



Adenosine A_{2A} receptors and A_{2A} receptor heteromers as key players in striatal function

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A very significant density of adenosine A_{2A} receptors (A_{2A}Rs) is present in the striatum, where they are preferentially localized postsynaptically in striatopallidal medium spiny neurons (MSNs). In this localization A_{2A}Rs establish reciprocal antagonistic interactions with dopamine D₂ receptors (D₂Rs). In one type of interaction, A_{2A}R and D₂R are forming heteromers and, by means of an allosteric interaction, A_{2A}R counteracts D₂R-mediated inhibitory modulation of the effects of NMDA receptor stimulation in the striatopallidal neuron. This interaction is probably mostly responsible for the locomotor depressant and activating effects of A_{2A}R agonist and antagonists, respectively. The second type of interaction involves A_{2A}R and D₂R that do not form heteromers and takes place at the level of adenylyl cyclase (AC). Due to a strong tonic effect of endogenous dopamine on striatal D₂R, this interaction keeps A_{2A}R from signaling through AC. However, under conditions of dopamine depletion or with blockade of D₂R, A_{2A}R-mediated AC activation is unleashed with an increased gene expression and activity of the striatopallidal neuron and with a consequent motor depression. This interaction is probably the main mechanism responsible for the locomotor depression induced by D₂R antagonists. Finally, striatal A_{2A}Rs are also localized presynaptically, in cortico-striatal glutamatergic terminals that contact the striato-nigral MSN. These presynaptic A_{2A}Rs heteromerize with A₁ receptors (A₁Rs) and their activation facilitates glutamate release. These three different types of A_{2A}Rs can be pharmacologically dissected by their ability to bind ligands with different affinity and can therefore provide selective targets for drug development in different basal ganglia disorders.

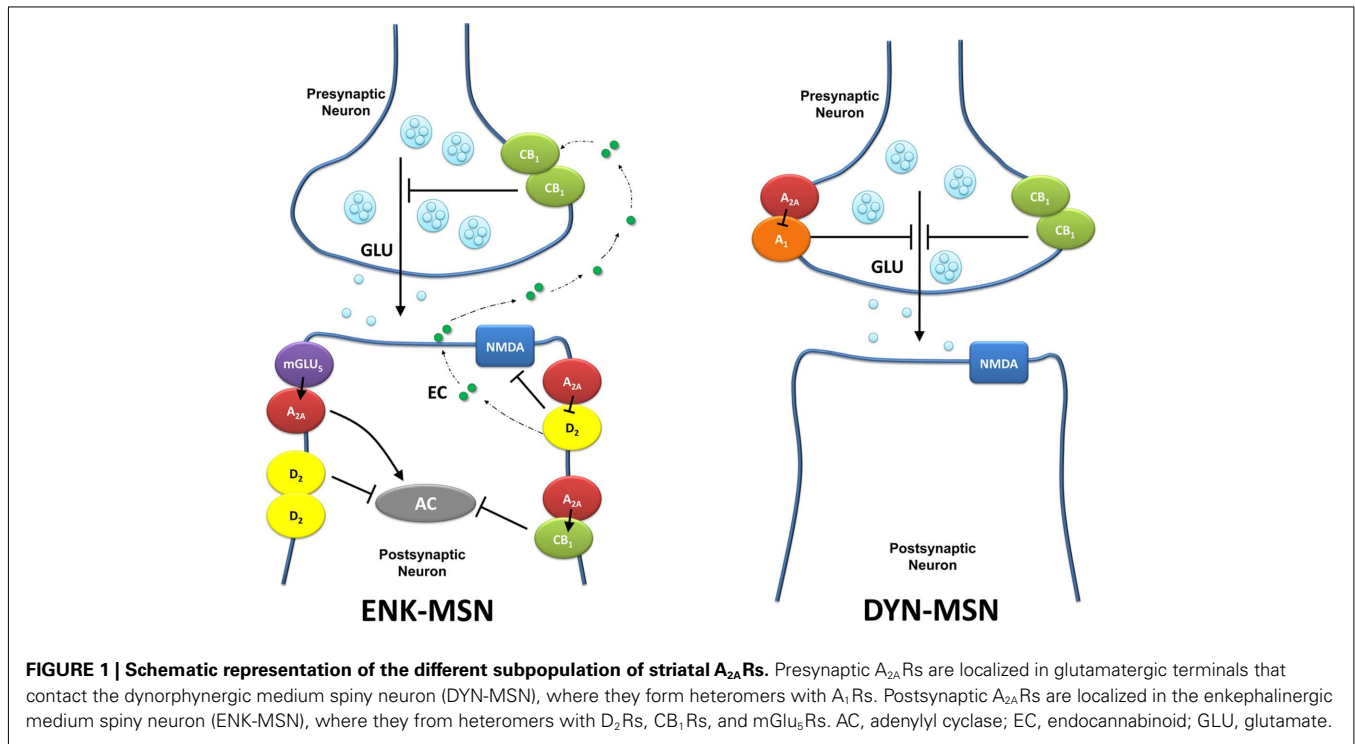
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POSTSYNAPTIC STRIATAL ADENOSINE A_{2A} RECEPTORS

