.

Example 1: Materials and Methods

[0054] *ErA Gene Cloning and Mutagenesis.* A codon-optimized synthetic gene corresponding to the amino acid sequence of *ErA* (UniProt entry P06608) lacking the first 21-amino acid residue signal peptide was synthesized by Genscript as previously described (Schalk, et al. (2014) *J. Biol. Chem.* 289:33175-33186). The synthetic gene was digested with *NdeI* and *BamHI*-HF restriction enzymes, gel purified, and ligated into a His₆-SUMO-pET14b vector (where the His₆ tag is followed by the yeast protein SUMO (small ubiquitin modifier, Smt3p) using Instant Sticky End DNA ligase (New England Biolabs), generating His₆-SUMO-*ErA*-WT plasmid. This plasmid was subsequently used as template to create the following 13 *ErA* single-mutant variants: Ala31Ser (A31S), Ala31Ile (A31I), Ala31Leu (A31L), Ala31Met (A31M), Ala31Asn (A31N), Ala31Thr (A31T), Ala31Val (A31V), Glu63Leu (E63L), Glu63Gln (E63Q), Pro123Ser (P123S), Pro123Asn (P123N), Ser254Asn (S254N), Ser254Pro (S254P). The plasmid carrying the mutant E63Q was then used as template to create *ErA* double-mutant variants (A31T-E63Q, A31I-E63Q, S254N-E63Q and S254Q-E63Q) while the mutant S254N was used to generate two other double-mutants (A31I-S254N and A31T-S254N). The plasmid carrying the double mutation A31I-E63Q was used as template to create two triple mutants A31I-E63Q-S254N and A31I-E63Q-S254Q.

[0055] *ErA Protein Expression and Purification.* Protein expression and purification were performed as previously described (Schalk, et al. (2014) *J. Biol. Chem.* 289:33175-33186). In brief, plasmids corresponding to wild-type *ErA* (*ErA*-WT) or mutated insert (verified by sequencing) were

transformed into *E. coli* BL21(DE3) C41 cells for expression. A single colony was picked and expanded at 37°C in 2xYT medium. Protein expression was induced with 0.3 mM Isopropyl β -D-1-thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG) when the culture reached an optical density (at 600 nm) of 0.6-0.8. The incubation temperature was then reduced and maintained at 18°C for the next 12 hours. The cells were disrupted by sonication and the debris was cleared by centrifugation at 20,000 g at 4°C for 30 minutes. The supernatant was loaded onto a 5 mL HISTRAP nickel affinity column (GE Healthcare). The column was subsequently washed with buffers composed of 25 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.5, 500 mM NaCl, and 25, 50 and 75 mM imidazole. The bound protein was eluted with the same buffer but containing 500 mM imidazole. The N-terminal His₆-SUMO tag was cleaved with SUMO protease and the protein solution was loaded back onto a nickel affinity column to separate the tag. The flow-through fraction containing the purified enzyme was dialyzed into 25 mM Tris, pH 8.5, 100 mM NaCl, concentrated to 20-80 mg/ml, aliquoted, flash frozen in liquid nitrogen, and stored at -80°C.

[0056] *TRAIL Gene Cloning and Mutagenesis.* A synthetic gene (codon-optimized for protein expression in *Escherichia coli*) containing three repeats of human TRAIL (UniProt entry P50591) was synthesized by Genscript. Each repeat included amino acid residues 115 to 281 of TRAIL (SEQ ID NO:17). A single glycine or a single serine residue was inserted between the first and second repeat and second and third repeat. In addition, a 57 bp oligonucleotide (5'-GGC GGT GGC AGC GGT GGA GGA GGC TCT GGT GGA GGC GGT AGC GGA GGC GGA GGG TCG-3'; SEQ ID NO:24), encoding a GGGG(SGGGG)₃ linker (SEQ ID NO:21), was added to the end of the repeat third repeat between restriction sites *Bgl*III and *Nde*I. The resulting gene was inserted into a pUC57 vector.

[0057] Using site-directed mutagenesis and the primers Hano-203: 5'-CGA ATG CAT CTA GAT CTC GAG cgt gag cgt g-3' (SEQ ID NO:25) and Hano-204: 5'-cac gct cac gCT CGA GAT CTA GAT GCA TTC G-3' (SEQ ID NO:26), the unique *Bgl*III site of the vector pUC57 containing *Bgl*III-TRAIL₁-G-TRAIL₂-G-TRAIL₃-linker-*Nde*I was modified to an *Xho*I site to facilitate sub-cloning. The plasmid obtained was then digested with *Xho*I and *Nde*I restriction enzymes, gel-purified to generate the double-digested and purified insert, *Xho*I-TRAIL₁-G/S-TRAIL₂-G/S-TRAIL₃-linker-*Nde*I.

[0058] The vector His₆-SUMO-*Nde*I-*ErA*-TM2-pET14b, encoding the *ErA* A31I-E63Q-S254Q triple mutant (TM2) was amplified using the primers Hano-201: 5'-gaa cag att ggt ggt CTC GAG gga gga att cCA TAT Gga taa act g-3' (SEQ ID NO:27) and Hano-202: 5'-cag ttt atc CAT ATG gaa ttc ctc cCT CGA Gac cac caa tct gtt c-3' (SEQ ID NO:28) thereby creating an *Xho*I site. The resulting pET14b plasmid containing His₆-SUMO-*Xho*I-*Nde*I-*ErA*-TM2 was digested with *Xho*I and *Nde*I restriction enzymes and gel-purified to generate the double-digested and purified vector pET14b-His₆-SUMO-*Xho*I-*Nde*I-*ErA*-TM2.

[0059] The double-digested and purified insert, *Xho*I-TRAIL₁-G/S-TRAIL₂-G/S-TRAIL₃-linker-*Nde*I, was ligated into the double-digested and purified vector pET14b-His₆-SUMO-*Xho*I-*Nde*I-*ErA*-TM2 using Instant Sticky End DNA ligase (New England BioLabs), generating the pET14b-His₆-SUMO-*Xho*I-TRAIL₁-G/S-TRAIL₂-G/S-TRAIL₃-linker-*Nde*I-*ErA*-TM2 plasmid. The correct sequence was confirmed by DNA sequence analysis. Using the primers Hano-211: 5'-gca cgc tat atc acc atg acg aac gct tcg acc-3' (SEQ ID NO:29) and Hano-212: 5'-ggt cga agc gtt cgt cat ggt gat ata gcg tgc-3' (SEQ ID NO:30), this plasmid was used as template to generate the

inactive mutant pET14b-His₆-SUMO-XhoI-TRAIL₁-G-TRAIL₂-G-TRAIL₃-linker-NdeI-*ErA*-TM2-K168M.

[0060] *Fusion Protein Expression and Purification.* The pET14b-His₆-SUMO-XhoI-TRAIL₁-G/S-TRAIL₂-G/S-TRAIL₃-linker-NdeI-*ErA*-TM2 and pET14b-His₆-SUMO-XhoI-TRAIL₁-G/S-TRAIL₂-G/S-TRAIL₃-linker-NdeI-*ErA*-TM2-K168M plasmids were separately transformed into *E. coli* BL21(DE3) C41 cells for expression, wherein the resulting proteins are referred to herein as TRAIL_{trimer}-*ErA*-TM2 and TRAIL_{trimer}-*ErA*-TM2-K168M, respectively. A single colony was picked and grown overnight at 37°C in 2YT medium. Two protocols were established to express the proteins toward similar high production yield.

[0061] In the first protocol, an overnight culture was transferred into fresh 2YT medium and grown at 37°C until the culture reached an optical density (at 600 nm) of 0.6-0.8. Protein expression was induced with 0.1 mM IPTG for four to five hours at 37°C before cells were harvested.

[0062] In the second protocol, an overnight culture was transferred into fresh ZY medium (1% N-Z-Amine or tryptone plus 0.5 % yeast extract) supplemented with 20 mL sterile 50xM (1.25 M Na₂HPO₄, 1.25 M KH₂PO₄, 2.5 M NH₄Cl and 0.25 M Na₂SO₄), 20 mL sterile 50x5052 (25% glycerol, 2.5% glucose and 10% α-lactose monohydrate), 1 mL sterile 2 M MgSO₄, and 0.1-1 mL sterile 1000x metal mix (50 mM FeCl₃x6 H₂O; 20 mM CaCl₂x2 H₂O; 10 mM MnCl₂; 10 mM ZnSO₄x7 H₂O; 2 mM CoCl₂x6 H₂O; 2 mM CuCl₂; 2 mM NiCl₂x6 H₂O; 2 mM Na₂MoO₄x2 H₂O; 2 mM Na₂SeO₃; 2 mM H₂BO₃) per 1 L of ZY. The incubation temperature was then reduced and maintained at 20°C for overnight before cells were harvested.

[0063] Cells obtained by the first or second protocol were disrupted by sonication, and the debris was cleared by centrifugation at 20,000 g at 4°C for 30 minutes. The

supernatant was loaded onto a 5-ml HISTRAP nickel affinity column (GE Healthcare). The column was subsequently washed with buffers composed of 25 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.5, 500 mM NaCl, and either 25, 50, or 75 mM imidazole. The bound protein was eluted with the same buffer but containing 500 mM imidazole. The N-terminal His₆-SUMO tag was cleaved by His₆-tagged SUMO protease. The flow-through fraction containing the purified enzyme was dialyzed into Dulbecco's phosphate-buffered saline (DPBS, Mediatech). The purity of the fusion proteins of 97 kDa was confirmed by SDS-PAGE.

[0064] *Kinetic Assays.* L-asparaginase activity was determined using a continuous spectroscopic enzyme-coupled assay as previously described (Schalk, et al. (2014) *J. Biol. Chem.* 289:33175-33186). In brief, the assay measures the production of L-aspartate through the 1:1 oxidation of reduced NADH. The conversion of NADH to NAD⁺ was measured spectrophotometrically as a decrease in absorbance at 340 nm at 37°C. All measurements were taken in triplicate. Rates were fit to the Michaelis-Menten equation using SIGMAPLOT software (Systat Software Inc). Notably, the fusion protein TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 had a specific activity of ~10 International Units (IU) per mg; while the inactive fusion protein TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2-K168M had only <0.2 IU per mg.

[0065] A conventional assay for determining L-glutaminase activity (Gella & Pascual (1982) *Anal. Biochem.* 127:322-5) was used with some modifications. The purified enzyme was mixed into a solution containing 50 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.5, 1 mg/mL BSA, 7 U GDH (Glutamate dehydrogenase, Sigma-Aldrich), 3 mM INT (Iodonitrotetrazolium chloride, Sigma-Aldrich), 100 mM PMS (Phenazine methosulfate, Sigma-Aldrich), and 100 mM NAD⁺. Adding different concentrations of L-glutamine triggered the first reaction to produce

ammonia and L-glutamic acid. The latter, in the presence of NAD⁺ and under the catalysis of GDH, is broken further into α -ketoglutarate and ammonia. NADH produced by this second reaction, together with INT serve as inputs to the third reaction, where the formation of INT-formazan under the catalysis of PMS can be followed spectrophotometrically as an increase in absorbance at 500 nm. All reactions were carried out at 37°C. 1 IU of enzyme is defined as the amount of enzyme used to produce 1 μ mole of product in 1 minute at 37°C.

[0066] *Cultivation of Cells.* The LOUCY cell line was verified to be mycoplasma free and confirmed to match 100% to corresponding STR (Short Tandem Repeat) profile data from the Global Bioresource Center ATCC. Cells were cultivated in a humid atmosphere (5% CO₂, 37°C) using RPMI 1640 media supplemented with 10% FBS (Hyclone) and 1x penicillin-streptomycin solution (Invitrogen). L-Glutamine was added directly into cell cultures to a final concentration of 2 mM.

[0067] *Cell Viability-Proliferation Assay.* Ninety μ L aliquots of cell suspension (2.5×10^5 cells per mL) were cultured in triplicate in round-bottomed 96-well microtiter plates in the presence of 10 μ L of either DPBS (Dulbecco's phosphate-buffered saline, Mediatech) or L-asparaginases to a final concentration ranging from 0.0001 to 1 IU/mL. After incubating the plates for 4 days at 37°C in humidified air containing 5% CO₂, Alamar Blue (Invitrogen) was added to a final concentration of 10% v/v and the plates were incubated for an additional four hours, followed by reading of the fluorescence signal. The leukemic cell viability was calculated as percentage of fluorescence counts in the presence of L-asparaginase versus that in the DPBS control.

[0068] *Crystallization, X-ray Data Collection, and Refinement.* Crystals of the *ErA* mutants were grown at 285 K using the hanging-drop vapor-diffusion method. Two μL of enzyme at 2.5-10 mg/mL were mixed with 1-4 μL of reservoir buffer solution. The reservoir solution was composed of 0.1M HEPES, pH 7.5 and 24% of PEG MME 2000.

