Understanding the neurotransmitter changes underlying cognitive dysfunction in traumatic brain injury and possible therapeutic targets: a review

Ping Zheng¹,², Wusong Tong²

¹Department of Medicine, Royal Melbourne Hospital, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
²Department of Neurosurgery, Shanghai Pudong New Area People’s Hospital, Shanghai, China

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Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is the primary cause of death and disability in younger individuals [1]. To date, the mechanism behind the cognitive dysfunction following TBI remains unclear. Neurotransmitters (NT) represent a particularly important system in physiological events relevant to cognition affected by TBI [2]. Preclinical evaluations of both agonists and antagonists affecting acetylcholine (Ach) and the dopamine (DA) system have shown marked benefits for cognitive recovery. Hence, the aim of this article is to outline clinical studies that have shown potential efficacy of Ach- and DA-oriented medications in the treatment of TBI.

PubMed was used to search for articles published since 1998 that reported any association between cognitive dysfunction following TBI. Before 1998, no clinical studies regarding the neurotransmitter-targeted therapies in TBI had been reported. After reviewing the abstracts, 14 articles were submitted to the final evidence review.

Acetylcholinesterase (AChE) inhibitors are most beneficial for the treatment of posttraumatic cognitive impairments [3]. Principally, rivastigmine improved the cognitive function in TBI patients [4]. However, the results from randomized controlled trials have remained modest [5]. Zhang et al. [6] performed a 24-week, randomized, placebo-controlled, double-blind crossover trial to demonstrate sustained improvements in immediate auditory and visual memory, attention, working memory and information processing speed. An open-label study conducted by Tenovuo [7] also found a subjective and longer (average 24 months) improvement following donepezil (summarized in Table I).

Dopamine represents a unique role in the NT system within the central nervous system (CNS) due to its influences on a number of physiological functions including working memory, behavioral flexibility, and decision making [8].

In 2006, the Neurotrauma Foundation (NTF) recommended three drugs with DAergic effects to be used in TBI patients to enhance cognitive recovery and rehabilitation [9]. The identified drugs were methylphenidate (MPD), amantadine hydrochloride (AMH), and bromocriptine [9]. Multiple studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of MPD used in TBI patients with cognitive dysfunction especially in information processing speed [10], attention [11, 12], alertness [13], and working mem-
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| Table I. Acetylcholinesterase inhibitors for cognitive rehabilitation after TBI |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Study                          | Design              | Participants             | Interventions            | Primary outcomes                                      | Notes                                      |
| Silver et al.                  | 26-week double-blind open-label | 134 adults with TBI      | 12 mg daily of rivastigmine | Verbal learning test visual information processing     | An extension study                         |
| Tenuvuo et al.                 | 8-week              | 69 patients with TBI     | 12 mg daily rivastigmine  | Computerized neuropsychological testing and standardized clinical interviews | A weak trend favoring rivastigmine was observed |
| Zhang et al.                   | RCT crossover, double blind | 18 participants with mild-severe TBI | 5–10 mg/day of donepezil | *All, VII PASAT                                        |                                           |
| Tenovuo et al.                 | Retrospective pseudo-randomized cohort | 111 patients with mild-severe TBI | 5 mg/day of donepezil 4 mg/day of galantamine 1.5 mg/day of rivastigmine | Self-assessment rated from no response to excellent response | No differences were found among the three drugs |

*All indicates Auditory Immediate Index, VII – Visual Immediate Index, PASAT – Paced Auditory Serial Addition Test.

| Table II. Dopamine drugs for cognitive rehabilitation after TBI |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Study                          | Design              | Participants             | Interventions            | Primary outcomes                                      | Notes                                      |
| Whyte et al.                   | 6-week double-blind placebo-controlled repeated crossover study | 34 adults with moderate to severe TBI and attention complaints | 0.3 mg/kg dose MPD, twice a day | Processing speed Work attentiveness Caregiver rating of attention Reaction time |                                           |
| Pavlovskaya et al.             | 4-week              | 6 patients with TBI      | 5–10 mg/day of MPD       | Author-modified Attention based performance            | No objective assessment                   |
| Willmott et al.                | RCT, crossover, double blind | 40 participants with moderate-severe TBI | 0.3 mg/kg twice daily of MPD | Processing speed Selective attention task Dissimilar compatible |                                           |
| Lee et al.                     | 4 week double-blind parallel-group trial | 30 patients with mild to moderate TBI | 5–20 mg/day of MPD | MMSE                                                   |                                           |
| Kim et al.                     | Double-blind placebo-controlled study | 18 subjects with TBI | 20 mg/day of MPD         | Working memory and visuospatial attention tasks        |                                           |
| Kraus et al.                   | An open-label design | Twenty-two subjects with TBI | 400 mg/day of AMH        | Neuropsychological test Executive function             |                                           |
| Patrick et al.                 | A retrospective review | 10 children with severe TBI and a low response state | 100–400 mg/day of AMH | Arousal/attention and auditory response Expressive communication visual response Tactile response and olfactory response |                                           |
| Ben et al.                     | Case report         | An old patient with severe TBI associated with PD | AMH (unknown dose) | Author modified tests Motor function and cognitive function |                                           |
| McDowell et al.                | RCT cross over      | 24 patients with severe TBI | 1 dose of bromocriptine  | Executive function                                   | No effect on the working memory Related to prefrontal function |
| McAllister et al.              | Unblinded controlled study | 26 individuals with TBI | 1.25 mg bromocriptine    | A neuropsychological test battery                     |                                           |
ory [14] after brain trauma. However, there is no longer than six months follow-up in the clinical trials regarding MPD in patients with TBI.

Amantadine hydrochloride has also been found to be effective at treating cognitive dysfunction post-TBI in both clinical trials and case reports. Kraus et al. [15] showed that AMH treatment improved prefrontal executive function in TBI patients correlated with an increase in left prefrontal cortex glucose metabolism. Patrick et al. [16] reported that AMH accelerated recovery of attention deficit in children with a lower response following brain injury.

Bromocriptine is a specific D2 receptor agonist, and a past case report [17] showed improvements in motor function and executive function after administering bromocriptine in a severe TBI patient associated with Parkinson's syndrome. In contrast, McDowell et al. did not find that bromocriptine appeared to improve attentional difficulties in moderate to severe TBI patients. However, this study employed a relatively high dose of bromocriptine at 10 mg/day for a more prolonged treatment period than previously studied in TBI [18]. In addition, a 6-week placebo-controlled pilot study showed that bromocriptine in TBI patients also did not enhance attentional skills [19] (summarized in Table II).

This brief review has sought to summarize the evidence that supports an NT-oriented hypothesis of cognitive dysfunction after TBI and provide a context for the use of Ach and DA targeted therapies during patient rehabilitation.

In conclusion, it seems that applications of AChE inhibitors and DA agonists are beneficial in TBI patients with cognitive dysfunction.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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