Opioid-Induced Quantal Slowing Reveals Dual Networks for Respiratory Rhythm Generation

Nicholas M. Mellen,* Wiktor A. Janczewski,
Christopher M. Bocchiaro,
and Jack L. Feldman
Department of Neurobiology
University of California, Los Angeles
P.O. Box 951763
Los Angeles, California 90095

Summary

Current consensus holds that a single medullary network generates respiratory rhythm in mammals. Pre-Bötzinger Complex inspiratory (I) neurons, isolated in transverse slices, and preinspiratory (pre-I) neurons, found only in more intact en bloc preparations and in vivo, are each proposed as necessary for rhythm generation. Opioids slow I, but not pre-I, neuronal burst periods. In slices, opioids gradually lengthened respiratory periods, whereas in more intact preparations, periods jumped nondeterministically to integer multiples of the control period (quantal slowing). These findings suggest that opioid-induced quantal slowing results from transmission failure of rhythmic drive from pre-I neurons to preBötz I networks, depressed below threshold for spontaneous rhythmic activity. Thus, both I (in the slice), and pre-I neurons are sufficient for respiratory rhytmogenesis.

Introduction

Two distinct neural networks in the ventrolateral medulla are separately proposed to be the essential substrate for respiratory rhythm generation (Onimaru et al., 1997; Rekling and Feldman, 1998): (i) I neurons in the pre-Bötzinger Complex (preBötz) (Gray et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1991) and (ii) pre-I neurons within and rostral to the preBötz (Onimaru et al., 1995). In neonatal rodent transverse medullary slices that isolate the preBötz and require elevated [K+]o to generate a respiratory-related rhythm, neurons with pre-I firing pattern (Smith et al., 1991) have not been described, either because they are scarce, because their pattern of activity is transformed by removal of synaptic inputs, or because elevated [K+]o disrupts their activity. The more inclusive en bloc brain-stem-spinal cord preparation, which generates an essentially identical rhythm at normal (3 mM) [K+]o, (Smith and Feldman, 1987; Suzue, 1984), has both preBötz and pre-I networks. The connectivity and synaptic interactions between these populations have been inferred (Ballanyi et al., 1999; Mellen and Feldman, 2001), but the functional significance of their interactions has remained unresolved.

Opiates slow I neuron, but have no effect on pre-I neuron, burst period (Takeda et al., 2001). We exploited this differential sensitivity to test the roles of these populations in rhythm generation. If both the I and pre-I networks are rhythmogenic, then the effects of opioids on slowing respiratory period should differ between transverse slice and en bloc preparations. Inspiratory burst timing should be dominated by I neurons in transverse slices, whereas burst timing should depend on the interaction of I and pre-I neurons in en bloc preparations.

Results

Continuous Slowing in Slices

Consistent with earlier observations (Gray et al., 1999), in the transverse slice at 9 mM [K+]o, respiratory period gradually slowed following bath application of the μ-opiate agonist DAMGO (200–300 nM; n = 5) (Figure 1A) and returned to control values following bath application of the μ-opiate antagonist naloxone (10 μM; data not shown). In normalized period histograms (Figure 1A, right), the graded nature of the opioid-induced slowing is apparent as a long tail to the right of the peak associated with control periods. Matching results were obtained in slices from P6 rats (n = 3, data not shown).

Quantal Slowing En Bloc and In Vivo

In the en bloc preparation (n = 8), bath-applied DAMGO (200–400 nM) initially caused a graded slowing of respiratory period over 20–40 cycles (Figure 1B, left, black bar). This abruptly gave way to quantal, i.e., step-like, slowing of respiratory period. In normalized period histograms, this quantal slowing is apparent as separate peaks at integer multiples of the control period (Figure 1B, right, blue histograms; Figure 3B). When this protocol was repeated with [K+]o elevated to concentrations matching the transverse slice (9 mM), periods were distributed continuously (Figure 1B, right, red histograms), and respiratory rhythm persisted at DAMGO concentrations (>400 nM) that completely blocked respiratory rhythm at standard en bloc [K+]o (3 mM).

