High activity of an affinity-matured ACE2 decoy against Omicron SARS-CoV-2 and pre-emergent coronaviruses

Running Title: ACE2 decoy maintains activity against emerging coronavirus variants

[1]Joshua J. Sims, [1]Sharon Lian, and [1]James M. Wilson*

[1]Gene Therapy Program, Department of Medicine, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

*Corresponding author:

James M. Wilson, MD, PhD

Gene Therapy Program

Perelman School of Medicine

University of Pennsylvania

125 South 31st Street, Suite 1200

Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

Phone: 215-573-9020; Fax: 215-494-5444

E-mail: wilsonjm@upenn.edu

Abstract

The viral genome of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), and particularly its cell-binding spike protein gene, has undergone rapid evolution during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Variants including Omicron now seriously threaten the efficacy of therapeutic monoclonal antibodies and vaccines that target the spike protein. Viral evolution over a much longer timescale has generated a wide range of genetically distinct *sarbecoviruses* in animal populations, including the pandemic viruses SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV-1. The genetic diversity and widespread zoonotic potential of this group complicates current attempts to develop drugs in preparation for the next *sarbecovirus* pandemic. Receptor-based decoy inhibitors can target a wide range of viral strains with a common receptor and may have intrinsic resistance to escape mutant generation and antigenic drift. We previously generated an affinity-matured decoy inhibitor based on the receptor target of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein, angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2), and deployed it in an adeno-associated viral vector (rAAV) for intranasal delivery and passive prophylaxis against COVID-19. Here, we demonstrate the exceptional binding and neutralizing potency of this ACE2 decoy against SARS-CoV-2 variants including Omicron, as well as binding to diverse ACE2-dependent coronaviruses. We also discuss a strategy of decoy-based treatment and passive protection to mitigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and future airway virus threats.

Author Summary

Viral sequences can change dramatically during pandemics lasting multiple years. Likewise, evolution over centuries has generated genetically diverse virus families posing similar threats to humans. This variation presents a challenge to drug development, in both the breadth of achievable protection against related groups of viruses and the durability of therapeutic agents or vaccines during extended outbreaks. This phenomenon has played out dramatically during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The highly divergent Omicron variant of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has upended previous gains won by vaccine and monoclonal antibody development. Moreover, ecological surveys have increasingly revealed a broad class of SARS-CoV-2-like viruses in animals, each poised to cause a future human pandemic. Here, we evaluate an alternative to antibody-based protection and prevention—a decoy molecule based on the SARS-CoV-2 receptor. Our engineered decoy has proven resistant to SARS-CoV-2 evolution during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and can neutralize all variants of concern, including Omicron. Furthermore, the decoy binds tightly to a broad class of *sarbecoviruses* related to pandemic SARS-CoV-2 and SARS-CoV-1, indicating that receptor decoys offer advantages over monoclonal antibodies and may be deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic and future coronavirus outbreaks to prevent and treat severe illness.

64 **1. Introduction**

65 Monoclonal antibody therapeutics with the ability to bind the spike protein of severe acute
66 respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and prevent cell entry have been critical
67 tools in managing the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (1, 2). These drugs
68 prevent hospitalizations when applied early in the course of infection (3) and can provide critical
69 passive protection for vulnerable populations of immunocompromised patients who cannot
70 mount a protective response to vaccines (4). However, monoclonals have proven particularly
71 susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 evolution (5). This susceptibility may arise because the spike
72 epitopes most sensitive to neutralization have been under intense selection as the virus has made
73 gains in transmissibility and its ability to evade human immunity (6). Furthermore, evidence
74 suggests that single monoclonals applied in a therapeutic setting can rapidly give rise to escape
75 mutants (7-10). Together, these findings call into question the ability of the antibody platform to
76 keep pace with the course of the COVID-19 pandemic or to be of use in future pandemics caused
77 by other coronaviruses.

