(R)-(3-Amino-2-fluoropropyl) Phosphinic Acid (AZD3355), a Novel GABA<sub>B</sub> Receptor Agonist, Inhibits Transient Lower Esophageal Sphincter Relaxation through a Peripheral Mode of Action


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Received March 17, 2009; accepted July 30, 2009

ABSTRACT

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) affects >10% of the Western population. Conventionally, GERD is treated by reducing gastric acid secretion, which is effective in most patients but inadequate in a significant minority. We describe a new therapeutic approach for GERD, based on inhibition of transient lower esophageal sphincter relaxation (TLESR) with a proposed peripherally acting GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonist, (R)-(3-amino-2-fluoropropyl)phosphinic acid (AZD3355). AZD3355 potently stimulated recombinant human GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors and inhibited TLESR in dogs, with a biphasic dose-response curve. In mice, AZD3355 produced considerably less central side effects than baclofen but evoked hypothermia at very high doses (blocked by a GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor antagonist and absent in GABA<sub>A</sub> mice). AZD3355 and baclofen differed markedly in their distribution in rat brain; AZD3355, but not baclofen, was concentrated in circumventricular organs as a result of active uptake (shown by avid intracellular sequestration) and related to binding of AZD3355 to native GABA transporters in rat cerebrocortical membranes. AZD3355 was also shown to be transported by all four recombinant human GABA transporters. AR-H061719 [(R/S)-(3-amino-2-fluoropropyl)phosphinic acid], (the racemate of AZD3355) inhibited the response of ferret mechanoreceptors to gastric distension, further supporting its peripheral site of action on TLESR. In summary, AZD3355 probably inhibits TLESR through stimulation of peripheral GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors and may offer a potential new approach to treatment of GERD.

The GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor was originally defined pharmacologically by virtue of its insensitivity to the GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor antagonist bicuculline and its sensitivity to the GABA analog baclofen (Bowery et al., 1980). The GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor, a member of family C of the G protein-coupled receptors, is characterized by its large, ligand-binding extracellular N-terminal domain. It couples negatively to adenylyl cyclase and to voltage-gated calcium channels and positively to inwardly rectifying potassium channels (Bettler et al., 2004).

Based on a wealth of preclinical data, the GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor has been proposed as a therapeutic target for several dis-
eases, including gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) (Lehmann, 2009), one of the most common diseases of the upper gastrointestinal tract. Inhibition of gastric acid secretion with proton pump inhibitors is the mainstay of GERD therapy. However, symptoms do not resolve in all patients despite efficient suppression of acid secretion with a proton pump inhibitor (Fass et al., 2005), and this may be partly explained by reflux of weakly acidic/alkaline or neutral gastric contents. As a consequence, pharmacotherapies beyond acid suppression are needed. A logical approach to this problem is to target the major barrier against reflux, the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), together with the partly superimposed crural diaphragm. Combined pH-metric and manometric studies have demonstrated that transient lower esophageal sphincter relaxation (TLESR) accounts for most reflux episodes in healthy subjects and in those with GERD (Mittal et al., 1995). Inhibitors of TLESR may therefore afford symptomatic relief in this population. Baclofen, for example, the prototypical GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonist, has been demonstrated to inhibit TLESR and acid reflux in those with GERD (van Herwaarden et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2002); in turn, GERD symptoms are mitigated (Ciccaglione and Marzio, 2003; Koek et al., 2003; Vela et al., 2003). Another beneficial effect of baclofen is its enhancing effect on basal LES pressure (Zhang et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2003), which may be therapeutically relevant in some patients. Despite clinical “proof of concept,” central side effects such as dizziness limit the usefulness of baclofen in patients with GERD. As a consequence, research efforts have focused on GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonists with minimal side effects. Here, we characterize the in vitro and in vivo pharmacology of AZD3355 (Alstermark et al., 2008), a potent and selective GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonist with a preclinical therapeutic window superior to baclofen.

Materials and Methods

All animal experiments were approved by the relevant local ethical committees for animal experiments. Further details on certain methods outlined below, along with chemical structures of compounds used in the experiments, can be found in Supplemental Fig. 1.