A very significant density of adenosine A_{2A} receptors (A_{2A}Rs) is present in the striatum (Rosin et al., 1998; Hettinger et al., 1998; Schiffmann et al., 2007; Quiroz et al., 2009), where they are preferentially localized postsynaptically in the soma and dendrites of GABAergic striatopallidal. These neurons also show a high density of dopamine D₂ receptors (D₂Rs) and there is clear evidence for the existence of postsynaptic mechanisms in the control of glutamatergic neurotransmission to the enkephalinergic medium spiny neuron (MSN) by at least two reciprocal antagonistic interactions between A_{2A}Rs and D₂Rs (Ferré et al., 2008). In one type of interaction, stimulation of A_{2A}R counteracts the D₂R-mediated inhibitory modulation of NMDA receptor (NMDAR)-mediated effects, which include modulation of Ca²⁺ influx, transition to the up-state and neuronal firing (Azdad et al., 2009; Higley and Sabatini, 2010; **Figure 1**). This interaction seems to be mostly responsible for the locomotor depressant and activating effects of A_{2A}R agonists and antagonists, respectively (Ferré et al., 2008; Orru et al., 2011), which correlates with the results of behavioral experiments showing that A_{2A}R activation or blockade decreases or

increases, respectively, the motor effects elicited by D₂R activation (Ferré et al., 2008).

Initially, the main mechanism responsible for this A_{2A}R–D₂R interaction was attributed to what it was described as an “intramembrane interaction,” by which activation of A_{2A}R could decrease the affinity of an adjacent D₂R for agonists in striatal membrane preparations (Ferré et al., 1991). It was afterward hypothesized that this kind of intramembrane interaction was a biochemical property of receptor heteromers with important functional implications (Zoli et al., 1993). A receptor heteromer is now defined as a macromolecular complex composed of at least two (functional) receptor units with biochemical properties that are demonstrably different from those of its individual components (Ferré et al., 2009). The term “intramembrane interaction” is now known as “allosteric interaction in the receptor heteromer,” which is defined as an intermolecular interaction by which binding of a ligand to one of the receptor units in the receptor heteromer changes the binding properties of another receptor unit (Ferré et al., 2009). Another definition recently introduced in the field of receptor heteromers is “biochemical fingerprint,” which is a



biochemical characteristic of a receptor heteromer that can be used for its identification, even in a native tissue (Ferré et al., 2009). The introduction of this concept is important in view of the difficulty in demonstrating receptor heteromers in native tissues. Biophysical techniques, such as bioluminescence and fluorescence resonance energy transfer (BRET and FRET) techniques can be easily applied in artificial cell systems to demonstrate receptor heteromerization (Bouvier, 2001), but not in native tissues. Recent technological advances, using receptor labeling with selective fluorescent ligands, have allowed the demonstration of receptor homomers with time-resolved FRET in a native tissue (oxytocin receptor homomers in mammary glands; Albizu et al., 2010). However, this required the use of high quantities of a tissue with high expression of the receptor under study (Albizu et al., 2010).

The A_{2A}R–D₂R allosteric interaction, in fact, constitutes a biochemical fingerprint of the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer, since it depends on the proper quaternary structure of the heteromer. Thus, it has been recently shown that disruption of an electrostatic interaction between identified intracellular domains of the A_{2A}R and D₂R leads to a significant modification of the quaternary structure of the heteromer and to the disappearance of the A_{2A}R–D₂R allosteric interaction (Borroto-Escuela et al., 2010a; Navarro et al., 2010). The electrostatic interaction in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer involves an arginine-rich epitope of the third intracellular loop (3IL) of the D₂R and a phosphorylated residue localized in the C terminus of the A_{2A}R (Woods and Ferré, 2005; Navarro et al., 2010). It is important to point out that this electrostatic interaction is not directly involved in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer interface, which seems to be mostly determined by direct interactions between transmembrane domains (Borroto-Escuela et al., 2010b; Navarro et al., 2010).