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79 Receptor decoys may represent a mode of viral neutralization that is more resistant to continued
80 viral evolution and escape-mutant generation (11). SARS-CoV-2 evolution has occurred in a
81 way that retains tight binding to its primary cell entry receptor, angiotensin-converting enzyme 2
82 (ACE2) (12). We and others have developed affinity-matured, soluble ACE2 decoy molecules
83 that potently neutralize SARS-CoV-2 (11, 13-18). Our soluble Fc-fused decoy, CDY14HL-Fc4,
84 contains six amino acid substitutions that improve the neutralization of CoV-2 variants by 300-
85 fold versus un-engineered ACE2 and an active site nutation to ablate its endogenous angiotensin-

86 cleaving activity. Furthermore, CDY14HL maintains tight binding or neutralizing activity for the
87 distantly related *sarbecoviruses* WIV1-CoV, and SARS-CoV-1 despite being engineered for
88 improved activity against SARS-CoV-2 (13). This property suggests that this decoy may be a
89 useful tool to combat future pandemics from currently pre-emergent, ACE2-dependent
90 coronaviruses.

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92 Here, we evaluate the binding and neutralization activity of CDY14HL against a wide range of
93 emerging SARS-CoV-2 variants, including Omicron, and pre-emergent ACE2-dependent
94 coronaviruses. These studies suggest the broad utility of decoy-based viral entry inhibitors in
95 combating current and future coronavirus pandemics.

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106 **2. Results**

107 **2.1 CDY14HL maintains tight binding to diverse SARS-CoV-2 variants**

108 We set out to evaluate the ability of our engineered ACE2 decoy to neutralize emerging SARS-
109 CoV-2 strains. As a first step, we assessed binding to variant receptor-binding domains (RBDs)
110 using a yeast display system (19) (**Figure 1A**). We incubated budding yeast displaying viral
111 RBDs on the cell surface with CDY14HL-Fc fusion protein and then assessed decoy binding via
112 flow cytometry by staining bound decoy with a fluorescent secondary antibody. CDY14HL-Fc
113 bound the ancestral (Wuhan-Hu1) RBD with an apparent affinity of 0.14 nM (**Figure 1B**). This
114 result is in good agreement with the picomolar binding affinity we previously measured for the
115 engineered decoy:RBD interaction using surface plasmon resonance (13).

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117 Since our first description of CDY14HL (13), several SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern (VoCs)
118 have emerged with far greater transmissibility and clinical sequelae than the original Wuhan
119 strain (20); most of this evolution has occurred at the RBD:ACE2 interface (**Figure 1C**). We
120 used the yeast display system to evaluate decoy binding to five of these VoCs. We included an
121 additional RBD mutant not observed in natural SARS-CoV-2 isolates. This RBD sequence,
122 "Delta 4+," contains four additional substitutions (K417N, N439K, E484K, and N501Y) derived
123 from systematic analysis of RBD monoclonal antibody epitopes. These substitutions are
124 hypothesized to hold maximum potential for antibody escape (21). Remarkably, CDY14HL
125 maintained subnanomolar binding affinity for all VoC RBDs, including Iota, Delta +, Lambda,
126 and Mu, and the "Delta 4+" RBD (**Figure 1D**). This finding is consistent with the broad

127 resistance of CDY14HL to SARS-CoV-2 variant evolution previously observed in binding and
128 pseudotype neutralization studies (13).
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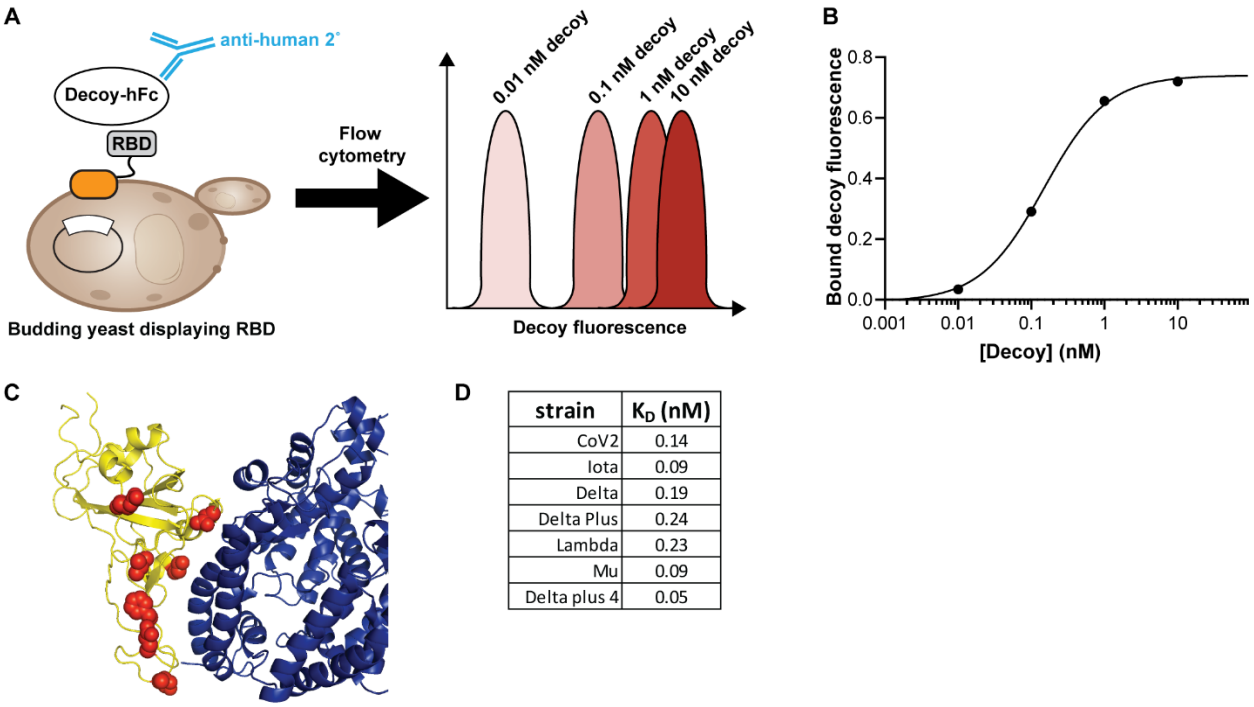

