The promise of minocycline in neurology

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The capacity of minocycline to alleviate disease for several neurological disorders in animals is increasingly being recognised. Indeed, that one drug alone can attenuate the severity of disease in stroke, multiple sclerosis, spinal-cord injury, Parkinson’s disease, Huntington’s disease, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis is astounding. In this review, we describe the evidence for the efficacy of minocycline in several animal models of neurological disease, discuss the mechanisms by which minocycline affects a range of neurological diseases with diverse causes, and introduce the emerging investigation of minocycline in clinical neurology. The encouraging results of minocycline in experimental neurology bode well for its therapeutic use in human neurological diseases.

Minocycline in animal models

Ischaemic and haemorrhagic stroke

The first researchers to report of the efficacy of minocycline in experimental neurology used this drug because of the known expression of several proinflammatory genes in the ischaemic brain and because minocycline had been shown to inhibit the activity and expression of these inflammatory mediators. Thus, Yrjanheikki and colleagues showed that minocycline protected hippocampal neurons from death in a gerbil model of forebrain ischaemia when administered 30 min after brain insult. Shortly thereafter, researchers found that minocycline was also effective in focal brain ischaemia in rats; its injection by the intraperitoneal route reduced cortical infarction volume by 76% when given 12 h before ischaemia and by 63% when given 4 h after the onset of ischaemia. In that study, minocycline had a better neuroprotective effect than doxycycline.

More recently, in rats with focal ischaemic injury induced by embolising a preformed clot into the middle cerebral artery, infarct volume was significantly reduced when minocycline was given from either 1 h or 4 h after embolisation. By comparison, a similar period of delayed hypothermia was not protective. Similarly, in a rat model of neonatal hypoxic-ischaemic brain injury, a single intraperitoneal injection of minocycline given immediately after the insult prevented the damage seen at 1 week in the ipsilateral hemisphere of animals treated with drug vehicle alone. Neuroprotection by minocycline in hypoxic-ischaemic injury in neonatal rats has been reproduced by another group. Finally, intravenously given minocycline, which results in a more predictable plasma concentration and half-life than that achieved by intraperitoneal injection, was neuroprotective after middle-cerebral-artery occlusion in rats at doses lower than those needed by other parenteral routes. In a model of intracerebral haemorrhage in rats, minocycline reduced glial activation, cellular apoptosis and behavioural recovery when given twice daily for the first week starting 1 h after the insult.

Overall, these studies of minocycline in animal models of ischaemic and haemorrhagic stroke hold promise for minocycline as a therapy in patients with stroke.

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Multiple sclerosis

Our initial rationale for using minocycline to treat autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE), an animal model of multiple sclerosis, was to target matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs). MMPs are upregulated in multiple sclerosis and EAE, in which they have several detrimental effects including breakdown of the blood–brain barrier, promotion of neuroinflammation, and neurotoxicity. Indeed, one mechanism of action of interferon-beta therapy in multiple sclerosis may be to decrease the production of MMPs by T lymphocytes, thereby attenuating the ability of these leucocytes to penetrate the CNS. As interferon beta affects the synthesis of MMPs but does not influence enzyme activity directly, we reasoned that the combination of interferon beta with a direct inhibitor of MMP enzyme activity might result in a greater reduction of leucocyte influx and a better control of disease activity. We selected minocycline for testing because of reports that it inhibited the enzymatic activity of MMPs. Furthermore, the good safety record of minocycline in long-term oral use to treat acne is an important consideration for treatment of a chronic disease such as multiple sclerosis.

