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## MINIMAL IMPACT ELECTRO-INJECTION OF CELLS UNDERGOING DYNAMIC SHAPE CHANGE REVEALS CALPAIN ACTIVATION

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Running title:- Calpain activation and cell spreading

*The ability of neutrophils to rapidly change shape underlies their physiological functions of phagocytosis and spreading. A major problem in establishing the mechanism is that conventional microinjection of substances and indicators interferes with this dynamic cell behavior. Here we show that electroinjection, a “no-touch” point-and-shoot means of introducing material into the cell, is sufficiently gentle to allow neutrophils to be injected whilst undergoing chemokinesis and spreading without disturbing cell shape change behavior. Using this approach, a fluorogenic calpain-1 selective peptide substrate was introduced into the cytosol of individual neutrophils undergoing shape changes. These data showed that (i) physiologically elevated cytosolic  $Ca^{2+}$  concentrations were sufficient to trigger calpain-1 activation, blockade of  $Ca^{2+}$  influx preventing calpain activation and(ii) calpain-1 activity was elevated in spreading neutrophil.. These findings provide the first direct demonstration of a physiological role for  $Ca^{2+}$  elevation in calpain-1 activation and rapid cell spreading. Electroinjection of cells undergoing dynamic shape changes thus opens new avenues of investigation for defining the molecular mechanism underlying dynamic cell shape changes.*

**Words 166**

*Keywords:* Cell spreading/ chemokinesis/ Cytosolic  $Ca^{2+}$  / Neutrophil/ phagocytosis

## 1. Introduction

An essential feature of the way in which motile and phagocytic cells behave, is their capacity for rapid changes in cell shape, often resulting in a doubling of the cell surface area [1]. It has been suggested that the additional membrane for this comes largely from the unwrinkling of cell surface folds [1,2] which are formed by proteins such as ezrin linking the plasma membrane to the underlying cortical actin network. Many of these proteins are sensitive to cleavage by the cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  activated protease calpain [3,4] and since an elevation of cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  can trigger rapid cell spreading [5-7], it has been speculated that calpain-1 activation provides the signalling link. However, calpain-1 activation requires 10-50  $\mu\text{M}$   $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ , yet cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  in spreading cells transiently only reaches a max of 1  $\mu\text{M}$ . Theoretical modelling of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  within the wrinkles suggests that within this microdomain,  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  concentration may reach sufficiently high for localised calpain activation [8]. Calpain inhibitor studies have pointed to a link between calpain activation and neutrophil shape change behaviour [9,10], and the possibility that calpain was constitutively active in these cells [10]. However, it is difficult to investigate whether this occurs physiologically as fluorogenic peptide substrates which are selective for calpain-1 must be micro-injected into the cytosol of cells. Conventional microinjection is prone to serious problems which hamper its use in this way for investigating dynamic cell shape changes, and usually results in an immediate retraction and cessation of cell motility [11,12]. Since, the micropipette tip enters the cell during stabbing at the velocities in the region of 700  $\mu\text{m/s}$  [13], and is likely to displace, damage, or enter organelles. Excessive pressure required to expel the contents of the micropipette into the cell can also cause significant impairment of chemokinesis and phagocytosis, probably because the “inflation” of the cell reduces wrinkles on the cell surface. The SLAM

(soft lipid-assisted microinjection) technique, where contact between a phospholipid coating on the micropipette and the plasma membrane allows fusion and results in transfer of material from within the micropipette into the cell cytosol, negating both the need for the micropipette to enter the cytosol and thus for high pressures and has been used successfully on cells which are otherwise difficult to microinject [14,15]. However, the fusion requires a close contact between the two bilayers for several (often tens of ) seconds [13], and is not usable with rapidly moving cells or those undergoing other dynamic shape changes. We have therefore investigated a previously described “no touch” approach based on localised electroporation [16-18], which we found was surprisingly benign and could be used in a number of cell types, including neutrophils engaged in chemokinesis without affects their motile behaviour.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Electro-injection**

