Sustained Administration of Trazodone Enhances Serotonergic Neurotransmission: In Vivo Electrophysiological Study in the Rat Brain

Ramez Ghanbari, Mostafa El Mansari, and Pierre Blier

University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada (R.G., M.E.M., P.B.); and Department of Cellular and Molecular Medicine, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada (P.B.)

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ABSTRACT

Despite its clinical use for more than two decades, the mechanisms by which trazodone acts as an antidepressant are not clear, because it has affinity for a variety of 5-hydroxytryptamine (5-HT; serotonin) receptors and the 5-HT transporter. This study examined the effects of sustained trazodone administration on 5-HT neurotransmission. Electrophysiological recordings were conducted in anesthetized rats. Subcutaneously implanted minipumps delivered vehicle or trazodone (10 mg/kg/day) for 2 and 14 days. A 2-day trazodone administration suppressed the firing rate of raphe 5-HT neurons, which recovered to baseline after 14 days. This was attributable to 5-HT1A autoreceptor desensitization because the suppressant effect of the 5-HT autoreceptor agonist lysergic acid diethylamide was dampened in 14-day trazodone-treated rats. Prolonged trazodone administration did not change the sensitivity of postsynaptic 5-HT1A and α2-adrenergic receptors in hippocampus, but enhanced synaptic 5-HT levels because the 5-HT1A antagonist N-[2-[4-(2-methoxyphenyl)-1-piperazinyl]ethyl]-N-(2-pyridyl) cyclohexanecarboxamide trihydrochloride (WAY-100635) enhanced hippocampal firing in treated rats, but not in controls. Trazodone administration for 14 days increased the 50% recovery time value, an index of 5-HT transporter blockade in vivo, and decreased the inhibitory function of terminal 5-HT1A autoreceptors on the electrically evoked release of 5-HT. The agonistic action of trazodone at 5-HT1A receptors was characterized as being full because it did not attenuate the inhibitory action of 5-HT when coapplied locally. The enhanced 5-HT neurotransmission by trazodone is caused in part by reuptake blockade and activation of postsynaptic 5-HT1A receptors, which may account for its effectiveness in major depression.

Introduction

Since its introduction in the 1980s, trazodone hydrochloride, a triazolopyridine derivative, has been used in the treatment of major depression (Cunningham et al., 1994) and as a bedtime sedative. The structure of trazodone, which is unrelated to those of other major classes of antidepressants, results in a low toxicity profile (Al-Yassiri et al., 1981). Its mechanism of action in the treatment of depression has not been fully elucidated, largely in part to its affinity for a variety of receptors that may contribute to its clinical actions (Table 1). Although the antidepressant action of trazodone is partially attributed to the blockade of 5-hydroxytryptamine (5-HT; serotonin) reuptake sites, its potency to inhibit 5-HT transporters (5-HTTs) is considerably less than that of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as citalopram and fluoxetine (Owens et al., 1997). The action of SSRIs on 5-HT neurotransmission has been established over the years. Short-term administration of SSRIs attenuates the firing rate of dorsal raphe (DR) 5-HT neurons, due to overactivation of somatodendritic 5-HT1A autoreceptors because SSRIs...
promptly inhibit 5-HT uptake, leading to an enhancement of 5-HT levels in the vicinity of the cell body. Prolonged administration of SSRIs, however, leads to complete recovery of the 5-HT firing rate. Such a phenomenon is attributable to the desensitization of 5-HT₁A autoreceptors (see Píneyro and Blier, 1999). Indeed, desensitization of somatodendritic and terminal autoreceptors, after chronic administration of SSRIs, enhances 5-HT levels in the synaptic cleft (see Píneyro and Blier, 1999). The gradual adaptive changes of 5-HT neuronal elements, which correspond to the delayed onset of therapeutic action, are perhaps caused by alterations in receptor gene transcription and modifications of G protein coupled to the 5-HT₁A autoreceptor (Hensler, 2003).

In addition to its inhibiting action at 5-HTT, trazodone shows moderate potency at blocking 5-HT₂₃C receptors (Table 1), which may contribute to the mechanism of the action of trazodone. Microdialysis studies have consistently shown that 5-HT₂₃C antagonists enhance dopamine (DA) concentration in the prefrontal cortex (Di Matteo et al., 1999; Gobert and Millan, 1999), whereas the effect of 5-HT₂₄A antagonists on DA levels remains controversial (Schmidt and Fadayel, 1995; Gobert and Millan, 1999). The active metabolite of trazodone meta-chlorophenyl piperazine (mCPP) is, however, a potent 5-HT₂₃C receptor agonist that would tend to counteract 5-HT₂₃C receptor antagonist properties of the parent compound. More importantly, pharmacological experiments have shown that blockade of 5-HT₂₃A receptors restores inhibited locus coeruleus norepinephrine (NE) neuronal activity produced by SSRIs (Dremencov et al., 2007). Given the interactions between the monoaminergic neurons in vivo, the antagonism of trazodone at 5-HT₂₄A receptors may help compensate for a lower 5-HT inhibitory action at 5-HTT.

