Discovering and targeting the basic mechanism of neurodegeneration: The role of peptides from the C-terminus of acetylcholinesterase
Non-hydrolytic effects of ache: The actions of peptides derived from the C-terminal and their relevance to neurodegeneration

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A R T I C L E   I N F O
Article history:
Available online 3 April 2013

Keywords:
C-terminal peptide
Alzheimer's
Alpha-7 receptor

A B S T R A C T
Acetylcholinesterase (AChE) is now well-established widely as a signalling molecule with non-hydrolytic functions including trophic activity in a diverse variety of situations in both neural and non-neural tissues. We have focussed on the observation that AChE, operating as a trophic agent independent of its enzymatic action, does indeed trigger calcium entry into neurons. It is possible that AChE has a dual non-classical action that ranges along a trophic-toxic axis, depending on amount, duration of availability and, most significantly, age. The neurodegenerative diseases could therefore be viewed as aberrant activation of developmental mechanisms with ‘non-cholinergic’ AChE as a, perhaps the, pivotal molecule. We have identified two peptides that could be cleaved from the C-terminus of T-AChE, one (T14), within the other (T30), and which have a strong sequence homology to the comparable region of beta-amyloid whilst the inert residue within the T30 sequence (‘T15’) acts as a control, and is without effect. We have subsequently been able to ascribe the trophic-toxic actions of the both T14 and T30 peptides to the modulation of calcium influx via an allosteric site on the alpha-7 nicotinic acetylcholine receptor (α7-nAChR).

If the scenario described here is indeed the primary mechanism of neurodegeneration, then interception of the actions of the ‘non-cholinergic’ AChE-peptides T14 and T30 at the α7-nAChR, would be a promising novel therapy for arresting and stabilising cell loss in Alzheimer’s disease, whereas detection of the peptides ideally in the blood, could provide a sensitive surrogate marker. If the marker was sensitive enough to be detected pre-symptomatically in a routine blood test, then the medication for arresting further cell loss could be initiated at that time, and the symptoms would never appear. This dual approach of identifying the marker and then intercepting its further action, could thus amount to an effective treatment for Alzheimer’s and other neurodegenerative diseases.

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1. Introduction

There has been no new drug introduced to combat Alzheimer’s disease specifically, nor neurodegeneration more generally, over the last 15 years. The reason is that as yet, there is no accepted nor proven basic mechanism that could consequently be targeted pharmacologically. The ‘cholinergic hypothesis’ posits that the key issue is a deficit of acetylcholine, due to death of cholinergic neurons. However this theory fails to account for a well know discrepancy: not all areas of the brain affected by Alzheimer’s are cholinergic, nor are all cholinergic areas of the brain affected in the disease. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the current treatment of choice, the AChE inhibitor Aricept, does not prevent the continuing death of cells, since it merely tackles a symptom, i.e. the dwindling availability of a transmitter.

The other main contender for accounting for the process of neurodegeneration is the ‘amyloid hypothesis’, where neuronal death is attributed to disruption of the cell membrane by toxic deposits of amyloid, a characteristic feature of the post-mortem Alzheimer brain, and resulting from abnormal cleavage of amyloid precursor protein. However, the ‘amyloid hypothesis’ does not explain the neuronal selectivity for death seen in neurodegenerative diseases nor the absence of amyloid deposits in animal models of dementia, nor indeed the occurrence of amyloid in certain brain regions e.g. cerebellum, where cognitive deficits are not apparent. Moreover there is a lack of correlation between amyloid plaques, neurodegeneration and cognitive impairment [17].

Where is our approach different? First, our starting point is based not on discrepancies in post-mortem brains, but on a
hypothosis for the basic mechanism of neurodegenerative diseases in general, although examples may well be drawn from Alzheimer's Disease specifically since it has been so intensively studied. Secondly, our approach will explain previously puzzling facts, i.e. neuronal selectivity where only certain brain cells seem prone to neurodegeneration, and the frequent co-pathology of Alzheimer's with Parkinson's Disease. Thirdly, by identifying the potential pivotal mechanism of neurodegeneration, a twin-pronged strategy will be possible: the identification of a biomarker in blood that could be used to detect disease before symptoms present coupled with the development of an oral medication for stopping any further cell loss. Each goal on its own, if successful, would be a great advance: but in combination, this two stage approach would amount to an effective ‘cure’.