[0069] Prior to data collection, crystals were soaked for 5 minutes with 10 mM L-aspartic acid (Sigma-Aldrich) or 25 mM L-glutamic acid (Sigma-Aldrich) in 0.1 M HEPES, pH 7.5 and 24% of PEG MME 2000. Soaked crystals were then transferred to the same solutions respectively but supplemented with 25% of glycerol for cryoprotection.

[0070] Diffraction data were collected on the Life Sciences Collaborative Access Team (LS-CAT) beamline 21-ID-F located at Argonne National Laboratory. Data were processed with the XDS package (Kabsch (2010) *Acta Crystallogr. D Biol. Crystallogr.* 66:133-144). Structures were determined by molecular replacement with MOLREP (Roberts (1976) *J. Biol. Chem.* 251:2119-2123) using the atomic resolution structure (PDB entry 107J) as a search model. Refinement was conducted using REFMAC (Steckel, et al. (1983) *Biochem. Pharmacol.* 32:971-977) and model building was conducted using Coot (Steckel, et al. (1983) *Biochem. Pharmacol.* 32:971-977). Data collection and refinement statistics are listed in Table 1. Structures were prepared using the PyMOL Molecular Graphics System (version 1.6.0, Schrödinger).

[0071] Inspection of the electron density showed the presence of the soaked Asp at the active site. In contrast, electron density for the soaked Glu was not observed.

TABLE 1

Structure	E63Q+Asp	ErA-A31I- E63Q+Asp	ErA-E63Q- S254Q+Asp
PDB codes	5I3Z	5I3Z	5I3Z
Data collection statistics			
X-ray source and detector	LS-CAT ID-D MARCCD 300	LS-CAT ID-F MARCCD 225	LS-CAT ID-D MARCCD 300
Wavelength (Å)	1.008264	0.97872	1.008264
Temperature (K)	100	100	100
Resolution ^a (Å)	1.008264	1.008264	1.60 (1.69-1.60)
No. of Reflections			
Observed	437716 (49641)	1278167 (118300)	682869 (105570)
Unique	74069 (10093)	183230 (23339)	122786 (19113)
Completeness (%)	97.2 (83.5)	95.7 (76.2)	98.2 (95.7)
R _{sym} (%)	12.6 (53.7)	5.5 (60.8)	10.1 (61.6)
Average I/σ(I)	16.88 (4.08)	23.09 (3.01)	14.71 (3.36)
Space group	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁	I222
Unit cell (Å): a, b, c	77.89, 87.89, 175.99	77.19, 87.69, 175.11	76.98, 123.12, 198.44
Wilson B-factors (Å ²)	16.5	16.6	17.1
Refinement statistics			
Refinement program	REFMAC5	REFMAC5	REFMAC5
R _{cryst} (%)	17.39	12.02	15.43
R _{free} (%)	20.93	17.06	18.28
Resolution range (Å)	30.00-2.05	30.0-1.5	30.0-1.6
Protein molecules per a.u.	4	4	3
No. of atoms:			
Protein ^b	2455, 2455, 2464, 2463	2487, 2481, 2466, 2487	2521, 2499, 2503
H ₂ O molecules	976	1004	954
Asp molecules	4	4	3
R.m.s. deviation from ideal:			
Bond length (Å)	0.0135	0.0226	0.0193
Bond angles (°)	1.5853	1.9611	1.9204
Average B-factors (Å ²)			
Protein ^b	21.0 22.1, 20.0, 19.9, 20.4	20.0 18.7, 19.9, 21.4, 19.4	16.0 14.9, 15.1, 16.5
Water molecules	27.4	30.9	26.7
Asp molecules	21.3, 22.6, 18.8, 22.1	17.5	16.3, 16.6, 16.4
Most favored regions	96.81	96.67	97.38
Additionally allowed regions	2.88	3.01	2.29
Outlier regions	0.31	0.32	0.33

^aHigh resolution shell in parenthesis.

^bProtA, protB, protC, protD.

Example 2: High L-Glutaminase Co-Activity is Not Required for *in vivo* Efficacy of L-Asparaginases

[0072] *Design and Characterization of ErA Variants With High L-Asparaginase and Low L-Glutaminase Activities.* It was posited that for an L-asparaginase to be a successful in treating ALL, the enzyme needs as high as possible L-asparaginase activity (to kill the cancer cells), but as low as possible L-glutaminase activity (to minimize toxic side effects). Of the two FDA-approved bacterial L-asparaginases, the one from *E. chrysanthemi* (*ErA*) has a higher L-asparaginase activity than that from *E. coli* (*EcA*). See Table 2.

TABLE 2

Enzyme Name	k_{cat} (sec^{-1})	K_m (μM)	k_{cat}/K_m ($\text{sec}^{-1}\mu\text{M}^{-1}$)	$k_{obs}@50\mu\text{M}$ (sec^{-1})
<i>ErA</i> -WT	194.9±2.5	44.2±1.6	4.41	105.3
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q-S254Q (DM3)	147.3±1.0	179.1±5.6	0.82	36.3
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	179.9±1.4	48.1±1.1	3.74	92.2
<i>EcA</i> -WT	44.4±0.3	15.0±0.5	2.96	41.3

[0073] The parameters that define the asparagine-depleting power of such enzyme drugs are of significance. The rate of the reaction (k_{cat}) is important (a slow enzyme would be inefficient at depleting the Asn), but probably more critical is the K_m value. To achieve the required low micromolar concentration of blood Asn, the enzyme must have a K_m value in this range. Enzymologists often combine these two parameters into a single value (k_{cat}/K_m) that is thought to represent the efficiency of the enzyme. Since human blood contains about 50 μM Asn, the rate of Asn hydrolysis by the enzyme at this exact substrate concentration is also a parameter that informs on the clinical suitability of an L-asparaginase. Table 2 presents these values for the FDA-approved wild-type *ErA* and *EcA* (*i.e.*, *ErA*-WT and *EcA*-WT). These numbers show that *ErA*-WT is ~2-fold better than *EcA*-

WT in hydrolyzing Asn under physiological concentration of Asn. Therefore, the *ErA* enzyme was selected for developing a variant with low L-glutaminase activity.

[0074] In addition to superior L-asparaginase activity, *ErA*-WT also has higher L-glutaminase activity (Table 3).

TABLE 3

Enzyme Name	k_{cat} (sec^{-1})	K_m (mM)	k_{cat}/K_m ($\text{sec}^{-1}\text{mM}^{-1}$)	$k_{obs}@50\text{mM}$ (sec^{-1})
<i>ErA</i> -WT	26.84±0.26	0.36±0.02	74.56	15.87
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q-S254Q (DM3)	2.93±0.03	15.8±0.3	0.19	0.11
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	8.33±0.16	3.86±0.23	3.68	0.74
<i>EcA</i> -WT	0.89±0.01	1.38±0.09	0.64	0.22

[0075] Wild-type *ErA* has >70-fold higher L-glutaminase activity compared to *EcA*-WT at the physiological concentration of 0.5 mM Gln. The result of the *ErA* engineering effort geared at lowering the intrinsic L-glutaminase activity while maintaining its high L-asparaginase activity resulted in several variants that fulfill these criteria, with the top two variants listed in Table 3.

[0076] The single mutation of Glu63 to glutamine reduced the L-glutaminase activity by >21-fold. Adding to the E63Q, the Ser254 to asparagine mutation resulted in a double mutant (*ErA*-DM1) with an additional 7-fold reduction of the L-glutaminase activity. Not only do both *ErA* mutants have significantly reduced L-glutaminase activity compared to *ErA*-WT, *ErA*-DM1 is even lower compared to that of *EcA*-WT (Table 3). However, the L-asparaginase activity of the *ErA*-DM1 was reduced to a level similar to that of *EcA*-WT (see k_{obs} @50 μM Asn, Table 2).

[0077] For clinical utility, the relative L-asparaginase to L-glutaminase ratio is of importance. Therefore, this ratio was calculated based on rates observed at physiological substrate concentrations (50 μM for Asn, 500 μM for Gln)

and on IUs (clinically, L-asparaginases are dosed based on International Units). Both ratios show that *ErA*-DM2 is a superior enzyme relative to *ErA*-WT (Table 4). Notably, even when compared to *EcA*-WT, an enzyme with an intrinsically low L-glutaminase activity, *ErA*-DM1 showed a lower L-glutaminase activity. This point was validated using NMR spectroscopy, which was used to follow the L-glutaminase rate of the enzymes listed in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Enzyme Name	$K_{obs} [Asn_{phs}] / K_{obs} [Gln_{phs}]$	Specific Activity (Asn) / Specific Activity (Gln)
<i>ErA</i> -WT	6.6	7.3
<i>ErA</i> -DM1	330	59.9
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	124.6	21.6
<i>EcA</i> -WT	187.7	49.9

[0078] These experiments demonstrate the reduced L-glutaminase rate for the designed *ErA* mutants, and the exceptionally low L-glutaminase activity of *ErA*-DM1.

[0079] *In vitro* Testing of L-Asparaginases. The dependence on exogenous Asn for growth of mouse leukemia L5178Y cells (Haley, et al. (1961) *Cancer Res.* 21:532-536) has made this cell line a useful model for assessing L-asparaginase activity. Therefore, the activity of the *ErA*-E63Q mutant as compared to *ErA*-WT and *EcA*-WT was assessed using this cell line. It was observed that, under conventional cell culture conditions, all three enzymes were efficient at preventing the proliferation of these cells (Table 5).

TABLE 5

Enzyme Name	IC ₅₀ (IU/mL)		Fold Increase
	-Gln	+Gln	
<i>ErA</i> -WT	0.0036	0.0538	14.94
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	0.0223	0.4259	19.10
<i>EcA</i> -WT	0.0174	0.4114	23.64

[0080] Using the IC_{50} value as an indicator for the cell killing power of the enzymes, *ErA*-WT was more efficient (*i.e.*, lower IC_{50} value) than *EcA*-WT or *ErA*-63Q. Since this order mirrors the relative L-glutaminase activity of these enzymes (*ErA*-WT > *EcA*-WT > *ErA*-63Q), it was surmised that this difference in IC_{50} was largely due to this side activity of the enzymes. To test this, the dose response experiment was repeated, but this time the cell culture medium was supplemented with Gln. Indeed, the IC_{50} values increased (Table 5). The effect of Gln supplementation on the observed IC_{50} values was dramatic, ranging from a ~15-25-fold increase (Table 5). It was noted that the enzyme with the lowest L-glutaminase side activity was the best protected by Gln supplementation. Said differently, enzymes with high L-glutaminase activity (*e.g.*, *ErA*-WT) overcome Gln supplementation to a larger degree compared to enzymes with decreased L-glutaminase activity (*e.g.*, *ErA*-e63Q). This is presumably due to high L-glutaminase activity enzymes hydrolyzing the additional Gln.

[0081] Previous work addressing the role of the L-glutaminase side activity of L-asparaginases has relied on cell culture as the experimental model. Since any cell line grown in culture requires Gln, it is apparent that enzymes with high L-glutaminase activity will show better killing. However, this does not necessarily mean that this side activity of L-asparaginase drugs is required for clinical efficacy. In fact, at the extreme case, an enzyme endowed with low L-asparaginase but high L-glutaminase activities will appear in cell culture to be very effective, but will have no clinical relevance in treating cancers such as ALL that depend on exogenous Asn. Accordingly, an *in vivo* model is preferably used to test the importance of L-glutaminase side activity present in an L-asparaginase.

[0082] *Development of a Human Xenograft Model of ALL for Assessment of L-Asparaginase Variants.* Past researchers have used the L5178Y murine cell line for *in vivo* evaluation of L-asparaginases (e.g., Abuchowski, et al. (1984) *Cancer Biochem. Biophys.* 7:175-186; Kwon, et al. (2009) *J. Control Rel.* 139:182-189). Apart from this cell line not being of human origin, an additional disadvantage of this syngeneic ALL mouse model is the inability to quantitatively track the animal's disease burden. This makes it difficult to correctly assess different L-asparaginase preparations. Therefore, a quantitative *in vivo* model for ALL was developed using luciferase-expressing LOUCY (human T-ALL) and SUP-B15 (human B-ALL) cell lines. The advantage of these systems is the ability to use *in vivo* imaging, where the bioluminescence signal produced by the implanted luciferase-expressing cells act as a quantitative measure for disease burden.

[0083] Initially, the *in vitro* sensitivity of these human ALL cell lines to the wild-type versions of *ErA* and *EcA*, and to the low L-glutaminase *ErA* variants was determined. This analysis showed that both cell lines were sensitive to L-asparaginase administration. As expected from their higher L-glutaminase activity, the IC₅₀ values determined in culture for *ErA*-WT and *EcA*-WT were determined to be 50 to 100% lower compared to the low L-glutaminase *ErA* mutants (Table 6).

TABLE 6

Enzyme Name	IC ₅₀ (IU/mL)	
	LOUCY	SUP-B15
<i>ErA</i> -WT	0.00033	0.00016
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	0.00055	0.00024
<i>ErA</i> -DM1	0.00065	0.00031
<i>EcA</i> -WT	0.00035	0.00022

[0084] After verifying the L-asparaginase sensitivity of the human ALL cell lines, it was confirmed that these cells could be implanted in mice. Based upon an increase in the bioluminescence signal over time, demonstrating the proliferation of the cells and increase in diseases burden.

