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Inhibition of a tonic inhibitory conductance in mouse hippocampal neurons by negative allosteric modulators of $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors: implications for treating cognitive deficits

Running Title: Comparing the effect of $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptor NAMs

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ABSTRACT

Background: Multiple cognitive and psychiatric disorders are associated with an increased tonic inhibitory conductance that is generated by $\alpha 5$ subunit-containing γ -aminobutyric acid type A ($\alpha 5$ GABA_A) receptors. Negative allosteric modulators that inhibit $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors ($\alpha 5$ -NAMs) are being developed as treatments for these disorders. The effects of $\alpha 5$ -NAMs have been intensely studied on recombinant GABA_A receptors expressed in non-neuronal cells; however, no study has compared drug effects on the tonic conductance generated by native GABA_A receptors in neurons. Thus, the goal of this study was to compare $\alpha 5$ -NAM modulation of tonic inhibitory current in primary neurons.

Methods: The effects of five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs (basmisamil; Ono-160; L-655,708; $\alpha 5$ IA; and MRK-016) on tonic current evoked by a persistent low concentration of GABA were studied using whole-cell recordings in cultured hippocampal neurons. Also, drug effects on current evoked by a saturating concentration of GABA, and on miniature inhibitory postsynaptic currents (mIPSCs) were examined.

Results: The $\alpha 5$ -NAMs caused a concentration-dependent decrease in tonic current. The potencies varied as the IC₅₀ of basmisamil (126.8 nM) was significantly higher than that of the other compounds (0.4 – 0.8 nM). In contrast, the maximal efficacies of the drugs were similar (35.5% to 51.3% inhibition). The $\alpha 5$ -NAMs did not modify current evoked by saturating GABA, or mIPSCs.

Conclusions: Basmisamil was markedly less potent than the other $\alpha 5$ -NAMs, an unexpected result based on studies of recombinant $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors. Studying the effects of $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptor-

selective drugs on the tonic inhibitory current in neurons could inform the selection of compounds for future clinical trials.

Introduction

An increased tonic inhibitory conductance generated by γ -aminobutyric acid type A (GABA_A) receptors has been implicated in various cognitive and psychiatric disorders, including Alzheimer disease, Down syndrome, and schizophrenia.¹⁻⁴ In addition, perioperative neurocognitive disorders, which are some of the most common adverse events that occur in older patients after anesthesia and surgery, may result in part from an increase in the tonic inhibitory conductance.^{5,6} Preclinical models have shown that commonly used general anesthetic drugs can trigger a sustained increase in the tonic inhibitory conductance in brain regions that regulate cognition, including the hippocampus.⁶ These cognitive disorders are associated with poor long-term outcomes and impose a tremendous burden on patients, their families, and the healthcare system; yet, no effective pharmacological treatments exist. The development of drugs that reduce the tonic inhibitory conductance is therefore of great interest.

The tonic inhibitory conductance is generated by GABA_A receptors that are predominantly expressed in extrasynaptic regions of neurons.^{7,8} GABA_A receptors are heteropentameric ion channels that are formed from 19 different subunits (α 1–6, β 1–3, γ 1–3, δ , ϵ , θ , π , and ρ 1–3). The combination of the various subunits confers unique physiological and pharmacological properties to the pentameric receptor complexes.^{7,8} The properties of GABA_A receptors are also influenced by their specific location within neurons, the conditions of agonist-dependent activation, and receptor phosphorylation.⁷⁻⁹

Extrasynaptic GABA_A receptors have a relatively high affinity for GABA and are activated by persistent, low ambient levels of GABA, which either spills over from the synaptic cleft or is released from the glia.^{7,8,10} These receptors are thought to mediate a paracrine or slow form of inhibition. There are two major classes of extrasynaptic receptors: those containing a δ subunit

($\alpha 4\beta\delta$, $\alpha 6\beta\delta$, $\alpha 1\beta\delta$) and those containing $\alpha 5$ subunits ($\alpha 5\beta\gamma$).⁸ Combinations of $\alpha\beta$, $\alpha\beta\epsilon$, and $\alpha 3\beta\gamma 2$ subunits also exist at lower levels.^{11,12} In contrast, synaptic GABA_A receptors have lower affinity for GABA, often contain $\alpha 1\beta\gamma$ or $\alpha 2\beta\gamma$ subunits, and are transiently activated by high concentrations of GABA that are released from presynaptic terminals.^{7,8}