In EAE, we found that mice treated with minocycline at the time of disease induction with a myelin peptide have delayed onset of clinical symptoms. Animals treated with minocycline eventually succumbed to EAE when the immunisation protocol resulted in severe disease, but if the disease-inducing protocol gave rise to a mild disease, daily minocycline attenuated severity over the course of the experiment, even when started at the first appearance of symptoms. Another study, which aimed to prevent microglial activation, reported that minocycline suppressed ongoing disease activity and limited disease progression in chronic relapsing-remitting EAE in rats. Similarly, Nessler and colleagues found that minocycline given intraperitoneally alleviated the severity of adoptive transfer EAE, in which disease was induced through the transfer into naive recipients of activated T cells that were myelin-protein specific. In the same study, however, minocycline given orally did not influence the disease course. These findings suggest that the bioavailability of minocycline varies with the route of administration. As noted earlier, intravenous minocycline resulted in a more predictable serum concentration and a lower dose requirement than intraperitoneal injection, and it is possible that even higher oral doses will need to be given to achieve the same serum concentrations as parenteral administration.

Overall, minocycline given at the time of disease induction can delay or abrogate subsequent neuroinflammation and neuropathological changes in EAE, whereas treatment initiated at the onset of clinical signs can still attenuate the disease course.

Spinal-cord injury

Various inflammatory molecules and neurotoxic compounds, including glutamate, free radicals, and MMPs, are upregulated after spinal-cord injury. We reasoned that rather than using a highly selective treatment that targets a specific molecule or pathway, a compound with multifunctional properties that targets several mediators involved in spinal-cord pathology may be more effective. Thus, we selected minocycline for testing in spinal-cord injury in animals given its capacity to inhibit several mediators of damage found in the injured spinal cord. In agreement with our hypothesis, we observed that after spinal-cord compression injury in mice, minocycline treatment, beginning 1 h after injury and then daily for 6 days, provided significant recovery of hind-limb function compared with injured mice that were treated with the drug vehicle alone. Behavioural recovery was accompanied by histological evidence of tissue, neuronal, and axonal preservation at the site of injury (figure 1).

Since this initial report, other groups have reported promising results with minocycline in several models of spinal-cord injury. Rats receiving a weight-drop contusion injury had improved hind-limb motor function and fewer apoptotic cells in the spinal cord if treated with minocycline immediately after spinal-cord injury and then twice more over the next 24 h. Adult rats with a C7–C8 dorsal column transection, with minocycline injected intraperitoneally 30 min, and 8 h after the injury and twice daily thereafter for 2 days, also showed functional improvement as well as a reduction in the number of apoptotic oligodendrocytes at 7 days and 14 days. Furthermore, Teng and colleagues reported the beneficial effect of minocycline in rats with weight-drop spinal-cord injury.

The finding of significant improvement in functional recovery in animals given minocycline within the first 2 days of spinal-cord injury suggests that a critical mechanism of minocycline efficacy involves early events in the pathophysiology of this type of injury. The reports also provide evidence for the efficacy of minocycline in alleviating not only axonal and neuronal loss, but also the destruction of oligodendrocytes and possibly other cell types in the injured area and in projecting fibre tracts.

Finally, in concordance with the spinal-cord injury results, minocycline treatment decreased lesion size and improved rotarod test performance 4 days after traumatic brain injury, thus providing further evidence for the neuroprotective efficacy of minocycline therapy in CNS trauma.

Parkinson’s disease

The impressive therapeutic effects of minocycline have been extended to models of Parkinson’s disease. Of note is the neuroprotection by minocycline of the nigrostriatal pathway against a very potent neurotoxin, N-methyl-4-phenyltetralhydroqu deniedine (MPTP). In another model of Parkinson’s disease, in which 6-hydroxydopamine was injected into the striatum of mice, minocycline was similarly neuroprotective. In yet another model of damage to the nigrostriatal pathway, in which lipopolysaccharide was injected into the substantia nigra of rats to produce inflammation and damage to the blood–brain barrier, minocycline treatment reduced the severity of these effects.