[0085] *In vivo Testing of ErA-WT and ErA Variants in T-ALL and B-ALL Mouse Models.* To test whether the very high intrinsic L-glutaminase activity present in *ErA-WT* is required for clinical efficacy, mice implanted with LOUCY or SUP-B15 cells were treated with the FDA-approved L-asparaginase and activity was compared to the low L-glutaminase variants described herein. It is important to note that, in addition to enzymatic parameters of the enzymes, other variables can influence the *in vivo* response. For example, an enzyme with long *in vivo* stability will be more efficient in depleting blood Asn compared to one with short half-life. In humans, *ErA-WT* is known to have a much shorter half-life than *Eca-WT* (0.65 vs 1.24 days; Asselin, et al. (1993) *J. Clin. Oncol.* 11:1780-1786). During the first experiments with *ErA-WT*, there was no observed decrease in tumor cell growth. It was posited that this was due to the low stability of *ErA-WT* in the mice, mirroring the observations in humans. To test this, a SUMO tag was added to the N-terminus of *ErA-WT* to impart increased stability without adversely effecting enzymatic properties. Indeed, mice treated with SUMO-*ErA-WT* showed a marked decrease in tumor burden. Therefore, all *ErA* enzymes used in the following *in vivo* studies contained this stability tag.

[0086] Mice implanted with LOUCY T-ALL cells were treated with L-asparaginase daily via intraperitoneal injection (i.p.) for 14 days with a dose of 50 IU/mouse. This dose is equivalent to about 1/3 of the *ErA-WT* dose given to humans,

though in humans it is administered three times a week and is given intramuscularly or intravenously. This difference in administration mode is noted because efficacy in the animal model may be influenced by the amount of drug that makes it into circulation. In other words, while the goal is to test the ability of the L-glutaminase *ErA* variants to limit cancer growth *in vivo*, there may be other factors that determine *in vivo* efficacy. However, since the comparison was between nearly identical enzymes (*ErA*-WT and *ErA* mutants), it was assumed that these enzymes would have very similar pharmacokinetic properties.

[0087] The high L-glutaminase *ErA*-WT, the low L-glutaminase *ErA*-E63Q, and the very low L-glutaminase *ErA*-DM2 rapidly decreased the number of cancer cells in the animals (Figure 1A). The slightly slower decrease in luciferase signal observed with *ErA*-DM1 can be attributed to the higher K_m of this mutant. Nevertheless, by treatment end, the level of luciferase signal coming from all *ErA* variants was close to background, demonstrating very potent killing of these cells.

[0088] These experiments were repeated with the B-ALL SUP-B15 cell line. This time, only *ErA*-WT and *ErA*-DM1 were compared since these enzymes represent the extremes in terms of L-glutaminase activity (highest in *ErA*-WT, lowest in *ErA*-DM2). As seen for the T-ALL LOUCY cell line, both *ErA*-WT and *ErA*-DM1 dramatically reduced the number of cancer cells in the mice (Figure 1B).

[0089] *Indication for Reduced Toxicity of the Low L-Glutaminase ErA Variants.* The data presented herein demonstrate that L-asparaginases that contain only very low L-glutaminase activity are potent inhibitors of ALL proliferation *in vivo*. In addition, it was noted that the weights of the animals were dramatically affected by drug

administration, an effect which correlated with the relative L-glutaminase activity. The higher the L-glutaminase activity of the drug, the larger the weight loss (Figure 2). Of note, the weight loss had no correlation with disease burden. In fact, the vehicle-treated mice (the sickest cohort) suffered the least weight loss. This indicates that the observed weight loss was due to Gln depletion by the enzymes, with higher depletion (as would be expected for *ErA*-WT) leading to largest weight loss. Conversely, mice treated with the enzyme expected to induce the least Gln depletion, *i.e.*, *ErA*-DM2, imparted the lowest amount of weight loss.

[0090] To further probe the difference in activities between *ErA*-WT, *ErA*-DM1, and that of *Eca*-WT, NMR was used to follow the asparagine and glutamine levels as a function of time in solution at 37°C. For these experiments, the concentration present in the cell culture experiments was selected as the starting concentrations of these amino acids, *i.e.*, 2.05 mM Gln and 0.375 mM Asn. Notably, human blood contains ~0.6 mM Gln and ~0.05 mM Asn. For all enzymes, added at a dose of 0.5 IU/ml, all of the Asn had been hydrolyzed to Asp by the time the first time point was taken. This shows that the tested enzymes were very similar in terms of the ability to deplete Asn.

[0091] By comparison, when assessing Gln depletion, the enzymes displayed very different properties. As expected from its kinetic properties, *ErA*-WT was very efficient at depleting Gln; by the 48-hour time point all of the Gln had been hydrolyzed to Glu. Even after 24 hours, the Gln level had been reduced by *ErA*-WT from ~2 mM to ~0.1 mM. Since cell culture studies evaluating L-asparaginases often incubate the cells with the drugs for 72 or even 96 hours, it was not surprising that *ErA*-WT demonstrated very potent

cell killing ability, as the cells would be deprived for a very long time of essential Gln. *EcA*-WT has intrinsically lower L-glutaminase activity, but showed the same Gln depletion as *ErA*-WT at the 24- and 48-hour time points (its slower L-glutaminase activity was noticeable in the 5 hour time point).

[0092] Most importantly, the *ErA*-DM1 variant had significantly reduced Gln depletion. At the 24 hour time point, the Gln levels of the solution incubated with this enzyme were still ~0.4 mM, and at 48 hours ~0.1 mM. Only at the 72-hour time point was Gln fully depleted by *ErA*-DM1. Of note, Gln undergoes spontaneous hydrolysis, and under the experimental conditions used, significant Gln was hydrolyzed during the 4-day incubation period of the experiment. Therefore, the amount of Gln depletion at the later time is a combination of L-asparaginase catalyzed hydrolysis and spontaneous hydrolysis. Thus, if one limits the analysis to the 24-hour time point, at which negligible spontaneous Gln hydrolysis has occurred, it is very apparent that *ErA*-DM1 causes much less Gln depletion relative to *ErA*-WT or *EcA*-WT.

[0093] In light of the high L-asparaginase activity and concomitant decrease in L-glutaminase activity, the *ErA* variants described herein can be readily used, in particular in a PEGylated a fusion protein form to increase *in vivo* half-life, in the treatment of cancers such as ALL.

Example 3: Structural Basis for Low L-Glutaminase Activity of Engineered *ErA*

[0094] *Residue Selection for Mutagenesis.* Four residues Ala31, Glu63, Pro123, and Ser254 were identified as candidate sites that may influence the L-glutaminase/L-asparaginase ratio. Due to their role in catalysis,

residues present in consensus motifs among the L-asparaginase/L-glutaminase superfamily (indicated with asterisks in Figure 3 and includes T12GGT15, H93GTDT97, S62, K168) were excluded from consideration for mutation. Instead, non-conserved residues that surround the active site and that do not necessarily interact with the substrate were targeted. Based on a multiple sequence alignment (Figure 3), and combined with analysis of the crystal structure of *ErA* in complex with the product Asp and Glu, Ala31, Glu63, Pro123 and Ser254 were identified as four potential candidate sites for mutagenesis. Interestingly, of these four residues, only one, Glu63, makes a direct interaction with the substrate.

[0095] Site 1, Ala31, is part of the flexible N-terminal loop that closes and becomes ordered in the presence of ligand at the active site. When ordered, Ala31 is located at the entrance of the substrate-binding pocket. While not interacting directly with the preferred substrate Asn, it is within 4 Å of the C α atom of the amino acid. In the *ErA* structure with the larger substrate Gln, it was observed that the extra methylene atom present in this amino acid twists in the direction of Ala31. To maintain accommodation of Asn, but exclude Gln, the aim was to sterically constrain the cavity by replacing the small alanine side chain with a bulkier one. That is, this design was made to sterically repeal the extra Gln methylene group. Based on modeling studies, the side chains present in valine, isoleucine, leucine and methionine were identified as being most appropriate. Additionally, as shown in the sequence alignment (Figure 3), Ala31 is replaced by a valine or serine in the case of the *E. coli* and *Helicobacter pylori* L-asparaginases, respectively. Compared to *ErA*, these enzymes have been reported to have either lower or

negligible L-glutaminase activity (Parmentier, et al. (2015) *Leuk. Res.* 39:757-762; Cappelletti, et al. (2008) *Biochem. Biophys. Res. Commun.* 377:1222-1226). Accordingly, Ala31 was replaced with either serine or threonine (the latter mimicking valine but retaining hydroxyl group of serine).

[0096] Site 2, Glu63, is a residue that directly interacts with the α -amino group of the amino acid substrate. Structural analysis of *ErA* in complex with Asp and Glu showed that in order to accommodate the larger Glu, the substrate shifts in the direction of Glu63 relative to binding position adopted by the small Asp. To make this repositioning of Gln less favorable, Glu63 was replaced with a glutamine. This choice of mutation was reinforced by the fact that the counterpart of Glu63 in the low L-glutaminase *Helicobacter pylori* and *E. coli* L-asparaginases is a glutamine. Both the glutamate and glutamine side chains contain an oxygen atom that can participate in binding the α -amino group of either Asn or Gln. However, it was posited that the amino group present in the glutamine side chain (contrasted with a second oxygen atom in glutamate) may be less favorable for accommodating Gln. In addition to the E63Q mutant, an E63L mutation was also created in accordance with the identification of a Q59L *ErA* variant exhibiting high L-asparaginase activity (Chan, et al. (2014) *Blood* 123:3596-3606).

[0097] The third site chosen for mutagenesis was Pro123. This site was selected because this residue is either serine or asparagine in *Wolinella succinogenes* L-asparaginase and *Helicobacter pylori* L-asparaginase, respectively (Figure 3), both of which exhibit low L-glutaminase activity. Based on the location of Pro123, it was expected that this residue may play an indirect role in

increasing the preference for Asn over Gln. To demonstrate this, P123S and P123N *ErA* variants were prepared.

[0098] Residue Ser254, Site 4 for modification, is located at the entrance of the substrate-binding pocket and originates from an adjacent protomer. Therefore, as rationalized above for Ala31, it was postulated that replacing this serine with a residue having a larger side chain would exclude Gln. The multiple sequence alignment (Figure 3) revealed the counterparts of this residue in *E. coli* and guinea pig enzymes (lower to no L-glutaminase activity) are asparagine and proline, respectively. Therefore, mutants S254N and S254P were created to probe the effect of this site on the L-glutaminase/L-asparaginase preference.

[0099] *Kinetic Characterization of ErA Mutants.* In addition to *ErA*-WT, the 18 *ErA* mutants listed in Table 7 were expressed and purified.

TABLE 7

Enzyme	%Glnase vs ErA-WT	%Asnase vs ErA-WT	%(Glnase/Asnase) within same protein ^a
ErA-WT	100%	100%	14%
ErA-A31V	72%	81%	13%
ErA-A31S	124%	110%	16%
ErA-A31T	18%	28%	9%
ErA-A31N	3%	33%	1%
ErA-A31M	7%	26%	3%
ErA-A31I	65%	85%	12%
ErA-A31L	6%	12%	4%
ErA-E63L	0%	12%	0%
ErA-E63Q ^b	31%	90%	5%
ErA-P123S	2%	3%	11%
ErA-P123N	1%	2%	6%
ErA-S254N	34%	40%	12%
ErA-S254P ^b	0%	120%	0%
ErA-A31T + E63Q	8%	15%	7%
ErA-A31I + E63Q ^b	22%	60%	5%
ErA-S254N + E63Q ^b	0%	82%	0%
ErA-S254N + A31T	9%	18%	7%

ErA-S254N + A31I	22%	25%	12%
EcA-WT	100%	100%	2%

^aObserved Glnase rate measured with 20 mM Gln and 5 nM enzyme; observed Asnase rate measured with 2 mM Asn and 0.5 nM enzyme.

^bMutants that were selected for determination of k_{cat} and K_m parameters.

[00100] Using colorimetric enzyme-coupled assays, L-asparaginase and L-glutaminase activity of the enzymes was determined. To assure that the rate at saturating substrate concentrations was measured, 10 mM Gln and 2 mM Asn were used as substrates for the L-glutaminase and L-asparaginase assays, respectively. Seventeen of the 18 mutants had reduced L-glutaminase activity (Table 7). However, for most of the mutants, this decrease was concomitant with a decline in the L-asparaginase activity. Using the criteria of (i) $\geq 60\%$ retained L-asparaginase activity (relative to *Erw*-WT) and (ii) $\leq 5\%$ L-glutaminase versus L-asparaginase activity, mutants ErA-E63Q, ErA-S254P, ErA-A31I + E63Q and ErA-S254N + E63Q were selected for further study.