$\alpha 5$ subunit-containing GABA_A ($\alpha 5$ GABA_A) receptors have gained particular attention due to their roles in learning and memory processes.⁴ The most widely expressed $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors are $\alpha 5\beta 3\gamma 2$ complexes, although $\alpha 5$ subunits also associate with $\beta 1$ or $\beta 2$ subunits and $\gamma 1$ or $\gamma 3$ subunits.^{13,14} Interestingly, $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors are also expressed, albeit at lower levels, in synapses where they primarily contribute to slowly decaying inhibitory postsynaptic currents (IPSCs).¹⁵⁻¹⁹ $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors are highly expressed in the hippocampus and, to a lesser extent, in the neocortex, where they regulate cognition.^{20,21} Animal models have shown that increasing $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptor activity typically impairs cognition, whereas reducing $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptor function through either pharmacological or genetic approaches, enhances cognitive performance.^{6,22-24}

Given the well-established role of $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors in cognition, drugs that act as negative allosteric modulators (NAMs) of these receptors, the so-called $\alpha 5$ -NAMs, are being developed and tested in clinical trials as nootropic agents.^{4,25,26} Similar to positive allosteric modulators (PAMs) such as midazolam and diazepam, $\alpha 5$ -NAMs bind at a high-affinity benzodiazepine-binding site on GABA_A receptors.²⁶ The binding site is located at the interface between α and the γ subunits, when the α subunit is an $\alpha 1$, $\alpha 2$, $\alpha 3$, or $\alpha 5$ subunit.²⁷ In contrast to the actions of PAMs, $\alpha 5$ -NAMs reduce the affinity of GABA and thus, reduce GABA-dependent channel opening. The resultant decrease in anion permeability of the cell membrane, increases neuronal excitability and enhances synaptic plasticity.^{28,29}

To date, more than a dozen $\alpha 5$ -NAMs have been developed and several have progressed to clinical trials.^{4,25,26} The pharmacological properties of $\alpha 5$ -NAMs have been primarily studied using recombinant expression systems including HEK293 cells, *Xenopus* oocytes and mouse L(tk-) cells;²⁵ however, no study has directly compared the properties of $\alpha 5$ -NAMs on the tonic inhibitory conductance in primary neurons.

$\alpha 5$ -NAM modulation of the tonic current in neurons may better reflect the *in vivo* pharmacodynamic properties of the drugs for several reasons. First, GABA_A receptor populations that generate current in neurons are heterogeneous. Although the tonic current in hippocampal neurons is predominantly generated by $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors, other GABA_A receptor subtypes also contribute.^{12,20} Second, $\alpha 5$ -NAMs can both inhibit and enhance the function of different GABA_A receptor subtypes. For example, L-655,708 inhibits $\alpha 5\beta 3\gamma 2$, $\alpha 1\beta 3\gamma 2$, and $\alpha 2\beta 3\gamma 2$ GABA_A receptors but increase the function of $\alpha 3\beta 3\gamma 2$, $\alpha 4\beta 3\gamma 2$ and $\alpha 6\beta 3\gamma 2$ GABA_A receptors.³⁰ Overall, the net effect of $\alpha 5$ -NAMs on the tonic current in neurons will be determined by both the inhibitory and potentiating drug actions on multiple subpopulations of GABA_A receptors. Finally, intracellular signaling pathways such as kinases and phosphatases regulate GABA_A receptor function and receptor pharmacology, and the activity of second messenger systems can differ between neurons and non-neuronal cells.^{31,32}

The goal of this study was to directly compare the effect of five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs (basimisanil; Ono-160; L-655,708; $\alpha 5$ IA; and MRK-016) on the tonic inhibitory conductance in hippocampal neurons. These particular drugs were selected because they have been investigated in *in vitro* studies and several have been studied in clinical trials.^{25,26} We also studied current evoked by a saturating concentration of GABA as well as miniature inhibitory postsynaptic currents (mIPSCs) as $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors can also contribute to synaptic currents. Overall, we expected to

demonstrate a utility of our experimental approach for screening and selection of α 5-NAMs for future clinical trials.