If quantal slowing is an intrinsic property of the respiratory oscillator rather than an artifact of in vitro conditions, a similar response should be inducible in vivo. We tested this by systemic administration of the selective μ-opiate receptor agonist fentanyl citrate (Chen et al., 1996) to otherwise intact, unanesthetized juvenile rats (P5–P7). Low-order quantal slowing with a high variability of respiratory period was observed (Figure 1C, n = 6), with more pronounced initial continuous slowing compared to that seen in vitro. We speculated that this response was more dispersed than that seen en bloc due to both sensory feedback from the lungs (Bruce, 1996) and the effects of wakefulness. This was borne out by the more clearly observable opioid-induced quantal slowing obtained in anesthetized, vagotomized juvenile rats (P5–P7), (Figure 1D, n = 4).

Constraints on Quantal Slowing Mechanisms

Both the pre-I and preBötz I networks are rhythmically active in the en bloc preparation; thus quantal slowing

* Correspondence: nmellen@ucla.edu
likely arises out of the mutual coupling of these two oscillatory networks. A common feature of multiperiodic dynamics of individual oscillatory networks (Del Negro et al., 2002; Hokkanen, 2000), or those arising out of interactions between mutually coupled oscillatory networks (Niizeki et al., 1993), is that transitions between periods are deterministic, i.e., the present period is determined by prior periods. If the strength of the bidirectional coupling varies stochastically, or if one of the networks merely follows the other, so that skips result from stochastic transmission failure, then the transitions between periods will appear random. Thus, in order to impose constraints on mechanisms for quantal slowing, we investigated whether transitions between long and short periods had temporal structure. We compared each period to preceding and subsequent periods (up to lag \( \pm 7 \)) to obtain the serial correlation coefficient (Perkel et al., 1967). The statistical significance of these coefficients was tested against surrogate serial correlation coefficients computed from shuffled periods (Figure 2, left). Statistically significant correlations during opioid-induced slowing of respiratory period were a consistent feature of awake in vivo preparations only (4/5; Figure 2D, left). None of the transverse slice or anaesthetized vagotomized preparations, and only 3/8 of the en bloc preparations, had statistically significant correlations. We also used Poincaré maps of successive periods, i.e., \( T_n \) versus \( T_{n+1} \) (Figure 2D, right), to detect deterministic transitions between periods that would be missed by the serial correlation method, such as chaos (Garfinkel et al., 1992; Nayfeh and Balachandran, 1995). During continuous slowing in transverse slices, periods were distributed without pattern (Figure 2A, right), while during quantal slowing from en bloc and in vivo experiments, tight clustering of intervals at integer multiples of baseline period and with relatively even densities was apparent (Figures 2B–2D, right). Thus, by the methods used here, we failed to detect deterministic structure in the transitions between periods during quantal slowing in vitro or in anaesthetized deafferented rats. Two mechanisms are consistent with these findings: noisy mutual
variable and increasingly uncoupled from motor output (Figure 3C). The finding that pre-I neuron rhythm is stable and remains phase locked to motor output before and during quantal slowing, but not during continuous slowing, is consistent with the hypothesis that pre-I neuron activity determines inspiratory burst timing during quantal slowing. The finding that at 9 mM [K\(^+\)], pre-I rhythm became irregular, and phase relations between pre-I bursts and motor output were disrupted, indicates that at [K\(^+\)], standard in the transverse slice, if pre-I neurons are present, they are functionally uncoupled from preBötc I neuron networks.

If pre-I neurons determine inspiratory burst timing, then phasic drive to preBötc I neurons at control frequency should be observed during quantal slowing. In preBötc I neurons (n = 4/9), periodic subthreshold excitatory (Figure 3D, top) or inhibitory (Figure 3D, bottom) polarizations at close to control frequency were apparent during quantal slowing. This is consistent with the hypothesis that pre-I neurons provide phasic drive to preBötc I neurons.