strain	K_D (nM)
CoV2	0.14
Iota	0.09
Delta	0.19
Delta Plus	0.24
Lambda	0.23
Mu	0.09
Delta plus 4	0.05

Fig 1. CDY14HL maintains tight binding to diverse SARS-CoV-2 variants

(A) Scheme for measuring decoy binding to yeast surface-expressed RBDs. (B) Representative decoy binding data for the RBD from the ancestral (Wuhan-Hu1) SARS-CoV-2 strain. (C) RBD amino acid positions mutated relative to the ancestral strain in the panel of SARS-CoV-2 variants are highlighted in red spheres on the yellow RBD ribbon diagram. These mutations cluster around the interface with ACE2 (blue ribbons), as shown by the coordinates of the complex (36) (D) Fitted values of the dissociation equilibrium constant (K_D) for SARS-CoV-2 variants.

146 **2.2 CDY14HL maintains potent neutralization for diverse SARS-CoV-2 variants**

147 We next investigated whether the broad decoy affinity for SARS-CoV-2 variants observed using
148 the yeast display binding assay would translate to potent viral neutralization. We first examined
149 the Omicron VoC. Unlike previous variants, which contain one, two, or three RBD mutations,
150 the Omicron RBD differs from the ancestral strain by 15 amino acids (**Figure 2A**) (22). This
151 level of mutation has caused a reduction in the efficacy of first-generation vaccines and most of
152 the monoclonal antibodies developed for therapeutic and passive prophylaxis applications (23-
153 28). We used a lentivirus harboring a luciferase reporter gene and pseudotyped with the SARS-
154 CoV-2 spike protein from the Omicron strain to measure the neutralization potency (half-
155 maximal inhibitory concentration [IC50]) of purified CDY14HL-Fc decoy (**Figure 2B**).
156 CDY14HL-Fc neutralizes Omicron more potently than the ancestral strain (18 ng/ml vs. 35
157 ng/ml, **Figure 2C**). We extended this approach to include VoCs and variants of interest (VoI) not
158 previously evaluated. CDY14HL neutralized all SARS-CoV-2 strain pseudotypes tested,
159 including Lambda, Kappa, Delta, Delta +, Mu, and Zeta, with IC50 values near or below the
160 potency of the ancestral strain, Wuhan, against which it was engineered (**Figure 2C**).

