Prion Protein as Copper-Binding Protein at the Synapse

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1. Introduction

Various approaches have been taken to study the function of prion proteins. Biochemical methods were applied to search for a binding partner of PrP C which is attached to the cell surface by a glycosylphosphatidylinositol GPI anchor (1). The glial fibrillary acidic protein was one of the first possible binding partners to be described (2) followed by Bcl-2 (3,4), molecular chaperones (5), amyloid precursor-like protein 1 (6), the 37-kDa laminin receptor (7) and a 66-kDa membrane protein which has not been characterized in more detail (8). However, it has not been possible to show any biological significance for PrP C binding of these proteins. Based on biochemical analyses of chicken PrP C, Harris et al. (9) hypothesized that PrP C may play a role in the regulation of the expression of cholinergic receptors at the neuromuscular endplate.

Biochemical, morphological, and electrophysiological studies of the first PrP gene (Prnp) knockout mouse (Prnp0/0 mouse), which was generated by Büeler et al. (10), showed a regular expression of the acetylcholine receptor (11). Except for changes in its circadian rhythm (12,13) and increased sensitivity to seizures (14), this Prnp0/0 mouse showed no developmental or behavioral changes (10). These findings were confirmed in studies of another Prnp0/0 line generated by Manson et al. (15). The lack of severe defects in these two lines of Prnp0/0 mice was ascribed to adaptation, because PrP C was absent throughout embryogenesis. However, transgenic mice expressing inducible PrP C-
transgenes that were rendered PrP^C-deficient as adults by administration of
doxycycline have remained healthy for more than 1.5 yr (16). A third Prnp^0/0
mouse generated by Sakaguchi et al. (17) showed progressive ataxia and loss
of Purkinje cells in mice aged more than 70 wk. Also, a fourth independently
generated Prnp^0/0 mouse (18,19) exhibits ataxia and Purkinje cell degenera-
tion. Weissmann (20) suggested that additional deletions of intronic sequences
of Prnp may play a role in this knockout line. Most recently the upregulation of
a novel PrP^C-like protein, designated Doppel, whose gene is located 16 kb
downstream of the mouse PrP, has been speculated to be the cause of Purkinje
cell degeneration observed in two of the Prnp^0/0 mouse lines (21). Even though
the hypothesis of the interaction of prion proteins with cholinergic receptors
thus could not be confirmed, the studies of Harris et al. (9) indicated that PrP^C
is enriched at the neuromuscular end-plate, i.e. at synaptic endings. Indeed
immunohistochemistry of PrP^C-overexpressing transgenic mice reveal a syn-
aptic expression pattern of PrP^C (22,23). PrP^C is predominantly expressed in
regions of high synaptic density, such as the inner and outer plexiform layer of
the retina or the cerebellar molecular layer (Fig. 1), in contrast to earlier studies
in which a predominantly somatic expression of PrP^C was described (24–26).
Further evidence for a preferentially synaptic location of the prion protein in
the central nervous system was shown in immunoelectron microscopic studies
by Fournier et al. (27) and Salès et al. (28). Electron microscopic evidence for
a synaptic location of PrP^C has proven very difficult, however. Thus, it was
necessary to use embedding techniques leading to destruction of cell mem-
branes. As a consequence, the electron microscopic evidence for PrP^C location
in synaptic vesicles has been disputed. Biochemical studies showed that the
prion protein is located predominantly in the synaptic plasma membrane (23)
and, to a lesser extent, in the synaptic vesicle fraction. Fig. 2 shows a Western
blot analysis of PrP^C expression in various synaptic fractions. The enrichment
of PrP^C in the synaptic plasma membrane fraction is evident (Fig. 2A, lane 4).

2. Electrophysiological Studies

Electrophysiological studies in Prnp^0/0 mice have been used to identify the
function of PrP^C in neurons. Collinge et al. (29) were the first to describe a
change in long-term potentiation (LTP), i.e., a change of synaptic transmission
after repetitive stimulation in the Prnp^0/0 mouse generated by Büeler et al. (10).
This finding was confirmed in a second Prnp^0/0 mouse generated by Manson et
al. (30). However, Lledo et al. (31) did not observe LTP changes.