[00101] From the initial mutant screen at saturating substrate concentrations, the single mutant *ErA*-S245P seemed to have the most desired properties: The L-glutaminase activity being below the detection sensitivity of the assay conditions, whereas the L-asparaginase activity at 120% relative to the wild-type enzyme (Table 7). Further kinetic characterization of the mutant's L-asparaginase activity confirmed the high turnover rate with Asn. However, it also revealed a 25-fold increase (relative to *ErA*-WT) in the K_m value for Asn (Table 8).

TABLE 8

Enzyme	K _m (μ M)	k _{obs} @50 μ M (sec ⁻¹)	k _{obs} @20 μ M (sec ⁻¹)
ErA-WT	47.5 \pm 3.5	105.3	50.7
ErA-S254P	1154.2 \pm 25.5	10.5	4.5
ErA-E63Q	50.7 \pm 2.0	92.2	46.3
ErA-A31I-E63Q (DM2)	36.9 \pm 2.2	69.7	38.8
ErA-E63Q-S254N (DM1)	185.3 \pm 5.5	36.3	18.9
ErA-E63Q-S254Q (DM3)	179.1 \pm 5.6	30.8	14.2
ErA-A31I-E63Q-S254Q (TM2)	95.0 \pm 3.5	89.1	40.8
ECA-WT	15.0 \pm 0.5	41.3	28.3

[00102] Since clinical use of L-asparaginase requires complete depletion of blood Asn levels, the K_m of the enzyme must be in the low micromolar range to be effective. Hence, while the goal of largely eliminating the L-glutaminase activity was achieved, the *ErA*-S245P variant was not selected for further analysis in light of the unacceptable increase in the K_m value of Asn in the L-asparaginase reaction.

[00103] Further inspection of the properties of the mutants from the initial screen (Table 7) indicated that the three next most promising variants were the E63Q (*ErA*-E63Q) single mutant and the A31I-E63Q (*ErA*-DM2) and E63Q-S254N (*ErA*-DM1) double mutants. Further kinetic characterization of these mutants revealed that the critical K_m value for the substrate Asn is comparable to that of *ErA*-WT (Tables 8 and 9). In fact, *ErA*-DM2 acquired an even lower Asn K_m than that of *ErA*-WT (37 vs. 48 μ M). In contrast, *ErA*-DM1 variant exhibited a 4-fold increase in Asn K_m. Together with near wild-type k_{cat} (range 60-90% of *ErA*-WT), these mutants fulfill the criteria required to achieve efficient depletion of Asn from the blood.

TABLE 9

Enzyme name	k_{cat} (sec^{-1})	K_m (μM)	k_{cat}/K_m ($\text{sec}^{-1}\mu\text{M}^{-1}$)	k_{obs} @50 μM (sec^{-1})	k_{obs} @20 μM (sec^{-1})	Specific activity (IU/mg) ^a
<i>ErA</i> -WT	207.5± 3.6	47.5± 3.5	4.37	105.3	50.7	353.2± 6.1
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	186.8± 1.7	50.7± 2.0	3.68	92.2	46.3	317.8± 2.9
<i>ErA</i> -A31I- E63Q (DM2)	123.0± 1.8	36.9± 2.2	3.33	69.7	38.8	209.1± 3.1
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q- S254N (DM1)	169.8± 1.5	185.3± 5.5	0.92	36.3	18.9	288.8± 2.6
<i>ErA</i> -S254P	250.0± 2.8	1154.2± 25.5	0.22	10.5	4.5	425.4± 4.8
<i>Eca</i> -WT	44.4± 0.3	15.0± 0.5	2.96	41.3	28.3	76.3± 0.5
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q- S254Q (DM3)	147.3± 1.0	179.1± 5.6	0.82	30.8	14.2	250.4± 1.7
<i>ErA</i> -A31I- E63Q-S254N (TM1)	109.7± 0.8	124.2± 4.3	0.89	29.2	16.4	186.4± 1.4
<i>ErA</i> -A31I- E63Q-S254Q (TM2)	261.2± 2.8	95.0± 3.5	2.75	89.1	40.8	443.5± 4.8

^a1 IU of enzyme is defined as the amount of enzyme used to produce 1 μmole of product in 1 minute at 37°C.

[00104] The precise kinetic parameters for the undesired L-glutaminase activity were subsequently determined. This work established that the reduced L-glutaminase activity of these mutants is due to a reduced k_{cat} (3-9 fold lower) and much increased K_m (8-44 fold higher) compared *ErA*-WT (Tables 10 and 11).

TABLE 10

Enzyme	K_m (μM)	k_{obs} @500 μM (sec^{-1})	k_{obs} @100 μM (sec^{-1})
<i>ErA</i> -WT	360±20	15.06	6.118
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	3860±230	0.72	0.098
<i>ErA</i> -A31I-E63Q (DM2)	2730±20	0.73	0.105
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q-S254N (DM1)	15800±300	0.07	0.019
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q-S254Q (DM3)	84000±560	0.02	0.009
<i>ErA</i> -A31I-E63Q-S254Q (TM2)	47500±700	0.0083	0.0045
<i>Eca</i> -WT	1380±90	0.22	0.047

TABLE 11

Enzyme name	k_{cat} (sec^{-1})	K_m (μM)	k_{cat}/K_m ($\text{sec}^{-1}\mu\text{M}^{-1}$)	k_{obs} @1 mM (sec^{-1})	k_{obs} @0.5mM (sec^{-1})	Specific activity (IU/mg) ^a
<i>ErA</i> -WT	26.84 ± 0.26	360 ± 20	74.56 × 10 ⁻³	19.22	15.87	45.68 ± 0.44
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	8.33 ± 0.16	3,860 ± 230	3.68 × 10 ⁻³	2.16	0.74	14.17 ± 0.27
<i>ErA</i> -A31I- E63Q (DM2)	6.01 ± 0.13	2,730 ± 200	2.2 × 10 ⁻³	2.20	0.83	10.22 ± 0.22
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q- S254N (DM1)	2.93 ± 0.03	15,800 ± 300	0.19 × 10 ⁻³	0.18	0.11	4.98 ± 0.05
<i>ECA</i> -WT	0.89 ± 0.01	1,380 ± 90	0.64 × 10 ⁻³	0.36	0.22	1.53 ± 0.02
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q- S254Q (DM3)	7.17 ± 0.64	84,000 ± 12,000	0.85 × 10 ⁻³	0.19	0.0226	12.17 ± 1.19
<i>ErA</i> -A31I- E63Q-S254N (TM1)	5.6 ± 0.2	28,200 ± 2,300	0.19 × 10 ⁻³	0.33	0.11	9.51 ± 0.34
<i>ErA</i> -A31I- E63Q-S254Q (TM2)	1.836 ± 0.11	47,460 ± 695	0.04 × 10 ⁻³	-	0.0083	3.12 ± 0.02

^a1 IU of enzyme is defined as the amount of enzyme used to produce 1 μmole of product in 1 minute at 37°C.

[00105] As indicated by the k_{cat}/K_m parameter, the L-glutaminase efficiency of the mutants was reduced by about 20-400 fold. Likewise, at the physiological blood concentration of 0.5 mM, the observed L-glutaminase rate was reduced by 95-99% relative to *ErA*-WT. This analysis demonstrates that these three mutants largely fulfill the design criteria of being severely impaired in their L-glutaminase activity but with near *ErA*-WT L-asparaginase activity.

[00106] *Molecular Basis for Improved L-Asparaginase Selectivity.* Although structural considerations were incorporated into the design of the mutants discussed above, the mechanism for the increased Asn selectivity was verified. Accordingly, the *ErA*-E63Q, *ErA*-DM1, and *ErA*-DM2 enzyme variants were crystallized with either Asp or Glu (the products of the L-asparaginase and L-glutaminase

reaction, respectively). High resolution diffraction data was collected on both Asp and Glu soaked crystals. For the Asp soaked crystals (see Table 1 for data collection and refinement statistics), inspection of the electron density at the enzymes' active sites unambiguously showed the presence of the ligand. However, despite several attempts under different soak conditions (e.g., increasing soak time, increasing Glu concentration), electron density for the soaked Glu was not observed. Instead, the active site of the Glu soaked crystals had electron density for HEPES buffer, which is a component of the crystallization solution. A molecule of HEPES was previously observed bound at the active site of apo *ErA*-WT, which was crystallized using the same conditions. Of note, for *ErA*-WT, both soaked Asp and Glu are able to displace the buffer molecule from the active site. In contrast, for the three *ErA* mutants discussed here, only Asp (but not Glu) was successful in fully displacing the bound HEPES molecule. This inability of soaked Glu to displace the buffer molecule in the *ErA* mutant crystals correlates with their much-increased Gln K_m value relative to the wild-type enzyme.

[00107] *Overall Structure of the ErA Variants.* *ErA*-WT builds a tetramer composed of a dimer-of-dimers, irrespective of the presence or absence of Asp/Glu at the active site. However, in the absence of Asp/Glu, the N-terminal region (residues 18-34) lacks clear electron density. This so-called flexible N-terminal loop was observed ordered and approaching the active site when either Asp or Glu bound to *ErA*-WT. For the three *ErA* variants analyzed here (*ErA*-E63Q, *ErA*-DM1, *ErA*-DM2), the tetrameric organization is maintained, and the flexible N-terminal loop displayed clear electron density and adopted its closed conformation. The *ErA*-E63Q-Asp, *ErA*-DM1-Asp, and *ErA*-DM2-Asp structures

were solved at a resolution of 2.05 Å, 1.50 Å, and 1.60 Å, respectively (Table 1) and all are very similar to the *ErA*-WT-ASP structure (PDB ID 5F52; rmsd of 0.09 - 0.135 Å).

[00108] *Binding of ASP to ErA-E63Q.* As indicated, in the wild-type enzyme, Glu63 directly interacts with the α -amino group of the amino acid ligand (Asp or Glu); in the specific case of *ErA*-WT-Asp, that interaction distance is 2.8 Å. It was postulated that replacing Glu63 with a glutamine would result in interaction that is more distance sensitive since, whereas Glu63 forms a salt-bridge with the α -amino group of the substrate, Gln63 would form a H-bond. The increase in distance sensitivity of this interaction was predicted to affect the binding of Gln but not of Asn. The assignment of the Gln63 side chain orientation (carbonyl oxygen atom versus amide nitrogen atom) was done based on chemical reasoning, where the amide nitrogen atom of Gln63 (a H-bond donor) would be the one further away from the α -amino group of the ligand (also a H-bond donor).

[00109] The analysis indicated that in the *ErA*-E63Q-Asp structure the interaction distance between the α -amino group of the ligand (Asp) and the carbonyl moiety of the glutamine side-chain of Gln63 had increased to 3.0 Å. Importantly, the distance between the amide nitrogen atom of Gln63 and the α -amino group of the ASP ligand was acceptably long at 3.9 Å. In other words, in the case of ASP (and holding true also for the substrate Asn), there was sufficient separation between these H-bond donor moieties so as not to negatively affect the L-asparaginase reaction. This explains why this mutant maintains a high L-asparaginase activity.

[00110] *Binding of Asp to ErA-DM1.* The crystal structure of the A31I-E63Q double mutant (*ErA*-DM2) in complex with Asp (*ErA*-DM2-Asp) was subsequently determined. The minimal

effect of the E63Q mutation on *ErA*-DM2 was similar to that seen for *ErA*-E63Q. In contrast, the effect of the A31I mutation was more significant, impacting the conformation of the flexible N-terminal loop. While still closed, this loop adopted a different conformation to the one seen in the *ErA*-WT-Asp complex structure. The isoleucine in position 31 that replaced the smaller alanine prevented this section of the N-terminal flexible loop from approaching the substrate binding site. In *ErA*-WT-Asp, the alanine at position 31 was 4.1 and 5.3 Å away from the C α and C β atoms of the bound Asp, respectively. When Ala31 was replaced by the larger isoleucine, the position of the flexible N-terminal loop adjusted such that the tip of the isoleucine in the *ErA*-DM2-Asp was nearly at the same distance from the ASP (4.2 and 5.3 Å). Hence, this structure revealed how the mutant adapts to maintain its L-asparaginase activity.

[00111] *Binding of Asp to ErA-DM1.* The single substitution of Ser254 to asparagine resulted in a mutant with a comparable decrease in L-asparaginase and L-glutaminase activities (Table 7). Interestingly, combining the S254N mutation with the E63Q mutation (*ErA*-DM1) resulted in a variant that was highly selective toward Asn (Tables 8 and 10). To understand this phenomenon, the crystal structure of *ErA*-DM1 in complex with Asp (*ErA*-DM1-Asp) was solved. Again, the minor effect of the E63Q mutation was similar to that previously discussed. Residue 254, the site of the second mutation, originated from a neighboring protomer in the tetrameric enzyme (denoted with a prime after the number). In *ErA*-WT, Ser254' did not interact directly with the bound ASP (distance 4.0 Å to the α -amino group of Asp) but rather functioned to position the side chain of the conserved Asp96 (2.7 Å distance between the Ser254'

hydroxyl and the side chain of Asp96). When Ser254' was mutated to an asparagine, the larger side chain was now closer to the bound ASP (3.5 Å to the α -amino group of Asp) and maintained the positioning interaction with Asp96 (3.1 Å). The orientation of the Asn254' was dictated by Asp96, such that the Asn254' side chain amide nitrogen atom (H-bond donor) faced the carboxylic acid moiety of Asp96 (H-bond acceptor). This is an important point, since the Asn254' side chain amide nitrogen atom, as positioned by Asp96, now generates repulsion to the α -amino group of Asn or Gln. This explains why the *ErA*-S254N single mutant had decreased activity with both Asn and Gln (Table 7).