A closer look to recent electrophysiological experiments (Azdad et al., 2009; Higley and Sabatini, 2010) indicates that, although useful as a biochemical fingerprint, the allosteric interaction in the receptor heteromer does not play a main role in the antagonistic A_{2A}R–D₂R-mediated functional interaction. In the study by Azdad et al. (2009), the D₂R-mediated response consisted on the counteraction of NMDAR-mediated increase in firing rate by enkephalinergic MSNs (analyzed by patch-clamp experiments in identified striatal D₂R-expressing MSNs). In this experimental setting, application of an A_{2A}R agonist did not produce any significant effect on its own, but completely blocked the D₂R-mediated response. Remarkably, this interaction was dependent on the integrity of the quaternary structure of the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer. Thus, the counteracting effect of the A_{2A}R agonist disappeared after the application of peptides that selectively disrupted the intracellular electrostatic interaction (Azdad et al., 2009). Importantly, the counteracting effect of the A_{2A}R agonist was detected in the presence of a high concentration of the D₂R agonist, which should be able to surmount a decrease in the affinity of the D₂R caused by A_{2A}R occupation (Ferré et al., 1991). Therefore, although it might still be involved, the allosteric interaction, which leads to a lower affinity of D₂R for dopamine when adenosine is activating A_{2A}R, does not seem to be the main mechanism underlying the A_{2A}R–D₂R functional interaction in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer.

The same intracellular arginine-rich epitope of the D₂R that is involved in the electrostatic interaction with A_{2A}R in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer has been demonstrated to bind to calmodulin and also to be fundamental for the activation of G_{i/o} proteins (Bofill-Cardona et al., 2000; Navarro et al., 2009). Since calmodulin binding to the same epitope of the D₂R impairs its ability to signal

through G_{i/o} proteins (Bofill-Cardona et al., 2000), it is likely that binding of the C terminus of the A_{2A}R to the same epitope reduces the capacity of the D₂R to bind calmodulin and to signal through G_{i/o} proteins. In fact, it has recently been shown that the binding of calmodulin to the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer is occurring within the proximal portion of the A_{2A}R but not with the D₂R (Navarro et al., 2009). It is possible that agonist binding to the A_{2A}R induces a conformational change in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer that causes an even further impairment in the coupling of the D₂R to the G_{i/o} protein. Thus, it seems that, in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer, D₂R does not signal through G_{i/o} proteins or that its main signaling is by a G-protein-independent mechanism. However, the recent study by Higley and Sabatini (2010) suggests that the D₂R-mediated inhibitory modulation of NMDAR-mediated Ca²⁺ signaling in the enkephalinergic MSN is mediated by PKA and, therefore, most probably related to the ability of D₂R to couple to G_{i/o} and to inhibit adenylyl cyclase (AC). Interestingly, in these experiments (and in agreement with the experiments by Azdad et al., 2009), an A_{2A}R agonist did not produce any significant effect on its own, but counteracted the effect of a D₂R agonist. Thus, although Higley and Sabatini (2010) suggested that this interaction between A_{2A}R and D₂R takes place at the AC level, it shows similar characteristics to the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer-dependent interaction. In summary, A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers seem to play a key role in the modulation of NMDAR-mediated signaling in the enkephalinergic MSN, but the molecular mechanisms involved in these A_{2A}R–D₂R–NMDAR interactions are yet to be determined.

In addition to the antagonistic A_{2A}R–D₂R receptor interaction in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer, D₂R stimulation impedes A_{2A}R to signal through AC (Kull et al., 1999; Chen et al., 2001; Hillion et al., 2002; Håkansson et al., 2006; **Figure 1**). This D₂R–A_{2A}R interaction takes place at the second messenger level, and stimulation of G_{i/o}-coupled D₂R counteracts the effects of G_{s/olf}-coupled A_{2A}R (Ferré et al., 2007, 2008). Due to a strong tonic effect of endogenous dopamine on striatal D₂R, this interaction keeps A_{2A}R from signaling through AC. However, under conditions of dopamine depletion or with pharmacological D₂R blockade, A_{2A}R-mediated signaling through the cAMP–PKA cascade may be unleashed. Antagonism of D₂R is biochemically associated with a significant increase in the phosphorylation of PKA-dependent substrates, which increases gene expression and the activity of the enkephalinergic MSN, producing locomotor depression (reviewed in Ferré et al., 2008). This appears to be the main mechanism responsible for the locomotor depression induced by D₂R antagonists. Thus the motor depressant and most biochemical effects induced by pharmacologic blockade of D₂R may be counteracted by pharmacological blockade of A_{2A}R (Chen et al., 2001; Håkansson et al., 2006).

The two reciprocal antagonistic interactions, A_{2A}R toward D₂R (A_{2A}R–D₂R) and D₂R toward A_{2A}R (D₂R–A_{2A}R), take place simultaneously in the same cell, which suggest that are most likely mediated by the existence of at least two different populations of postsynaptic striatal A_{2A}R in the enkephalinergic MSN (Ferré et al., 2008). One population would be forming heteromers with D₂R and would determine that A_{2A}R stimulation inhibits D₂R-mediated signaling (A_{2A}R–D₂R interaction), while another population would not be forming heteromers with D₂R and would