In addition, Collinge et al. (29) found altered kinetics of the inhibitory
postsynaptic currents (IPSCs), i.e., a prolongation of the rise time of GABA_A
receptor-mediated IPSCs in hippocampal neurons of Prnp^0/0 mice. The authors
argue that this may be caused by changes in the GABA_A receptor on the
postsynaptic membrane since a decrease of the amplitude of stimulated inhibitory postsynaptic currents and a shift of the reverse potential of GABA_A receptor-mediated chloride currents were also observed. Lledo et al. (31) did not confirm this finding for hippocampal neurons of the same knockout line. Also, a more detailed analysis of the kinetics of GABA_A-induced currents in outside-out patches from cerebellar Purkinje cells of Prnp^{0/0} mice did not reveal significant deviations from control cells (32). Moreover, studies on the kinetics of spontaneous inhibitory postsynaptic currents (sIPSCs) in cerebellar Purkinje cells of Prnp^{0/0} mice initially showed significant differences between the rise time of wild-type and that of Prnp^{0/0} Purkinje cells (32). Further experiments with Purkinje cells of younger animals, with a better voltage clamp (and consequently a more exact estimation of the rise time (33)) showed a significant increase in the rise time, from 1.9 ms in wild-type to 2.81 ms in Prnp^{0/0} mouse Purkinje cells (Fig. 3D; P = 0.001). No differences were found in the decay time (Fig. 3E). Evidence for the hypothesis that the increased rise time is caused by loss of the PrP_C was found in studies on the rise time in Prnp^{0/0} mice that were Prnp reconstituted (Fig. 3D; Tg35; (34)). The IPSC rise time in Purkinje cells of these animals corresponds to the rise time in wildtype ani-
To clarify the question of whether the increase in rise time in Prnp0/0 mice is caused by the loss of PrPC expression in the presynapse or postsynapse, an additional Tg line, which expresses PrPC only at the presynapse (Tg20) was examined. In this line, rise times corresponding to the wildtype were found (Fig. 3D). Thus, it appears that the loss of the presynaptic PrP C expression at the inhibitory synapse is responsible for the prolongation of the rise time of inhibitory postsynaptic currents in Prnp0/0 mice.

Independent of the findings at inhibitory synapses, Colling et al. (35) described an additional electrophysiological phenotype in Prnp0/0 mice, i.e. a disturbance of the late afterhyperpolarization current, I_{AHP}. This current is involved in action potential repolarization and therefore influences the frequency of action potentials. Colling et al. (35) reasoned that the disturbed I_{AHP} in Prnp0/0 mice is caused by a decreased conductance of calcium-activated...
Presynaptic PrP<sup>C</sup> expression modulates the kinetics of inhibitory postsynaptic currents (IPSC). (A), Spontaneous IPSCs from a Purkinje cell of a 10-d-old wild-type mouse using the patch-clamp technique, as described (32). (B), Using the effect of 10 µM bicucullin, a γ-aminobutyric acid A (GABA<sub>A</sub>) receptor blocker, it is shown that the synaptic currents are inhibitory GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor-mediated conductances. (C), rise time and decay time in wildtype IPSCs. During rise time, there is a linear increase of GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor-mediated current from 10 to 90% of the maximum (gray line a). The decay time (τ) is calculated from the kinetics of an exponential function (gray line b) that shows the best fit to the actual decay of the current. (D), Rise time in WT, Prnp<sup>0/0</sup>, Tg20, and Tg35. Shown is the mean of results from each of 10 measurements in Purkinje cells of 9–12d-old animals. Each point corresponds to the rise time of inhibitory postsynaptic currents of a Purkinje cell (mean of the rise time of 20 consecutive IPSCs for each cell). The mean of all measurements is shown as black line. The IPSC rise time is significantly prolonged in Prnp<sup>0/0</sup> mice compared to wild-type mice (p = 0.001, t-test according to Welch). No significant differences were found among the rise times of wild-type, Tg20, and Tg35 cells. (E), Means of the decay time of IPSCs in wildtype, Prnp<sup>0/0</sup>, Tg20 and Tg35. There are no differences among these mouse lines.