2. A new approach

One clue for identifying the basic mechanism of neurodegeneration, could be that only certain neuronal groups are primarily vulnerable. Moreover, the different cell groups prone to degeneration in Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Motor Neurone Diseases nonetheless form a continuous 'hub' extending from brainstem to forebrain that send diffuse projections upwards and outwards to higher cerebral centres. Hence, despite their heterogeneity in transmitters, these neuronal groups have been collectively dubbed 'Global' neurons to distinguish them from the more familiar and localised circuits of cells in most other parts of the brain, such as the cerebellum, thalamus, cortex etc. (Fig. 1). These selectively vulnerable neuronal groups have been collectively dubbed 'Global' neurons to distinguish them from the more familiar and localised circuits of cells in most other parts of the brain, such as the cerebellum, thalamus, cortex etc. (Fig. 1). These selectively vulnerable neuronal groups have a critical feature in common that might explain the puzzling and as yet unanswered question as to why only these cells succumb to progressive death whilst their counterpart elsewhere in the brain, even when damaged by stroke, do not: they have retained a developmental mechanism for regrowth. Interestingly enough these same groups of cells had been previously identified by Michael Rossor some thirty years ago when he suggested that neurodegenerative diseases could be viewed as dysfunctions in the 'isodendritic core' [18].

Global neurons differ in some very fundamental and telling ways, for example their embryonic provenance – the basal rather than the alar plate. However, perhaps the difference of most relevance here, is that Global neurons selectively retain a robust plasticity into and throughout adulthood, accompanied by a specific sensitivity to substances aiding and sustaining growth – 'trophic factors'. In the developing brain, trophic factors work by stimulating calcium influx, which triggers a cascade of events within the cell, eventually resulting in selective differentiation and growth. However, in higher doses or with longer exposures, sustained calcium entry can be toxic to neurons [8]. Most significantly, a further determining factor in whether or not calcium entry triggers trophic or toxic effects, is age: as neurons mature, an erstwhile trophic level of intracellular calcium becomes lethal [9].

We are therefore proposing that the neurodegenerative process is in fact an aberrantly activated process of development: in support of this hypothesis, a hyper-trophy of the brainstem 'hub' neurons has actually been reported in Alzheimer brains [5]. If large areas of this hub are damaged, then more than one neurodegenerative disease will present, as occurs in the frequently seen but never as yet explained cases of co-pathology with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. Could there be a common developmental mechanism restricted specifically to all Global neurons irrespective of the different transmitters they use? If so, and if indeed it accounted for the vulnerability of these cells to neurodegeneration, then identification and characterisation of such a mechanism would be the first step towards a novel approach to combating neurodegenerative diseases.

Interestingly, all the neurons within the vulnerable hub, despite transmitter heterogeneity, all contain the familiar enzyme acetylcholinesterase (AChE). AChE is therefore present in neurons where it would be unable to perform its normal function, since such cells as the noradrenergic locus coeruleus, the dopaminergic substantia nigra, or the serotonergic raphe nuclei, in no cases contain the usual substrate, acetylcholine. A further unexpected deviation from its normal, enzymatic role is that the AChE is actually released from Global neurons, presumably as some kind of inter-cellular messenger in its own right. Our group have been among the first to pioneer the concept, and provide substantial evidence, that AChE does indeed have novel, non-classical actions including a trophic one of enhancement of neurite outgrowth.

In general, AChE is now widely and well-established as a signalling molecule that has trophic activity in a diverse variety of situations in both neural and non-neural tissue. One particular contribution of our group has been to show that AChE, operating as a trophic agent independent of its enzymatic action, does indeed trigger calcium entry into neurons. It is possible therefore that within Global neurons, AChE has a dual non-classical action that ranges along a trophic-toxic axis, depending on amount, duration of availability and, most significantly, age. If standard neurons are damaged in adulthood, as in a stroke, others will compensate functionally. In contrast, Global neurons will respond by calling on their trophic resources in an attempt to regenerate. But because the subsequent calcium influx will be lethal in the older, mature cells, the resulting damage will trigger further attempts to compensate in a pernicious cycle that characterises neurodegeneration. The neurodegenerative diseases could therefore be viewed as aberrant activation of developmental mechanisms with 'non-cholinergic' AChE as a, perhaps the, pivotal molecule (Fig. 2).