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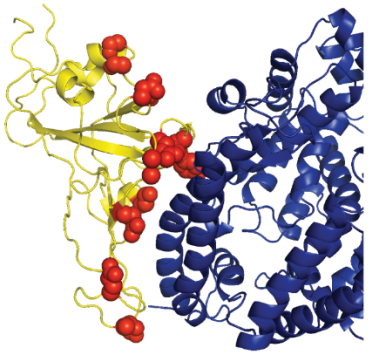

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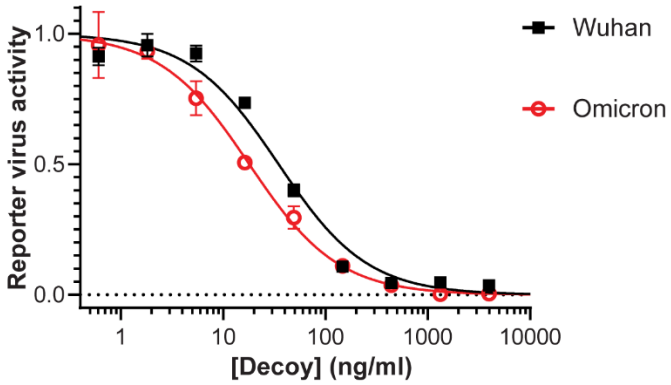

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RBD mutations	CoV-2 strain	IC50 (ng/ml)
Reference	ancestral (Wuhan-Hu1)	35
L452Q F490S	lambda	11
L452R E484Q	kappa	18
L452R T478K	delta	14
K417N L452R T478K	delta plus	10
G339D S371L S373P S375F K417N N440K G446S S477N T478K E484A Q493K G496S Q498R N501Y Y505H	omicron	18
R346K E484K N501Y	mu	21
E484K	zeta	37

Fig 2. CDY14HL maintains potent neutralization for diverse SARS-CoV-2 variants

(A) RBD amino acid positions mutated relative to the ancestral strain in the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 are highlighted in red spheres on the yellow RBD ribbon diagram. These mutations cluster around the interface with ACE2 (blue ribbons), as shown by the coordinates of the complex(36). (B) Viral neutralization assay using lentiviruses pseudotyped with the ancestral (Wuhan-Hu1) or Omicron variant spike protein. (C) Table of CDY14HL neutralization IC50 values collected for SARS-CoV-2 variant pseudotypes along with the RBD mutations of each variant.

167 **2.3 CDY14HL binds diverse ACE2-dependent CoVs**

168 Next, we evaluated the ability of CDY14HL to bind diverse RBDs from coronaviruses with
169 pandemic potential. We identified 10 *sarbecoviruses* isolated from bats in southern China and
170 Laos (12, 29) that are thought to utilize ACE2 as a receptor (**Figure 3A**). We cloned synthetic
171 RBD genes into the yeast display format for binding analysis. Additionally, we included the
172 RBD from the human coronavirus NL63, an alpha-CoV with a genetically distinct RBD that has
173 been shown to use ACE2 for cell entry (30). We determined the binding affinities of yeast-
174 displayed RBD to CDY14HL-Fc by flow cytometry. Remarkably, the decoy bound to all but one
175 strain with subnanomolar affinity (**Figure 3B**). Research has recently shown that the weakest
176 decoy binder in the group, RATG13, also binds ACE2 more weakly than other members of the
177 clade (31). This behavior suggests that affinity for the decoy and the endogenous ACE2 receptor
178 are closely linked, as we have previously observed (13).

179

180 These binding data are in broad agreement with our previous work demonstrating tight decoy
181 binding to RBDs from SARS-CoV-1 and WIV1-CoV [(13). In the case of SARS-CoV-1, both
182 decoy and wild-type (wt) ACE2 (32) binding were weaker than for SARS-CoV-2, although the
183 decoy more potently neutralized SARS-CoV-1 than SARS-CoV-2 (18 ng/ml vs. 37 ng/ml) (13).
184 Thus, decoy affinity measurements alone are not perfectly predictive of neutralizing potency.
185 Instead, the competitive binding of the viral spike for the decoy versus ACE2 receptors may
186 better predict neutralization.

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188 To assess this possibility, we employed a competitive binding assay between the decoy and
189 ACE2 receptor in the yeast system. We incubated RBD yeast with a low concentration of decoy
190 (1 nM of CDY14HL-hFc; 95 ng/ml) along with a 100-fold molar excess of wt-ACE2 (100 nM of
191 wt-ACE2-mFc, with a mouse Fc fusion to distinguish it from the decoy). We assessed the level
192 of decoy binding retained in the presence of receptor competition by flow cytometry and
193 compared these values across the set of RBDs (**Figure 3C**). The positive control, the RBD from
194 the well-neutralized ancestral SARS-CoV-2 strain, retained 32% of decoy binding in the
195 presence of saturating levels of wt-ACE2-mFc (**Figure 3D**). Similar to SARS-CoV-2, all
196 *sarbecovirus* RBDs retained >30% binding in the competition assay. Together with the observed
197 subnanomolar binding affinity, these data predict broad and potent neutralization of ACE2-
198 dependent beta-CoVs. The lone alpha-CoV in our study, NL63, retained a lower fraction of
199 decoy binding in the competition assay (23%, **Figure 3D**). Further study is needed to determine
200 whether this result indicates a lower neutralizing potency of the decoy for the genetically distinct
201 ACE2-dependent alpha-CoVs.