potassium channels, which may be related to a disturbed intracellular calcium homeostasis. This concept is based on findings by Whatley et al. (36) that indicated an effect of recombinant PrP<sup>C</sup> on the intracellular calcium concentration
in synaptosomes. Indeed, a study of calcium-activated potassium currents in Purkinje cells of Prnp0/0 mice showed a reduced amplitude of these currents (Herms et al., in preparation). Further investigations of transgenic animals which were Prnp reconstituted on the Prnp0/0 background (Tg35, Tg20) showed that loss of PrPC expression in Purkinje cells is responsible for this finding (37). Thus, a reconstitution of the amplitude of calcium-activated potassium conductances was observed in a transgenic line that shows overexpression of PrP C in all neurons (Tg35), whereas a transgenic line that overexpresses PrPC in all neurons but Purkinje cells, showed no reconstitution of the amplitude. The subsequent microfluorometric investigation of the intracellular calcium homeostasis in Prnp0/0 mice confirmed that the reduction of calcium-activated potassium currents is probably caused by reduced calcium release from intracellular calcium-sensitive calcium stores (37) (Herms et al., in preparation).

3. The Role of Copper

The cause of the observed electrophysiological alterations in Prnp0/0 mice is not yet known. They may be related to the decreased copper concentration in synaptic membranes of Prnp0/0 mice (Fig. 4, [23]). The N-terminus of PrPC has

Fig. 4. Copper concentration in synaptosomes correlates with PrPC expression. The copper concentrations in whole-brain homogenates and synaptosomal fractions from wild-type (open columns), Prnp0/0 (black columns), and Tg20 (gray columns) mice were studied by atomic absorption spectroscopy. Shown are the mean and SE of the arithmetic mean of 3–7 preparations from each of five brains of age-matched (2 ± 0.4 mo) female animals of various lines. The copper concentration related to protein concentration in whole-brain homogenates shows no significant differences among wild-type, Prnp0/0 and Tg20 mice, but the synaptosomal fraction shows a significant reduction of copper in Prnp0/0 mice compared to wildtype and Tg20 mice (p = 0.03; t-test).
a highly conserved octapeptide repeat sequence (PHGGGWGQ) x4 (38), whose possible copper-binding properties were first shown by Hornshaw et al. (39,40) and later by Miura et al. (41). The recombinant N-terminus of PrPC from amino acid 23 to 98 (PrP 23–98) shows a cooperative binding of 5–6 copper ions (42). Half-maximal cooperative copper binding of PrP23–98 is in the micromolar range (5.9 µM). Further investigations, using synthetic octapeptides (43) confirmed cooperative copper binding by PrPC.

The significant decrease of synaptosomal copper concentration in Prnp0/0 mouse synaptosomes (Fig. 4) may be caused by a decreased reuptake of copper released into the synaptic cleft during synaptic vesicle release, since the difference in the synaptosomal copper concentration between Prnp0/0 mice and wildtype mice seems to be too large to be explained solely by the loss of copper bound to PrPC. In addition, one would then also expect differences in the copper concentration of the crude homogenate in wildtype, Tg20 and Prnp0/0 mice (Fig. 4). The findings may therefore be explained by a dysregulation of the copper concentration in the brains of Prnp0/0 mice caused by loss of PrPC.

In addition to the decreased synaptosomal copper concentration, a number of further changes were observed that indicated a biological function of copper binding by PrPC. Thus, significant differences between Prnp0/0 mice and wildtype mice were found in inhibitory synaptic transmission in the presence of copper (42). The application of copper elicited a significant reduction of the mean amplitude of spontaneous inhibitory postsynaptic GABA A receptor-mediated currents in Purkinje cells of Prnp0/0 mice at a concentration of 2 µM Cu2+, whereas this concentration showed no effect on the IPSCs of the wildtype mice. Because it is well known that the GABA A receptor is functionally disturbed at a concentration of copper in the range of 1 µM (44), this finding indicates that differences between Prnp0/0 and wildtype mice may be caused by missing copper buffering in the synaptic cleft by PrPC.