[00112] The kinetic property of the enzyme was markedly different when the S254N mutation was combined with the E63Q mutation (*i.e.*, *ErA*-DM1). Similar to the previous E63Q containing variants, the distance in the *ErA*-DM1-Asp structure between the side chain at position 63 and Asp increased to 3.0 Å. This increase in distance, while small, increased the separation between Asn254' and the substrate Asn to 3.5 Å. This shift in the position of Asp (due to the E63Q mutation) allowed it to lessen the repulsive interaction with the side chain of Asn254'. In other words, the E63Q mutation sufficiently displaced the ligand such as to limit the repulsive interaction between the ligand α -amino group (H-bond donor) and the Asn254' amide nitrogen atom (also a H-bond donor). This allows *ErA*-DM1 to maintain high L-asparaginase activity.

[00113] *Modeling the Glu Binding Mode to the ErA Variants.* The preceding structural analysis demonstrates the compatibility of the mutations with the enzymatic activity with Asn. Accordingly, basis for the incompatibility of the mutations with the hydrolysis of Gln was sought. However, direct experimental view of how the mutants bind Gln was

not possible since the Glu-soaked crystals of the mutant enzymes failed to bind the amino acid. Therefore, the *ErA*-WT-Glu was overlaid with the mutant structures. While not being bound by theory, in this type of analysis it was postulated that Glu binds to the mutant enzymes the same as observed to *ErA*-WT. This analysis provides insight into the potential Glu binding mode to the mutant variants.

[00114] The E63Q mutation must play a key role in the discrimination between Asn and Gln as it is present in all three mutants discussed so far that have high L-asparaginase/low L-glutaminase properties. The overlay of *ErA*-WT-Glu and the *ErA*-E63Q structure provided the putative Glu binding mode to *ErA*-E63Q, and revealed a short distance between the Glu α -amino group and the Gln63 amide nitrogen atom (3.5 Å). Since both of these moieties are H-bond donors, such proximity would be detrimental for the binding of this amino acid. As discussed, in the case of ASP, whose smaller size allowed it to reposition away from Gln63, the analogous H-bond:H-bond distance was 3.9 Å, and was therefore less detrimental. In the wild-type enzyme, instead of an amide nitrogen, there was the second oxygen atom of the Glu63 side chain carboxylate, which was an H-bond acceptor, and this explains why Gln is a relatively good substrate of *ErA*-WT. The Glu does not reposition, as ASP does to increase the distance to the amide nitrogen atom of Gln63 since the Glu side chain carboxylate (and that of Asp) is anchored by Thr95. This threonine, in combination with Thr15, is important for the enzymatic hydrolysis of Asn and Gln. Hence, the E63Q mutation discriminates against Gln by exploiting the requirement of this large amino acid to fit in the active site by shifting in the direction of Glu63/Gln63, which in turn would place the Gln α -amino group at an unfavorable proximity to the

Gln63 amide nitrogen atom (but is compatible with wild-type Glu63).

[00115] The A31I (as present in *ErA*-DM2) does not act to increase the discrimination against Gln, but rather, reduces the K_m of Asn (from 51 μM in *ErA*-E63Q to 37 μM in *ErA*-DM2). This mutation also reduces the K_m of Gln. The *ErA*-DM1-ASP structure revealed that this mutation forces the flexible N-terminal loop to adopt a different closed conformation relative to the one adopted by the wild-type enzyme. How this reduces the Asn K_m value is not apparent from the structure. It was speculated that this mutation influences the dynamics of loop closure, and that this ultimately influences the substrate K_m value.

[00116] The S254N mutation (as present in *ErA*-DM1) does increase the selectivity between Asn and Gln, and it does so in a similar manner to the E63Q mutation. Namely, this mutation introduces a H-bond donor in proximity to the Gln α -amino group. Overlay of *ErA*-WT-Glu and *ErA*-DM1-Asp revealed the likely position Glu would adopt when bound to the mutant enzyme. This superposition revealed that the larger Glu, by shifting towards Asn254', would result in an unfavorably short (3.2 Å) separation between H-bond groups. The reason that the smaller substrate Asn was not affected by this mutation to a significant degree (though its K_m is also increased from 51 μM in *ErA*-E63Q to 185 in *ErA*-DM1) was due to the larger separation (3.5 Å) between these H-bond donor groups.

[00117] *Exploiting the Structural Analysis to Develop Improved 2nd-Generation Mutants.* The previous work has identified positions 63 and 254 as "hot-spots" for Asn/Gln selectivity, and position 31 for reducing the substrate K_m value. Accordingly, it was determined whether a variant with substitutions at all three hot-spots would have

improved properties. The triple mutant *ErA*-A31I-E63Q-S254N (*ErA*-TM1) did indeed have a lower K_m for Asn (110 versus 170 μM for *ErA*-DM1, Table 9) but its L-glutaminase rate increased (Table 11). Together, *ErA*-TM1 was only marginally better than the previous best variant, *ErA*-DM1.

[00118] The structure of *ErA*-DM1-Asp indicated that glutamine at position 254 may better discriminate against Gln. Indeed, the *ErA*-E63Q-S254Q (*ErA*-DM3) variant was endowed with an even higher Gln K_m compared to *ErA*-DM1 (84 versus 15.8 mM) (Table 8). Critically, the L-asparaginase activity of *ErA*-DM3 was not negatively impacted by changing Ser254 from an asparagine (as in *ErA*-DM1) to a glutamine (Table 8).

[00119] Since a variant with an extremely high Gln K_m value (*ErA*-DM3) was identified, the A31A mutation was added to this variant. A benefit of adding to this variant the A31A mutation included a reduction in the Asn K_m value. Indeed, *ErA*-A31I-E63Q-S254Q (*ErA*-TM2) had an Asn K_m value that was approximately half of that of *ErA*-DM3 (95 versus 179 μM , Table 8). The K_m value of Gln was also reduced (47.5 versus 84 mM), but despite this reduction, remained 100-fold higher than the physiological blood Gln concentration. Accordingly, the *ErA* triple mutant A31I-E63Q-S254Q (*ErA*-TM2) possessed the best combination of high L-asparaginase/low L-glutaminase properties (Table 12).

TABLE 12

Enzyme name	$k_{\text{obs}}[\text{Asn}_{50}] / k_{\text{obs}}[\text{Gln}_{500}]^{\text{a}}$	Specific activity (Asn) / Specific Activity (Gln) ^b
<i>ErA</i> -WT	6.6	7.3
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q	125	22
<i>ErA</i> -E63Q-S254N (DM1)	330	60
<i>ErA</i> -A31I-E63Q-S254Q (TM2)	8910	142
<i>EcA</i> -WT	188	50

^a k_{obs} for Asn@50 μM , k_{obs} for Gln@500 μM .

^b Specific activity (units of IU/mg) was determined at saturating substrate concentration (Asn or Gln).

[00120] *The Ultra-Low L-Glutaminase ErA-TM2 Variant Maintains Its Cell Killing Properties.* This work designed and characterized several *ErA* variants that had high L-asparaginase and low L-glutaminase activity, with two variants (*ErA-DM3* and *ErA-TM2*) having ultra-low L-glutaminase properties. To test whether variants with ultra-low L-glutaminase activity maintained the ability to kill ALL cells, the human T-ALL LOUCY cell line was exposed to increasing concentrations of *ErA-TM2*, and the IC₅₀ value of this enzyme was determined. This analysis indicated that the *ErA-TM2* had a comparable IC₅₀ value (0.00061 IU/mL) to that of *ErA-WT* (0.00033 IU/mL).

[00121] *Efficacy of the Ultra-Low L-Glutaminase ErA-TM2 in Mice.* Female mice were tail vein-injected with luciferase-expressing LOUCY cells. Four weeks later, mice were treated daily with vehicle (n=3), *ErA-WT* (n=4), or *ErA-TM2* (n=4) for 14 days (drug dose 50 IU/mouse/day; i.p.). The bioluminescence signal was measured at days 0, 7 and 14. Relative bioluminescence imaging (BLI) flux at day 14 was assessed and found to increase 10-fold relative to day 0 in the vehicle treated mice. For both treated groups (*ErA-WT* and *ErA-TM2*), the flux decreased dramatically relative to vehicle control (p-value <0.0001), returning to background levels by day 14, with no significant difference between the treated groups. Peripheral blood %huCD45+ levels were determined one week prior to treatment initiation (day -7), at treatment start (day 0), and at end of treatment (day 14). At day 0, all animals were highly engrafted, as indicated by %huCD45+ >8%. By day 14, for the vehicle-treated mice, the %huCD45+ increased to 40-60%, whereas for

both treatment groups, the %huCD45+ was undetectable (p-value <0.0001 between vehicle- and enzyme-treated groups). At day 0, assessment of bone marrow %huCD45+ in three mice with similar BLI flux as the ones used for treatment revealed high engraftment. At day 14, bone marrow %huCD45+ remained high in the vehicle-treated mice, but was undetectable in both enzyme-treated groups (p-value <0.0001 between vehicle- and enzyme-treated groups). Spleens from the vehicle-treated mice were highly enlarged, whereas spleens from the *ErA*-WT and *ErA*-TM2 groups resembled normal mouse spleens in size. H&E-stained paraffin sections of livers from vehicle-, *ErA*-WT- and *ErA*-TM2-treated mice showed that vehicle-treated animals had livers filled with deposits of lymphoblastic leukemic cells. In contrast, livers of mice treated with *ErA*-WT or *ErA*-TM2 had no detectable leukemic cells present. Regarding killing activity, the results of this analysis indicated a remarkable killing effect of the ALL cells by *ErA*-TM2 (Figure 4). In particular, the ultra-low L-glutaminase *ErA*-TM2 eliminates T-ALL LOUCY cells as effectively as the high L-glutaminase *ErA*-WT. Further, using weight loss (in grams, relative to day 0) as an indicator of toxicity, it was observed that whereas *ErA*-WT-treated mice exhibited a pronounced daily weight loss, weight loss was ameliorated in the *ErA*-TM2-treated group by 0.29 g/day (p-value <0.0001).

[00122] To further correlate L-glutaminase activity and toxicity, CD-1 mice were subjected to an acute single dose-escalation toxicity study. Each group had 3 males and 3 females, except group 6 which had only 4 animals (3 females, 1 male) due to a shortage of *ErA*-TM2. Animals administered *ErA*-WT presented significant physical and

behavioral symptoms, whereas the *ErA-TM2* administered animals were largely devoid of such symptoms (Table 13).

TABLE 13

Group	<i>ErA-WT</i>			<i>ErA-TM2</i>		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Dose (IU/g)	40	80	160	40	80	160
Hunched posture	6 (2-4)	6 (2-4)	6 (1-4)	0*	0*	4(1)
Decreased activity	0	6(3)	0	0	0*	0
Sunken eyes	1 (2-3)	6 (2-3)	6 (1-4)	0	0*	0*
Rough coat	6 (1-4)	6 (1-4)	6 (1-4)	4 (1-2)	0*	0*

The number of animals (out of 6 total) presenting symptoms is indicated. In parenthesis, the day(s) on which the symptom was observed is noted. One male in group 3 was dosed with 136 IU/g, and one female in group 5 was dosed with 60 IU/g. *p < 0.05, analysis by Fisher's exact test: (Group 1 vs. Group 4, Group 2 vs. Group 5, Group 3 vs. Group 6). *p < 0.05, analysis by Mann-Whitney U Test: (Group 1 vs. Group 4, Group 2 vs. Group 5, Group 3 vs. Group 6).

Example 4: TRAIL-*ErA* Fusion Protein

[00123] TRAIL (TNF-related apoptosis inducing ligand) is a protein that induces cell death by apoptosis. Accordingly, a TRAIL-Asparaginase fusion protein was created to combine the activity of these two proteins. Using this fusion protein, the L-asparaginase component signals the cell to undergo apoptosis, and the TRAIL component induces cell death.

[00124] *Efficacy of the Fusion Protein TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 Toward Human AML Cells.* Human acute myeloid leukemia MV4;11 cells were cultivated in a humid atmosphere (5% CO₂, 37°C) using RPMI 1640 media (with L-Glutamine) supplemented with 10% FBS (Hyclone) and 1x penicillin-streptomycin solution (Invitrogen). Ninety µL aliquots of cell suspension (2.5 x10⁵ cells per mL) were cultured in triplicate in round-

bottomed 96-well microtiter plates in the presence of 10 μ L of either DPBS or TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 to a final concentration ranging from 0.0001 to 2.5 IU/ml. After incubating the plates for 4 days at 37°C in humidified air containing 5% CO₂, Alamar Blue (Invitrogen) was added to a final concentration of 10% v/v, and the plates were incubated for an additional 4 hours followed by reading of the fluorescence signal. The leukemic cell viability was calculated as the percentage of fluorescence counts in the presence of L-asparaginase versus that in the DPBS control. This analysis indicated that the active TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 fusion protein possessed remarkably better killing property against the MV4;11 cell line (IC₅₀ = 0.064 IU/mL) compared to the L-asparaginase ErA-TM2 alone (IC₅₀ = 1.631 IU/mL).