Determination of Binding Affinities of GABA Agonists at GABA<sub>B</sub> and GABA<sub>A</sub> Receptor Sites in Brain Membranes. Preparation of Sprague-Dawley rat brain synaptic vesicles was performed as described previously (Jensen et al., 2002). The whole brain from beagles (Rååhöjden’s Kennel, Rååhöjden, Sweden) was isolated, and membranes were prepared using the same method as used for the rat brain membranes.

Inhibition of [<sup>3</sup>H]GABA binding at GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor sites in rat or dog brain membranes by test compounds was measured using a filtration binding assay. Displacement curves to determine IC<sub>50</sub> values were constructed by fitting the four-parameter logistic equation to the data. Binding affinity (K<sub>i</sub>) for GABA was determined on each preparation by homologous competition and was used to calculate K<sub>i</sub> values from IC<sub>50</sub> determinations on that particular preparation using the Cheng-Prusoff equation. The average K<sub>i</sub> for GABA was 110 ± 21 nM (mean ± S.E.M.; n = 16 preparations). The affinity of test compounds at GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor sites in rat brain membranes was measured using a [<sup>3</sup>H]muscimol radioligand binding assay (Lehmann et al., 2005).

Determination of in Vitro Potency and Efficacy of GABA<sub>B</sub> Receptor Agonists on GABA<sub>B</sub> Receptor-Mediated Intracellular Calcium Release. The effect of test compounds on GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor-mediated intracellular calcium release was determined in Chinese hamster ovary-K1 cells stably coexpressing a GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1a</sub> G<sub>q</sub>/<sub>11</sub> fusion protein and GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>2</sub> using fluorescence imaging, as described in detail previously (Lehmann et al., 2005).

Comparison of the Effect of GABA<sub>B</sub> Receptor Agonists on Various GABA<sub>B</sub> Splice Variants. The human GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1</sub> splice variants GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1a</sub>, GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1b</sub>, GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1c</sub>, GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1d</sub>, GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1e</sub>, GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1f</sub>, and GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1g</sub>, as well as GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>2a</sub> were cloned from a human brain cDNA library as described previously (Lehmann et al., 2005) and subcloned into pCI-Neo expression vectors. Transient cotransfections of GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>1</sub> splice variants and GABA<sub>B</sub><sub>2</sub> in Chinese hamster ovary-O<sub>26</sub> cells were performed using Lipofectamine (Invitrogen, Paisley, Scotland) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. Thereafter, the effect of agonists on GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor-mediated calcium release was determined using fluorescence imaging (Lehmann et al., 2005). Details concerning saturation binding analysis with [<sup>3</sup>H]CGP54626 (0.1–30 nM) (Toecis Bioscience, Bristol, UK) can be found in Supplemental Data. Nonspecific binding was determined by the inclusion of 3 nM GABA in the assay buffer. K<sub>i</sub> and B<sub>max</sub> values were calculated by fitting binding data to the equation B = B<sub>max</sub>/(1 + K<sub>i</sub>/[L]).

Uptake of Radiolabeled GABA<sub>B</sub> Receptor Agonists in Rat Cerebrocortical Slices. Rat cerebrocortical slices were prepared and incubated as described previously (Oja and Kontro, 1980), with 0.1, 1.0, or 10.0 μM of labeled compounds for 5, 10, and 30 min. The intracellular uptake of [<sup>3</sup>H]GABA (GE Healthcare, Chalfont St. Giles, Buckinghamshire, UK; specific activity, 3.40 TBq/mol; positive control), [<sup>14</sup>C]baclofen (3.2 TBq/mol; radiochemical purity, 99%), and [<sup>14</sup>C]AZD3355 (6.8 TBq/mol; radiochemical purity, 96%) was calculated after subtraction of the amount of label in the extracellular spaces, estimated with the hydroxy[<sup>14</sup>C]-methyl]inulin (GE Healthcare) method.

GABA (GAT) Transporter Binding Competition Assay in Rat Cerebrocortical Membranes. The method of Shank et al. (1990) was used to determine competition between GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonists and [<sup>3</sup>H]GABA for binding to the native GATs in rat cerebrocortical membranes. The assay was performed in the presence of 10 μM isoguvacine and 10 μM baclofen to block binding to GABA<sub>A</sub> and GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors, respectively. The specific binding of ligands was defined as the difference between the total binding and the nonspecific binding in the presence of 1 mM GABA. The IC<sub>50</sub> values and Hill coefficients (n<sub>H</sub>) were determined by nonlinear regression analysis of the competition curves using Hill equation curve fitting. Baclofen and AZD3355 were evaluated in this assay using nipeotic acid as a positive control.