Another interesting feature of trazodone is its moderate affinity at 5-HT₁A autoreceptors (Table 1). Indeed, Odagaki et al. (2005) showed that trazodone acts as an agonist at human 5-HT₁A receptors. The agonistic action of trazodone at 5-HT₁A autoreceptors may contribute to the modulation of the 5-HT system, in addition to the inhibition of 5-HT uptake. An in vivo electrophysiological study showed that systemic administration of trazodone potently suppressed the firing rate of DR 5-HT neurons (Scuveé-Moreau and Dresse, 1982), although this effect could be caused by the inhibition of 5-HTT or its potent 5-HT₁A autoreceptor agonist action (Table 1). Nevertheless, it is expected that the combined action of trazodone at 5-HTT and 5-HT₁A receptors may enhance 5-HT neurotransmission. In line with this, previous studies have shown that 5-HT₁A agonists enhance the tonic activation of postsynaptic 5-HT₁A recep-tors caused by desensitization of somatodendritic 5-HT₁A autoreceptors and direct activation of normosensitive postsynaptic 5-HT₁A receptors in hippocampus (Blier and de Montigny, 1990).

The various 5-HT agonist–antagonist properties of trazo-done may, therefore, contribute to the net therapeutic benefits of this antidepressant. The present in vivo electrophysiological experiments were thus undertaken to examine the effects of sustained administration of trazodone on 5-HT neuronal elements in the DR and hippocampus of the rat brain.

### Materials and Methods

#### Experimental Preparations

All of the electrophysiological experiments were carried out in male Sprague-Dawley rats (Charles River, St. Constant, QC, Canada), weighing between 250 and 350 g, at the time of the recordings. The animals were kept under standard laboratory conditions (12:12 light/dark cycle with access to food and water ad libitum). Under isoflurane anesthesia, the rats were implantated subcutaneously with an osmotic Alzet minipump (Alza, Palo Alto, CA) to ensure slow and steady release of 5, 10, and 20 mg/kg/day of trazodone hydrochloride or vehicle (20% hydroxypropyl-β-cyclodextrin used to dissolve the drug) for 2 or 14 days. On the day of recording, the rats were anesthetized with chloral hydrate (400 mg/kg i.p.) and mounted in a stereotaxic frame (David Kopf Instruments, Tujunga, CA). Additional doses of chloral hydrate were given to maintain constant anesthesia. Body temperature was maintained at 37°C throughout the experiment by using a thermistor-controlled heating pad. For systemic injection of pharmacological agents a catheter was inserted in a lateral tail vein before the electrophysiological recordings. The electrophysiological experiments were carried out with the minipumps in place. All of the experiments were approved by the local Animal Care Committee and conducted in accordance with the Canadian Council on Animal Care for the care and use of laboratory animals.

#### In Vitro Determination of [³H]5-HT Uptake

To determine the degree of 5-HT reuptake inhibition in hippocampus, after a 2-day administration of trazodone (5, 10, and 20 mg/kg/day) and the SSRI escitalopram (10 mg/kg/day; used as a positive control), hippocampal slices were incubated in oxygenated Krebs’ solution at 37°C to determine in vitro [³H]5-HT uptake. After a 3-min stabilization period, the slices were incubated with 20 nM [³H]5-HT for 3 min. The uptake process was stopped by transferring the slices into 5 ml of ice-cold Krebs’ solution. The slices were then solubilized in 0.5 ml of Soluene 350. A parallel experiment was carried out at 0°C as a control for passive diffusion. The radioactivity in the media and tissue was determined by liquid scintillation spectrometry (Beckman Coulter, Fullerton, CA). The reuptake activity was assessed by determining the tissue-medium ratio of radioactivity, using the formula: \( R_C = \frac{R_T}{R_C} \), where \( R_C \) is the ratio of tissue to medium for the control slice, \( R_T \) is the ratio of tissue for the treated slice, and \( R_0 \) is the ratio of tissue to medium for the control slice at 0°C. For the in vitro determination of [³H]5-HT uptake, each set of experiment consisted of five test tubes each containing two hippocampus slices from a single rat. A total of three to six rats were used per group.