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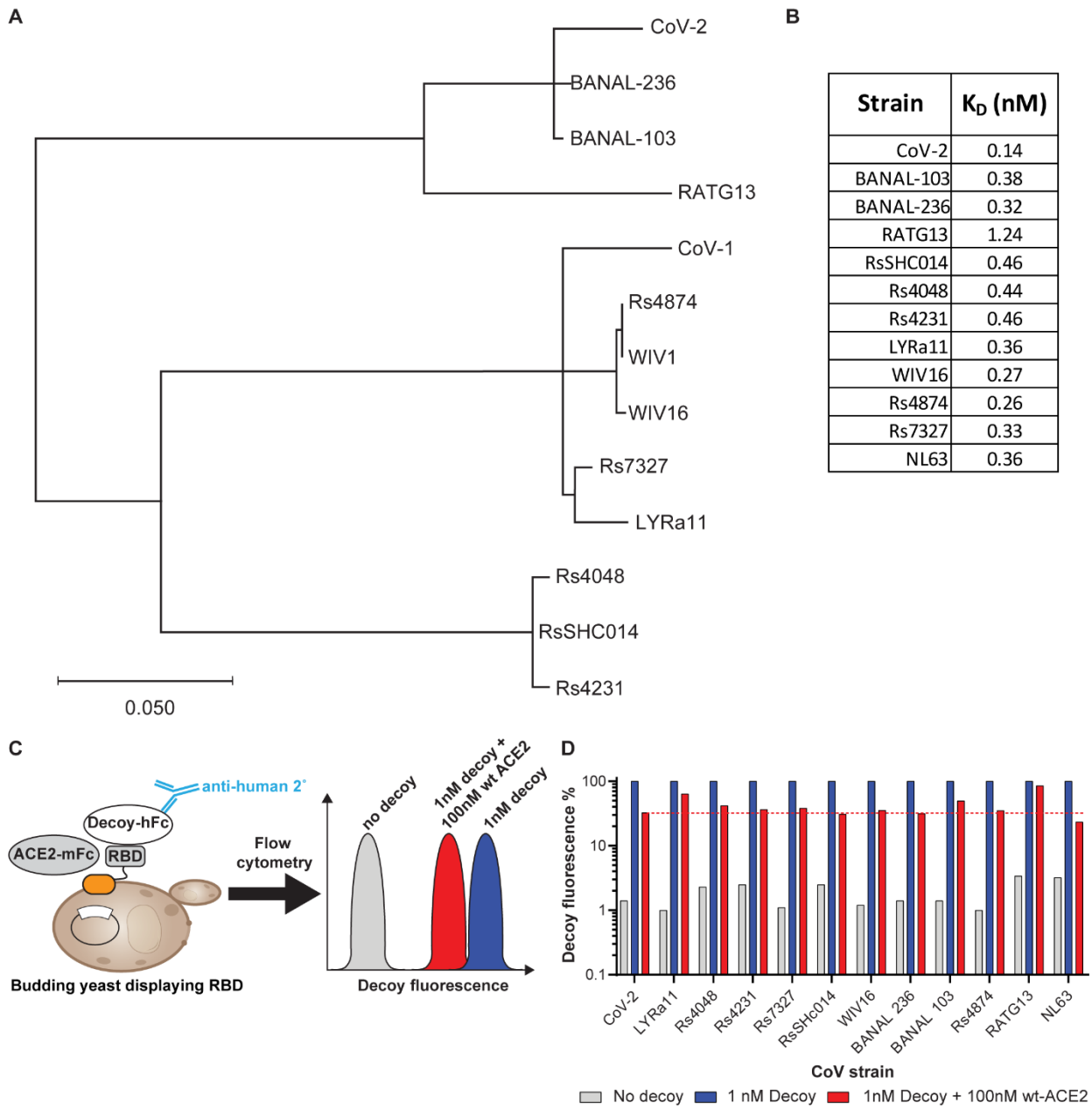