[<sup>3</sup>H]GABA Uptake Assay and FLIPR Membrane Potential Assay in Mammalian Cells Transiently Expressing the Human GATs. The experiments were performed as described previously (see supplemental data). In brief, tsA201 cells were transfected with constructs encoding each of the four human GATs (hGAT-1, hGAT-2, hGAT-3, and hGAT-4). The uptake of [<sup>3</sup>H]GABA in the absence or presence of drugs was measured after 3-min incubation at 37°C, and unlabeled GABA was included as a positive control. GAT-mediated transport of the ligands was measured by using the FLIPR membrane potential assay (Molecular Devices, Crawley, UK). The assay is based on the depolarizing effects of cotransport of a substrate and sodium and chloride ions. This assay, in contrast to the [<sup>3</sup>H]GABA uptake assay, determines whether the test compounds are actively transported by the GATs.

Vagal Afferent Recordings. Single fibers were dissected from the main vagal trunks with receptive fields in the esophagus and stomach, as described previously in isolated superfused preparations of ferret tissue (Page and Blackshaw, 1999). The effects of ARH061719 (raceramate of AZD3355) on mucosal and tension receptors was studied after cumulative dosing. The racemate was used in this experiment because the R-enantiomer (AZD3355, the most active enantiomer) was not available at the time of the experiments.
TLESR in Dogs. The method for quantitation of gastric distention-induced TLESR in dogs has been described in detail previously (Lehmann et al., 1999). In short, adult Labrador retrievers were equipped with a cervical esophagostomy. Manometry was performed using a Dentsleeve multilumen assembly (Dentsleeve, Wayville, Australia), and TLESRs were stimulated by infusion of an acidified liquid nutrient followed by insufflation of air. Acid reflux was measured with an antimony pH catheter positioned 3 cm above the LES. The total stimulation period was 45 min, and each dog served as its own control. The following compounds were evaluated: AZD3355, AR-H061719, baclofen, and GABA. Compounds were given intravenously (via a foreleg vein) or intragastrically (i.g.; via the Dentsleeve assembly) 10 and 30 min before nutrient infusion, respectively. GABA was infused continuously intravenously starting 10 min before nutrient infusion. The doses of GABA were chosen according to Thrilby et al. (1988).

The potential for agonists to induce tolerance was addressed in a 2-week study with once-daily administration of AZD3355 to dogs. The study design, results, and interpretation can be found in Supplemental Fig. 2.

TLESR in Ferrets. Experiments were performed according to Staunton et al. (2000) on adult female ferrets (weight range, 0.6–0.8 kg) obtained from the Institute for Medical and Veterinary Science, Adelaide, Australia (see supplemental data). In brief, chronic lateral cervical mucosa-to-skin esophagostomy were constructed under anesthesia, and manometric studies were begun at least a month after surgery. Animals were fasted overnight before studies. On the day of study, 60 min before gastric infusions, an intraperitoneal injection of saline (1 ml/kg) or drug was given. The pH/manometric assembly was then introduced, and the ferret was placed into the recording chamber and allowed to adapt to study conditions for 10 min before data acquisition commenced. A gastric load (25 ml of 10% D-glucose, pH 3.5) was then administered after a 30-min baseline period. This was immediately followed by 2 ml/min air for 10 min, then a rest period of 10 min, and finally another similar infusion of air. Only AR-H061719 was evaluated in the ferret model.

Hypothermia after Subcutaneous Administration of GABAB Receptor Agonists in Mice. The measurement of changes in body temperature using thermosensitive chips has been described previously (Quéva et al., 2003). The nadir temperature after drug treatment adjusted for any changes in vehicle-treated controls was used. For comparisons between compounds, the dose producing a 2°C drop in temperature (ED2) was calculated (see Supplemental Data). The hypothermia results were analyzed using unpaired Student’s t test. To avoid multiple comparisons, only nadir temperatures were analyzed. Data on vagal afferent firing were analyzed statistically by two-way analysis of variance of stimulus-response functions.

