All quiet on the neuronal front: NMDA receptor inhibition by prion protein

Andrew D. Steele

Division of Biology, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA 91125

The normal function of the prion protein (PrP)—the causative agent of mad cow or prion disease—has long remained out of reach. Deciphering PrP’s function may help to unravel the complex chain of events triggered by PrP misfolding during prion disease. In this issue of the JCB, an exciting paper (Khosravani, H., Y. Zhang, S. Tsutsui, S. Hameed, C. Altier, J. Hamid, L. Chen, M. Villemaire, Z. Ali, F.R. Jirik, and G.W. Zamponi. 2008. J. Cell Biol. 181:551–565) connects diverse observations regarding PrP into a coherent framework whereby PrP dampens the activity of an N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor (NMDAR) subtype and reduces excitotoxic lesions. The findings of this study suggest that understanding the normal function of proteins associated with neurodegenerative disease may elucidate the molecular pathogenesis.

The study of the normal function of PrP has been hampered by one simple fact revealed in 1992 in a seminal study from Charles Weissmann’s laboratory (Bueler et al., 1992): the PrP knockout mouse has no overt phenotype (nor, for that matter, does the PrP-null cow [Richt et al., 2006]). However, subsequent studies have uncovered a multitude of phenotypes in PrP knockout mice, many of which manifest upon physiological challenge (for review see Steele et al., 2007a). These phenotypes range from defects in stem cell maintenance (Steele et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2006) to dental abnormalities (Schneider et al., 2004) and seizure (Walz et al., 1999) and even resistance to viral infection (Thackray and Bujdoso, 2002). Because of the diverse cellular functions attributed to PrP, molecular characterization of the phenotypes of PrP knockout mice is sorely needed, and Khosravani et al. (see p. 551 of this issue) seize the torch. By using electrophysiology, pharmacology, cell death assays, and biochemistry, they reveal a new and exciting role for PrP in directly silencing NMDARs (Khosravani et al., 2008).

Khosravani et al. (2008) launch their investigation by revisiting the peculiar electrophysiological properties of PrP-null neurons, which were first documented more than a decade ago (Collinge et al., 1994). Using hippocampal slices, they observed increased action potentials and a lower stimulation threshold to induce action potentials in PrP-null neurons. By using electrophysiology, pharmacology, cell death assays, and biochemistry, they reveal a new and exciting role for PrP in directly silencing NMDARs (Khosravani et al., 2008).

Further slice recording experiments by Khosravani et al. (2008) revealed that in the absence of magnesium, which blocks NMDARs at resting potential, PrP-null neurons show an exaggerated hyperexcitability, reaching a seizure-like state much more rapidly than control slices. Next, the authors measure miniature excitatory postsynaptic currents in dissociated cultures of hippocampal neurons. Compared with controls, PrP-null neurons exhibited currents that had larger amplitudes and lasted much longer in response to the focal application of NMDA. Importantly, the authors performed additional control experiments to
How do these new findings relate to prion diseases? Clearly, the detection of exaggerated NMDAR activity in prion-diseased samples would be a smoking gun implicating a loss of PrP function in prion disease. Do the familial mutants of PrP fail to effectively silence NMDARs, leading to hyperexcitability and a mechanism of neuronal damage similar to excitotoxicity? The cell death pathways involved in prion disease are far from understood (Steele et al., 2007b), and this new angle of investigation deserves attention, as perhaps NMDAR inhibition will have potential as a prion disease therapeutic strategy.

Based on an interaction of PrP with NMDARs, one might speculate that the psychiatric symptoms of prion diseases could relate to defects in glutamatergic neurotransmission brought about either by PrP being titrated away from NR2D subunits or from direct interference by PrP oligomers or aggregates with NMDARs.

How does PrP silence NMDAR? As noted by Khosravani et al. (2008), PrP could block agonist binding, stabilize the closed state of the channel, or indirectly regulate function by interfering with signaling pathways affecting NR2D-containing NMDARs. With respect to NMDAR assembly, very little is known about NR2D subunits other than that they likely require NR1 subunits to reach the cell surface. In wild-type conditions, with ample PrP present on the neuronal cell surface, these channels will not open. What is the molecular logic of building a tonically inhibited NMDAR? Perhaps these channels only respond to extreme stimuli where they need not only a magnesium unblocking event but also a PrP-releasing event to open. The identification and characterization of additional interacting partners of PrP or NMDARs will be a complex and stimulating area of research. These questions aside, it is exciting to see the pieces of the PrP function puzzle start to come together.

A.D. Steele is supported by the Broad Fellows in Brain Circuitry program at the California Institute of Technology.
References