Borosilicate glass capillaries (1mm outer diameter and 0.5mm inner diameter; with filament) were pulled with a Sutter Instrument P-2000 laser-operated micropipette puller creating a tip diameter of 0.8-1  $\mu\text{m}$  (by optical inspection) and an inner opening diameter of 0.4-0.5  $\mu\text{m}$ . The micropipette was back-filled with appropriate loading solution (approx 1-2  $\mu\text{l}$ ). A silver wire (0.25mm diameter) was passed through the micropipette holder, into the micropipette and into the loading solution, and connected to a voltage stimulator terminal (Grass SD9). The opposite terminal was connected to a second silver wire, which was fixed in place in the cell-containing medium on a microscope slide. The micropipette was positioned next to the target cell (preferably within 1  $\mu\text{m}$ ) using a micromanipulator (InjectMan Eppendorf) and

electroporation initiated by a 1s train of pulses (1ms square pulses; 10-50V volts; 200Hz).

## **2.2 Imaging and Ca<sup>2+</sup> measurement**

Cultured cells were grown on glass-bottomed petri dishes and neutrophils attached to glass coverslip and maintained at 37°C as previously described [31,32]. Human neutrophils, isolated from the blood of healthy volunteers as described previously [7,21,25] were suspended in Krebs medium (NaCl 120mM, KCl, 4.9mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 1.2mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>, 1.2mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>, 1.3mM, HEPES 25mM and bovine serum albumin, 0.1% adjusted to pH 7.4 with NaOH). Neutrophils were allowed to settle onto clean, non-coated glass coverslips maintained at 37°C. The imaging parameters were set before the electro-injection micropipette was manoeuvred into position and images were acquired using either convention or confocal microscopy. The relative amount of fluorescent material ejected from the micropipette and injected within the cell was monitored by the relative fluorescence intensities. The concentration of material ejected was also estimated by comparing the fluorescence intensity with the (known) concentration of material which is in the pipette. When required, formyl-met-leu-phe (1µM) was added directly onto the cells to give a step change in concentration. Superimposed fluorescence and phase contrast images were created using Leica software and quantitative data was extracted using a measurement “region of interest” within the cell either using ImageJ or Leica software. The mean intensity of the cytosolic fluorogenic calpain-1 substrate was quantified by restricting the region of interest within the perimeter of the cell. When required, cells were pre-loaded with fura-red from its AM ester as previously described [30,31] and the change in Ca<sup>2+</sup> concentration monitored from the intensity decrease using the standard Tsien equation

[33]. For simultaneous  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  and calpain measurement, images were acquired sequentially (acquisition parameters changed between lines) to avoid cross talk between the signals in each channel.

## 2.3 Materials

Lucifer yellow was purchased from Sigma –Aldrich. FuraRed-AM was purchased from Molecular Probes (Invitrogen). Calpain-1 substrate Fluorogenic calpain-1 substrate (H-Lys(FAM)-Glu-Val-Tyr-Gly-Met-Met-Lys(Dabcyl)-OH) was purchased from Calbiochem.

## 3. Results

The micro-injection technique used here involved passing controllable electrical voltage pulses from the open tip of a small bore micropipette (containing the molecules to be injected) through the cell to be injected as described by Haas et al [16-18]. The voltage pulses will cause a localised and transient electroporation of the cell membrane and since many molecules also carry a charge, provided the electrical polarity is in the appropriate direction, the voltage pulses will also have an iontophoretic effect forcing molecules out of the pipette synchronously with the opening of the electroporation pore. As the electroporation effect is dependent on the membrane curvature [22], it is selective for the larger radius of curvature of the cell membrane over the smaller curvatures of intracellular organelles. Single cell electroporation of this type was first described using two carbon fibre filaments [23] and GFP-expressing plasmid to show successfully transfection. Haas and Cline [16,17] extended this approach by using micropipettes as a method for transfecting neurones *in vivo* with GFP-expressing plasmids and for introducing macromolecules into cells *in vivo* [18] and *in vitro* [24]. This approach proved to be surprisingly gentle and simple, resulting in a no-touch (point and shoot) method for introducing material



into the cell cytosol with minimal impact of cell shape change dynamics. For convenience, we have used the term “electro-injection” to describe the outcome of this procedure.