Results

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>GABAB Affinity $K_i$ ($nM$)</th>
<th>GABA$\alpha_1$ Affinity $K_i$ ($nM$)</th>
<th>Selectivity</th>
<th>GABA$\beta$/GABA$\alpha_1$ Agonism $EC_{50}$ ($\mu M$)</th>
<th>GABA$\alpha_1$ Agonism Intrinsic Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AZD3355</td>
<td>5.1 ± 1.2 (10)</td>
<td>1.4 ± 0.3 (3)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>8.6 ± 0.77 (4)</td>
<td>1.0 ± 0.1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AR-H061719</td>
<td>10 ± 1.9 (12)</td>
<td>4.5 ± 0.7 (3)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>15 ± 1.5 (5)</td>
<td>1.1 ± 0.1 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baclofen</td>
<td>220 ± 50 (6)</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td></td>
<td>750 ± 150 (6)</td>
<td>1.0 ± 0.02 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GABA</td>
<td>110 ± 21 (16)</td>
<td>0.097 ± 0.001 (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>160 ± 10 (94)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.D., not determined.
Uptake of GABAB Agonists in Rat Cerebrocortical Slices. GABA was efficiently taken up by brain slices, whereas accumulation of baclofen was considerably lower and uptake of AZD3355 was intermediary (Table 2). The differences were evident not only with respect to maximal uptake but also for the rate of uptake.

Binding of AZD3355 and Baclofen to Native GATs in Rat Cerebrocortical Membranes. AZD3355 inhibited GABA binding with a mean IC\textsubscript{50} value of 0.67 mM (n=H, 0.8), but baclofen was unable to displace GABA (Fig. 1). Mean IC\textsubscript{50} value for the positive control nipecotic acid was 6.4 μM (n=H, 0.6).

Effects of GABA, AZD3355, and Baclofen on [3H]GABA Uptake and Membrane Potential in tsA201 Cells Expressing the Human GATs. AZD3355 displayed pronounced competition of [3H]GABA transport at all four human GATs (Table 3). At hBGT-1, the IC\textsubscript{50} value of AZD3355 was found to be three to four times higher than for GABA. The effect of AZD3355 at the three remaining subtypes was too weak to establish an IC\textsubscript{50} value, but approximately 50% inhibition of [3H]GABA transport was observed at the maximal tested concentration (3 mM). In contrast, baclofen displayed only minor competition of [3H]GABA transport at all four GATs.

The FLIPR membrane potential assay was used to establish that AZD3355 is actively transported by the human GATs. Concentration-dependent cell depolarization was observed for all four subtypes. Again, the effect of AZD3355 was most distinct at the hBGT-1 subtype (Table 3). Baclofen was ineffective in depolarizing cells expressing either of the human GATs. Neither AZD3355 nor baclofen at concentrations up to 3 mM had any effect on the human glutamate transporter EAAT3 in the two cellular assays (data not shown).

Effects of AR-H061719 on Firing of Ferret Gastric Vagal Mechanoreceptors in Vitro. Two populations of vagal afferent endings exist in the ferret stomach. Mucosal receptors responded to tactile stimulation of the epithelium, whose responses were unaffected by AR-H061719 at any concentration tested (Fig. 2a). However, receptors in the smooth muscle responded to distension proportional to the load applied. AR-H061719 reduced stimulus-response function of tension receptors in a concentration-dependent manner (Fig. 2b). The effect of the compound was observed at all tensions applied. Basal firing rate of tension receptors was also suppressed by AR-H061719. Time control experiments were performed with the vehicle over the same time course to the drug experiments, and no changes in afferent sensitivity were seen with n=5 experiments at any time point.

Effect of AZD3355, Baclofen, and GABA on TLESR in Dogs. Despite the very potent effect of AZD3355 on GABA\textsubscript{H}