[00125] To confirm that the better anticancer effect of TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 resulted from the synchronization of both TRAIL_{trimer} and L-asparaginase and not from the activity of TRAIL_{trimer} alone, TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 was replaced with the same quantity of the inactive mutant TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2-K168M. The results of this analysis demonstrated that with impaired L-asparaginase activity, the fusion TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2-K168M protein lost its MV4;11 cell killing effect.

[00126] *Efficacy of the Fusion Protein TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 Toward Human AML Cells in Mice.* Four non-obese diabetic/severe combined immune-deficient γ (NSG) mice (The Jackson Laboratory) were i.v.-injected at 6 weeks of age with 150 μ L DPBS containing 5x10⁶ luciferase-positive MV4;11 cells. At regular time points, the bioluminescence was measured using the IVIS Lumina II imaging system (PerkinElmer). After engraftment (Day 0), the mice were treated everyday for one week with an i.p. injection of 15 IU/mouse of TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2. The bioluminescence signal was measured at day 0 and day 7. The results of this

analysis indicate a remarkable killing effect of the MV4;11 cells by TRAIL_{trimer}-ErA-TM2 (Figure 5).

Example 5: Tags for Increasing *in vivo* Half-Life

[00127] Efficacy of L-asparaginase is related to the *in vivo* half-life of the drug; the longer the half-life, the longer the enzyme acts to hydrolyze the blood asparagine. Accordingly, to increase the *in vivo* half-life of L-asparaginase, as well as the variants and fusion proteins disclosed herein, tags were fused to the N-terminus of L-asparaginase. The tags included a His₆-yeast SUMO tag, a His₆-human SUMO tag and an albumin-binding peptide SA21 tag. Each of the tags increased the circulation time of the L-asparaginase enzyme. In addition, combinations of tags were tested. In particular, the SA21 and yeast SUMO tags were combined to obtain variants with an even further extended half-life.

[00128] *The Histidine Tag.* The DNA sequence specifying a string of six to nine histidine residues is frequently used in vectors for production of recombinant proteins. The result is expression of a recombinant protein with a 6xHis or poly-His tag fused to its N- or C-terminus.

[00129] Expressed His-tagged proteins can be purified and detected easily and provide a means of specifically purifying or detecting the recombinant protein without a protein-specific antibody or probe. Kits are commercially available to His-tag proteins.

[00130] *SUMO Modification.* It has been found that SUMO as an N-terminal fusion partner enhances functional protein production in prokaryotic and eukaryotic expression systems, based upon significantly improved protein stability and solubility.

[00131] Following the expression and purification of the fusion protein, the SUMO-tag can be cleaved by specific (SUMO) proteases via their endopeptidase activity *in vitro* to generate the desired N-terminus of the released protein partner. SUMO tag expression systems are commercially available. In some embodiments, the SUMO tag is a yeast SUMO tag (e.g., Smt3). In other embodiments, the SUMO tag is a human SUMO tag (e.g., SUMO-1, SUMO-2 or SUMO-3).

[00132] *His-SUMO Modification.* Combining a polyhistidine (e.g., 6xHis) tag and SUMO modification provides for efficient purification, increased expression and solubility, as well as increased half-life of L-asparaginases. Expression systems for providing the His-SUMO modification to a protein of interest are commercially available. See, e.g., the CHAMPION pET SUMO protein expression system (Invitrogen).

[00133] *Albumin Binding Domain.* The albumin-binding domain is a small, three-helical protein domain found in various surface proteins expressed by gram-positive bacteria. Such albumin-binding regions have been used for protein purification or immobilization. Exemplary albumin binding domains include, but are not limited to, SA20 (QRLIEDICLPRWGCLWEDDF; SEQ ID NO:13), SA21 (RLIEDICLPRWGCLWEDD; SEQ ID NO:14), and SA31 (RLIEDICLPRWGCLW; SEQ ID NO:15).

[00134] Moreover, improvement of the pharmacokinetics, through the non-covalent association to albumin, by fusing such domains to therapeutic proteins has been shown to be successful. See Dennis, et al. (2002) *J. Biol. Chem.* 277(38):35035-35043; US 2016/0185874; and US 2004/0001827.

Example 6: Site-Specific PEGylation

[00135] The function of PEG is to shield L-asparaginase from proteolytic degradation and from the host immune system. To allow for maleimide-based PEGylation of L-asparaginase, various amino acid residues were mutated to cysteine residues to identify a suitable location that had little to no effect on enzyme activity. Notably, *ErA*-WT and *ErA*-TM2 do not contain any cysteine residues. Therefore, the introduction of this amino acid residue had to be at an appropriate location of the enzyme so as not to disrupt folding or activity. Accordingly, the structure of *ErA*-TM2 was analyzed to identify regions of residues that could be mutated to cysteine. Five such regions were identified (Table 14), which: (1) were located on the surface, (2) were an appropriate distant from oligomerization interfaces (*ErA*-TM2 is a tetramer, so PEGylating a residue near an interface could be detrimental to the activity of the enzyme), and (3) included residues that pointed outward.

TABLE 14

Region	Residue
1	K72
	R76
	E79
	D84
	D85
2	R206
	D210
	T215
	S216
3	D235
	Q239
	H240
4	A261
	R264
	K265
	E268
	K269
5	K318
	E322

[00136] To demonstrate the use of the amino acid residues in Table 14 as sites for site-specific PEGylation, residue Asp84 of *ErA-TM2* was mutated to cysteine. The resulting *ErA-TM2-D84C* protein was expressed, purified and PEGylated with mPEG-10K. Based upon SDS-PAGE analysis, *ErA-TM2-D84C* was PEGylated, as evidenced by a measurable increase in molecular weight of the *ErA-TM2-D84C* protein.

[00137] Subsequently, it was verified that the D84C mutation, and a PEGylated version thereof, does not negatively impact enzyme activity. When comparing the activity of *ErA-TM2*, *ErA-TM2-D84C*, and PEGylated-*ErA-TM2-D84C*, it was observed that the calculated rates of each enzyme were comparable, wherein PEGylation of *ErA-TM2-D84C* reduced the activity by less than 10% compared to *ErA-TM2* (Table 15).

TABLE 15

Variant	k_{obs} at 2mM Asn (1/sec)	% vs. <i>ErA-TM2</i>
<i>ErA-TM2</i>	178.8	100
<i>ErA-TM2-D84C</i>	172.8	97
10K PEGylated- <i>ErA-TM2-D84C</i>	163.4	91

[00138] In light of these data, there are 5 regions (Table 14) of an L-asparaginase disclosed herein that can be targeted to include the incorporation of a cysteine residue for PEGylation. In accordance with the invention, PEGylation can be achieved by maleimide-based conjugation of the cysteine residue(s) with large molecular weight PEG molecules such as PEG5K, PEG10K, PEG20K, PEG40K, as either linear or branched PEG molecules. It is contemplated that 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 cysteine residues can be incorporated at the positions indicated in Table 14 thereby providing between 1 and 5 PEG attachment sites.

What is claimed is:

1. An *Erwinia chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase (*ErA*) variant comprising an amino acid substitution at one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1.

2. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein the amino acid substitution at position 31 comprises an isoleucine, valine, leucine, or threonine.

3. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein the amino acid substitution at position 63 comprises a glutamine, asparagine, or aspartate.

4. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein the amino acid substitution at position 254 comprises an asparagine or glutamine.

5. The *ErA* variant of claim 1 comprising an amino acid sequence set forth in SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 or SEQ ID NO:7.

6. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein said *ErA* variant exhibits an asparaginase reaction rate (k_{cat}) of least 75% of wild-type *ErA* enzyme.

7. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein said *ErA* variant exhibits a K_m for L-asparagine of less than 250 μM .

8. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein said *ErA* variant exhibits a glutaminase reaction rate (k_{cat}) of less than 60% of wild-type *ErA* enzyme.

9. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein said *ErA* variant exhibits a K_m for L-glutamine of greater than 3 mM.

10. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, further comprising a histidine tag, a SUMO tag, an albumin-binding domain, or a combination thereof.

11. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, wherein said *ErA* variant is PEGylated.

12. The *ErA* variant of claim 11, wherein the *ErA* variant further comprises a cysteine residue at position 72, 76, 79, 84, 85, 206, 210, 215, 216, 235, 239, 240, 261, 264, 265, 268, 269, 318, 322, or a combination thereof.

13. The *ErA* variant of claim 1, further comprising three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL.

14. The *ErA* variant of claim 13, wherein the soluble domains of TRAIL comprise residues 115-281 of human TRAIL.

15. The *ErA* variant of claim 13, wherein the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to one another via a peptide linking group comprising one to eight amino acid residues.

16. The *ErA* variant of claim 15, wherein the amino acid residues are selected from glycine and serine.

17. The *ErA* variant of claim 13, wherein the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to the *ErA* variant via a peptide linking group comprising one to twenty amino acid residues.

18. The *ErA* variant of claim 17, wherein the amino acid residues are selected from glycine and serine.

19. A nucleic acid molecule encoding the *ErA* variant of claim 1.

20. An expression vector comprising the nucleic acid molecule of claim 19.

21. A host cell comprising the nucleic acid molecule of claim 19.

22. A pharmaceutical composition comprising the *ErA* variant of claim 1 and a pharmaceutically acceptable excipient.

23. The pharmaceutical composition of claim 1, further comprising a stable form of TRAIL.

24. The pharmaceutical composition of claim 23, wherein the stable form of TRAIL comprises the FOLDON sequence GYIPEAPRDGQAYVRKDGWVLLSTFL (SEQ ID NO:31).

25. A method of treating cancer comprising administering to a subject in need of treatment an effective amount of the *ErA* variant of claim 1 thereby treating the subject's cancer.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein the cancer is selected from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, leukemia, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, acute myeloid leukemia, B cell

lymphoma, Burkitt's lymphoma, chronic myelocytic leukemia, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, and hairy cell leukemia.

27. The method of claim 25, further comprising administering a stable form of TRAIL.

28. The method of claim 27, wherein the stable form of TRAIL comprises the FOLDON sequence GYIPEAPRDGQAYVRKDGWVLLSTFL (SEQ ID NO:31).

29. A fusion protein comprising an L-asparaginase linked to three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL.

30. The fusion protein of claim 29, wherein the soluble domains of TRAIL comprise residues 115-281 of human TRAIL.

31. The fusion protein of claim 29, wherein the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to one another via a peptide linking group comprising one to eight amino acid residues.

32. The fusion protein of claim 31, wherein the amino acid residues are selected from glycine and serine.

33. The fusion protein of claim 29, wherein the three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL are linked to the L-asparaginase via a peptide linking group comprising one to twenty amino acid residues.

34. The fusion protein of claim 33, wherein the amino acid residues are selected from glycine and serine.

35. The fusion protein of claim 29, wherein the L-asparaginase is an L-asparaginase from *Erwinia chrysanthemi* or *Escherichia coli*.

36. The fusion protein of claim 35, wherein the *Erwinia chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase is a variant comprising an amino acid substitution at one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1.

37. The fusion protein of claim 29, further comprising a histidine tag, a SUMO tag, an albumin-binding domain, or a combination thereof.

38. The fusion protein of claim 29, wherein said fusion protein is PEGylated.

39. The fusion protein of claim 38, wherein the L-asparaginase is an L-asparaginase from *Erwinia chrysanthemi* comprising a cysteine residue at position 72, 76, 79, 84, 85, 206, 210, 215, 216, 235, 239, 240, 261, 264, 265, 268, 269, 318, 322, or a combination thereof.

40. A nucleic acid molecule encoding the fusion protein of claim 29.

41. An expression vector comprising the nucleic acid molecule of claim 40.

42. A host cell comprising the nucleic acid molecule of claim 40.

43. A pharmaceutical composition comprising the fusion protein of claim 29 and a pharmaceutically acceptable excipient.

44. A method of treating cancer comprising administering to a subject in need of treatment an effective amount of the fusion protein of claim 29 thereby treating the subject's cancer.

45. The method of claim 44, wherein the cancer is selected from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, leukemia, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, acute myeloid leukemia, B cell lymphoma, Burkitt's lymphoma, chronic myelocytic leukemia, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, and hairy cell leukemia.