### ***3.1 Transfer of material to the cytosol by electro-injection***

In order to optimise the electro-injection transfer process, the cell impermeant dye, lucifer yellow, was used as a marker of injection in the “stationary” cell line, 3T3 cells. With appropriate pulse parameters, the success rate of transfer into these immobile cells was very high, with 90-100% successfully injected cells. Since 3T3 cells are reasonably flat, the lateral distance between the cell and micropipette tip could be measured. It was estimated that effective electroinjection required the distance of micropipette tip from the cell to be within  $1.25 \mu\text{m}$  ( $\pm 0.12 \mu\text{m}$ ;  $n=27$ ). The cytosolic concentration as Lucifer yellow was approximately the same as ejectate (92-115%;  $n=35$ ) giving a final cytosolic concentration of 1% that within the micropipette (fig 1a).

### ***3.2 Transfer to small and potentially motile neutrophils***

Resting neutrophils, which were attached to the substrate but stationary, could also be easily electro-injected and were no obvious consequences of the injection process (fig 1b). In a study, electro-injection (10V square pulses train; 1ms 200Hz; for 0.5 s) was 89.5% successful: 10.5% unsuccessful: 0% lysis ( $n=19$ ). The subsequent cell spreading behaviour in response to a formylated -met-leu-phe (f-mlp) of neutrophils which had been successfully electro-injected, was unaltered with symmetrical spreading showing no effect localised to the injection locus (fig 1b and supplementary movie 1). The fmlp-induced  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal also remained intact and could be monitored in neutrophils previously loaded with fura red by acetoxymethyl ester loading (fig 1c).

### **3.3 Effect of electro-injection on cell changing shape dynamics**

Given the apparently benign affect of electro-injection, human neutrophils were allowed to adhere, polarise and undergo spontaneous motility before attempting electro-injection. As we found that the micropipette need not touch the cell for effective electro-injection, it was possible that, provided the micropipette could be placed sufficiently close to the moving cells, motile neutrophils could also be injected. Although it was more difficult to estimate the tip cell distance in bright field images (due to the 3D character of the spherical cell and changing morphology of motile cells), it was estimated from confocal slice images that the maximum distance at which electroinjection could occur was about 3  $\mu\text{m}$ . After fluorescent material was transferred to neutrophils, they remained motile and had similar characteristics to non-injected cells ( fig 2 and supplementary movie 3). There was also no detectable effect on the motile behaviour of individual cells before and after electro-injection while in the process of chemokinesis. The rate of movement before ( $0.436 \pm 0.19 \mu\text{m/s}$ ;  $n=14$ ) and after ( $0.431 \pm 0.069 \mu\text{m/s}$ ;  $n=14$ ) microinjection not being significantly different ( $p>0.9$ ; paired t-test). Further no cells were observed to round up or change direction after electro-injection (0/14 cells). In the example shown in fig 2, an uninjected motile cell is also shown next to an electro-injected cell for comparison of their cell motility. This comparison may be better seen in the entire imaging sequence which shows the cells moving randomly about the microscopic field during electro-injection (supplementary movie 3).

### **3.4 Electro-injection of fluorogenic peptide to monitor calpain activation**

As electro-injected neutrophils retained the ability to response to the chemotactic stimulus f-met-leu-phe by signalling  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  and exhibiting the typical rapid cell spreading response (fig 1b), this opened the opportunity to investigate the

relationship between  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signalling, calpain-1 activation and neutrophil spreading. As the rapid spreading of these cells is both accompanied by a large  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal [4,5] and can be triggered by elevating cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  [7], it has consequently been proposed that the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal activates the cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated protease calpain-1 [1,25]. While measurement of cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  can be achieved using synthetic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  indicators, it is more difficult to measure calpain-1 activity within an individual living cell with specificity (especially discriminating between calpain-1 and calpain-2). However,  $\alpha$ -spectrin is reported to be susceptible to  $\mu$ -calpain degradation, yet resistant to cleavage by other proteases [26,27]. A peptide sequence from  $\alpha$ -spectrin which includes the calpain-1 cleavage site has specificity for cleavage by calpain-1 [28]. This forms the basis for a fluorogenic peptide calpain substrate, the fluorescence from which is quenched by FRET between the fluor and quencher at either end of the peptide. After lysis at the calpain-1 specific cleavage site, the quenching is released [28]. A rise in fluorescence from the cleaved peptide thus indicates the appearance of proteolytic product and elevated calpain-1 activity [29]. The efficiency of electro-injection of the weakly fluorescent peptide was lower than Lucifer yellow, with the cytosolic concentration being approximately 40% of the injectate concentration, giving a cytosolic concentration 0.4% of the concentration within the micropipette. Electro-injecting the fluorogenic-calpain substrate peptide into spontaneously motile and spreading neutrophils showed that calpain-1 was active in these cells, as the cleavage of the peptide was observed by the progressive increase in cellular fluorescent signal after injection had terminated and the extracellular fluorescent signal had fallen back as a result of dilution (fig 3a). In polarising and spreading neutrophils, the fluorescent signal reached intensities approximately twice the initial level over the subsequent 30s (6 out of 7 cells). This response was