TABLE 2
Intracellular uptake (micromoles per kilogram of tissue) of radiolabeled AZD3355, baclofen, and GABA in rat cerebrocortical slices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conc.</th>
<th>5 min</th>
<th>30 min</th>
<th>60 min</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AZD3355</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1 μM</td>
<td>0.18 ± 0.01</td>
<td>1.40 ± 0.03</td>
<td>2.23 ± 0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 μM</td>
<td>2.01 ± 0.10</td>
<td>11.07 ± 0.28</td>
<td>19.38 ± 0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.0 μM</td>
<td>21.26 ± 1.13</td>
<td>123.03 ± 9.13</td>
<td>195.66 ± 4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baclofen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1 μM</td>
<td>0.11 ± 0.00</td>
<td>0.18 ± 0.01</td>
<td>0.20 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 μM</td>
<td>0.99 ± 0.03</td>
<td>1.77 ± 0.01</td>
<td>1.64 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.0 μM</td>
<td>10.06 ± 0.17 (7)</td>
<td>16.73 ± 0.70 (12)</td>
<td>16.62 ± 0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GABA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1 μM</td>
<td>1.54 ± 0.14 (7)</td>
<td>5.69 ± 0.29</td>
<td>6.66 ± 0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 μM</td>
<td>15.37 ± 1.07</td>
<td>52.11 ± 4.60</td>
<td>68.84 ± 4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.0 μM</td>
<td>126.42 ± 8.99 (11)</td>
<td>471.59 ± 16.65 (12)</td>
<td>631.36 ± 31.45 (12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Fig. 1. Displacement of GABA from the GAT in rat cortical membranes by AZD3355 and baclofen. The IC\textsubscript{50} value for AZD3355 was 0.67 mM, but no IC\textsubscript{50} value could be calculated for baclofen. Each concentration was tested in duplicate, and the means are presented.](https://www.aspetjournals.org/content/17/10/507)
receptors, the dose-response curve for this compound differed markedly from that of baclofen (Fig. 3a). Even at high doses of AZD3355 (up to 100 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \) i.g.), only partial inhibition was observed, and there was only a small increase in effect in the dose range 3 to 100 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \). However, at 300 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \) AZD3355, close to full inhibition of TLESR was achieved. This dose did not produce any visible side effects, but pilot experiments showed that at 500 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \), AZD3355 induced typical GABAB-related side effects such as sedation and muscle relaxation. An intravenous dose of 7 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \) AZD3355 induced typical GABAB-related side effects in dogs (10 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \); AstraZeneca, unpublished observations). The slope of the dose-response curve for this compound differed markedly from that of baclofen (Fig. 3a). Even at high doses of AZD3355 (up to 100 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \) i.g.), only partial inhibition was observed, and there was only a small increase in effect in the dose range 3 to 100 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \). However, at 300 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \) AZD3355, close to full inhibition of TLESR was achieved. This dose did not produce any visible side effects, but pilot experiments showed that at 500 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \), AZD3355 induced typical GABAB-related side effects such as sedation and muscle relaxation. An intravenous dose of 7 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \) AZD3355 induced typical GABAB-related side effects in dogs (10 \( \mu \text{mol/kg} \); AstraZeneca, unpublished observations).

**TABLE 3**

Effects of GABA, AZD3355, and baclofen on \(^3\text{H}\)GABA uptake and membrane potential in tsA201 cells transiently expressing the four human GATs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>(^3\text{H})GABA Uptake Assay IC\text{$<em>{50}$} (pIC\text{$</em>{50}$} \pm S.E.M.)</th>
<th>FLIPR Membrane Potential Assay EC\text{$<em>{50}$} (pEC\text{$</em>{50}$} \pm S.E.M.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hGAT-1</td>
<td>hBGT-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GABA</td>
<td>24 (4.6 \pm 0.02)</td>
<td>30 (4.5 \pm 0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AZD3355</td>
<td>(&gt;1000)</td>
<td>(110 (4.0 \pm 0.06))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baclofen</td>
<td>(&gt;3000)</td>
<td>(&gt;3000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The compounds displayed less than 75% inhibition of the indicated GABA transporters at the maximal tested concentration, and it was therefore not possible to generate concentration-inhibition curves. These compounds exhibited the following maximal inhibition at 3 mM (mean \( \pm \) S.E.M.): AZD3355 at hGAT-1, 54 \( \pm \) 1.1%; AZD3355 at hGAT-2, 46 \( \pm \) 1.2%; AZD3355 at hGAT-3, 46 \( \pm \) 5.3%; baclofen at hGAT-1, 11 \( \pm \) 1.1%; baclofen at hGAT-2, 10 \( \pm \) 2.8%; and baclofen at hGAT-3, 3.1 \( \pm \) 3.9%.

**Fig. 2.** Effects of AR-H061719 on firing of ferret mucosal (a) and muscular (b) mechanosensitive gastroesophageal vagal afferents. Results are mean \( \pm \) S.E.M.; \( n \) 3 (control) and \( n \) 4 (AR-H061719).