Strain	K_D (nM)
CoV-2	0.14
BANAL-103	0.38
BANAL-236	0.32
RATG13	1.24
RsSHC014	0.46
Rs4048	0.44
Rs4231	0.46
LYRa11	0.36
WIV16	0.27
Rs4874	0.26
Rs7327	0.33
NL63	0.36

Fig 3. CDY14HL binds diverse ACE2-dependent CoVs

(A) Phylogenetic tree of *sarbecovirus* RBDs created using the maximum likelihood method. (B) Table of dissociation equilibrium constants for the decoy interacting with various CoV RBDs. (C) Schematic for measuring the competition between decoy and endogenous ACE2 receptor using yeast-displayed RBDs. (D) Relative levels of decoy binding to diverse RBDs under several conditions, as assessed via the yeast display system.

209 **3. Discussion**

210 We previously reported the development of an affinity-matured, soluble ACE2 decoy, termed
211 CDY14HL-Fc. This decoy binds and neutralizes SARS-CoV-2 strains from the early pandemic
212 as well as the related pandemic *sarbecovirus*, SARS-CoV-1 (13). In this study, we have shown
213 that the affinity-matured decoy retains broad neutralizing activity against every SARS-CoV-2
214 variant tested, including Delta, Delta +, and Omicron.

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216 Our original strategy for deploying the decoy was developed in the context of preventing SARS-
217 CoV-2 infection. We accomplished this aim through the creation of an adeno-associated virus
218 (AAV) vector expressing the decoy that is administered via nasal administration to engineer
219 proximal airway cells to express neutralizing levels of the decoy at the airway surface (i.e., the
220 virus' entry point). This approach could be particularly useful for immunocompromised patients
221 who do not generate protective immunity following active vaccination. We are also developing
222 the decoy as a therapeutic protein for treatment, or possibly prevention in high-risk groups,
223 following parenteral administration.

224

225 The relentless emergence of new, highly transmissible SARS-CoV-2 variants in the current
226 pandemic reminds us of our vulnerability to the power of zoonosis and the intense selection
227 pressures experienced by pandemic viruses to evolve into more pathogenic and/or transmissible
228 variants. This experience suggests the importance of proactively developing countermeasures
229 against future pandemics, which will likely be caused by a coronavirus based on the recent
230 history of SARS, Middle East respiratory syndrome, and COVID-19. Indeed, CoVs constitute a

major fraction of pre-zoonotic viruses ranked by multiple genetic and environmental factors for pandemic potential (33). This threat compelled us to evaluate the competitive binding of our ACE2 decoy to spike proteins from a variety of animal coronaviruses with zoonotic potential, particularly *sarbecoviruses* that use ACE2 as a receptor. We were delighted to find that the decoy retained very high binding activity against spike proteins from every pre-emergent strain that was studied.

COVID-19 has illustrated how powerful the drive for viral fitness can be in circumventing immunity generated from previous infection, vaccines, and antibody therapeutics. This rapid evolution is substantially amplified in the setting of a global pandemic caused by a highly transmissible virus. The use of a decoy protein based on a soluble version of a viral receptor holds the promise of significantly restricting viral escape, as any mutation that diminishes decoy binding will likely also diminish receptor binding and thus viral fitness. We are quickly moving this ACE2 decoy into the clinic in the AAV platform as well as a protein therapeutic as a possible solution to COVID-19 variants and to prepare for future coronavirus outbreaks.

252 **4. Materials and Methods**

253 **4.1 CoV pseudotyped lentiviral neutralization assay**

254 Replication-incompetent lentiviruses pseudotyped with CoV spike proteins and packaging for a
255 Renilla luciferase reporter gene were purchased from Integral Molecular: RVP-701L Wuhan (lot
256 CL-114B), RVP-763L Delta (lot CL-267A), RVP-736L Zeta (lot CL-255A), RVP-730L Kappa
257 (lot CL-247A), RVP-768L Omicron (lot CL-297A), RVP-767L Mu (lot CL-274A), RVP-766L
258 Lambda (lot CL-259A), and RVP-765L Delta + (lot CL-258A). We performed neutralization
259 assays using human embryonic kidney 293T cells overexpressing ACE2 (Integral Molecular) as
260 previously described (13).