prevented by treatment of cells with mercaptoacrylate derivatives [29] which inhibit cytosolic calpain-1 activity. In non-motile or non-spreading neutrophils, the cellular fluorescent signal rose during electroinjection but was stable. Although calpain activity was enhanced, the cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  concentration in these cells was near the resting level. However, the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal during spreading is transient and these cells had probably experienced a large  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal at the time of spreading [4.5]. In order to establish the temporal relationship between the cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal and activation of calpain-1, non-spreading neutrophils were pre-loaded with the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  indicator fura-red before electro-injection with fluorogenic calpain substrate to permit simultaneous measurement of changes in cytosolic free  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  and calpain activity from the same cell. Rapid cell spreading was then induced by stimulation of the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal with f-met-leu-phe (fig 3b). This approach thus attempted to capture the temporal relationship between  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signalling and calpain-1 activation for the first time in spreading neutrophils. It has long been speculated that calpain-1 was activated by physiological rise in cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  even though it requires around  $30\mu\text{M}$   $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  for activation [30,31] and the bulk cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  peaks at only  $1\mu\text{M}$  [32]. When triggered by the formylated peptide, fmlp, both an increase in cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  and an increase in calpain activity were recorded in 7 out of 9 cells. In the remaining two cells, a  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal was not triggered and no calpain activation was observed. As the fluorescence increase reflects the accumulation of cleaved substrate, it is difficult to locate the precise instant at which calpain activation begins. There may be, therefore, an artefactual temporal displacement between the onset of the  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signal and apparent calpain activation. When  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  influx into the neutrophils was blocked by extracellular  $\text{Ni}^{2+}$  ions (1mM), fmlp failed to trigger calpain activation despite some small  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signals, which we have previously shown to be due to the release of stored

$\text{Ca}^{2+}$  from within the cell [34] (fig 3d). This is accompanied by inhibition of rapid cell spreading, as we have previously reported [35]. This data clearly demonstrates that physiological influx of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  is sufficient to trigger calpain activation in neutrophils.

#### **4. Discussion**

The data reported here showed a clear correlation between calpain activation and cell spreading by neutrophils. It was further shown that a physiological elevation in cytosolic free  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  was correlated to an increase in calpain activity and that blockade of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  influx prevented the activation of calpain. Although calpain is well known as a  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -activated enzyme [30], the requirement for  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  is in excess in that normally thought to be achieved within the cell. The  $k_d$  for calpain-1 is within the 30-50 $\mu\text{M}$  range, yet cytosolic free  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  within neutrophils reaching only approx. 1 $\mu\text{M}$  [25, 32]. When cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  is elevated by uncaging cytosolic (chelated)  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ , it was previously found that extremely high levels of cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  are required to induce neutrophil spreading [7]. However, modelling  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  levels within neutrophils during  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  influx reveals that the cell surface topography can have a extreme influence on localised  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ , and that microdomains of high  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  are generated during physiological  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  influx within wrinkled region of plasma membrane which reach levels of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  sufficient to activate calpain-1 [8]. High concentrations of  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  can also be detected just beneath the plasma membrane of neutrophils using membrane attached fluorescent  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  probes [34,36]. This suggests that calpain-1 within wrinkles at the cell surface are activated only at these cortical and intra-wrinkle regions of the cell. The fluorogenic peptide used here was not suitable to detect such localised sites of calpain activation as the peptide was free to diffuse within the cell. However, the

data here showed that calpain was indeed activated by  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  and was therefore consistent with that proposal that activation occurred in microdomains of high  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ .

The no-touch electro-injection approach which we used here, and reported previously by Haas and Cline [16-18], was obviously key to the success of this work as the cytosolic processes involved in neutrophil spreading cannot be investigated by approaches which depended on conventional micro-injection. As electro-injection of dynamically active cells, had minimal impact on neutrophil morphological changes, it thus promises to open additional avenues for investigating dynamic shape change behaviour by motile cells.

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KJL and BM performed and developed the microinjection experiments and contributed equally to the data for this paper. IL manufactured the micropipettes and assisted with micromanipulation techniques. KJL, SD, BM and MBH analysed the data. MBH and SD devised and supervised the experiments and MBH wrote the paper.

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## Figure Legends

Figure 1. **Electro-injection of cells** with the fluorescent marker lucifer yellow (10V square pulses train; 1ms 200Hz; for 0.5 s); (a) five 3T3 cells were electro-injected sequentially and the fluorescent images are shown for the times indicated; (b) a human neutrophil, which in response to fmlp (1 $\mu$ M), was shown to spread symmetrically and at a similar rate to untreated neutrophils. The images show the fluorescent images for the neutrophil during the spreading response to fmlp at the times indicated. The phase contrast images shows the same cell after injection, before and after the spreading event. The times at which the images are shown are given at the bottom of each image. (c) A comparison between the Ca<sup>2+</sup> signalling in response to fmlp (1 $\mu$ M) by non-injected (Uni-inj) and electroinjected (Inj) neutrophil is shown. In each pair of traces, the raw fluorescent signal from cytosolic fura red is shown and the estimated cytosolic Ca<sup>2+</sup> change shown.

## Figure 2

- (a) The sequence of images of a typical experiment and shows an overlay of the fluorescent signal (Lucifer yellow) and the phase contrast image of the cells.
- (i) The micropipette is positioned near the moving cell; (ii) the position of the cell at electro-injection; (iii) after electro-injection the cell continues to move as before; and (iv) the cell locations approx 150s post injection. The exact times at which the images were taken is shown at the bottom of each image and the cell movements can be followed continuously in supplementary movie 1.

### Figure 3

(a) Electro-injection a fluorogenic peptide substrate for calpain-1 into a quiescent neutrophil, showing the extracellular pulse which results from iontophoretic ejection (blue line) and the cytosolic intensity of the peptide (green line). It is seen that the cytosolic intensity of the substrate is stable in these cells: into a spread and actively shape changing neutrophil, showing the extracellular pulse which results from the iontophoretic ejection (blue line) and the cytosolic intensity of the peptide (green line). It is seen that the cytosolic fluorescence intensity of the substrate rises after the electroinjection pulse has subsided indicating calpain activity in these cells (6 out of 7 spreading/dynamically shape changing neutrophils electro-injected showed this effect). (c,d) Induced  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  signalling and calpain activation was demonstrated by simultaneous imaging of the fura-red signal and the fluorescence intensity of the calpain substrate within the same electro-injected cell. The upper trace marked shows the cytosolic  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  change (marked “ $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ ”) and the lower trace show the intensity of the calpain substrate (marked “calpain”). At the point indicated in (c) and (d), the peptide f-mlp ( $1\mu\text{M}$ ) was added as a stimulus. In (d)  $\text{Ni}^{2+}$  ( $1\text{mM}$ ) was present through the experiment. These traces were typical of at least 5 similar experiments.

## **SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**

### **Supplementary Movies**

#### ***1. Electro-injection and cell spreading (Spreading.mov).***

The movie shows fluorescence image sequence of a human neutrophil being electro-injected with Lucifer yellow and then stimulated with fmlp (1 $\mu$ M) at the time indicated. The spreading response is observed and it should be noted that spreading was symmetrical with no evidence of localised cell damage or inhibition of spreading at the electro-injection locus. The movie shows the complete data for fig 1b.

#### ***2. Electro-injection and spontaneous motility (inj-mov.mov).***

The movie shows an overlay of the fluorescent signal (Lucifer yellow) and the phase contrast image of the neutrophils undergoing spontaneous motility. The motility of the non-injected and the electro-injected cell can be compared.