Methods

Selection of five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs

The five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs investigated here (basmisnil; Ono-160; L-655,708; $\alpha 5$ IA; and MRK-016; Supplementary Fig. 1), were selected because they have high binding affinities for $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors (Supplementary Table 1). In fact, three of the drugs had progressed to clinical trials namely basmisnil, $\alpha 5$ IA and MRK-016. Basmisnil is the most widely studied $\alpha 5$ -NAM in humans to date. At least three Phase 2 clinical trials have enrolled participants with either Down syndrome, stroke or schizophrenia, with the common goal of improving cognitive function (www.clinicaltrials.gov; NCT02024789, NCT02928393, NCT02953639). Both $\alpha 5$ IA and MRK-016 progressed to clinical trials, but these studies were halted in Phase 1 due to adverse side-effects.^{33,34} Ono-160 was described in a most recent patent (WO 2015/115673 A1), and L-655,708 has been widely investigated in preclinical studies.^{6,23,24,35}

Primary hippocampal neuronal culture

All experimental procedures were approved by the local Animal Care Committee at the University of Toronto. Timed-pregnant CD1 mice (Charles River, Montreal, Quebec, Canada) were used to prepare cultures of primary hippocampal neurons, as previously described.^{36,37} Briefly, fetuses (embryonic days 16-18) were removed from a pregnant mouse that was euthanized by cervical dislocation. Hippocampi were dissected and cells were dissociated through mechanical titration. Cells were then plated at a density of approximately 1×10^6 cells per 35-mm culture dish coated with poly-D-lysine (Sigma-Aldrich, Oakville, Ontario, Canada). Cultures were maintained in neurobasal medium (Gibco, Burlington, Ontario, Canada) that was supplemented with B-27

(Gibco) and L-glutamate (Gibco) for 14 to 20 days before use. Cell cultures prepared under these conditions primarily contain neurons. At the time of the recordings, the neurons became polarized, had extensive axonal and dendritic arbors and formed numerous, functional synapses. Thus, the cultured cells resemble mature neurons *in vivo*.^{38,39} Neurons that were adhered to the bottom of the culture dish with pyramid-shaped soma and clearly visible dendrites were selected for the recordings. Culture dishes were prepared from at least two different mice for each experiment, and a maximum of two cells was recorded from each dish.

Electrophysiology

Whole-cell voltage clamp recordings were performed in cultured hippocampal neurons using an Axopatch 200B amplifier (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, California, USA) that was controlled with the pClamp 8.0 software (Molecular Devices) via a Digidata 1322 interface (Molecular Devices). Neurons were voltage-clamped at a holding potential of -60 mV. Patch pipettes were pulled from thin-walled borosilicate glass capillary tubes and had an open-tip resistance of 2–4 M Ω . The intracellular solution contained (in mM) 140 CsCl, 10 HEPES, 11 EGTA, 4 MgATP, 2 MgCl₂, 1 CaCl₂, and 2 TEA (pH 7.3 with CsOH, 285 to 295 mOsm). Extracellular recording solution contained (in mM) 140 NaCl, 2 CaCl₂, 1 MgCl₂, 5.4 KCl, 25 HEPES, and 28 glucose (pH 7.4, 320 to 330 mOsm). Drugs dissolved in extracellular solution were applied to the patched neuron by a computer-controlled, multibarrelled perfusion system (SF-77B, Warner Instruments, Hamden, Connecticut, USA) that allowed fast solution exchange. All electrophysiological recordings were performed at room temperature (22–24 °C).

Ionotropic glutamate receptor blockers 6-cyano-7-nitroquinoxaline-2,3-dione (CNQX, 10 μ M) and (2R)-amino-5-phosphonovaleric acid (APV, 20 μ M) were added to the extracellular

solution. Tetrodotoxin (0.2 μM) was used to block voltage-dependent sodium channels. Tonic current was recorded by adding exogenous GABA (0.5 μM) to the extracellular solution. This concentration of GABA was selected because it is similar to the low extracellular concentration of GABA that occurs *in vivo*.^{7,10} The competitive GABA_A receptor antagonist bicuculline (20 μM) was applied to reveal the amplitude of the tonic current. mIPSCs were recorded in the presence of CNQX (10 μM), APV (20 μM) and tetrodotoxin (0.2 μM) without exogenous GABA.