determine that D₂R stimulation inhibits A_{2A}R-mediated signaling (D₂R–A_{2A}R interaction). This second population of postsynaptic A_{2A}R would either not form heteromers or would form heteromers with other receptors, such as glutamate mGlu₅ receptors (mGlu₅Rs; Ferré et al., 2002; **Figure 1**). Importantly, heteromerization of A_{2A}R with mGlu₅R is associated with a synergistic effect upon A_{2A}R and mGlu₅R co-activation at the level of AC and MAPK, providing a physiological mechanism by which A_{2A}R can overcome the D₂R–A_{2A}R interaction (Ferré et al., 2002; Nishi et al., 2003). Co-stimulation of A_{2A}R and mGlu₅R *in vivo*, with the central administration of selective agonists, allowed A_{2A}R to get rid of the inhibitory effect of the D₂R and signal through the cAMP–PKA cascade (Ferré et al., 2002). Since this A_{2A}R–D₂R–mGlu₅R interaction could be demonstrated in animal models of Parkinson's disease (Popoli et al., 2001; Kachroo et al., 2005), it was postulated that co-administration of A_{2A}R and mGlu₅R antagonists could be useful as a therapeutic strategy in this disease (Popoli et al., 2001).

Still a third population of postsynaptic A_{2A}R would form heteromers with cannabinoid CB₁ receptors (CB₁Rs; Carriba et al., 2007; **Figure 1**). In this heteromer, activation of A_{2A}R is necessary to allow CB₁R-mediated signaling. Thus, in a human neuroblastoma cell line, CB₁R-mediated inhibition of AC activity was found to be completely dependent on A_{2A}R co-activation (Carriba et al., 2007). Similarly, several biochemical effects of CB₁R agonists in primary striatal cell cultures and striatal slices have been shown to depend on A_{2A}R co-activation (Yao et al., 2003; Andersson et al., 2005). Accordingly, Tebano et al. (2009) reported that the depression of synaptic transmission induced by a CB₁R agonist in cortico-striatal slices was prevented by A_{2A}R antagonists and also by the conditional genetic blockade of striatal postsynaptic A_{2A}R. The permissive effect of A_{2A}R toward CB₁R function did not seem to occur presynaptically, as the ability of the CB₁R agonist to increase the R2/R1 ratio under a protocol of paired-pulse stimulation was not modified by an A_{2A}R antagonist (Tebano et al., 2009). These results would predict that A_{2A}R antagonists should produce similar behavioral effects than CB₁R antagonists and, in fact, pharmacological or genetic inactivation of A_{2A}Rs reduce the motor depressant, cataleptic, and rewarding effects of CB₁R agonists (Soria et al., 2004; Andersson et al., 2005; Carriba et al., 2007; Justinova et al., 2011). Significantly, it has been recently reported that low doses of an A_{2A}R antagonist (MSX-3) reduce in squirrel monkeys self-administration of THC and anandamide, but not cocaine (Justinova et al., 2011).

Although the studies just mentioned indicate that the motor (depressant) effects of CB₁R agonists might depend on adenosine A_{2A} receptor signaling, a recent study by Lerner et al. (2010) suggested quite the opposite, that CB₁R signaling mediates the locomotor-activating effects of A_{2A}R antagonists. Thus, pharmacological or genetic inactivation of CB₁R reduced the locomotor activation induced by an A_{2A}R antagonist in mice habituated to the testing environment (Lerner et al., 2010). The mechanistic explanation of this interaction is related to the previously reported D₂R agonist-mediated endocannabinoid release by the enkephalinergic MSN, which by retrograde signaling would inhibit glutamate release by stimulating CB₁R localized in glutamatergic terminals. This would lead to a decreased stimulation of the striatopallidal MSN, which would produce locomotor activation (Kreitzer and

Malenka, 2007). In fact, Kreitzer and Malenka (2007) advocated that, instead of direct postsynaptic effects, such as the previously mentioned D₂R-mediated modulation of NMDAR-mediated signaling (Azdad et al., 2009; Higley and Sabatini, 2010), this indirect and endocannabinoid-mediated presynaptic effect is the main mechanism by which D₂R stimulation produces inhibition of the enkephalinergic MSN function. According to Lerner et al. (2010), an A_{2A}R antagonist would then produce locomotor activation by disinhibiting a tonic A_{2A}R-mediated inhibition of D₂R-mediated endocannabinoid release. However, this hypothesis would predict that CB₁R agonists and antagonists should produce locomotor activation and depression, respectively, and that CB₁R blockade should counteract the motor effects of D₂ receptor agonists. This is the opposite of what has been reported in previous studies (for a recent review, see Ferré et al., 2010). To reevaluate the findings by Lerner et al. (2010) we studied in detail the effects of pharmacological interactions between A_{2A}R antagonists and CB₁R antagonists on the locomotor activity in rats not habituated to the testing environment (Orru et al., submitted). Whereas we could indeed reproduce the results by Lerner et al. (2010) showing that a CB₁R antagonist significantly decreases the locomotor effects induced by an A_{2A}R antagonist, we found that the CB₁R antagonist also produces a comparable decrease in locomotion in vehicle-treated animals (statistical analysis indicated that the locomotor effects of A_{2A}R and CB₁R antagonists were not interrelated). It was therefore the use of habituated animals (which display very low locomotor activity in the testing environment) what masked the depressant effect of CB₁R antagonist in the vehicle-treated animals in the study by Lerner et al. (2010).