**Fig. 3.** Effects of AR-H061719 on firing of ferret mucosal (a) and muscular (b) mechanosensitive gastroesophageal vagal afferents. Results are mean \( \pm \) S.E.M.; \( n \) 3 (control) and \( n \) 4 (AR-H061719).
curve for baclofen was markedly steeper than that of AZD3355 and GABA. There were no effects of any compound on basal LES pressure (data not shown).

Effect of AR-H061719 on TLESR in Ferrets and Dogs. The profile of the dose-response curve for AR-H061719 in the ferret was somewhat different from that in the dog, in that the compound slightly reduced the incidence of TLESRs up to approximately 30% at the second highest dose, 250 μmol/kg (Fig. 3b). However, the interindividual variation was marked. At 500 μmol/kg, TLESRs were abolished in all ferrets. At this dose, there was some retching as seen in other studies of GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> agonists (Blackshaw et al., 1999; Staunton et al., 2000), but no other typical GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub>–related side effects were noted. The highest dose of AR-H061719 evaluated in the dog was 35 μmol/kg, and maximal inhibition in the present dose range was seen already at 3 μmol/kg (Fig. 3b). Basal LES pressure was unaffected by AR-H061719 in both species (data not shown).

Hypothermia after Subcutaneous Administration of GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> Receptor Agonists in Mice. ED<sub>50</sub> values were calculated from the dose-response experiments, and there was a remarkable difference between AZD3355 and AR-H061719 on one hand, and baclofen on the other. Despite the fact that the two former compounds were much more potent on the GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> receptor, baclofen was more potent in inducing hypothermia (Fig. 4a).

To ascertain that the hypothermic effects of AZD3355 (1 mmol/kg) are mediated by the GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> receptor, the selective GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> receptor antagonist AR-H040551 (2 mg/kg) was administered 20 min before injection of AZD3355. AR-H040551 did not have any effects on body temperature in its own right, but it prevented hypothermia induced by AZD3355 (Fig. 4b). AZD3355 at 1 mmol/kg produced a marked hypothermic effect in GABA<sub>B<sub>(−/+)</sub></sub> and GABA<sub>B<sub>(+/-)</sub></sub> mice. However, there was no effect on body temperature in GABA<sub>B<sub>(−/-)</sub></sub> mice (Fig. 4c).

CNS Autoradiography in Rats. Both baclofen and AZD3355 were found at low levels in the CNS (Fig. 5), and baclofen was distributed evenly. In contrast, although AZD3355 was evenly distributed in areas within the blood-brain barrier, high levels were observed in the circumventricular organs such as the area postrema and median eminence. The pineal gland was also strongly labeled after administration of AZD3355 but not after dosing with baclofen. The high levels in circumventricular organs were not restricted to those areas; a concentration gradient into the adjacent regions was also apparent.

Pharmacokinetic Studies. The pharmacokinetics of AZD3355 were characterized by high oral availability (88% in the dog and 100% in the rat) and relatively low systemic clearance (Supplemental Table 3; Supplemental Fig. 3). The plasma levels in dogs and rats were dose-linear (data not shown). Plasma protein binding was ~1% in rat and human plasma.

Discussion

The troublesome symptoms of GERD often persist despite acid-suppressive therapy (Fass et al., 2005). Evidence from animal and human studies (considerations regarding extrapolation of results across species are in Supplemental Data) indicates that TLESR inhibition by GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> receptor agonists could address this unmet need, although the search for new GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> receptor agonists with a benign side effect profile has proved challenging. AZD3355 is one of the most potent GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> agonists described, and its CNS side-effect liability is minimized by the unusual disposition of the compound. The marked differences between baclofen and AZD3355 in vivo can be explained by GAT-mediated transport of AZD3355 but not baclofen. Sequestration of AZD3355 by CNS neurons/glial cells prevents stimulation of central GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> receptors, whereas concentrations sufficient to activate GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> receptors can be maintained peripherally. The basis for this conclusion is discussed below.