#### ***3. Moving target (electro-inj.mov)***

The movie shows a short sequence demonstrating the electro-injection of a human neutrophil whilst undergoing rapid motility. The movie is an overlay of the fluorescent signal (Lucifer yellow) and the phase contrast image of the cells. Each attempted electro-injection is accompanied by the ejection of Lucifer yellow into the medium (by iontophoresis) with a successful electroporation resulting in delivery of fluorescence to the cytosol of a neutrophil which continues to move randomly after micro-injection. The entire sequence shows about 200s of real time and is the complete data from which fig 2a was constructed

Figure 1  
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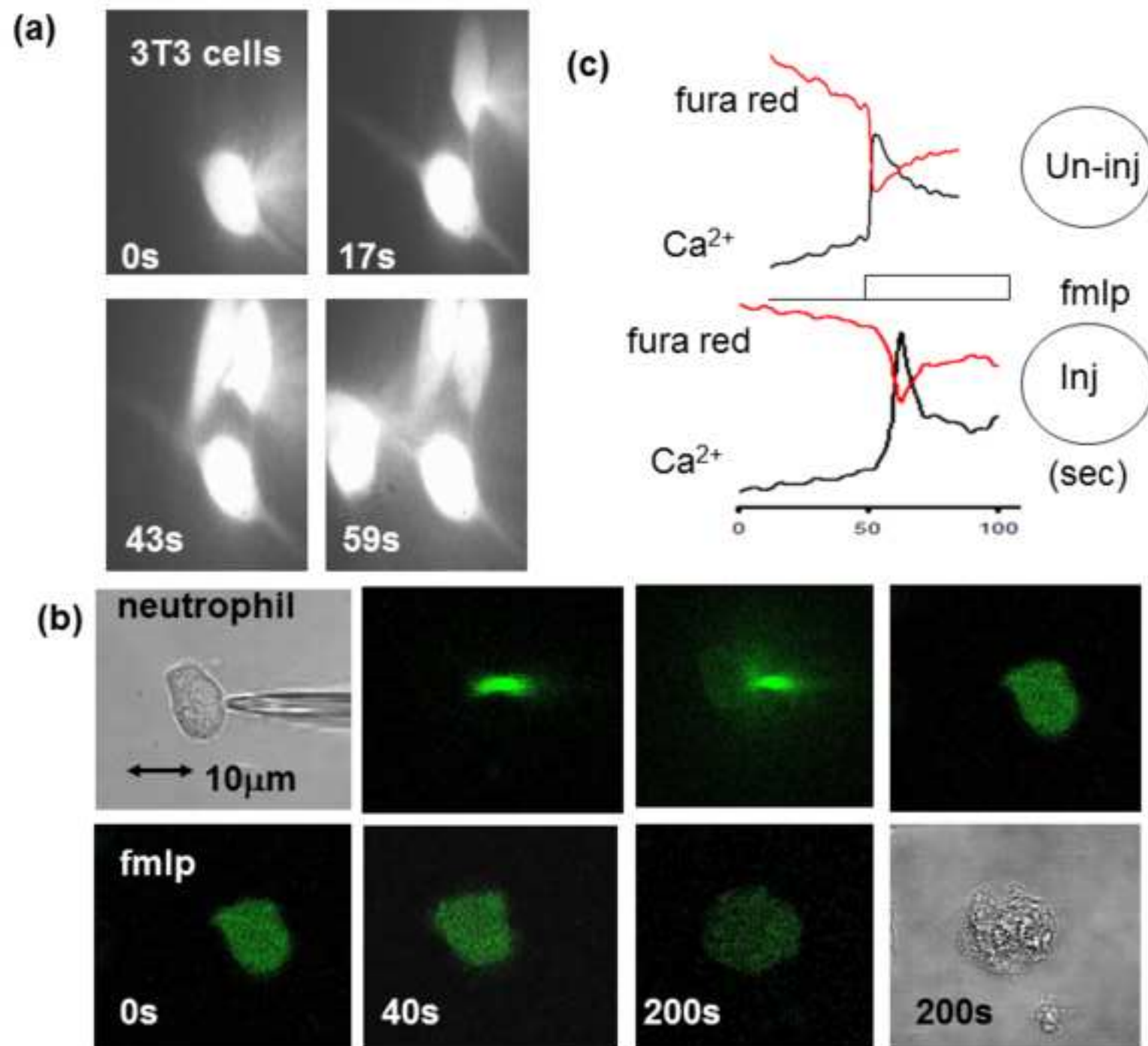