261

262 **4.2 Recombinant protein production**

263 To generate wt-ACE2-Fc for competitive binding assays, we cloned human ACE2 (1–615) fused
264 to a C-terminal mouse IgG2a Fc into pcDNA3.1. We transfected the plasmid into Expi293 cells
265 for expression. The supernatant was collected and exchanged to 0.1 M sodium phosphate, pH 7.2
266 and 150 mM NaCl buffer for purification on Protein A Sepharose 4B (ThermoFisher). The
267 protein was eluted in 0.1 M citric acid, pH 3.0 and neutralized in 1 M Tris, pH 9.0 before a final
268 buffer exchange to 25 mM HEPES pH 7.2 and 150 mM NaCl by size-exclusion chromatography
269 with Superose 6 resin (Cytiva). For these studies, we cloned the engineered CDY14HL 1–615
270 fragment in front of the human IgG1 Fc domain for expression and purification. We previously
271 characterized a decoy fusion to human IgG4 Fc (13), but found that Fc1 and Fc4 decoy fusions
272 behave similarly with respect to binding and neutralization (e.g., the IC50 values against Wuhan-
273 Hu1 pseudotypes were 37 ng/ml and 35 ng/ml for CDY14HL-Fc4 and CDY14HL-Fc1,
274 respectively).

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276 **4.3 Phylogenic tree construction**

277 The RBD sequences of the CoVs were taken from spike protein coding sequences downloaded
278 from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI). Using MEGA X (34), we
279 aligned the amino acid sequences in ClustalW and constructed a phylogenic tree using maximum
280 likelihood analysis.

281

282 **4.4 Yeast display binding assays**

283 The nucleic acid sequences of the CoV RBDs were taken from NCBI: CoV-2 (NC_045512.2),
284 NL63 (AY567487), LYRa11 (KF569996), Rs4048 (KY417144), Rs4231 (KY417146), Rs7327
285 (KY417151), RsSHC014 (KC881005), WIV16 (KT444582.1), BANAL-236 (MZ937003),
286 BANAL-103 (MZ937001), Rs4874 (KY417150), and RaTG13 (MN996532.2). We cloned the
287 RBDs into a plasmid between an upstream Aga2 gene and a downstream hemagglutinin (HA)
288 epitope tag with flexible GSG linkers. The plasmid has a low-copy centromeric origin similar to
289 that of pTCON2 (35). Plasmids were transformed into EBY100 using the Frozen-EZ Yeast
290 Transformation II Kit (Zymo). We grew colonies in SD-trp media before induction in log phase
291 for 24 hr at 30˚C in SG-CAA (35). For competition or direct binding assays, we incubated the
292 yeast with CDY14HL-Fc1 with or without wt-ACE-mFc for 30 min at 25˚C before staining the
293 sample with goat anti-human fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC; ThermoFisher A18812) and
294 rabbit anti-HA-PE (Cell Signaling Technology 14904S). We used phosphate-buffered saline with
295 0.1% bovine serum albumin for all staining and washes. For the titration of CDY14HL-Fc1, we
296 incubated the yeast with 1:10 dilution series of CDY14HL-Fc1 at 25˚C for 6 hr. The yeast were
297 analyzed on an ACEA NovoCyte flow cytometer. We determined the level of CDY14HL-Fc1

binding by taking the mean FITC signal for 500 RBD+ yeast cells collected for each condition. We fitted the decoy concentration versus the decoy binding signal in GraphPad Prism using a three-parameter fit to the binding isotherm.

Data Availability Statement

All data discussed in the manuscript are available in the main text.

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Author Contributions

J.J.S. – conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, visualization, writing-original, writing-review, and edits. S.L. – data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, validation, visualization, writing-original, writing-review, and edits. J.M.W. – conceptualization, funding acquisition, writing-original, writing-review, and edits.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

J.M.W. is a paid advisor to and holds equity in Scout Bio and Passage Bio. He also holds equity in the G2 Bio-associated asset companies and iECURE. He has sponsored research agreements with Amicus Therapeutics, Biogen, Elaaj Bio, FA212, G2 Bio, G2 Bio-associated asset companies, iECURE, Janssen, Passage Bio, and Scout Bio, which are licensees of Penn technology. J.M.W. and J.J.S. are inventors on patents that have been licensed to various biopharmaceutical companies and for which they may receive payments.

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