Selectivity for the GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub> Receptor and GABA<sub>B<sub>u</sub></sub>(1) Splice Variants. Binding studies showed that AZD3355 had
a higher selectivity for GABA_B than GABA_A receptors. Accordingly, AZD3355 was completely selective for GABA_B receptors at doses administered in vivo, as shown by a lack of effect of AZD3355 on body temperature in GABA_B(1/1/1) mice, in whom GABA_A receptor stimulation induces an exaggerated hypothermic response (Quevauviller et al., 2003). In addition, the GABA_B receptor antagonist AR-H040551 abolished the effects of AZD3355 in wild-type mice. Our data therefore show that the hypothermic action of AZD3355 is not an off-target effect.

Similar to other GABA_B receptor agonists, AZD3355 stimulated different human recombinant GABA_B splice variants, with no conspicuous differences in potency and efficacy. Thus, the unique profile of AZD3355 in vivo is unrelated to selectivity for any splice variants. This also demonstrates that the potency of AZD3355 on splice variants is virtually identical to the two predominant variants, GABA_B(1a) and GABA_B(1b). Moreover, the GABA_B receptor antagonist [3H]CGP54626 bound with similar affinity to all receptor isoforms, reflecting the pharmacological similarities between the splice variants. It is notable that AZD3355 is a full agonist in vitro, so the in vivo properties do not reflect partial agonism.

Sequestration of AZD3355 by CNS Neural Cells. Both baclofen and AZD3355 are metabolically stable in rats (AstraZeneca, unpublished observations), so the distribution of radioactivity in autoradiographic experiments largely reflects that of the parent compounds. There were some differences in the distribution of AZD3355 and baclofen in peripheral tissues. However, the most striking difference was observed for concentrations in and around circumventricular organs. AZD3355 was present at high levels in the basomedial hypothalamus and the median eminence, as well as the dorsomedial brain stem within and in the vicinity of the area postrema. AZD3355, but not baclofen, also strongly labeled the pineal body, which has an avid GABA uptake system (Rosenstein et al., 1990). It is interesting that a previous report described very similar differences between baclofen and GABA distribution in the mouse brain (Kuroda et al., 2000). This supports the view that AZD3355 is more similar to GABA than is baclofen and that it is taken up in circumventricular organs as a result of active uptake. The hypothesis that AZD3355 is sequestered by neural cells was investigated directly using rat brain cortical slices. Although baclofen uptake was very modest, accumulation of AZD3355 was considerable, although not as high as that of GABA. The notion that uptake into brain slices was mediated by GATs was confirmed by the finding that AZD3355, but not baclofen, inhibited binding of [3H]GABA to GATs in rat brain membranes. Previous data also suggested that baclofen has only a low affinity for native GATs in rat cerebral cortex (Palló et al., 2007), and for the recombinantly expressed rat brain GABA transporter GAT-1 (Corey et al., 1994). Because we
hypothesized that AZD3355 affinity for GAT explains its favorable side effect profile in laboratory animals, it is critical to demonstrate that this mechanism is valid for human GATs. This was confirmed in recombinantly expressed human GATs, and AZD3355 was transported by all four human GATs with some preference for hBGT-1. There were major differences in the concentrations used in the three different in vitro models used to study uptake or GAT interaction, with the rat brain membrane assay showing the lowest sensitivity. The observations that AZD3355 uptake could be demonstrated in brain slices at 0.1 μM and that the compound was only three to four times less active than GABA in recombinant human BGT-1 clearly support the notion that uptake mechanisms control extracellular levels in vivo. Moreover, the results strongly suggest that BGT-1, but not the other GATs, plays an important role in this regard. CGP27492 (the desfluoro analog of AZD3355) is an unexpectedly weak agonist in brain slices compared with baclofen when actual potency at the receptor level is considered (Ong and Kerr, 1998). It has been proposed that this is due to cellular uptake in brain slices, because NO-711 (a selective inhibitor of GAT-1) potentiates the electrophysiological effects of CGP27492 but not baclofen (Ong and Kerr, 1998). Our data support this notion and provide the first direct evidence for active uptake of 3-aminopropylphosphinic acid derivatives.