#### Extracellular Unitary Recording of DR 5-HT Neurons

In vivo extracellular recordings of 5-HT neurons were obtained by using single-barrel glass micropipettes. The impedance of the electrodes was between 4 and 6 MΩ. After securing the rats on the stereotaxic apparatus, a burr hole was drilled 1 mm anterior to lambda. The microelectrodes were positioned 0.9 to 1.2 mm anterior...
to lambda on the midline and lowered into the DR. The 5-HT neurons were encountered over a distance of 1 mm starting immediately below the ventral border of the Sylvius aqueduct. These neurons were identified by their slow (0.5–2.5 Hz), regular firing rate and a long duration (0.8–1.2 ms) positive action potential (Aghajanian, 1978).

Assessment of Sensitivity of the DR 5-HT1A Autoreceptor

To assess the sensitivity of the 5-HT1A autoreceptor, dose-response curves for the alteration of 5-HT neuronal firing activities were constructed by using systemic administration of the 5-HT autoreceptor agonist lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) in control and treated rats. LSD is a more reliable probe than the 5-HT1A receptor agonist 8-hydroxy-2-(di-n-propylamino) tetralin (8-OH-DPAT) for 5-HT1A autoreceptor because the latter also acts on 5-HT1A receptors of cortical neurons feeding back to DR 5-HT neurons. Furthermore, the responsiveness of DR 5-HT neurons to microiontophoretic application of LSD, 8-OH-DPAT, and systemic injection of LSD is decreased, whereas that to systemic 8-OH-DPAT is not altered after chronic administration of the 5-HT1A receptor agonist gepirone (Blier and de Montigny, 1990). The potent and selective 5-HT1A receptor agonist N-[2-[4(2-methoxyphenyl)-1-piperazinyl]ethyl]-2-pyrindinyl]cyclohexanecarboxamide trihydrochloride (WAY-100635) (Khwaja et al., 1995) was injected, after the LSD-induced inhibition, to reverse 5-HT firing activity. This also served to validate the use of the agonist that is not entirely selective for 5-HT1A receptors. To avoid the drug residual effects, the dose-response curves were obtained by using only the last neuron in each rat. It is worth noting that the firing rate of all 5-HT neurons used in this set of experiments was within their average firing rate, and a 2-min period was allowed to obtain a stable baseline before the systemic injection of LSD. The rate and pattern of firing rate were typical for 5-HT neurons as described previously (Aghajanian, 1978).

Extracellular Recording and Microiontophoresis of CA3 Dorsal Hippocampus Pyramidal Neurons

Extracellular recording and microiontophoresis of CA3 pyramidal neurons were performed with five-barreled glass micropipettes. The central barrel, used for the unitary recording, was filled with a 2 M NaCl solution, and the impedance of these electrodes ranged from 2 to 4 MΩ. The side barrels were filled with the following solutions: 5-HT creatinine sulfate (10 mM in 200 mM NaCl, pH 4), (±)NE bitartrate (10 mM in 200 mM NaCl, pH 4), trazodone hydrochloride (20 mM in 200 mM NaCl, pH 4), or quisqualic acid (1.5 mM in 200 mM NaCl, pH 8), and the last barrel was filled with a 2 M NaCl solution used for automatic current balancing. The micropipettes were lowered into the dorsal hippocampus CA3 region by using the following coordinates: 4 mm anterior to lambda and 4.2 mm lateral (Paxinos and Watson, 1998). A small current of quisqualate (Paxinos and Watson, 1998) was used to activate the pyramidal neurons within the brain. Two hundred square pulses with duration of 0.5 ms were delivered by a stimulator (S48; Grass Instruments, Quincy, MA) at an intensity of 300 μA and a frequency of 1 and 5 Hz. The stimulation of the 5-HT pathway induces a brief suppressant period caused by the release of 5-HT in the synapse. The effects of stimulation of ascending 5-HT pathway were assessed at 1 and 5 Hz, on the same neuron, to determine the function of terminal 5-HT1B autoreceptors (Chaput et al., 1986). The two series of stimulations, 1 and 5 Hz, were carried out because previous studies showed that the activation of terminal 5-HT1B autoreceptors decreases the 5-HT release in the terminal areas and increasing the frequency of stimulation from 1 to 5 Hz induces a greater activation of 5-HT1B autoreceptors and consequently a greater negative feedback on the release of 5-HT (Chaput et al., 1986). As a result, the smaller release of the neurotransmitter in the synapse, obtained at 5 Hz, induces a smaller period of suppression compared with that of the 1-Hz stimulation. The stimulation pulses and the firing activity were analyzed by computer using Spike 2 (Cambridge Electronic Design Limited, Cambridge, UK). Peristimulus time histograms of CA3 pyramidal neurons were generated to determine the suppression of firing measured in absolute silence (SIL) value in ms. The SIL value corresponds to the duration of a total suppression of the CA3 hippocampal pyramidal neuron. This parameter was calculated by computer by dividing the total number of events, suppressed by the stimulation, by the frequency of firing of the recorded neuron.

