Why did NMDA receptor antagonists fail clinical trials for stroke and traumatic brain injury?

Chrysanthy Ikonomidou and Lechoslaw Turski

Glutamate N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor antagonists (competitive receptor antagonists, ion channel blockers, and glycine antagonists)—such as selfotel, aptiganel, eliprodil, licostinel and gavestinel—failed to show efficacy in clinical trials of stroke or traumatic brain injury. This failure has been attributed to the deficient properties of the molecules that entered human trials and to inappropriate design of clinical studies. In this article we hypothesise that glutamate may be involved in the acute neurodestructive phase that occurs immediately after traumatic or ischaemic injury (excitotoxicity), but that, after this period, it assumes its normal physiological functions, which include promotion of neuronal survival. We propose that NMDA receptor antagonists failed stroke and traumatic brain injury trials in human beings because blockade of synaptic transmission mediated by NMDA receptors hinders neuronal survival.


It has been known for at least 30 years that high concentrations of glutamate can destroy neurons. The theory of excitotoxicity (the neurodestructive potential of glutamate) was established by the demonstration that an overdose of systemic glutamate destroys hypothalamic nuclei in immature monkeys and rodents.1 Follow-up research confirmed that high concentrations of glutamate [100–500 μM] induce cell death in vitro2 and that similar extracellular concentrations are present in the rodent brain and spinal cord during ischaemia or trauma.3 It was subsequently shown that NMDA receptors mediate glutamate-induced cell death in vitro4 and in vivo.5 These discoveries suggested that administration of NMDA antagonists in human beings could prevent cell death and confer neuroprotection after stroke and traumatic brain injury.

Chronic neurodegenerative disorders such as Parkinson’s disease, Huntington’s disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and Alzheimer’s disease were added to the list of disease candidates for neuroprotective therapy with NMDA antagonists,6 although experimental evidence for the involvement of excitotoxicity in the pathogenesis of these slowly progressing disorders was weak. To explain the role of glutamate in slow, ongoing neurodegeneration a hypothesis of “slow excitotoxicity”, mediated by physiological concentrations of glutamate, was coined.7 Namely, if the postsynaptic membrane is partially depolarised because of changes in the ionic homeostasis of the cell, dysfunction of ion channels, or deficient energy supply, then even physiological concentrations of glutamate, acting via NMDA receptors, may destroy the cell.

As a result, the race to design effective NMDA receptor antagonists started, with high public expectations of the pharmaceutical industry.8–10 The chemical design of NMDA antagonists was successful; the compounds proved to be the most effective neuroprotective drugs ever tested both in vitro and on antecedent treatment regimens in animal models of stroke, traumatic brain injury, and spinal-cord injury.11

Clinical trials failed

Clinical trials of NMDA antagonists for stroke and traumatic brain injury were started despite the fact that the NMDA antagonists did not produce a significant post-insult neuroprotective time window in rodent models of stroke and trauma.12,13 However, discouraging news started to accumulate14 as one by one the clinical trials were terminated.15,16 Serious concerns began to emerge and the ability of the pharmaceutical industry to apply molecular neurobiology’s progress was questioned.

Some researchers proposed that the clinical trials failed because the overall quality of the molecules was poor. In particular, they cited deficient pharmacokinetics, inability to reach effective concentrations in the penumbra, short neuroprotective time window, inappropriate receptor subunit selectivity, high drug toxicity in human beings precluding use of equivalent doses to those that were neuroprotective in rodents, and poor design of clinical trials.14,15 The alternative explanation—that the working hypothesis was flawed in some way—was not considered, however.

Subsequently, a second and third generation of NMDA receptor antagonists—such as aptiganel and gavestinel—were invented, but human trials with these compounds failed too.16,17 By 2001, all clinical trials of NMDA receptor antagonists in human beings with stroke or traumatic brain injury were considered unsuccessful because of lack of efficacy.18 Despite these developments, the theory of glutamate-induced excitotoxicity, the major power that forced NMDA receptor antagonists into human trials, has not been questioned and it continues to be advocated by scientists and clinicians.19

CI is at the Department of Pediatric Neurology, Children’s Hospital, Charite-Virchow Campus, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany. LT is at Solvay Pharmaceuticals Research Laboratories, Weesp, The Netherlands.

Correspondence: Prof Lechoslaw Turski, Solvay Pharmaceuticals Research Laboratories, Cj van Houtenlaan 36, 1381 CP Weesp, The Netherlands. Tel +31 294 477498; fax: +31 294 477109; email les.turski@solvay.com.
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The long-term (days to weeks) increase in glutamate concentrations in human brain after traumatic injury has been considered neurotoxic and interpreted as an opportunity for delayed therapy with NMDA antagonists (long time-window for therapy initiation). However, this interpretation may be wrong—such mild elevations of glutamate concentration may represent a self-defence mechanism of the injured brain, which may promote survival of endangered neurons and facilitate tissue repair.