3. A bioactive peptide

The next crucial issue has been to identify the salient part of the AChE molecule, responsible for these non-cholinergic actions, i.e. the trophic-toxic effects. We have identified two peptides that could be cleaved from the C-terminus of T-AChE, one (T14), within the other (T30), and which have a strong sequence homology to the comparable region of beta-amyloid (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 1. The ‘hub’ of neurons primarily affected in neurodegenerative disorders.](image-url)
Why should this peptide be viewed as the more salient, over amyloid itself? First, unlike amyloid, AChE and its peptide are secreted directly from within the cell into the extracellular space, hence acting as a signalling molecule; secondly AChE peptide was a selective signalling molecule for certain cell groups, the very same ones primarily vulnerable in neurodegeneration; thirdly, unlike the ACxhE-peptide, amyloid has a much wider, less specific distribution in the brain and is even found in non-neurodegenerative brain tissue – and hence unlikely to be the triggering compound.

The AChE C-terminal peptide ‘T14’ has been originally identified as being the salient part of the AChE molecule responsible for its range of non-hydrolytic actions; the synthetic 14mer peptide analogue, and subsequently the larger, more stable, and more potent amino acid sequence in which it is embedded (T30) display actions comparable to those reported for ‘non-cholinergic’ AChE, where scrambled peptide variants, the butyrylcholinesterase equivalent, or the inert residue within the T30 sequence (‘T15’) are all without effect (Table 1). It is hard to view the peptide as operating other than completely independently of its parent AChE molecule: in

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Rat brain hippocampus</td>
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<td>Trophic – ↑ neuron outgrowth</td>
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<tr>
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<td>↑ AChE</td>
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<td>Frog oocytes</td>
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<td>Toxic – ↑ cell death</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rat brain hippocampus</td>
<td>Tissue culture Immunohistochemistry</td>
<td>↓ neuron growth 50%; induces apoptosis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rat astroglia</td>
<td>Tissue culture Immunohistochemistry</td>
<td>↓ neuron growth 75%</td>
<td></td>
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<td>PC12 cells</td>
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<td>labelled binding to α7-receptor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enzyme assay</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>↓ cell growth 30%</td>
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normal adult brain, the ‘G4’ tetramer of four catalytic subunits, whilst in development and Alzheimer’s there is a disproportionate level of ‘G1’ [1], the monomer lacking a disulphide bond within which the peptide would reside. As well as validating the concept that neurodegeneration is an aberrant form of development, this finding suggests that the peptide is indeed cleaved in certain scenarios. Moreover, the entire ACHE molecule is unlikely to bind to the receptor in its entirety, as documented for the peptide itself.

4. The peptide target

We have suggested that the all-important molecular target for ACHE-peptide is a secondary, modularly (‘allosteric’) site on a specific receptor (the nicotinic alpha-7 receptor). This receptor would be an attractive candidate for therapeutic intervention, since (i) it is one of the most powerful calcium ionophores in the brain; (ii) it is co-expressed along with ACHE in precisely the same highly transient time period in various brain regions during development, (iii) it can bind the amyloid peptide already related to Alzheimer’s disease; (iv) it can operate independent of ACh, with choline as an alternative primary ligand. Since choline would be derived from the diet, the binding of ACHE-peptides at an allosteric site on the \( \alpha7 \)-nACHR would be a potent means for modulating calcium into neurons, no longer requiring any classic cholinergic transmission at all, and available throughout the ‘hub’ of the vulnerable Global neurons. Moreover, the neuronal death seen in Alzheimer’s disease has been linked to a dysfunction in choline uptake mechanisms (Novakova et al. [15]). We have shown [19] that the actions of the peptide are indeed sensitive to blockade of the alpha-7 receptor, in the nanomolar range, but such evidence could only be regarded as indirect. Subsequently, we obtained evidence that the peptides directly impact on receptor binding and expression: indeed, within 24 h, application of ACHE peptide leads to a marked enhancement of the alpha-7 receptor on the external plasmamembrane [4]. If indeed neurodegeneration is an aberrant form of development, and the C-terminal ACHE peptides are pivotal in the trophic-toxic action via an identified receptor site, then new avenues could open for devising a new approach to neurodegeneration: identification of a pre-symptomatic biomarker (the peptide) coupled with interception at the alpha-7 receptor thereby stabilising any further cell loss, an effective ‘cure’.

References