In addition to the three populations of postsynaptic striatal A_{2A}R so far reported, there is also experimental evidence for a potentially more complex picture, which includes the possibility of receptor heteromultimers. Thus, using a new biophysical/based technology, sequential resonance energy transfer (SRET), and bimolecular fluorescence complementation plus BRET, evidence for A_{2A}R–CB₁R–D₂R and A_{2A}R–D₂R–mGlu₅R heteromers in transfected cells has been recently obtained (Carriba et al., 2008; Cabello et al., 2009; Navarro et al., 2010). Mutation experiments indicated that the interactions of the intracellular domains of the CB₁R receptor with A_{2A}R and D₂R are fundamental for the correct formation of the quaternary structure needed for the function (MAPK signaling) of the A_{2A}R–CB₁R–D₂R heteromers. It should be noted that the analysis of MAPK signaling in striatal slices of CB₁R KO mice and wild-type littermates supports the existence of A_{2A}R–CB₁R–D₂R receptor heteromers in the brain (Navarro et al., 2010). Despite the stoichiometry of the different populations of postsynaptic striatal A_{2A}R heteromers (and homomers) is not known, taking into account the very high density of A_{2A}R and D₂Rs in the enkephalinergic MSM, we postulate that A_{2A}R and D₂R homomers and A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers are the most common receptor populations, followed by combinations of those populations with CB₁R and mGlu₅R.

It is also of importance to mention that there is also evidence for the existence of A_{2A}R receptors, also co-localized with D₂Rs, in the somatodendritic and nerve terminal regions of the cholinergic striatal interneurons and that their interactions modulate acetylcholine release (James and Richardson, 1993; Jin et al., 1993;

Preston et al., 2000; Tozzi et al., 2011). The study by Jin et al. (1993) showed evidence for an antagonistic A_{2A}R–D₂R interaction in the modulation of striatal acetylcholine release. Thus, A_{2A}R stimulation counteracted the ability of D₂R activation to inhibit acetylcholine release. Similarly, a recent study showed that A_{2A}R blockade potentiates D₂R-mediated modulation of acetylcholine release (Tozzi et al., 2011), again indicating the existence of an antagonistic A_{2A}R–D₂R interaction and, probably, A_{2A}R–A_{2A}R heteromers in striatal cholinergic interneurons.

PRESYNAPTIC STRIATAL ADENOSINE A_{2A} RECEPTORS

Striatal A_{2A}Rs are not only localized postsynaptically but also presynaptically, in glutamatergic terminals, where they heteromerize with A₁ receptors (A₁Rs) and where they perform a fine-tuned modulation of glutamate release (Ciruela et al., 2006; Quiroz et al., 2009; **Figure 1**). Thus, A₁R–A_{2A}R heteromers seem to work as a concentration-dependent switch (Ferré et al., 2007), with adenosine acting primarily at A₁Rs at low concentrations, and at both A₁Rs and A_{2A}Rs at higher concentrations. Activation of the A₁R in the A₁R–A_{2A}R heteromer produces inhibition of glutamate release, while the additional activation of the A_{2A}R produces the opposite effect, on a mechanism that seems to involve an allosteric modulation in the receptor heteromer and interactions at the G protein level (Ciruela et al., 2006; Ferré et al., 2007). Interestingly, presynaptic A_{2A}Rs are preferentially localized in glutamatergic terminals of cortico-striatal afferents to the dynorphinergic MSN (Quiroz et al., 2009). Apart from morphological evidence provided by immunohistochemical and electron microscopy experiments, patch-clamp experiments in identified enkephalinergic and dynorphinergic MSNs provided a functional demonstration of the segregation of striatal presynaptic A_{2A}Rs. Thus, an A_{2A}R agonist and an A_{2A}R receptor antagonist significantly increased and decreased, respectively, the amplitude of excitatory postsynaptic currents induced by the intrastriatal stimulation of glutamatergic afferents measured in identified enkephalinergic, but not dynorphinergic MSNs. Mean-variance analysis indicated a presynaptic locus for the A_{2A}R-mediated modulation (Quiroz et al., 2009). Thus, there seems to be a selective A_{2A}R-mediated modulation of glutamate release to the dynorphinergic MSN, which is in disagreement with the recently proposed role of postsynaptic A_{2A}Rs in the modulation of glutamate release to the enkephalinergic MSN (Lerner et al., 2010).