Fig 1

Figure 2  
[Click here to download high resolution image](#)

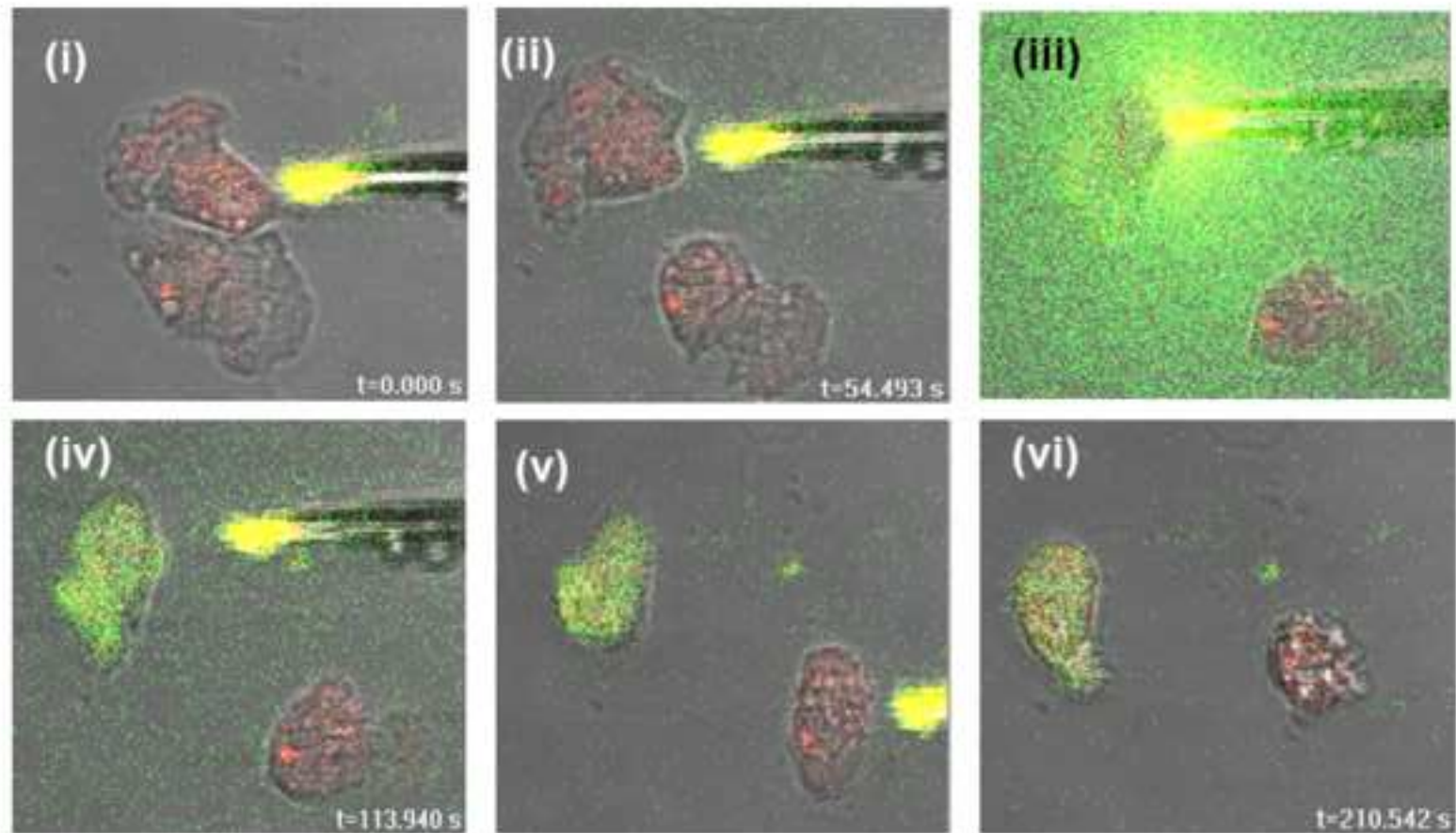