Quantification of Trazodone and mCPP in the Brain

Standards Preparation. Trazodone, mCPP, and domperidone were initially prepared at 1 mg/ml in dimethyl sulfoxide and subsequently diluted in acetonitrile. For analysis in brain, traz-
odone and mCPP were added to 100 mg/ml control brain homogenate (5–2500 pg/mg tissue) and extracted as described below. Domperidone was prepared at 1 µg/ml in acetonitrile to be used as an internal standard.

**Sample Preparation.** Tissue samples were homogenized at 100 mg/ml in deionized water and 100 µl of tissue homogenate was used for the extraction. To each sample, 10 ng (10 µl of 1 µg/ml) of domperidone was added followed by 1 ml of ethyl acetate containing 0.1% (v/v) ammonium hydroxide (30%, w/v) and extraction by vortexing for 10 min. Organic and aqueous layers were separated by centrifugation (10 min, 20,000g) and the organic layer was removed, evaporated by vacuum centrifugation at room temperature, and reconstituted in 200 µl of beginning mobile phase (20% acetonitrile/80% 0.1% formic acid in water) for liquid chromatography (LC)-double mass spectrometry analysis.

**Mass Spectrometry**

Positive ion electrospray ionization mass spectra were obtained with an AB Sciex 3200 QTRAP triple quadrupole mass spectrometer (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA) with a turbo V ion source interfaced to a Shimadzu (Kyoto, Japan) high-performance LC system. Samples were chromatographed with a Waters (Milford, MA) Sunfire C18, 2.5 µm, 50 mm × 4.6 mm column. The LC was a gradient elution using 100% acetonitrile as the organic phase and 0.1% formic acid in water as the aqueous as follows: 20% acetonitrile for 0.1 min, linearly ramp to 90% acetonitrile at 1.5 min, hold at 90% for 30 s, return to 20% acetonitrile over 30 s, and equilibrate column for 30 s at 20% acetonitrile. The flow rate was 1 ml/min, and sample injection volume was 60 µl. The analysis time was 3 min. The mass spectrometer settings were: temperature, 550°C; spray needle, 5500 V; curtain gas, 10; collision gas, N₂ (collisionally dissociated ionization), 3; and ion source gas 1 and 2, 55 and 45, respectively. The compound-dependent settings for trazodone, mCPP, and domperidone were as follows, respectively: declustering potential, 57, 24, and 63; excitation potential, 4, 10, and 9; collision cell entrance potential, 21, 26, and 19; collision energy, 33, 26, and 36; and collision cell exit potential, 3, 3, and 2. Samples were quantified by the internal standard reference method in the MRM mode by monitoring the transition m/z 372 → 176 for trazodone, m/z 197 → 154 for mCPP, m/z 426 → 175 for the internal standard domperidone. Each ion transition was integrated for 250 ms. Quantitation of trazodone and mCPP in the brain were based on standard curves in spiked tissue samples and quantitated by using the internal standard. The independence of the quantitation results was evaluated by using linear regression analysis with Prism 5 software (GraphPad Software Inc., La Jolla, CA). Statistical comparisons were carried out with two-tailed Student’s t test when a parameter was studied in control and treated rats. The effects of changing the frequency of stimulation from 1 to 5 Hz on the SII value of the same neuron were assessed by paired Student’s t test. Analysis of covariance was used to assess the statistical significance of the difference in the degree of reduction in the response of hippocampus neurons when the frequency of stimulation was increased from 1 to 5 Hz in control and trazodone-treated rats. Statistical significance was taken as P < 0.05.