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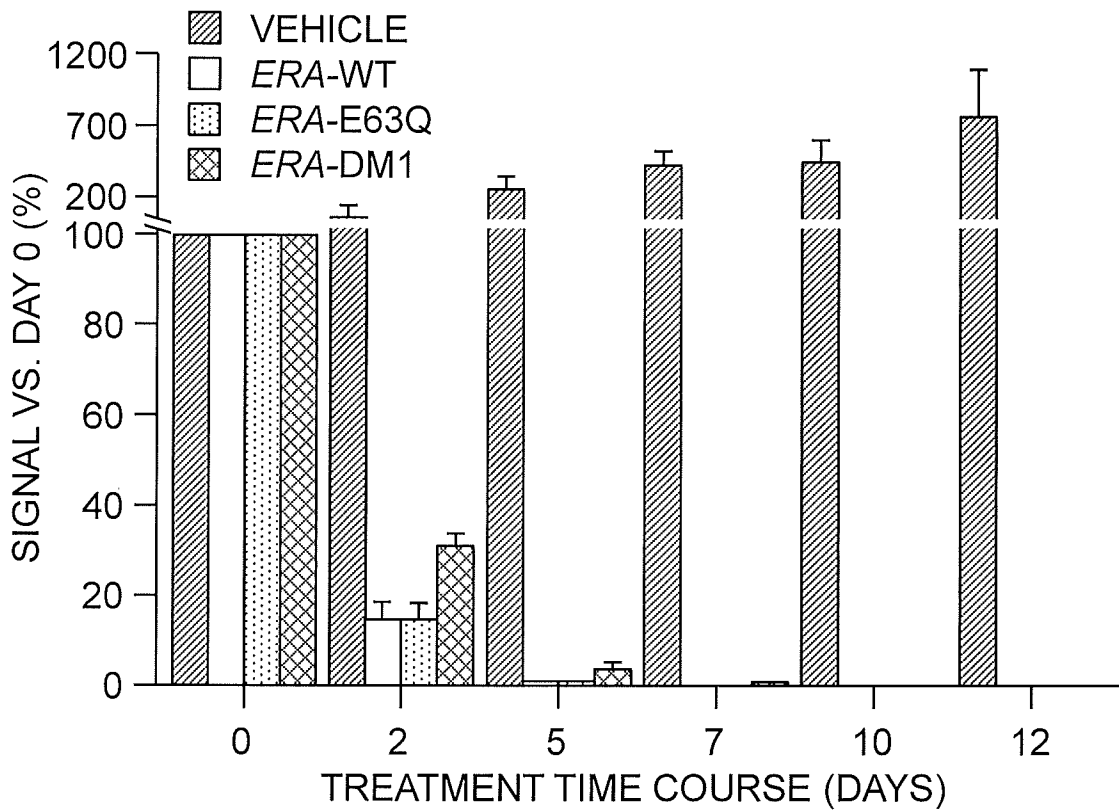


FIG. 1A

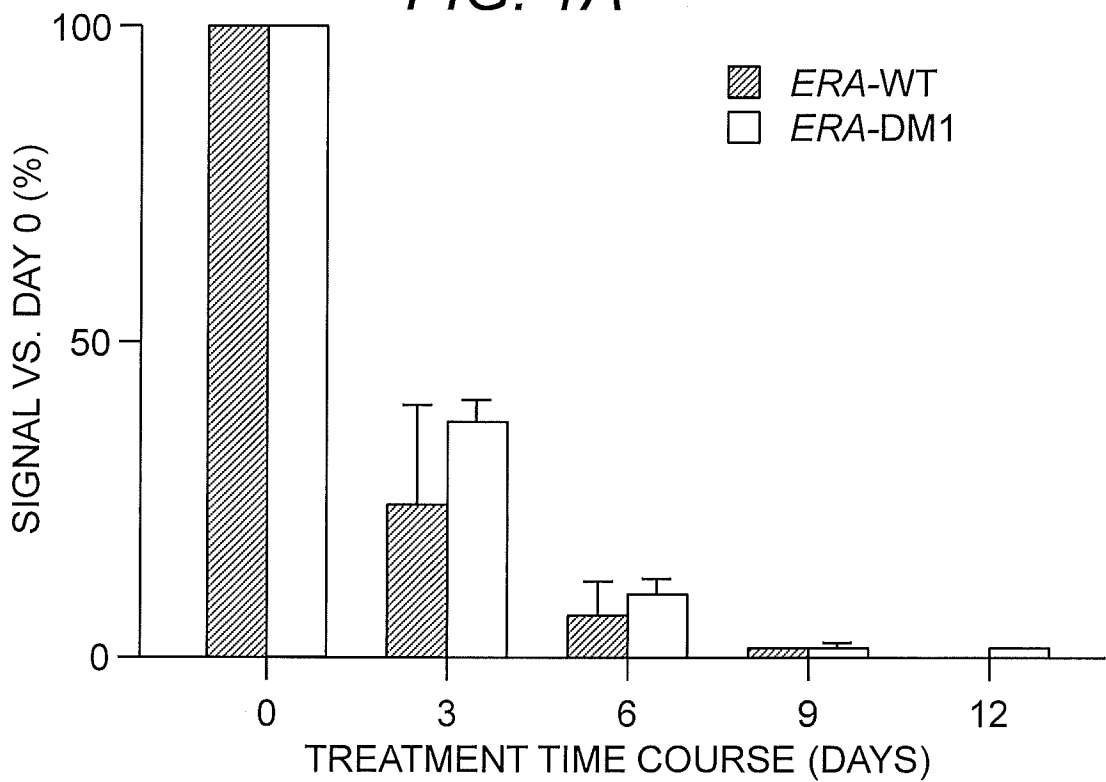


FIG. 1B

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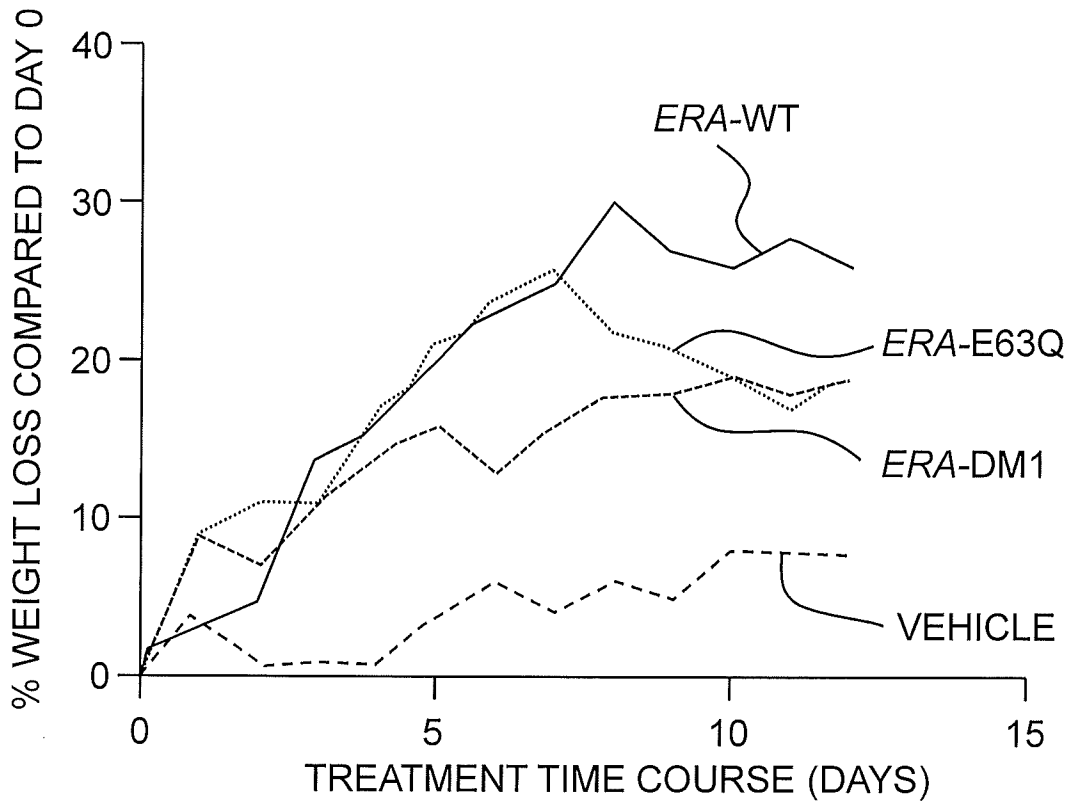


FIG. 2

* SITE 1 - A31

A MDKLPNIVILATGGTIAGSAAATGQTQTTGYKAGALGVDTLINAPEVKKLANV KGEQFSNM
 B MLPNIVILATGGTIAGSAAANTQTTGYKAGALGVETLIQAVPELKTLANI KGEQVASI
 C MLPNITILATGGTIAGGDSAT . KSNYTVKVGVENLVNAVFPQKDIANI KGEQVVNI
 D MAQNLP^{IA}LLATGGTIAGSGASAS . LGSYKSGELGIKEL^LKAIP^SINRLARI QGEQISNI
 E MAKPOVTILATGGTIAGSGESSV . KSSYSAGAVTVDKLLAAVPAINDLATI KGEQISSI
 F MARASGSE^RHLLLIY^TGGT^LGMQS KGGVLVPGGLV^TLLR^TLPMFHDKEFAQAGL^PDHALALPPASHGPRVLY^TVLE^CQPLL

* SITE 2 - E63

A ASENMTGDVVLKLSQVNE^LLARD^DVDG^VVI^THG^TDTVEESAYFLHLTV . KSDKPVV^FVAA^MRPATAISADGPMN^LLLEAVRVAGDKQS
 B GSE^NMTSDVLL^TL^SKRVNELLARS^DVDG^VVI^THG^TDTLDES^PYF^INLTV . KSDKPVV^FVAA^MRPATAISADGPMN^LYGAVKVAADKNS
 C GSQDMNDNVW^LT^LAKKINTDCD . KTDGEVIT^HG^TDTMEETAYFLDLTV . KCDKPVV^MVGAMR^PSTMSADGPFN^LYN^AVVTAA^DKAS
 D GSQDMNEEV^FFKLAKRAQEL^LDD^SRIQ^GVVI^THG^TDTLEESAYFLNLVL . RSTKPVV^LVGAMR^{NA}ASLSADGALN^LYN^AVSV^ALN^EKS
 E GSQEM^TGK^VWLK^LAKRVNELL^AQKETEAVI^ITHG^TDTMEETAFF^INLTV . KSQKPVV^LVGAMR^{SG}SSMSADGPMN^LYN^AVNV^AINKAS
 F DSSDM^TID^DWIRIAKIIERHYE QYQGFVVI^HG^TDTMASGAS^MISFMLENLH^KFPV^IL^TG^AQVPIRVLW^NDAREN^LLGA^LLLV^AGQYI .

* SITE 3 - P123

A RGRGVMV^LNDRIGSARYI^TKT^NASTLDTFKANE^EGYLGVII^GNRIY^QNRID^KLHT^TRSV^FDV^RGLT . SLPKVDI^LYGYQ^DDP^EYLY
 B RGRG^VL^VLV^LNDRIGSARFI^SK^TNASTLDTFKAPEE^GYLGVI^IGDKIY^QTRLD^KVHT^TRSV^FDV^TNVD . KLP^AVDII^YGYQ^DDP^EYMY
 C ANR^GV^LV^MNDTVLDGRD^VT^KT^NTDVAT^FKSVNY^GPLGI^HNGKIDY^QRT^PARKHTSD^TPF^DV^SKLN . ELPK^VGIV^YNYANASDL^PA
 D ANK^GV^LV^MDDN^IFSAREVI^KTH^TST^FKALNSGAI^GSVY^YGK^TRY^MQPL^RKHT^TSE^FLS^QLK^TPL^PK^VDII^YTHAG^MTP^DLF
 E TNK^GV^IV^MND^EIHAAREAT^KLN^TTAVNA^FASPNT^GKIG^TVY^GKVEY^FTQ^SVRP^HT^LASE^FDISKIE . ELP^RV^DI^LYAH^PDD^TD^VLV
 F IPE^VCL^FMNS^QLFRGN^RV^TK^VDSQ^KFEA^FC^SPNLS^PLATV^GAD^VTIA^WDLV^RK^VK^WK^DPL^VV^HSNME HD^VALL^RLY^PGIPAS^LV

* SITE 4 - S254

A DAAIQ^HGVK^GIVYAGMG AGSVSV^RG^IAGMR^KKAMEK^GVV^VIRSTR^TNGI^VPP^DEE LPGLV^SDSL^NPA HARILL^MLAL^TR
 B D^ASIKH^GVK^GIVYAGMG AGSVSK^RGD^AGIRK^AESK^GIVV^VRS^SRTG^SGIV^PPP^DAG QPGLV^ADSL^SPA KSRI^LLLM^IAL^TK
 C K^ALVDAGY^DGIVSAGVG NGNLY^KSV^FDT^LA^TA^AK^TG^TAV^VRS^SRV^PTG^AT^QDAE^VDDA^KY^GFV^ASG^TLN^PO KARV^LLQ^LAL^TQ
 D Q^ASLNSHAK^GVVIAGVG NGNV^SAG^FLKAMQ^EA^SOM^GVIV^RSS^RVNS^GE^ITS^GE^IDD KAFIT^SDN^LN^PO KARV^LLQ^LAL^TK
 E N^AALQAGAK^GI^HAGMG NGNPF^LTQ^NALEK^AK^SGVV^ARS^SRV^GSG^STQEA^EV^DDK^LG^FV^ATES^LN^PO KARV^LLL^MI^AL^TK
 F RA^FLQ^PPLK^GV^LE^TFG^SNG^NCP^SK^PDL^LQEL^RAA^AQ^GLIM^VNC^SQ^LR^GS^VTP^GYAT^SL^AGANIV^SGL^DMTSE^AAL^AK^LS^VI^GL^PE