The powerful modulatory role of presynaptic A_{2A}Rs on striatal glutamate release was first demonstrated with *in vivo* microdialysis experiments by Popoli et al. (1995), who showed that the striatal perfusion of an A_{2A}R agonist produced a very pronounced increase in the basal striatal extracellular concentrations of glutamate. Also intrastriatal perfusion of an A_{2A}R antagonist through a microdialysis probe could significantly counteract striatal glutamate release induced by cortical electrical stimulation in the orofacial premotor cortex (Quiroz et al., 2009). A striking unexpected finding was that the counteraction of glutamate release was also accompanied by a complete counteraction of the jaw movements induced by the cortical electrical stimulation, demonstrating the very important role of presynaptic A_{2A}Rs in the control of cortico-striatal glutamatergic neurotransmission. By combining cortical electrical stimulation and recording of EMG activity of the mastication

muscles, a power correlation coefficient (PCC) was established as a quantitative *in vivo* measure of cortico-striatal neurotransmission (Quiroz et al., 2009). PCC was shown to be significantly and dose dependently decreased by the systemic administration of an A_{2A}R receptor antagonist. PCC could therefore be used as a method to screen the presynaptic effect of A_{2A}R antagonists (see below).

According to the widely accepted functional basal circuitry model (Obeso et al., 2002; DeLong and Wichmann, 2007), blockade of postsynaptic striatal A_{2A}R in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer, localized in the enkephalinergic MSN should potentiate spontaneous or psychostimulant-induced motor activation. On the other hand, according to the same model, blockade of presynaptic striatal A_{2A}R localized in the cortico-striatal glutamatergic terminals that make synaptic contact with the dynorphinergic MSN should decrease motor activity. The clear locomotor-activating effects of systemically administered A_{2A}R antagonists could be explained by the significantly higher density of postsynaptic versus presynaptic striatal A_{2A}R and to a stronger influence of a tonic adenosine and A_{2A}R-mediated modulation of the enkephalinergic versus dynorphinergic MSNs under basal conditions. The results by Shen et al. (2008) about the differential effects of A_{2A}R antagonists on psychostimulant-induced locomotor activation in WT versus conditional striatal postsynaptic A_{2A}R KO mice (potentiation versus counteraction, respectively) support this hypothesis. As previously suggested (Ferré et al., 2007), activation of presynaptic A_{2A}Rs seems to be highly dependent on the level of adenosine generated upon cortico-striatal glutamatergic input.

Striatal D₂Rs are also localized presynaptically, in dopaminergic and glutamatergic terminals (Higley and Sabatini, 2010), giving the frame for the existence of interactions with A_{2A}Rs at least in those terminals establishing contact with the dynorphinergic MSN. The experimental evidence suggest that there is also a presynaptic D₂R–A_{2A}R interaction by which D₂R activation tonically inhibits the ability of endogenous adenosine to produce an A_{2A}R-mediated increase in the basal extracellular levels of glutamate. Thus, dopamine denervation significantly potentiates A_{2A}R agonist-mediated stimulation of glutamate release (Tanganelli et al., 2004). This has the biochemical characteristics of an interaction between A_{2A}Rs and D₂Rs at the AC level and not forming A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers. Furthermore, results Rodrigues et al. (2005) have also demonstrated the existence of mGlu₅Rs in striatal glutamatergic terminals co-localized with A_{2A}Rs and which facilitate glutamate release in a synergistic manner. The interplay between adenosine- and dopamine-mediated actions at the presynaptic level is therefore affected by the occurrence of mGlu₅Rs.

The presynaptic localization of CB₁Rs in striatal glutamatergic terminals is well established, and therefore they can be co-localized with A_{2A}R in terminals establishing contact with the dynorphinergic MSN (Ferré et al., 2010). The existence of A_{2A}R–CB₁R heteromers in striatal glutamatergic terminals which could mediate the reinforcing effects of cannabinoids has been recently postulated (Ferré et al., 2010; Justinova et al., 2011). However, a recent study by Martire et al. (2011) indicates that cannabinoid/adenosine functional interactions result from an interaction at the second messenger level. In the frame of heteromerization A_{2A}R activation should facilitate the G_{i/o}-mediated effect

of CB₁R activation measured, as inhibition of glutamate release. Nevertheless, Martire et al. (2011), by studying extracellular field potentials recordings in cortico-striatal slices and superfused striatal nerve terminals, very convincingly showed that, instead, A_{2A}R activation prevents CB₁R-mediated inhibition of glutamate release. These results indicate that regulation of glutamate release by cannabinoids is not dependent on presynaptic A_{2A}R–CB₁R heteromers.