**Results**

**Effects of 2- and 14-Day Administration of Trazodone on the Firing Rate of DR 5-HT Neurons.** In comparison to the vehicle group, the 2-day administration of trazodone at the dose of 10 and 20, but not 5, mg/kg/day significantly decreased the spontaneous firing rate of DR 5-HT neurons by 40 and 37%, respectively (vehicle: 1.11 ± 0.08 Hz, p < 0.01; Fig. 1A). Although trazodone at the dose of 20 mg/kg/day inhibited the 5-HT firing rate to the extent of 10 mg/kg/day, it significantly reduced the number of spontaneously active 5-HT neurons by 65% after 2 days once compared with the vehicle group (p < 0.01; Table 2). Therefore, the average firing rate for the 2-day trazodone dose of 20 mg/kg/day is an underestimated value because this regimen markedly decreased the number of spontaneously active 5-HT neurons. It is noteworthy that systemic administration of the potent and selective 5-HT₁A receptor antagonist WAY-100635 (100 µg/kg) normalized the 5-HT firing-inhibition induced by trazodone at 10 and 20 mg/kg/day (Fig. 1, A and B) and restored the number of spontaneously active neurons in rats treated with trazodone at 20 mg/kg/day (Table 2). It is important to note that our previous studies and those of others have shown that systemic administration of WAY-100635 does not significantly alter the average spontaneous firing rate of DR 5-HT neurons in naive rats (Gartside et al., 1995; Haddjeri et al., 2004).

Because trazodone at the dose of 10 mg/kg/day induced a marked physiological action on 5-HT neurons, this dose was used to study the effects of 14-day administration of trazodone on the 5-HT system. In contrast to the 2-day regimen, the firing rate of DR 5-HT neurons completely recovered to the baseline after 14 days of trazodone administration (10 mg/kg/day; p > 0.05; Fig. 1C).

**Brain Concentration of Trazodone and mCPP After 2-Day Regimen.** The steady-state concentrations of trazodone and its major metabolite mCPP were 25 ± 2.7 and 4 ± 0.25 ng/ml, respectively, after 2-day administration of trazodone (10 mg/kg). These levels are in the same range as those reported by DeVane et al. (1999).

**Assessment of Sensitivity of Somatodendritic 5-HT₁A Autoreceptors.** The responsiveness of somatodendritic 5-HT₁A autoreceptor, after 14-day trazodone (10 mg/kg/day) regimen, was assessed by using the 5-HT autoreceptor agonist LSD probe (Blier and de Montigny, 1990). The firing of DR 5-HT neurons in all of the naive rats was completely inhibited at the dose of 20 µg/kg (ED₅₀ = 9.0 ± 1.0 µg/kg; Fig. 2A). In contrast, the effect of LSD at this dose was markedly attenuated in suppressing the neuronal activity of 5-HT neurons in rats treated with trazodone.
for 14 days. In fact, higher doses of LSD were needed to induce a complete suppression of the 5-HT firing (ED50: 16.0 ± 1.0 µg/kg; Fig. 2B). A complete dose-response relationship between the suppression of DR 5-HT firing activity and doses of LSD administered intravenously in vehicle and trazodone-treated rats. Outer lines represent the standard error of the regression line.

**Fig. 2.** A and B, representative integrated firing rate histograms of DR 5-HT neurons illustrating the effect of intravenous administration of 5-HT autoreceptor agonist LSD in suppressing neuronal activity of rats treated with vehicle (A) and trazodone at 10 mg/kg/day (B) for 14 days. C, the relationship between the degree of suppression of DR 5-HT firing activity and doses of LSD administered intravenously in vehicle and trazodone-treated rats. Outer lines represent the standard error of the regression line.

**TABLE 2**

Average number of serotonergic neurons per electrode descent in the dorsal raphe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>2 Days</th>
<th>Post-WAY-100635</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>4.9 ± 0.5 (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trazodone (5 mg/kg)</td>
<td>5.5 ± 0.6 (14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trazodone (10 mg/kg)</td>
<td>4.2 ± 0.7 (10)</td>
<td>4.7 ± 0.7 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trazodone (20 mg/kg)</td>
<td>1.7 ± 0.3 (11)*</td>
<td>4.2 ± 0.8 (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P < 0.01.
In Vivo Determination of [3H]5-HT Uptake by Trazodone. After the 2-day regimens, the ex vivo experiments from hippocampal slices revealed that trazodone, in a dose-dependent manner, at doses of 5 and 10 mg/kg/day significantly blocked the 5-HT reuptake process by 57% (p < 0.05) and 62% (p < 0.01), respectively. It is worth noting that trazodone at the dose of 20 mg/kg/day also markedly inhibited 5-HTT in hippocampus by 70% (p < 0.01). The SSRI escitalopram, used as a positive control, at the dose of 10 mg/kg/day significantly inhibited the 5-HT reuptake process by 81% (p < 0.001; Fig. 4).