**Mechanism of Action of AZD3355 on TLESR.** Baclofen produced full inhibition of TLESR with a monophasic dose-response curve (also see Blackshaw et al., 1999; Lehmann et al., 1999). In contrast, the AZD3355 dose-response curve in dogs was biphasic, with 50% inhibition achieved at 3 to 7 μmol/kg, without much further increase up to 100 μmol/kg. At 300 μmol/kg, there was almost complete inhibition. A similar dose-response relationship was observed for the racemate (AR-H061719) in ferrets. At the doses tested, both GABA and AR-H061719 afforded approximately 50% inhibition of TLESR in dogs. Abolition of TLESR with baclofen was seen at 7 μmol/kg in dogs, but at 10 μmol/kg visible side effects occurred (sedation, vomiting, and hypothermia; AstraZeneca, unpublished observations). AZD3355 at 500 μmol/kg led to an identical side-effect profile (data not shown), which suggests that GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonists can abolish TLESR only at doses affecting the CNS.

As reported previously for baclofen and CGP27492 (Page and Blackshaw, 1999; Smid et al., 2001), AR-H061719 inhibited tension-induced firing of ferret gastric vagal mechanoreceptors in vitro. This is consistent with the dense expression of GABA<sub>B(1)</sub> in retrogradely labeled gastric neurons of the ferret nodose ganglion (Smid et al., 2001). We also found that GABA<sub>B(2)</sub>, which is required for functional GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors, is expressed in the nodose ganglion (AstraZeneca, unpublished observations). It is notable that the potency of GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonists on ferret vagal afferents was considerably lower than in most other functional assays in vitro. Whether this is due to differences in signal transduction efficiency, disproportionate expression of GABA<sub>B(1)</sub> versus GABA<sub>B(2)</sub>, low receptor density, or poor tissue penetration remains unknown.

Given these considerations, the dissimilarities in TLESR dose-response curves for AZD3355, AR-H061719, and GABA on one hand, and baclofen on the other, may be explained as follows. The former group of compounds inhibits TLESR at moderate doses by acting exclusively on GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors on peripheral gastric vagal mechanoreceptors. The comparatively low potency of GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor agonists in vagal afferents, as reported in the present study and previously (Smid et al., 2001), is compatible with the moderate effect on TLESR even if plasma concentrations (micromolar levels) would be sufficient to fully activate GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors in recombinant systems (nanomolar levels). At doses of AZD3355 close to those producing central side effects, complete TLESR inhibition occurs due to GAT saturation followed by elevation of brain interstitial AZD3355 concentrations. In addition, due to competition for the GATs, extracellular GABA concentrations may increase to levels at which GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors are activated. As a consequence of central GABA<sub>B</sub> receptor stimulation, possibly those expressing connections with vagal efferents, excitatory transmitter release would be inhibited and the vagovagal pathway underlying TLESR dampened. The proposal is also consistent with the finding that, in ferrets, baclofen inhibits gastric vagal tension-sensitive afferents and their central connections with vagal efferents, and that the latter are more sensitive (Partosodarso et al., 2001). This clearly suggests that a central effect is required to achieve maximal inhibition of the TLESR efferent response. It is notable that pharmacokinetic differences between baclofen and AZD3355 cannot explain the pharmacodynamic disparities. For example, there was a linear relationship between dose and exposure, whereas AZD3355 plasma protein binding was negligible.

Alternatively, AZD3355 could inhibit TLESR through an effect on presynaptic GABA<sub>B</sub> receptors on vagal motoneurons. Baclofen and CGP27492 reduce relaxation of ferret LES in vitro after electrical vagal stimulation (Smid and Blackshaw, 2000), supporting this hypothesis. However, because
swallow-induced LES relaxation is thought to share the same motor pathway as TLESR, swallow-induced LES relaxation would also be expected to decrease. Because such an effect has never been seen after administration of any GABAB receptor agonist, presynaptic inhibition is unlikely to play any significant role in the mechanism of action of AZD3355.

In summary, we have shown that the GABAB receptor agonist AZD3355 inhibits TLESR in dogs by a peripheral mechanism different from that of baclofen (which mainly acts centrally). AZD3355 therefore represents a promising candidate for the treatment of GERD, and recent clinical data confirm this proposal (Boeckxstaens et al., 2009a,b,c).

Acknowledgments

The expert technical assistance of Esther Staunton, Marianne Bremner-Danielsen, Anita Carlsson, Anna Uvebrant, Lillevi Kärberg, Susanne Stan, Christina Nordin, and Karin Rydstrom is gratefully acknowledged. We thank Steve Winter (Wolters Kluwer Health, Chester, UK) for providing editing assistance funded by AstraZeneca.

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