A TSDPK^VIQEY^FH^TY
 B TTNPA^VIQ^DYF^HAY
 C TKDP^QQIQ^IFN^QY
 D TNNKE^IQEM^FE^EY
 E TSDREAI^QKIF^STY
 F LSL[.]ERR^QELLAKD

FIG. 3

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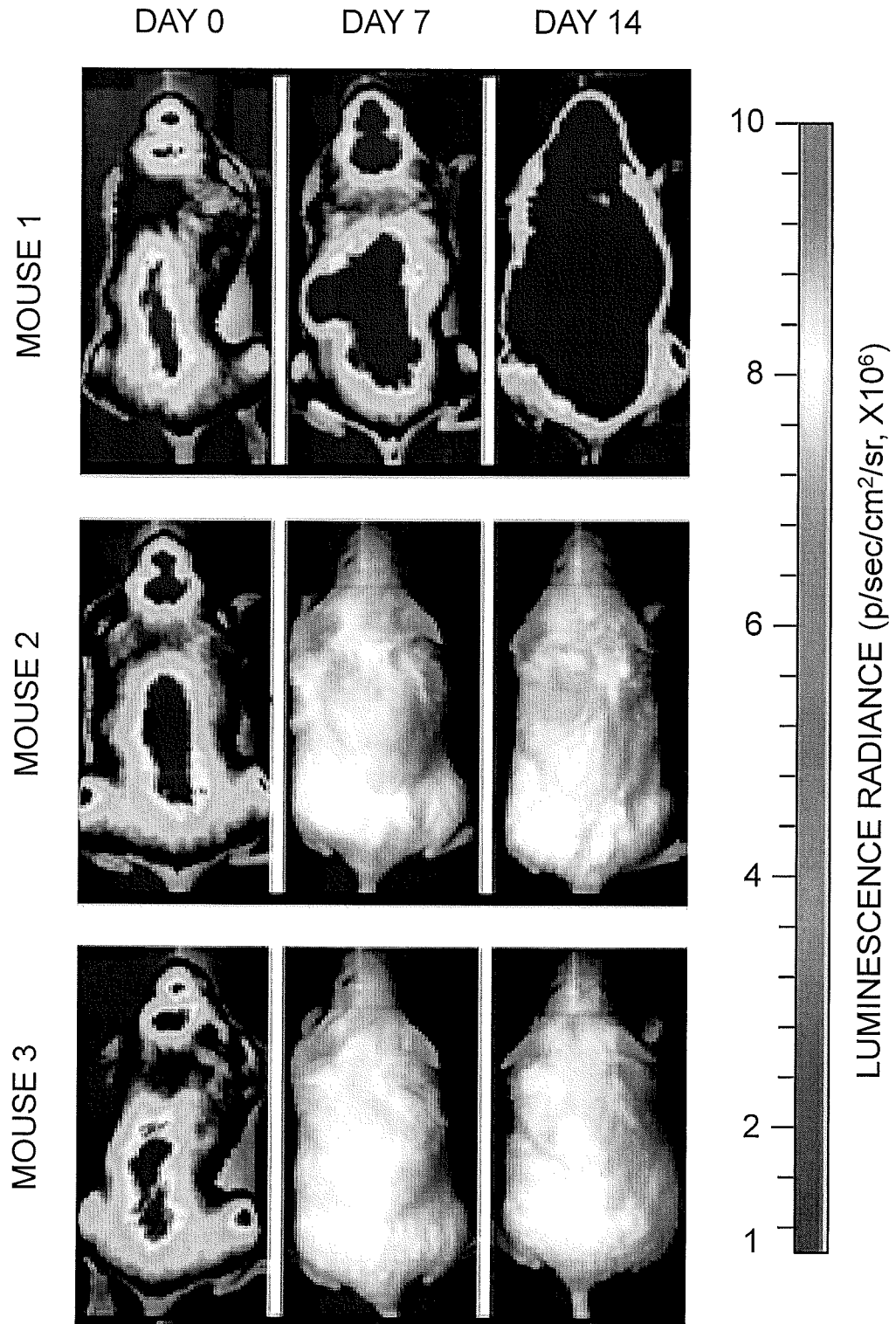


FIG. 5

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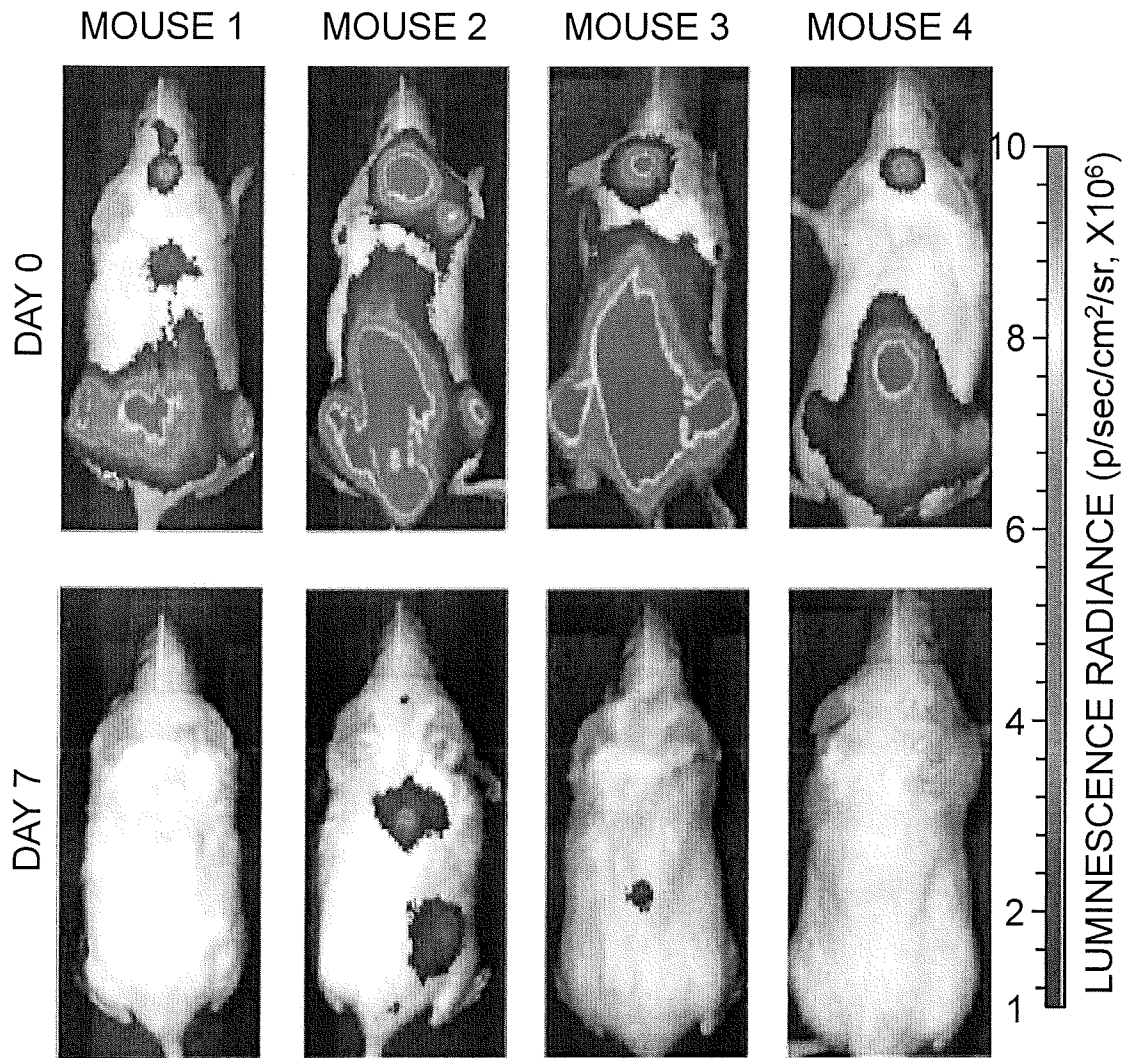


FIG. 5

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/US2017/020090

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
INV. C07K14/52 A61K38/50 C12N9/82
ADD.
According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED
Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
C07K A61K C12N

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)
EPO-Internal, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	HIEN ANH NGUYEN ET AL: "Structural Insight into Substrate Selectivity of Erwinia chrysanthemi L-Asparaginase", BIOCHEMISTRY, vol. 55, no. 8, 8 February 2016 (2016-02-08), pages 1246-1253, XP055369168, US ISSN: 0006-2960, DOI: 10.1021/acs.biochem.5b01351 cited in the application abstract figures 2-5 right column, last paragraph; page 1252 ----- -/--	1-28,36

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.

See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents :

<p>"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance</p> <p>"E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date</p> <p>"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)</p> <p>"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means</p> <p>"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed</p>	<p>"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention</p> <p>"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone</p> <p>"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art</p> <p>"&" document member of the same patent family</p>
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Date of the actual completion of the international search 4 May 2017	Date of mailing of the international search report 12/07/2017
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Name and mailing address of the ISA/ European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL - 2280 HV Rijswijk Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016	Authorized officer Brero, Alessandro
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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No

PCT/US2017/020090

C(Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		
Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	<p>KHOSROW AGHAIYPOUR ET AL: "Structural Basis for the Activity and Substrate Specificity of Erwinia chrysanthemi L-Asparaginase", BIOCHEMISTRY, vol. 40, no. 19, 1 May 2001 (2001-05-01), pages 5655-5664, XP055369170, US ISSN: 0006-2960, DOI: 10.1021/bi0029595 cited in the application abstract figures 1-5</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-----</p>	1-28,36
A	<p>GEORGIA A. KOTZIA ET AL: "Engineering thermal stability of L-asparaginase by in vitro directed evolution", FEBS JOURNAL, vol. 276, no. 6, 13 February 2009 (2009-02-13), pages 1750-1761, XP055369172, GB ISSN: 1742-464X, DOI: 10.1111/j.1742-4658.2009.06910.x cited in the application abstract page 1751 - page 1752</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-----</p>	1-28,36
A	<p>WO 2011/003633 A1 (ALIZE PHARMA II [FR]; ABRIBAT THIERRY [FR]) 13 January 2011 (2011-01-13) abstract paragraph [0051] - paragraph [0052] examples 1-5 claim 1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-----</p>	1-28,36
X,P	<p>HIEN ANH NGUYEN ET AL: "Design and Characterization of Erwinia Chrysanthemi L-Asparaginase Variants with Diminished l-Glutaminase Activity", JOURNAL OF BIOLOGICAL CHEMISTRY, vol. 291, no. 34, 19 August 2016 (2016-08-19), pages 17664-17676, XP055369173, US ISSN: 0021-9258, DOI: 10.1074/jbc.M116.728485 the whole document</p> <p style="text-align: center;">-----</p>	1-28,36

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US2017/020090

Box No. II Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of item 2 of first sheet)

This international search report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. Claims Nos.:
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:

2. Claims Nos.:
because they relate to parts of the international application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful international search can be carried out, specifically:

3. Claims Nos.:
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box No. III Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of item 3 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:

see additional sheet

1. As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers all searchable claims.

2. As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying an additional fees, this Authority did not invite payment of additional fees.

3. As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:

4. No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this international search report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:

1-12, 19-28(completely); 13-18, 36(partially)

Remark on Protest

- The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest and, where applicable, the payment of a protest fee.
- The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest but the applicable protest fee was not paid within the time limit specified in the invitation.
- No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

FURTHER INFORMATION CONTINUED FROM PCT/ISA/ 210

This International Searching Authority found multiple (groups of) inventions in this international application, as follows:

1. claims: 1-12, 19-28(completely); 13-18, 36(partially)

An *Erwinia chrysanthemi* L-asparaginase (ErA) variant comprising an amino acid substitution at one or more of positions 31, 63 and 254 of SEQ ID NO:1; and subject-matter relating thereto.

2. claims: 29-35, 37-45(completely); 13-18, 36(partially)

A fusion protein comprising an L-asparaginase linked to three tandem soluble domains of TRAIL; and subject-matter relating thereto.

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International application No

PCT/US2017/020090

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
WO 2011003633	A1	13-01-2011	
		AU 2010270294	A1 23-02-2012
		CA 2767149	A1 13-01-2011
		CN 102573917	A 11-07-2012
		CO 6612174	A2 01-02-2013
		EA 201270134	A1 30-07-2012
		HK 1173092	A1 20-05-2016
		JP 6014956	B2 26-10-2016
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