Assessment of the Overall Serotonergic Tone after 14-Day Administration of Trazodone as Determined with the Tonic Activation of Postsynaptic 5-HT1A Receptors. As illustrated in Fig. 5, cumulative administration of 5-HT1A antagonist WAY-100635 failed to modify the firing activity of dorsal hippocampus CA3 pyramidal neurons in the vehicle group (p > 0.05; Fig. 5). On the other hand, the second dose and subsequent doses of systemic injection of WAY-100635 markedly enhanced the firing activity in rats administered with trazodone for 14 days (p < 0.05 for all doses except the first one; Fig. 5). Indeed, the final injection of WAY-100635 increased the neuronal activity in the CA3 region by approximately 160% compared with control rats. The marked increment in the firing activity of pyramidal neurons in the trazodone-treated rats reflects the degree to which WAY-100635 disinhibits neuronal activity caused by the tonic activation of postsynaptic 5-HT1A receptors by extracellular 5-HT in the hippocampus. It is important to emphasize that the inhibitory effect of microiontophoretic application of 5-HT was significantly blocked in all rats after the last injection of WAY-100635 (vehicle: pre-WAY-100635, 55 ± 5 spikes suppressed/nA, post-WAY-100635, 29 ± 4 spikes suppressed/nA, n = 6, p < 0.001; 14-day trazodone: pre-WAY-100635, 46 ± 3, post-WAY-100635, 12 ± 2, n = 8, p < 0.001; Fig. 5), confirming that the inhibitory action was mediated by 5-HT1A receptors.

Effects of Sustained Administration of Trazodone for 14 Days on the Efficacy of the Electrical Stimulation of the 5-HT Afferent Fibers to the Hippocampus. To assess the amount of 5-HT released per electrical impulse in the 5-HT pathway, the 5-HT afferent fibers to the hippocampus were electrically stimulated. The responsiveness of terminal 5-HT1B autoreceptors was also evaluated by increasing the frequency of stimulation from 1 to 5 Hz on the same neuron. The stimulation of the 5-HT pathway at 1 Hz

(Fig. 3A and B, respectively). The inhibitory action of 5-HT and NE is mediated via postsynaptic 5-HT1A and α2-adrenergic receptors, respectively, because administration of 5-HT1A receptor antagonist WAY-100635 and α2-adrenoceptor antagonist idazoxan readily blocks the suppressant action of the agonists (Chaput and de Montigny, 1988; Curet and de Montigny, 1988). Microiontophoretic application of 5-HT and NE in the dorsal hippocampus of rats administered with trazodone for 14 days revealed that the number of spikes suppressed/nA was not significantly different from that of the vehicle group (p > 0.05 for both 5-HT and NE; Fig. 3C and D), suggesting that 5-HT1A and α2-adrenergic receptors in the CA3 region remain normosensitive after prolonged administration of trazodone.

In Vivo Assessment of the Degree of 5-HT Reuptake Inhibition by Trazodone. The function of hippocampus 5-HTT was determined by using the recovery time (RT50) of the firing rate of pyramidal neurons after a complete suppression of the firing activity induced by local application of 5-HT. Sustained administration of trazodone (10 mg/kg/day) for 14 days significantly increased the RT50 value compared with that of the vehicle group (p < 0.01; Fig. 3E), indicating that trazodone blocks 5-HT reuptake process in vivo.
enhanced the period of suppression in rats administered with trazodone for 14 days by 20% once compared with the corresponding SIL value in the vehicle group (p < 0.05; Fig. 6). The present data showed that trazodone potently suppressed the firing rate of DR 5-HT neurons after 2 days of sustained administration. This firing rate, however, recovered to baseline after administration of trazodone for 14 days. The complete recovery of 5-HT firing is attributable to decreased sensitivity of 5-HT1A autoreceptors because the suppressant effect of the 5-HT autoreceptor agonist LSD was decreased by the long-term trazodone regimen. With respect to 5-HT neurotransmission in the forebrain, although the sensitivity of postsynaptic 5-HT1A and α2-adrenergic receptors was not changed after its prolonged administration, trazodone increased tonic activation of postsynaptic 5-HT1A receptors in hippocampus, as indicated by disinhibition of neuronal activity by WAY-100635. This study, therefore, indicates that sustained administration of trazodone enhances 5-HT neurotransmission, at least in part, by desensitizing the inhibitory function of 5-HT1A and 5-HT1B autoreceptors that are present on the cell body and terminals, respectively, in the presence of 5-HT reuptake inhibition.