Each of the $\alpha 5$ -NAMs (basmisnil; Ono-160; L-655,708; $\alpha 5\text{IA}$ and MRK-016) was studied at multiple concentrations to obtain the maximal efficacy and the half maximal inhibitory concentration (IC_{50}) of the drug. The concentrations for L-655,708, $\alpha 5\text{IA}$ and MRK-016 were selected based on the results from studies of the binding affinity and efficacy of $\alpha 5\text{GABA}_A$ receptors expressed recombinantly.^{23,33,34,40} For some drugs, the concentrations were selected based on the results reported in patents (US8835425B2 for basmisnil and WO 2015/115673 A1 for Ono-160).

Drugs and chemicals

Tetrodotoxin was purchased from Alomone Labs (Jerusalem, Israel). CNQX, APV, and bicuculline were obtained from Hello Bio Inc. (Princeton, New Jersey, USA); and GABA from Sigma-Aldrich (Oakville, Ontario, Canada). Four of the five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs: basmisnil, Ono-160, $\alpha 5\text{IA}$ and MRK-016, were synthesized in-house at the Medicines Discovery Institute (Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales). L-655,708 was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (Oakville, Ontario, Canada). All $\alpha 5$ -NAMs were dissolved in dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) to produce a stock solution of 10 mM. The stock solution was subsequently diluted in ultrapure water to create a secondary stock of 0.1 mM in 1% DMSO, stored at $-20\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$. For the *in vitro* studies, the secondary stock was

further diluted in the extracellular solution to obtain the desired $\alpha 5$ -NAM concentration in $\leq 0.1\%$ DMSO.

Data analyses

Currents were analyzed with pClamp10 software (Molecular Devices). For the tonic current experiments, only a single concentration of the $\alpha 5$ -NAM was applied to each cell, and the values were normalized to the amplitude of the bicuculline inhibitory response in that cell. The effects of each $\alpha 5$ -NAM on the tonic current were reported as “percent inhibition,” which was calculated as $(I_{\alpha 5\text{NAM}}/I_{\text{bicuculline}}) \times 100\%$, where $I_{\alpha 5\text{NAM}}$ is the current amplitude of the $\alpha 5$ -NAM response and $I_{\text{bicuculline}}$ for that of bicuculline. The concentration-response curve of each $\alpha 5$ -NAM was fitted with GraphPad Prism 6.01 (GraphPad, San Diego, CA) using nonlinear regression of log (agonist) vs. response (three parameters): $Y = \text{Bottom} + (\text{Emax} - \text{Bottom}) / (1 + 10^{((\text{LogIC}_{50} - X))})$, where Y is the “percent inhibition” and X is the concentration. The fit yielded values for the bottom (lowest percent inhibition), Emax (maximal percent inhibition) and IC_{50} ; with SEM and 95% confidence intervals.

At least 30 seconds of mIPSC recordings under each experimental condition were analyzed with MiniAnalysis 6.0.3 (Synaptosoft Inc., Fort Lee, New Jersey, USA). Analyses were performed in recordings without bursting and compound events to accurately determine the parameters of mIPSCs. Each file was also manually inspected to reject false events caused by noise and to include events that were not automatically detected. The total number of events under each experimental condition that were averaged to obtain the mean values presented in Table 3 ranged from 335 – 1170. All graphs in the report were created with GraphPad Prism 6.01 (Graphpad Software Inc., La Jolla, California, USA).

Statistical analyses

Data are presented as mean \pm SEM. The normality of data sets was tested with the D'Agostino–Pearson omnibus test ($n \geq 8$) or the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test ($n < 8$). For comparing three or more groups, the one-way ANOVA followed by the Tukey's multiple comparisons test was used. If normality was not met, the Kruskal-Wallis test followed by the Dunn's multiple comparisons test was used. A paired Student's *t* test was used to compare two groups, and when normality assumptions were not satisfied, the nonparametric Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed rank test was utilized. Cumulative distributions of the amplitude and frequency of mIPSCs were compared using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. A two-tailed hypothesis test was used, and statistical significance was set to $P < 0.05$.