The hypothesis
We hypothesise that glutamate may be involved in the acute neurodestructive phase that occurs immediately after traumatic or ischaemic injury, but that after this period it assumes its normal physiological functions, which include promotion of neuronal survival (figure 2). Others have suggested that the prolonged mild increases in glutamate concentrations that have been recorded in human brain after a traumatic injury promote neuronal death. We hypothesise here that such mild increases promote neuronal survival after the injury and help neurons to maintain their physiological functions.

Indeed, we have shown that neurons subjected to traumatic brain injury are harmed when NMDA antagonist administration starts after the initial rapid increase in extracellular glutamate concentration has subsided (ie, 1–7 h after trauma). When NMDA antagonists were given prior to traumatic injury, neuronal death was prevented. Other researchers have shown that delayed treatment with NMDA antagonists suppresses neurogenesis, triggered by focal cerebral ischaemia, in the hippocampus. These findings suggest that glutamate kills neurons immediately after the injury, but starts to facilitate repair shortly thereafter. By contrast to its excitotoxic effect, repair mediated by glutamate appears to be long lasting. This is in agreement with the physiological function of glutamate in the nervous system during development (figure 2).

If our hypothesis is correct, the failure of NMDA antagonists in human stroke and traumatic brain injury trials should prompt a re-evaluation of how long “cytoprotective” therapies, based on blockade of NMDA receptors, can be delayed after the onset of the ischaemic or traumatic insults and whether such therapies are justified for chronic neurodegenerative disorders.

Where does the theory of excitotoxicity belong?
For more than three decades the theory of excitotoxicity guided basic research and discovery of novel molecules to stop neurodegeneration. This theory is based on the fact that glutamate, acting via NMDA receptors, kills neurons immediately after brain injury, but ignores the fact that glutamate preserves endangered neurons in the long term.

The interference with neuronal survival means that NMDA antagonists are unsuitable neuroprotective drugs for use in human emergency medicine. The only way to provide pharmacological neuroprotection with NMDA antagonists would be to administer them before the insult and for a very short period (minutes) after the injury, which is impossible in a clinical emergency setting.

The theory of glutamate-mediated excitotoxicity is correct with regards to the destructive function of glutamate. It should remain in textbooks of neurology and neurobiology as an explanation for acute neurodestruction after injuries to the nervous system, but it should not be regarded as a foundation for development of neuroprotective therapies aimed at delayed clinical application. When designing novel therapies, researchers need to consider and respect glutamate’s physiological role in the brain as well.

By focusing on the destructive effects of glutamate after injury and by ignoring its physiological functions, many patients were unnecessarily exposed to glutamate NMDA antagonists. In addition, many years of investigators’ time and pharmaceutical companies’ investment were wasted, resources that could have been used productively elsewhere.

Lessons to learn
Fundamental mistakes have been made while trying to understand the function of glutamate in the injured brain. Basic scientists must appreciate that drawing inaccurate conclusions can lead to the initiation of inappropriate clinical trials. Clinicians also need to be cautious when faced by enthusiastic “bench scientists”, and must not draw...
premature conclusions as to the therapeutic usefulness of new principles even if the medical need is great.

Mistakes can be limited by changing the emphasis of preclinical neuroscience from mechanistic to more applied research. This could result in experimental work that mimics the clinical setting better, so that close conformity to requirements of clinical studies could be established at the research bench. The endpoints relevant for the evaluation of neuroprotective drugs in human stroke and trauma trials—such as the long-term assessment of functional outcome or of mortality after brain injuries—should be used, and not ignored, to determine the therapeutic potential of experimental drugs in rodent stroke or brain trauma models, as well as to assess the extent of the damage measured by histology or imaging. A drug that was effective in rodent stroke or trauma models only when given before the injury should not be promoted to human trials. Furthermore, publication of negative experimental results with putative neuroprotective drugs, although not highly appreciated by basic science, is helpful to clinicians and should be encouraged.

Therapeutic outlook

Although the disappointment regarding the failure of NMDA antagonists in recent clinical trials is high, the neuroprotective potential of NMDA isoform-specific antagonists and specific NMDA-receptor antagonists acting extrasynaptically remains to be explored. Such novel drugs should not yet be disregarded as potential neuroprotectants. The search for new neuroprotective therapies continues and drugs are entering clinical trials. The lessons learnt will hopefully guide these new developments.

Authors’ contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the article.

Conflict of interest

We have no conflict of interest.

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