The in vitro data showed that trazodone inhibited 5-HTT in a dose-dependent manner in the hippocampus, a phenomenon that was also observed with the SSRI escitalopram (Fig. 4), suggesting that trazodone modulates the 5-HT system, in part, by inhibiting 5-HT reuptake sites. Although trazodone at the dose of 5 mg/kg/day significantly blocked the 5-HTT, it did not alter the firing rate of 5-HT neurons after 2 days (Fig. 1), indicating that the degree of blockade was below the threshold to induce a net physiological action. This result is akin to what has been reported in humans: an 80% occupancy of 5-HTT is required to obtain an antidepressant effect with a variety of reuptake inhibitors (Meyer et al., 2004). Trazodone at 10 and 20 mg/kg/day, on the other hand, suppressed the firing rate of 5-HT neurons after 2 days of administration. In parallel to the 2-day trazodone regimen, acute administration of trazodone dose-dependently reduced the firing rate of 5-HT neurons (Suvée-Moreau and Dresse, 1982), perhaps because of its blocking property at 5-HTT and/or α2-adrenoceptors (Table 1). Although the 2-day administration of trazodone at the dose of 20 mg/kg/day reduced the firing rate of 5-HT neurons to the same extent as 10 mg/kg/day, the number of spontaneously active 5-HT neurons was reduced only by the highest dose. It is well established that short-term
administration of SSRIs potently suppresses 5-HT neurons because of the activation of somatodendritic 5-HT$_{1A}$ autoreceptors by enhancing 5-HT levels in the vicinity of the cell body. In line with this, systemic administration of the 5-HT$_{1A}$ antagonist WAY-100635 reversed the trazodone-induced suppression of 5-HT firing rate to their baseline (Fig. 1) and normalized the number of spontaneously active 5-HT neurons (Table 2), indicating that the suppressant effect may be mediated via 5-HT$_{1A}$ receptors and not by blocking $\alpha_1$-adrenoceptors. In contrast to the 2-day effect, the firing rate of 5-HT neurons showed a full recovery after 14 days of trazodone administration. The recovery of 5-HT firing activity was concurrent with desensitization of 5-HT$_{1A}$ autoreceptors (Fig. 2), which may account for firing normalization, a physiological adaptation that was consistently observed with long-term SSRI administration (see Piñeiro and Blier, 1999).

Even though long-term administration of trazodone did not alter the sensitivity of postsynaptic 5-HT$_{1A}$ and $\alpha_2$-adrenergic receptors (Fig. 3), it induced a robust tonic activation of postsynaptic 5-HT$_{1A}$ receptors in the hippocampus after 14 days, as revealed by disinhibition of the neuronal firing activity induced by WAY-100635 (Fig. 5). Enhanced tonic activation is consistent with previous microdialysis experiments showing increased extracellular concentration of 5-HT in terminal brain areas after administration of antidepressants with serotonergic action (Romero et al., 1996). It has been shown that the presumed enhanced 5-HT levels in hippocampus may partially be caused by the inhibition of 5-HTT by prolonged, but not a 2-day, administration of the SSRI paroxetine (Besson et al., 2000). The observation that prolonged administration of trazodone considerably increased the overall net effect of 5-HT in hippocampus suggests similar mechanism of action as the SSRIs. In line with this, microdialysis experiments showed that administration of trazodone markedly enhanced the extracellular 5-HT concentration in the frontal cortex of freely moving rats (Pazzagli et al., 1999), an effect that was higher than that of the SSRI sertraline (Garrone et al., 2009). Vilazodone, which like trazodone is a SSRI/5-HT$_{1A}$ agonist, enhances extracellular 5-HT concentration in the rat frontal cortex more than the SSRI paroxetine alone (Hughes et al., 2005).

