HOT TOPICS

Adult neurogenesis, cell cycle and drug discovery in psychiatry

For many years the production of new neurons in mammalian brain was thought to be restricted to development. It is now clear that neurogenesis does occur in adult mammals, including humans (Eriksson *et al*, 1998). Antidepressant drugs and procedures that reduce depression, such as electroconvulsive shock and exercise, increase neurogenesis. The relationships among adult neurogenesis, antidepressant drugs, and depression have generated considerable interest and controversy (Duman, 2004; Scharfman and Hen, 2007).

p21Cip1, a cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor, restrains cell-cycle progression and proliferation. It is found in neuroblasts and newly developing neurons in the subgranular zone of the hippocampus (Pechnick et al, 2008). Chronic treatment with the tricyclic antidepressant imipramine decreases p21Cip1 transcript and protein levels and stimulates neurogenesis in this region. Moreover, mice lacking p21Cip1 have increased rates of hippocampal neurogenesis. Thus, p21Cip1 restrains neurogenesis in the hippocampus, and antidepressant-induced stimulation of neurogenesis might be due to decreased p21Cip1 expression. Cell-cycle regulation occurs downstream from the primary site of action of antidepressants, suggesting that new therapeutic strategies might directly target cell-cycle proteins.

Currently, neurogenesis is a phenomenon in search of a function. There are four key questions that must be answered prior to the implementation of effective treatment strategies directed at altering neurogenesis. First, what is the role of adult neurogenesis in normal brain function? In humans, neurogenesis occurs in the hippocampus and olfactory bulb (Gould, 2007). Advances in imaging technology would help establish the conditions and pathological states

under which neurogenesis is altered and whether neurogenesis is a latent process in other brain regions. This information is important because drug-induced stimulation of neurogenesis could disrupt fundamental neurobiological processes. Second, are changes in behavior and/or functional deficits in any disease state due to decreased (or increased) neurogenesis? Excessive neurogenesis could result in inappropriate integration into existing neural networks and could underlie pathological conditions such as epilepsy (Scharfman and Hen, 2007). Drug-induced stimulation of neurogenesis might have unforeseen adverse consequences.

Third, are basal and drug-induced neurogenesis age-dependent in humans? In rodents, the rate of neurogenesis decreases from adolescence to adulthood, and the decline is very steep (Abrous et al, 2008). If the rate of neurogenesis is profoundly decreased in older humans, then drugs targeted at stimulating neurogenesis might have limited efficacy in that population. Fourth, are there adverse consequences associated with long-term stimulation of neurogenesis? Long-term and unrelenting stimulation of mitosis without appropriate differentiation and migration could lead to unexpected problems. In addition, it is possible that adult neural stem cells have finite proliferation potentials. Long-term stimulation of neurogenesis might eventually produce premature exhaustion of neuronal precursors, the subsequent loss of therapeutic efficacy and premature 'aging' in the system.

There is a growing list of drugs and behavioral procedures that can stimulate or decrease neurogenesis. Modulating neurogenesis could be a new therapeutic target for the treatment of psychiatric disorders; however, more fundamental information on neurogenesis in humans needs to be obtained to design rational therapeutic strategies and avoid unforeseen adverse consequences.

Robert N Pechnick^{1,2,3} and Vera Chesnokova^{4,5}

¹Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, CA, USA;

²Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, David Geffen School of Medicine, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA;

³Brain Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA;

⁴Division of Endocrinology, Department of Medicine, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, CA, USA; ⁵Department of Medicine, David Geffen School of Medicine, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA E-mail: pechnickr@cshs.org

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Targeting nicotinic receptor antagonists as novel pharmacotherapies for tobacco dependence and relapse

Tobacco dependence is a significant health concern and the most preven-

table cause of death in the United States. Nicotine, the principal tobacco alkaloid, activates nicotinic receptors (nAChRs) on dopamine terminals in the mesolimbic and nigrostriatal systems to evoke dopamine release, leading to reward and tobacco dependence. Bupropion, which inhibits both neurotransmitter transporters and acts as a nAChR antagonist, has benefit as a smoking cessation agent. In addition, mecamylamine, a noncompetitive antagonist at both central and peripheral nAChRs, has shown benefit in clinical trials, but is limited by anticholinergic side effects because of its lack of nAChR selectivity. Bupropion and mecamylamine provide proof of the concept that nAChR antagonists have efficacy in treating nicotine addiction; however, high relapse rates indicate a continuing need for alternative pharmacotherapies.