Results

α 5-NAMs inhibited the tonic current with similar efficacies but different potencies

We first investigated the effects of five α 5-NAMs (basmisanil; Ono-160; L-655,708; α 5IA and MRK-016) on the amplitude of the tonic current. The tonic current in neurons *in vivo* is primarily generated by extrasynaptic GABA_A receptors that are activated by low, ambient concentrations of GABA.^{7,8} To mimic such agonist conditions,^{7,10} the neurons were continuously perfused with a low concentration of GABA (0.5 μ M). A competitive GABA_A receptor antagonist, bicuculline (20 μ M), was then co-applied with GABA. The amplitude of the tonic current was revealed, as indicated by a reduction in the holding current (Fig. 1a; $I_{\text{bicuculline}} = 122.7 \pm 5.3$ pA, $n = 167$). Following the washout of bicuculline and the return of current to baseline, a α 5-NAM was co-applied with GABA. The decrease in holding current caused by the α 5-NAM was compared to the decrease caused by bicuculline. The results were described as “percent inhibition” of the bicuculline response.

Basmisanil caused a concentration-dependent decrease in the amplitude of the tonic current where 1 μ M was significantly more effective than 0.1 nM to 100 nM (Fig. 1a). Increasing the concentration to 10 μ M failed to further reduce the tonic current. The inhibitory effect of basmisanil was rapidly reversed following drug washout. Similarly, Ono-160, L-655,708, α 5IA and MRK-016 inhibited the tonic current, albeit at lower concentrations (Fig. 1b-e). The tonic current returned to baseline after washout of the α 5-NAMs (Supplementary Fig. 2).

To compare the efficacy and potency of the α 5-NAMs, the data were fitted with sigmoidal concentration-response curves (Fig. 2). The fittings generated the maximal inhibitory effect (E_{max}) and the half-maximal inhibitory concentration (IC_{50}). The E_{max} values did not differ between the

five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs, as evidenced by the overlap in the 95% confidence intervals (Table 1). In contrast, the IC_{50} of basmisanil (126.8 nM, 95% confidence intervals of 27.5 – 583.4 nM) was significantly greater than the other four compounds (Table 1). Notably, the IC_{50} values of Ono-160, L-655,708, $\alpha 5IA$ and MRK-016 were consistently in the sub-nanomolar range (0.4 – 0.8 nM). The lower potency for basmisanil compared to the other four compounds was reflected by the rightward shift of the concentration-response curve, as shown in Fig. 2f.

$\alpha 5$ -NAMs did not inhibit current evoked by a saturating concentration of GABA

$\alpha 5$ -NAMs can have both positive and negative modulatory effects on other $GABA_A$ receptor subtypes.^{25,30} Some of these receptor subtypes have a lower affinity for GABA than $\alpha 5GABA_A$ receptors yet higher single channel conductance.⁴¹ Therefore, we next examined whether $\alpha 5$ -NAMs modulated currents evoked by a saturating concentration of GABA, a condition that would activate both low-affinity and high-affinity $GABA_A$ receptors.

A saturating concentration of GABA (1 mM) was applied for 16 seconds to activate a peak current and a lower steady-state current (due to receptor desensitization, Fig. 3a). The peak current was used as an indicator of maximal $GABA_A$ receptor activation, whereas the magnitude of the steady-state current revealed receptor subpopulations that resided in non-desensitized states. The effects of each $\alpha 5$ -NAM were studied at a concentration that produced the maximal reduction in the amplitude of the tonic current, as shown in Fig. 1. The $\alpha 5$ -NAM was pre-applied for 10 seconds before being co-applied with GABA.

Basmisanil did not alter the amplitude of the peak or steady-state current as shown in Fig. 3a, ($P > 0.05$ for both, $n = 8$; also see Table 2). Similarly, the other four $\alpha 5$ -NAMs had no effect

(Table 2). Together, the results show that the $\alpha 5$ -NAMs did not alter the function of GABA_A receptors when activated by a saturating concentration of GABA.

$\alpha 5$ -NAMs did not inhibit miniature inhibitory postsynaptic currents

mIPSCs are generated by postsynaptic GABA_A receptors that are activated by GABA released from presynaptic terminals.⁷ While $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors are predominantly located extrasynaptically, they are also expressed at lower levels in synaptic regions of neurons.^{16,42} Thus, we investigated the effects of $\alpha 5$ -NAMs on mIPSCs. Basmisanil had no effect on the amplitude or frequency of mIPSCs, as shown in Fig. 3b. Similarly, the time course and charge transfer of mIPSCs were unaffected by basmisanil (Table 3). Likewise, Ono-160, L-655,708, $\alpha 5$ IA and MRK-016 did not modulate mIPSCs (Table 3).

Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to compare the effects of five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs on the tonic inhibitory current in hippocampal neurons. The results showed that the maximal inhibitory effects of the five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs were similar ($E_{max} = 35.5\% - 51.3\%$) whereas the potencies differed. Basmisanil ($IC_{50} = 126.8$ nM) was less potent than the other four compounds, all of which exhibited similar potencies ($IC_{50} = 0.4 - 0.8$ nM).

None of the $\alpha 5$ -NAMs modified the amplitude of current evoked by a saturating concentration of GABA. While $\alpha 5GABA_A$ receptors contribute to 25% of $GABA_A$ receptors in the hippocampus,⁴ our results suggest that the current generated by other $GABA_A$ receptors masks the contribution of low-conductance $\alpha 5GABA_A$ receptors to the peak and steady-state responses. In addition, $\alpha 5$ -NAMs did not change the amplitude, frequency, or time course of mIPSCs. This latter result is consistent with the notion that $\alpha 5GABA_A$ receptors do not contribute substantially to synaptic currents,^{20,28} although they are expressed in synaptic regions on the dendrites of hippocampal neurons and can contribute to slowly decaying synaptic current.^{7,16,17,19,43}

All five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs inhibited the tonic current with similar efficacy. The E_{max} values (35.5% – 51.3%) are quite similar to those from recombinant $\alpha 5\beta 3\gamma 2$ receptors, but only for four of the five compounds (39% – 55%, Supplementary Table 1). The similarities between efficacies of basmisanil, Ono-160, $\alpha 5IA$ and MRK-016 for inhibiting the tonic current in neurons and inhibiting recombinant $\alpha 5GABA_A$ receptors are consistent with evidence that suggests the tonic current in neurons is primarily generated by $\alpha 5GABA_A$ receptors.^{4,6,20,37}

Interestingly, L-655,708 caused a greater inhibition of the tonic current in neurons (35.5%) than recombinant $\alpha 5\beta 3\gamma 2$ $GABA_A$ receptors expressed in mouse L (tk-) cells (17%, Supplementary

Table 1). Two factors, which are related to the experimental condition, could contribute to this discrepancy. GABA, applied at a low concentration as used in our study ($0.5 \mu\text{M} \approx \text{EC}_3$) could predominantly occupy only one of the two GABA binding sites on GABA_A receptors; whereas, GABA at higher concentrations, such as those used in studies of recombinant receptors (EC_{20}) might occupy both ligand binding sites.²⁵ L-655,708 may be more effective at a lower GABA concentration due to different conformational changes that occur in the mono-liganded state.²⁵ Also, primary neurons and heterologous systems may differ in their intracellular environment and cell signaling pathways that regulate GABA_A receptor function and their responses to drugs. For example, phosphorylation modulates the effects of benzodiazepines through regulation of ligand binding at the benzodiazepine-binding site.^{44,45} Such a difference in cell signaling pathways could alter the efficacy of L-655,708.

The potencies of the five $\alpha 5$ -NAMs were similar with the exception of basmisanil. Their IC_{50} values ranged from 0.4 to 0.8 nM, which are similar to those reported with recombinant $\alpha 5\beta 3\gamma 2$ GABA_A receptors (0.66 – 1.4 nM, Supplementary Table 1). Surprisingly, basmisanil ($\text{IC}_{50} = 126.8$ nM) was clearly less potent than the other compounds. The potency of basmisanil also differed by more than an order of magnitude from the binding affinity for recombinant $\alpha 5\beta 3\gamma 2$ receptors ($K_i = 4.7$ nM, Supplementary Table 1). It will be of interest to determine the reasons why basmisanil has a low potency (or functional affinity) for inhibition of $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors in neurons yet high binding affinity for $\alpha 5\beta 3\gamma 2$ receptors in recombinant systems.

The unexpected lower potency of basmisanil for inhibiting the tonic current is of considerable interests given the results from several clinical trials. Basmisanil is the most widely studied $\alpha 5$ -NAM in humans to date. Three Phase 2 trials have enrolled participants with either Down syndrome, stroke or schizophrenia, with the common goal of improving cognitive function.

No improvement in cognition was observed in participants with Down syndrome, as measured by a battery of neuropsychological tests (www.clinicaltrials.gov; NCT02024789). The study of stroke patients was terminated because of low recruitment of participants (NCT02928393). The clinical trial of patients with schizophrenia has been completed, but results have not yet been reported (NCT02953639). Our results, which show a low potency for basmisanil, raise the possibility that the drug might not reach sufficiently high concentrations in the human brain to inhibit the tonic current.