Previous studies have reported that long-term administration of agents that potently inhibit 5-HTT, such as citalopram, fluoxetine, paroxetine, and fluvoxamine, induce desensitization of 5-HT$_{1B}$ autoreceptors on 5-HT terminals (Piñeiro and Blier, 1999). Thus, it was deemed crucial to assess the sensitivity of terminal autoreceptors because these autoreceptors exert an inhibitory role on 5-HT release (Chaput et al., 1986). Compared with the vehicle group, stimulation of the 5-HT bundle at 1 Hz increased the effectiveness of stimulation in rats administered with trazodone for 14 days, as for the abovementioned SSRIs. Increasing the frequency of stimulation from 1 to 5 Hz reduces the period of suppression in the vehicle group, because of greater activation of terminal 5-HT$_{1B}$ autoreceptors, as reported previously (Chaput et al., 1986). In trazodone-treated rats, however, this decremental effect was abolished when the frequency of stimulation was increased from 1 to 5 Hz, suggesting that the inhibitory action of terminal autoreceptors was diminished (Fig. 6). In addition, long-term administration of YM992,
which like trazodone blocks 5-HTT and 5-HT\textsubscript{2A} receptors, desensitized terminal 5-HT autoreceptors (Dong et al., 1999). Desensitization of terminal 5-HT\textsubscript{1B} autoreceptors may thus be the driving force for the enhanced 5-HT release in the synapse after 14-day administration of trazodone. Indeed, 5-HT reuptake blockade per se could not explain the increased 5-HT tone in hippocampus, because acute administration of the SSRIs citalopram or fluoxetine does not enhance the effectiveness of stimulation (Pinyero and Blier, 1999). Furthermore, Gross et al. (1987) showed that trazodone increased the electrically induced [\textsuperscript{3}H]5-HT release from cortical slices, an effect that was independent of 5-HT reuptake inhibition. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that desensitization of the terminal 5-HT\textsubscript{1B} autoreceptor after long-term administration of trazodone is not likely caused by the agonistic action of its major metabolite mCPP on these receptors or its potent antagonistic effect at 5-HT\textsubscript{3} receptors, because its concentration is low in the brain, as reported previously at the steady-state level (DeVane et al., 1999).

Microiontophoretic application of trazodone showed that, similar to 5-HT, it acts as an agonist at postsynaptic 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptors in the hippocampus CA\textsubscript{3} region because administration of the 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptor antagonist WAY-100635 markedly blocked the inhibitory actions of both 5-HT and trazodone (Fig. 7). The agonistic action of trazodone at 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptors was further characterized as being full because it did not antagonize the inhibitory action of the endogenous agonist 5-HT when coapplied by microiontophoresis in hippocampus (Fig. 7). In addition, when trazodone was administered for 14 days and the responsiveness to 5-HT was examined with the minipump in the animal delivering the drug, there was no alteration in the sensitivity of the pyramidal neurons to 5-HT (Fig. 3). On the other hand, the 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} partial agonist gepirone (Blier and de Montigny, 1990) significantly offsets the inhibitory effect of 5-HT on the hippocampus firing rate when coapplied locally. Thus far, \( R(-)-2-[4-\text{[(chroman-2-ylmethyl)-amino]-butyl}]-1,1\text{-dioxo-benzo}[d]\text{-isothiazolone hydrochloride (BAY 36702)} \) is the only 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} agonist reported to act as a full agonist, like trazodone, at 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptors in the CA\textsubscript{3} region (Dong et al., 1998). Even though both agents behave as full agonists at these postsynaptic 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptors, they did not alter the sensitivity of these receptors after prolonged administration, in contrast to that of the somatodendritic autoreceptors. Furthermore, previous in vitro studies showed that trazodone has moderate affinity at 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptors in the frontal cortex of human brain and rat hippocampus (Cusack et al., 1994; Owens et al., 1997) and that it acts as an agonist at human 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptors (Odagaki et al., 2005). The agonistic action of trazodone at 5-HT\textsubscript{1A} receptors, in addition to its modulatory action on 5-HT neurotransmission, may contribute to enhance DA release in the medial prefrontal cortex (Chung et al., 2004).

Enhanced 5-HT transmission by prolonged administration of trazodone may be clinically relevant. Indeed, trazodone, similar to other classes of antidepressants including tricylics, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, SSRIs, mirtazapine, gepirone,
and electroconvulsive shares, the property of enhancing the overall 5-HT neurotransmission in hippocampus after long-term administration (Haddjeri et al., 1998). The therapeutic effect of trazodone in the treatment of major depression may thus be, at least in part, caused by the enhancement of 5-HT neurotransmission via 5-HT inhibition and 5-HT1A receptor agonism. This medication, however, has not been used as first-line treatment for depression because of its daytime sedative action. The latter effect is probably caused by a combination of H1, 5-HT1A, and α1-adrenergic receptor antagonism (Table 1), properties that individually can contribute to hypnotic and/or sedative effects. The development of a slow release preparation of trazodone, thereby eliminating sharp plasma/brain peaks, has, however, helped diminish daytime drowsiness, while maintaining the therapeutic benefit on depressed mood (Sheehan et al., 2009).

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Address correspondence to: Ramez Ghanbari, University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research, Room 7403, 1145 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1Z 7K4. E-mail: ramez.ghanbari@rohcg.on.ca