In summary, a great amount of available data indicates that, presynaptically, A_{2A}Rs form heteromers mostly with A₁Rs. In addition, there seems to be a population of A_{2A}Rs not forming heteromers but establishing antagonistic interactions with D₂Rs and CB₁Rs and synergistic interactions with mGlu₅Rs. Apart from co-expression, at this moment we do not know the variables that determine the ability of A_{2A}Rs to bind to different receptors to form different pre and postsynaptic heteromers. Thus, D₂Rs are also localized presynaptically, but yet they do not seem to form heteromers with A_{2A}Rs. A_{2A}Rs could bind with more affinity to A₁Rs than to D₂Rs or particular scaffolding proteins could favor a particular A_{2A}R heteromer. All these are questions still need to be answered.

TARGETING STRIATAL PRE AND POSTSYNAPTIC A_{2A} RECEPTORS

A surprising yet fundamental finding of a recent study is that several A_{2A}R antagonists previously thought as being pharmacologically similar present different striatal pre and postsynaptic profiles (Orru et al., 2011). Six compounds already known as selective A_{2A}R antagonists were first screened for their ability to block striatal pre and postsynaptic A_{2A}Rs with *in vivo* models. Locomotor activation was used to evaluate postsynaptic activity while PCC counteraction was used to determine presynaptic activity (see above). SCH-442416 and KW-6002, showed preferential pre and postsynaptic profiles, respectively, and four compounds, MSX-3, SCH-420814, SCH-58261, and ZM-241385, showed mixed pre–postsynaptic profiles. Combining *in vivo* microdialysis with cortical electrical stimulation was used as an additional *in vivo* evaluation of presynaptic activity of A_{2A}R antagonists. In agreement with its preferential presynaptic profile, SCH-442416 significantly counteracted striatal glutamate release induced by cortical stimulation at a dose that strongly counteracted PCC but did not induce locomotor activation. On the other hand, according to its preferential postsynaptic profile, KW-6002 did not modify striatal glutamate release induced by cortical stimulation at a dose that produced a pronounced locomotor activation but did not counteract PCC.

Another important finding of the study by Orru et al. (2011) was that at least part of these pharmacological differences between A_{2A}R antagonists could be explained by the ability of pre and postsynaptic A_{2A}R to form different receptor heteromers, with A₁R and D₂R, respectively (see above). Radioligand-binding experiments were performed in cells stably expressing A_{2A}R, A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers, or A₁R–A_{2A}R heteromers to determine possible differences in the affinity of these different A_{2A}Rs for A_{2A}R antagonists. Co-expression with A₁R did not significantly modify the affinity of A_{2A}Rs for the different ligands, but co-expression with D₂Rs decreased the affinity of all compounds, with the exception of

KW-6002 (Orru et al., 2011). The structural changes in the A_{2A}R induced by heteromerization with the D₂R could be detected not only by antagonists but also by agonist binding. Indeed, the affinity of the selective A_{2A}R agonist CGS-21680 was reduced in cells co-transfected with D₂Rs. When trying to explain the differential action of SCH-442416 observed *in vivo*, it is interesting to note that this compound in particular showed a much higher affinity for the A_{2A}R in a presynaptic-like than in a postsynaptic-like context. In fact, the affinity of A_{2A}R for SCH-442416 in cells expressing A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers was markedly reduced (40 times higher B₅₀ values in competitive-inhibition experiments with [³H]ZM-241385 in cells expressing A_{2A}R–D₂R than A₁R–A_{2A}R heteromers).

The decrease in affinity upon co-expression with D₂Rs was much less pronounced for ZM-241385, SCH-58261, MSX2, or SCH-420814, for which the affinity was reduced from two to about ninefold (Orru et al., 2011). Taking into account that these A_{2A}R antagonists behaved qualitatively similar than the A_{2A}R agonist CGS-21680 in terms of binding to A₁R–A_{2A}R and A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers, it was expected that these four compounds compete equally for the binding of the endogenous agonist at pre and at postsynaptic sites. This would fit with the *in vivo* data, which showed that these compounds have a non-preferred pre-postsynaptic profile. Yet, KW-6002 was the only antagonist whose affinity was not significantly different in cells expressing A_{2A}R, A₁R–A_{2A}R heteromers, or A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers. Thus, KW-6002 showed the best relative affinity for A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromers of all compounds, which can at least partially explain its preferential postsynaptic profile. Experiments performed with the non-selective adenosine receptor antagonist caffeine also showed a correlation between the *in vivo* data and the *in vitro* preference for postsynaptic A_{2A}R-containing heteromers. It was previously reported that in transfected mammalian cells the affinity of A_{2A}R for the non-selective adenosine receptor antagonist caffeine did not change when co-transfected with D₂R, but it was significantly decreased (about 10 times) when co-transfected with A₁R (Ciruela et al., 2006). As predicted, caffeine did not significantly reduce PCC at doses that produce pronounced motor activation (Zanoveli et al., in preparation).