Overall, we have identified two unexpected findings from the study: the greater efficacy of L-655,708 and the lower potency of basmisanil for inhibiting the tonic current in hippocampal neurons. These results suggest that $\alpha 5$ -NAM development programs would benefit from *in vitro* studies of native GABA_A receptors. Screening $\alpha 5$ -NAM effect on tonic current in cultured hippocampal neurons, where heterogeneous populations of GABA_A receptors are expressed, may offer critical information that either supports or rejects a decision to embark on costly, time-consuming and labor-intensive clinical trials.

Despite the challenges faced in recent clinical trials, the development of $\alpha 5$ -NAMs has considerable potential and should continue, given the extent to which hyperactivity of $\alpha 5$ GABA_A receptors is implicated in many devastating cognitive and psychiatric disorders.

Author contributions

Study design: MAM, DSW, MOP, JRA, BAO

Data collection: MAM, DSW, WWL, AP

Data analysis: MAM, DSW, SK, RAR

Compound synthesis: MOP, JRA

Manuscript preparation: DSW, MAM, MOP, JRA, RAR, BAO

Declaration of interests

BAO is an inventor named on a Canadian patent (2,852,978), a US patent (9,517,265), and a pending US patent (62/268,137). JRA received personal fees from Ono Pharmaceutical Co. MAM, DSW, WWL, AP, MOP, SK and RAR have no competing interests.

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Table 1. Maximal percent inhibition (E_{max}) and IC_{50} values were obtained from the fitted curves, shown in Fig. 2. Data are presented as mean \pm SEM (95% confidence intervals). The SEM values for IC_{50} are only available in Log form and shown in the bottom row. The asterisks indicate a significant difference between the IC_{50} value for basmisanil and those for the other compounds.

	Basmisanil	Ono-160	L-655,708	$\alpha 5IA$	MRK-016
E_{max}	50.6 \pm 6.5% (37.5 – 63.8)	36.1 \pm 4.7% (26.6 – 45.5)	35.5 \pm 3.8% (28.0 – 43.1)	51.3 \pm 4.2% (42.8 – 59.7)	48.5 \pm 4.8% (38.9 – 58.1)
IC_{50} (nM)	126.8* (27.5 – 583.4)	0.4 (0.06 – 2.9)	0.4 (0.06 – 2.9)	0.7 (0.2 – 2.7)	0.8 (0.2 – 3.7)
Log IC_{50} (M)	-6.9 \pm 0.3*	-9.4 \pm 0.4	-9.4 \pm 0.4	-9.2 \pm 0.3	-9.1 \pm 0.3

Table 2. $\alpha 5$ -NAMs do not modify the amplitude of the peak or steady-state current evoked by a saturating concentration of GABA (1 mM). $P > 0.05$, Student's paired t test. The steady-state current for Ono-160 was assessed using the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed rank test. Data are presented as mean \pm SEM

	Peak (pA)	Steady-state (pA)
Control (n = 8)	5264 \pm 950	644 \pm 134
Basmisanil (1 μ M)	5321 \pm 943	693 \pm 141
Control (n = 7)	4563 \pm 1099	646 \pm 226
Ono-160 (10 nM)	4252 \pm 1091	640 \pm 212
Control (n = 7)	4998 \pm 1005	752 \pm 186
L-655,708 (200 nM)	4945 \pm 1025	746 \pm 184
Control (n = 6)	4271 \pm 764	567 \pm 140
$\alpha 5$ IA (100 nM)	4286 \pm 849	549 \pm 136
Control (n = 5)	3514 \pm 894	349 \pm 98
MRK-016 (100 nM)	3390 \pm 799	375 \pm 84

Table 3. $\alpha 5$ -NAMs do not modify miniature inhibitory postsynaptic currents. For all the parameters, $P > 0.05$, Student's paired t test except for $\alpha 5$ IA (frequency, rise and area), basmisanil (frequency), L-655,708 (amplitude and area), and MRK-016 (frequency) where the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed rank test was used. Data are presented as mean \pm SEM