**Discussion**

Over the past decade, a consensus has emerged that neurons responsible for respiratory rhythm generation are confined to the rostral ventrolateral medulla. Two mutually exclusive hypotheses regarding the essential constituents of these rhythmogenic networks have been proposed. We considered here the role of the two candidate populations: preBötc I neurons, sufficient to generate respiratory rhythm in the transverse slice, and more rostrally distributed pre-I neurons, each proposed as the essential substrate for respiratory rhythm generation (Gray et al., 1999; Koshiya and Smith, 1999; Onimaru et al., 1997; Rekling and Feldman, 1998; Smith et al., 1991). Opioids depress putative rhythmogenic subtypes of preBötc I neurons and slow the bursting frequency of all I neurons (Gray et al., 1999), but have no effect on pre-I rhythm (Takeda et al., 2001). If preBötc I neurons are both necessary and sufficient for respiratory rhythm generation, then the effect of opioids at concentrations sufficient to slow but not stop respiratory rhythm should be the same in preparations with or without pre-I neurons. Conversely, if pre-I neurons are sufficient for respiratory rhythm generation, then in networks retaining pre-I neurons, the effects of opiates on respiratory rhythm should follow pre-I rhythm. In the transverse slice, opioids lengthened respiratory periods continuously; in the en bloc preparation, in anesthetized, vagotomized juvenile rats, and to a lesser extent in intact, awake juvenile rats, respiratory periods were distributed at integer multiples of the control period.

We propose that quantal slowing is due to differential effects of opioids on preBötc I neurons and pre-I neurons, which interact to generate respiratory rhythm (Figure 4). The preBötc I neuron network, with oligosynaptic projections to motoneurons, is sufficient to generate inspiratory-related motor output in the transverse slice (Figure 4, top) and includes rhythmogenic (Rekling et al., 1998), opiate-sensitive (Gray et al., 1999) type 1 neurons. In slices, opioids reduce their excitability, causing respiratory rhythm to gradually slow and at higher con-
Our findings indicate that two rhythmically active networks interact to generate respiratory rhythm and that under different conditions, each is sufficient to generate that rhythm. This finding has methodological consequences: a generally accepted heuristic used to distinguish between the kernel of neurons that generate the rhythm and relay neurons that have a matching pattern of activity is that neurons unaffected by experimental manipulations that change the rhythm are nonrhythmogenic. Here, however, opiate insensitive pre-I neurons appear to determine inspiratory burst timing during opiate-induced slowing of respiratory frequency en bloc and in vivo.

This organization differs from that of other multiple oscillator-mediated behaviors in vertebrates. In frog, respiration is also generated by two rhythmically active networks, each sufficient to maintain gas exchange, but each oscillator separately controls markedly different patterns of activity in distinct muscle groups for buccal (aquatic) and lung-driven (terrestrial) respiration (Gdovin et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 2002). Chains of bidirectionally coupled segmental oscillatory networks generate undulatory swimming in lamprey (Marder and Calabrese, 1996), but each segmental oscillator is similar in pharmacology, physiology, connectivity, and rhythmogenic mechanism. Multiple, pharmacologically separable networks may combine to generate locomotion in rodents (Cazalets and Bertrand, 2000).

PreBötC and pre-I networks respond differently to modulatory inputs other than opiates, including lung stretch receptor afferents (Mellen and Feldman, 2001) and serotonin (Onimaru et al., 1998). If each network is sufficient to generate respiratory rhythm, then their differential sensitivity extends the robustness of respiratory rhythm generation beyond that of either constituent oscillator, since modulators of one leave the other unaffected. Conversely, because the networks are coupled, differential sensitivity also assures responsiveness to appropriate inputs. A dual oscillator model of respiratory rhythm generation can account for how, during behaviors such as exercise, speech, and swallowing, respiratory rhythm rapidly departs from and returns to baseline. This organization thus offers one solution to a general problem faced by neural systems: how to combine robustness with responsiveness to appropriate inputs (Goldman et al., 2001).

**Experimental Procedures**

**In Vitro Methods**

In accordance with methods approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, neonatal rats (P1–P3; n = 6) were anaesthetized by hypothermia, and following standard techniques (Smith and Feldman, 1987), the brainstem and spinal cord were quickly isolated. For en bloc in vitro preparations, the brainstem was transected at the level of vagal nerve roots; transverse slices (~600 μm thick), retaining hypoglossal rootlets, with the preBötC at the rostral surface of the slice, were cut according to standard techniques (Smith et al., 1991). Preparations were transferred to a bath continuously perfused (5 ml/min) with artificial cerebrospinal fluid (aCSF containing 128.0 mM NaCl, 3.0 mM KCl, 1.5 mM CaCl₂, 1.0 mM MgSO₄, 21.0 mM NaHCO₃, 0.5 mM NaH₂PO₄, and 30.0 mM glucose,
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