Figure 2

Figure 3  
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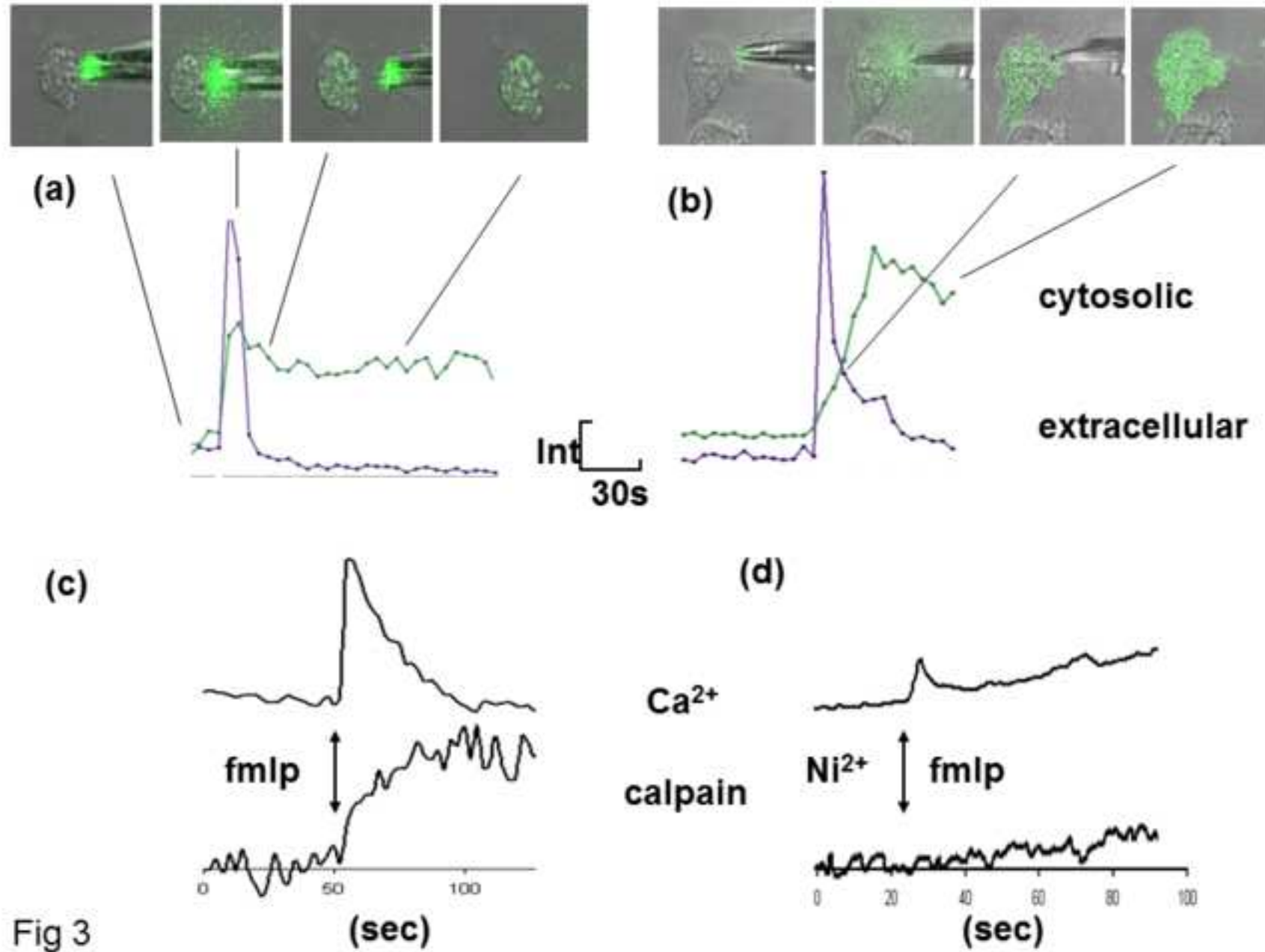


Fig 3