	Amplitude (pA)	Frequency (Hz)	Rise time (ms)	Decay time (ms)	Area (pA.ms)
Control (n = 7)	45.5 \pm 4.7	3.7 \pm 0.2	5.0 \pm 0.3	11.0 \pm 1.0	552.6 \pm 88.7
Basmisanil (1 μ M)	41.7 \pm 3.2	4.6 \pm 0.7	5.3 \pm 0.4	9.9 \pm 0.8	468.1 \pm 48.2
Control (n = 6)	39.0 \pm 3.2	4.0 \pm 0.9	5.8 \pm 0.6	9.0 \pm 1.2	399.0 \pm 53.2
Ono-160 (10 nM)	40.2 \pm 1.8	4.8 \pm 0.8	5.6 \pm 0.4	8.4 \pm 1.1	399.6 \pm 49.3
Control (n = 7)	47.2 \pm 6.5	5.3 \pm 0.8	5.2 \pm 0.3	9.9 \pm 0.8	533.0 \pm 109.0
L-655,708 (200 nM)	42.8 \pm 4.7	4.8 \pm 1.0	5.3 \pm 0.4	9.2 \pm 1.2	446.7 \pm 78.2
Control (n = 7)	43.8 \pm 2.6	1.6 \pm 0.3	5.4 \pm 0.3	10.3 \pm 0.2	514.3 \pm 75.8
$\alpha 5$ IA (100 nM)	43.0 \pm 2.3	2.2 \pm 0.4	5.9 \pm 0.2	10.7 \pm 1.3	510.2 \pm 72.6
Control (n = 8)	40.3 \pm 4.0	2.5 \pm 0.5	6.7 \pm 0.4	13.7 \pm 1.5	596.8 \pm 69.6
MRK-016 (100 nM)	40.0 \pm 3.9	2.8 \pm 0.7	6.4 \pm 0.5	13.8 \pm 1.0	591.9 \pm 75.8

Figure Legends

Fig 1. Tonic current is inhibited by $\alpha 5$ -NAMs. (a) Representative traces (left) showing the effects of basmisanil on the tonic current (10 nM and 1 μ M) in comparison to the effect of bicuculline (20 μ M). A single $\alpha 5$ -NAM concentration was tested on each cell. Summarized data for basmisanil (right) illustrate a concentration-dependent effect. $n = 7, 7, 7, 7, 8, 5$ (*left to right*). One-way ANOVA, $F_{(5,35)} = 11.1$, $P < 0.0001$. (b-e) Summarized data for the remaining four $\alpha 5$ -NAMs, which also show concentration-dependent effects. One-way ANOVA for all except MRK-016, where the Kruskal-Wallis test was used. (b) Ono-160, $n = 7, 7, 8, 8, 9$ (*left to right*). $F_{(4,34)} = 7.1$, $P = 0.0003$. (c) L-655,708, $n = 6, 8, 8, 8, 8, 6$ (*left to right*). $F_{(5,38)} = 5.3$, $P = 0.0009$. (d) $\alpha 5$ IA, $n = 7, 7, 9, 9, 9, 7$, $F_{(5,42)} = 9.9$, $P < 0.001$. (e) MRK-016, $n = 6, 8, 10, 8, 10, 7$ (*left to right*), Kruskal-Wallis statistic value $H_{(5)} = 24.3$, $P = 0.0002$. Data are mean \pm SEM. * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$, Tukey's multiple comparisons test except for MRK-016, where the Dunn's multiple comparisons test was used.

Fig 2. The concentration-response curve of each $\alpha 5$ -NAM is fitted from the same data in Fig. 1. All $\alpha 5$ -NAMs have similar efficacy, but basmisanil is the least potent as the curve is shifted to the right. Data are mean \pm SEM. Sample size is shown in Fig. 1.

Fig 3. Basmisanil does not modulate the peak and steady-state current evoked by a saturating concentration of GABA, nor affects mIPSCs. (a, left panel) Representative traces showing the effect of basmisanil on current evoked by GABA (1 mM). (a, right panel) Summarized data for the peak and steady-state current. $n = 8$; $P = 0.8$ and $P = 0.1$ for the peak and steady-state current,

respectively; Student's paired t test. Data are mean \pm SEM. (b, top panel) Representative traces of mIPSCs, in the absence and presence of basmisanil. (b, bottom panel) Cumulative distributions of the amplitude (left) and frequency (right) of mIPSCs show that both were not altered by basmisanil. $P = 0.1$ and $P = 0.7$ for the amplitude and frequency, respectively; Kolmogorov–Smirnov test.