It must be pointed out that to say that SCH-442416 is a selective presynaptic A_{2A}R antagonist is an oversimplification. In fact, the *in vitro* data indicated that SCH-442416 binds equally well to the A_{2A}R not forming heteromers than to the A_{2A}R in the A₁R–A_{2A}R heteromer. Therefore, according to the previous description of the different populations of striatal A_{2A}Rs, SCH-442416 should also be effective at counteracting D₂R antagonist-induced motor depression. In fact, at doses that are not producing locomotor activation (but that reduce PCC), SCH-442416 significantly counteracts the locomotor depression induced by the D₂R antagonist raclopride (Orru et al., submitted). On the other hand, KW-6002 produced the same locomotor activation with or without co-administration with raclopride, in agreement with its ability to block the three populations of A_{2A}R studied so far *in vitro*, A_{2A}R, A_{2A}–D₂R, and A₁R–A_{2A}R. Importantly, KW-6002 also produced the same locomotor activation when co-administered with the A_{2A}R agonist CGS-21680, while SCH-442416, at the same dose that counteracted the depressant effect of raclopride, did not significantly counteract the depressant effect of CGS-21680. These

results, therefore agree with the hypothesis that the subpopulation of postsynaptic A_{2A}R forming heteromers with D₂R are mainly responsible for both the locomotor activation and depression induced by A_{2A}R antagonists and agonists, respectively. In summary, SCH-442416 can be considered as a compound that at relatively low doses not only binds preferentially to presynaptic A_{2A}Rs localized in cortico-striatal glutamatergic terminals (Orru et al., 2011), but also to a subpopulation of postsynaptic A_{2A}Rs most probably not forming heteromers with D₂Rs, but which function is tonically inhibited by D₂Rs activated by endogenous dopamine. Interestingly, [¹¹C]SCH-442416 has been used in rats, monkeys, and humans as a PET radioligand and shown to nicely label striatal A_{2A}Rs (Moresco et al., 2005; Schiffmann et al., 2007; Brooks et al., 2010). The low doses used in PET experiments indicate that [¹¹C]SCH-442416 is mostly labeling presynaptic A_{2A}Rs and postsynaptic A_{2A}Rs that do not form heteromers with D₂Rs. The use of [¹¹C]SCH-442416 and other less selective radioligand in combination with cold SCH-442416 could allow the identification of the different populations of A_{2A}Rs in the human brain. The picture is still incomplete, and a further evaluation of the affinity of A_{2A}R antagonists for A_{2A}R–mGlu₅R and A_{2A}R–CB₁ heteromers (and of heterotrimers) is needed. Nevertheless, the information so far available is very valuable to attempt the design of more efficient A_{2A}R antagonists to be used in basal ganglia disorders.

A_{2A} RECEPTOR HETEROMERS AS TARGETS FOR DRUG DEVELOPMENT

The results of the above mentioned studies support the notion that receptor heteromers may be used as selective targets for drug development. Main reasons are the very specific neuronal localization of receptor heteromers (even more specific than receptor subtypes themselves), and a differential ligand affinity of a receptor depending on its partner (or partners) in the receptor heteromer. Striatal A_{2A}R-containing heteromers become particularly interesting targets, eventually useful for a variety of neuropsychiatric disorders. Blocking postsynaptic A_{2A}Rs in the enkephalinergic MSN should be beneficial for Parkinson's disease because it would decrease the activity of the indirect striatal efferent pathway. On the one hand, one benefit would come from potentiating the effect of l-dopa or other dopamine receptor agonists on the D₂R-mediated signaling in the A_{2A}R–D₂R heteromer. On the other hand, blockade of A_{2A}Rs not forming heteromers with D₂Rs (but antagonistically interacting with D₂R at the AC level) should counteract the effects of the disinhibited A_{2A}R signaling. However, blocking presynaptic A_{2A}R in glutamatergic terminals contacting dynorphinergic MSN (either forming or not heteromers with A₁R) should decrease glutamatergic transmission through the direct striatal efferent pathway, thus decreasing motor activity and, therefore, decreasing the antiparkinsonian efficacy of A_{2A}R antagonists. The most convenient A_{2A}R antagonist to treat Parkinson's disease patients would have more affinity for postsynaptic than for presynaptic receptors. Additionally, a selective blockade of presynaptic A_{2A}Rs should be useful in dyskinesic disorders such as Huntington's disease and could also be useful in obsessive–compulsive disorders and drug addiction. Effective treatment of l-dopa-induced dyskinesia using “presynaptic” A_{2A}R antagonists would be a possibility to explore.

The results by Orru et al. (2011) give a mechanistic explanation to the already reported antiparkinsonian activity of KW-6002 and suggest that SCH-442416 could be useful for the treatment of dyskinesia disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and in drug addiction. Medicinal chemistry and *in silico* modeling should help in elucidating the molecular properties that determine the particular pharmacological profile of SCH-442416 and

KW-6002, which may be used as lead compounds to obtain, respectively, more effective antidyskinetic and antiparkinsonian compounds.

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