Our hypothesis is that discovery of selective antagonists targeted at neuronal nAChRs mediating nicotineevoked neurotransmitter release, which mediates the reinforcing effects of nicotine, will provide clinically effective smoking cessation agents, circumventing unwanted side effects. The current pharmacological approach using a subtype-selective nAChR antagonist to block reversibly the specific nAChR subtype mediating the reinforcing effects of nicotine is similar to employing nAChR subunit deletion to prevent the expression of these nAChRs. In this regard, landmark work has shown that in β -2 subunit knockout mice, targeted injection into the ventral tegmental area of a lentiviral vector that efficiently expresses β -2 subunit protein, restores both nicotine-evoked dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens and nicotine reinforcement, providing convincing evidence that β -2-containing nAChRs expressed specifically in the ventral tegmental area are important in the reinforcing effects of nicotine (Molles et al. 2006).

Because nicotine interacts with all nAChR subtypes, discovery of subtype-selective nAChR antagonists that inhibit nicotine-evoked dopamine release was initiated using nicotine as the structural scaffold. Simple addition of an N-n-alkyl group converted nicotine from an agonist to an antagonist, and subtype selectivity began to emerge depending on the number of methylene groups in the *n*-alkyl chain (Dwoskin et al, 2004). The classic discovery that the bis-tri-alkylammonium nAChR channel blockers, hexamethonium and decamethonium, exhibit subtype selectivity between ganglionic and muscle-type nAChRs led us to use a similar approach by generating a sub-library of small molecules consisting of a bis-nicotinium analog structure, incorporating a variety of head groups and diverse linkers varying in length, unsaturation, and polarity. From this novel sub-library, a new lead compound, N,N'-dodecyl-1, 12-diyl-bis-3-picolinium dibromide (bPiDDB), emerged. bPiDDB potently inhibited nicotineevoked dopamine release from superfused rat striatal slices (Dwoskin et al, 2008a). Using microdialysis, systemically administered bPiDDB also inhibited the nicotine-induced increase in extracellular dopamine in nucleus accumbens (Rahman et al, 2007). Thus, following in vitro and in vivo peripheral administration, bPiDDB decreased nicotine-evoked dopamine release. Utilizing radiolabeled bPiDDB, we also demonstrated its brain bioavailability by the bloodbrain barrier choline transporter (Albayati et al, 2008).

Investigation of the behavioral pharmacology of bPiDDB revealed that this compound decreases nicotine-induced hyperactivity in nicotinesensitized rats, a response associated previously with enhanced nicotineevoked dopamine release in nucleus accumbens. Since bPiDDB did not reduce activity when administered alone in nicotine-sensitized rats, the decrease in nicotine-induced hyperactivity is not due to nonspecific motor impairment, but rather likely reflects inhibition of nicotine-evoked dopamine release. Moreover, bPiDDB decreases intravenous nicotine selfadministration in rats (Neugebauer et al, 2006). Surprisingly, bPiDDB did not block the discriminative stimulus effects of nicotine, indicating that bPiDDB dissociates the rewarding and discriminative stimulus properties of nicotine (Dwoskin et al, 2008a). Following extinction of nicotine selfadministration, bPiDDB also attenuated nicotine-induced reinstatement of nicotine-seeking behavior in rats (Dwoskin et al, 2008b). Taken together, the effectiveness of bPiDDB in decreasing both nicotine self-administration and reinstatement designates bPiDDB as a lead in our search for nAChR antagonists that may be a useful as treatments for tobacco dependence and relapse.