It is difficult to verify whether the loss of PrPC indeed leads to a reduction of the amount of copper located at the synaptic plasma membrane in intact synapses because direct synaptic measurements in vivo are not possible at present. We used an indirect approach to assess the problem of copper binding at the synapse, by studying the effect of hydrogen peroxide on inhibitory synaptic transmission (23). H2O2 is known to alter the probability of synaptic vesicle release by reacting with metal ions, particularly iron and copper at the presynapse, by increasing the presynaptic calcium concentration. By performing patch-clamp measurements on cerebellar slice preparations of wildtype, Prnp0/0 and PrPC reconstituted transgenic mice, we observed the effect of 0.01% H2O2 on the frequency of spontaneous IPSCs in Purkinje cells correlate with the amount of PrPC expressed in the presynaptic neuron (Fig. 5). This indicates that the amount of copper at the synapse may indeed be PrPC-related.
It remains to be shown whether buffering of copper released during synaptic vesicle release, which prevents or minimizes unspecific binding of copper to other proteins, is the primary function of PrP<sup>C</sup> (Fig. 6). Alternatively, the binding of copper to PrP<sup>C</sup> may primarily serve the reuptake of copper into the presynapse by endocytosis of PrP<sup>C</sup> (45,46) or may be of structural importance for the N-terminus of PrP<sup>C</sup> (47).

The hypothesis of a functional re-uptake of copper in the synaptic cleft by the prion protein (Fig. 6) may explain electrophysiological findings in Prnp<sup>0/0</sup> mice, which, on first glance, seem contradictory. A slight increase of extracellular copper concentration, caused by decreased or missing copper buffering in
the synaptic cleft in Prnp0/0 mice, may cause a decrease in the conductance of voltage-activated calcium channels and a change in the kinetics of the GABA_A receptor. Thus, the conductance of the GABA_A receptor and voltage-activated calcium channels, which modulate intracellular calcium homeostasis is clearly disturbed by copper concentrations of 1–10 μM (44,48). This would explain the alteration of the intracellular calcium homeostasis in Prnp0/0 mice, changes in the conductance of calcium-related ion currents, and changes in GABA_A receptor-related inhibitory postsynaptic currents observed under certain conditions. Reduced LTP in Prnp0/0 mice may be explained by this hypothesis, as well. As shown by Doreulee et al. (49), LTP is blocked by concentrations of free copper as low as 1 μM. Changes in the circadian rhythm observed by Tobler et al. (12,13) in Prnp0/0 mice could be related to a disturbed copper uptake and a decreased activity of copper-dependent enzymes, since the synthesis of melatonin, which is important in the regulation of circadian rhythms (50), is regulated by the copper-dependent enzyme monamine oxidase (51). Also, the activity of two other copper-dependent enzymes, the Cu/Zn superox-
ide dismutase and the glutathione reductase have been found to be altered in PrP0/0 mice (52,53).

4. Conclusion

In summary, our studies have shown that PrPc binds copper cooperatively and with high affinity. In the brain highest concentrations of PrPc are found at synapses. Synaptosomes of Prnp0/0 mice demonstrate a strong reduction of copper concentration. Copper binding by PrPc in the synaptic cleft has a significant influence on synaptic transmission. It remains to be shown whether additional phenotypes observed in Prnp0/0 mice result from decreased copper binding or from a disturbance of copper distribution in the absence of PrPc.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by the BMBF (German Federal Ministry of Science and Technology) grant K19461/8, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (grant Kr. 1561/21), and Sonderforschungsbereich 406, as well as the Wilhelm-Sander-Stiftung (grant 9343008). We thank Charles Weissmann (University of Zürich) for Prnp0/0, Tg35 and Tg20 mice.

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Molecular Pathology of the Prions
Baker, H.F. (Ed.)
2001, XII, 279 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-0-89603-924-7
A product of Humana Press