Antipsychotic drugs: from ‘major tranquilizers’ to Neuroscience-based-Nomenclature

Spyridon Siafis1, John M. Davis2,3 and Stefan Leucht1

1Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, School of Medicine, Technische Universität München, München, Germany; 2Department of Psychiatry, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, USA and 3Illinois and Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Correspondence

We highly appreciate Professor Moncrieff’s work and we find it very important that there are critical minds who challenge the ‘mainstream’, which in the history of medicine has often been proven wrong. We would like to be counted among these critical minds. Nevertheless, the public debate about psychotropic agents is often ideological rather than evidence-based. Therefore, although Professor Moncrieff did not explicitly write that antipsychotics are just unspecific sedatives, such arguments are often used making our systematic review important (Siafis et al., 2019).

Antipsychotic drugs

The introduction of antipsychotic agents in 1950s and their apparent efficacy was shortly followed by a tremendous reduction of institutionalized patients with schizophrenia. To deinstitutionalize patients was also based on general political decisions, but it is doubtful whether it would have been possible to the same extent without the availability of effective medication. Historically, these agents were called major tranquilizers or neuroleptics, but in the late 1960s, even before the establishment of dopamine theory of schizophrenia, they started to be described as antipsychotics, because they could improve fundamental symptoms of schizophrenia, i.e. thought disorder, blunted affect and withdrawal as well as secondary symptoms of hallucinations and delusions (Davis & Kline, 1969). In addition to their established efficacy in treating acute exacerbations of schizophrenia (Huhn et al., 2019) and preventing relapses (Leucht et al., 2012), there is also more recent evidence on their efficacy in patients with predominant negative symptoms; at least for amisulpride (lower doses 50–300 mg/day) and cariprazine (Krause et al., 2018).

All current antipsychotics target D2/3 receptors, yet each has a distinct receptor-binding profile (Fig. 1) and subsequently, a different side-effect profile (Huhn et al., 2019). Antipsychotics have per definition ‘psychoactive’ effects, including negative subjective experiences (Moncrieff, Cohen, & Mason, 2009) that could be associated with the antagonism of dopamine receptors or other receptors. Due to this general ‘dampening’ and the multiple side-effects, antipsychotics are indeed among ‘the bitterest pills’ (Moncrieff, 2013). However, these effects are well known and unfortunately, there is no other treatment which is effective in monotherapy. In general, there is a therapeutic window of D2/3 antagonism, since occupancy on D2/3 receptors is related to both clinical response and negative subjective well-being (Kaar, Natesan, McCutcheon, & Howes, 2019). Therefore, dosing needs to be carefully adjusted at an individual level in order to balance benefits and harms. Moreover, the multiple antipsychotics available have different side-effects, and some are generally more benign (Huhn et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it is clear that there is an enormous need for the development of better tolerable and more efficacious drugs to treat schizophrenia.

The neurobiology of schizophrenia is not well understood, but dopaminergic and excitatory-inhibitory dysfunctions are the current leading neurobiochemical hypotheses (Howes, McCutcheon, & Stone, 2015). Psychological factors, such as early childhood trauma, urban living, ethnic minority status, and substance abuse have also been clearly associated with the development of schizophrenia (McCutcheon, Reis Marques, & Howes, 2019). Therefore, it cannot be stated with certainty, whether the dopaminergic dysfunction is an epiphenomenon and how the mechanism of action of antipsychotics relates to the pathophysiology of schizophrenia or other mental disorders, and antipsychotics might target downstream pathways rather the main underlying dopaminergic dysfunction (Jauhar et al., 2019). In addition, the multi-receptor effects of antipsychotics and the overlay among diagnostic entities could explain their broader effects e.g. their antidepressant and anti-manic effects. In order to bridge these uncertainties and decrease confusion, the pharmacology-driven nomenclature $\text{NbN}$ (Neuroscience-based-Nomenclature) has been proposed (Zohar et al., 2015). It is quite gross and imperfect, but certainly better than previous distinctions such as ‘minor v. major...
for schizophrenia, though there are still questions about their exact mechanism of action, longer-term use, and treatment-resistance. Due to their multiple adverse effects, better tolerable and more specific treatments need to be developed. Clinical practice and research could be facilitated by using pharmacology-driven classifications of psychotropic drugs.

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