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Linda P Dwoskin¹ and Michael T Bardo¹

¹University of Kentucky National Cooperative Drug Discovery Group, Lexington, KY, USA E-mail: Idwoskin@email.uky.edu

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The University of Kentucky holds patents on N,N'dodecyl-1,12-diyl-bis-3-picolinium dibromide. A potential royalty stream to LPD may occur consistent with University of Kentucky policy. The authors declare that over the past three years LD has received compensation from Boston University, Emory University, Meharry Medical College, the Universities of Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Mississippi, Michigan, Nebraska, New Mexico as well as Yaupon Therapeutics Inc., and MB received compensation from Oregon Health Sciences University, University of Nebraska, University of Minnesota, Duke University, Morehead State University, Rutgers University, Medical College of Georgia, Centre College, Concordia University, Kansas University, University of Cincinnati, Yaupon Therapeutics, Inc., US World Meds and Targacept Inc.

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RNA editing as a therapeutic target for CNS disorders

The conversion of adenosine to inosine (A-to-I) by RNA editing is a widespread RNA processing event by which genomically encoded sequences are altered through site-specific deamination of adenosine residue(s) by a family of enzymes referred to as adenosine deaminases that act on RNA (ADARs). Notable targets of RNA editing in the CNS include transcripts encoding subunits of the AMPA and kainate (KA) subtypes of glutamate receptor, the $\alpha 3$ subunit of the GABA_A receptor, the serotonin 2C (5 HT_{2C}) receptor, and the K_v1.1 voltage-gated potassium channel. RNA editing can modulate the functional properties of the encoded protein products and variations in the editing of glutamate receptor subunit and 5 HT_{2C} mRNAs have been observed in several CNS disorders (Rula and Emeson, 2007), suggesting that modulation of RNA editing in the nervous system could represent a therapeutic strategy for the treatment of nervous system dysfunction.

A failure to edit GluR2 transcripts results in Ca²⁺-permeable AMPA receptors that can lead to excitotoxicity. Recent studies have observed a significant reduction in Q/R site editing for affected motor neurons isolated from patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, suggesting that glutamatergic excitotoxicity may underlie the selective neuronal death of these motor neurons (Kwak and Kawahara, 2005). RNA editing of another site within GluR2 transcripts (R/G site) alters both the recovery rate and desensitization kinetics of AMPA receptors containing edited subunits (Rula and Emeson, 2007) and increased editing has been observed in the hippocampus of patients with temporal lobe epilepsies (Vollmar et al, 2004). Significant alterations in KA receptor editing and ADAR2 protein expression also have been seen following seizures in humans and rats, and genetically modified animals solely expressing a nonedited GluR6(Q) subunit demonstrate increased susceptibility to KA-induced seizures (Vissel et al, 2001), suggesting KA receptor editing may modulate seizure vulnerability.

Editing of 5 HT_{2C} receptor transcripts can generate up to 24 receptor isoforms that not only have distinct functional properties affecting constitutive activity and receptor/G-protein coupling, but also differ in their pattern of CNS expression (Rula and Emeson, 2007). Altered editing patterns have been observed in suicide victims with a history of major depression and in response to antidepressant treatment (Niswender et al, 2001; Gurevich et al, 2002), suggesting that editing may be involved in affective disorders and the maintenance of appropriate serotonergic neurotransmission.

Although no conclusive data have demonstrated that changes in RNA editing are causal for human brain disorders, the role of ADARs in the function of numerous receptors/channels highlights the potential for ADAR activity as a future target for the treatment of CNS dysfunction. Therapeutic modulation of A-to-I editing patterns for specific substrates is complicated by the fact that only two ADAR proteins have been shown to catalyze all known editing events in mammals, predicting that broad alterations in ADAR activity could result in untoward effects. Observations that RNA editing changes in CNS disorders may occur in specific brain regions, or even subpopulations of neurons, suggest that substrate- or region-selective approaches to modify editing represent more promising areas of research for the treatment of CNS disorders.

Michael V Morabito^{1,2} and Ronald B Emeson^{1,2}

¹Department of Pharmacology, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA and

²Center for Molecular Neuroscience, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

E-mail: ron.emeson@vanderbilt.edu

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The authors declare that except for income received from their primary employer, no financial support or compensation has been received from any individual or corporate entity over the past 3 years for research or professional service and there are no personal financial holdings that could be perceived as constituting a potential conflict of interest.

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