Furthermore, in studies with cultures of mesencephalic and cerebellar granule neurons, minocycline inhibited the lethality mediated by 1-methyl-4-pyridinium ion (MPP+), the active metabolite of MPTP.
Minocycline and neurological diseases

Huntington’s disease
The R6/2 mouse has been used to assess the efficacy of minocycline in Huntington’s disease. In this model, caused by an expanded polyglutamine repeat in exon 1 of the huntingtin gene, mice develop progressive neurological dysfunction and die at about 13 weeks of age. When treated with daily intraperitoneal minocycline beginning at 6 weeks of age, disease progression was delayed and survival was 14% longer than in saline-treated mice;30,31 by contrast, tetracycline, which does not effectively cross the blood–brain barrier, was ineffective.30 In a striatal cell model of Huntington’s disease, minocycline inhibited the cell death caused by pathways that are caspase dependent or independent.31 Minocycline, as well as doxycycline and tetracycline, are potent inhibitors of aggregation of huntingtin in a hippocampal slice culture model of Huntington’s disease.32

By contrast with these favourable reports, the treatment of R6/2 mice with minocycline given orally in the drinking water resulted in no clear differences in behavioural abnormalities or aggregate disease-load post mortem.33 This negative result may be because of instability of minocycline when kept in drinking water for 7 days,33 although Hockly and colleagues34 showed that an aqueous solution of minocycline in 5% sucrose was stable for 1 week at room temperature. Our own experience is that minocycline is an unstable compound in aqueous solution and a standard procedure in our laboratory is to use minocycline solutions that are made fresh daily.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis
Mice expressing mutant superoxide dismutase provide an animal model of ALS. These mice show progressive neurological deterioration and destruction of motor neurons in the spinal cord and die prematurely at about age 120 days. Minocycline, started at age 5 weeks, delayed the onset of impaired motor ability on rotarod tests and significantly extended survival of mice from 126 days to 137 days;35 similar results have been reported by Kriz36 and Van Den Bosch37 and their coworkers. Finally, apoptosis induced by exposure of cultured neurons to CSF from patients with motor neuron diseases, including ALS, was ameliorated by minocycline.38

Exacerbation of disease by minocycline
By contrast with the numerous reports that minocycline is beneficial in several animal models of neurological diseases (table), there are also data indicating that minocycline worsens CNS disease. Contrary to the reports noted,26,27 minocycline significantly exacerbated the MPTP-induced damage to dopaminergic neurons in mice.39 The investigators suggested that this effect could be due to the inhibition of dopamine and MPP+ uptake into striatal vesicles, thereby potentiating the toxicity of the latter, but no data were provided to support this explanation. Species differences did not account for the different effects reported by these studies,26,27,39 as all three studies used mice. Nevertheless, in cynomolgus monkeys given MPTP, minocycline increased symptoms of parkinsonism and loss of dopaminergic nerve terminals in the putamen when compared with monkeys that received placebo.40 In the 3-nitropropionic-acid mouse model of Huntington’s disease, minocycline treatment aggravated motor scores in behavioural tasks, and produced more neuronal loss in the dorsal striatum than seen in controls.40

As noted above, minocycline given to neonatal rats reduced the pathological consequences of a hypoxic-ischaemic brain injury.7 This result has been reproduced by...
Whether minocycline has a direct or an indirect effect on microglial activation was investigated in tissue culture. Minocycline directly inhibited the proliferation and the activation state of cultured microglia. Microglial activation in tissue culture contributed to glutamate excitotoxicity, and microglial activation was reduced by minocycline with associated alleviation of excitotoxicity.

That minocycline inhibits microglial activation has been exploited in the area of cell transplants and neuroregeneration. A myelin mutation in the spinal cords of Long Evans Shaker rats produces myelin defects that are associated with progressive microglial activation. In this model, the transplantation of oligodendroglial progenitor cells during peak microglial activation did not lead to myelination because the grafted cells died promptly after transplantation. However, pretreatment of these animals with minocycline reduced microglial activation and resulted in cell survival and myelin formation by the implants. Furthermore, hippocampal neurogenesis, a process that continues in the adult brain, was impaired by microglial activation caused by lipopolysaccharide infusion into the brain, and this deficient neurogenesis was restored by the systemic administration of minocycline in association with reduced microglial activation.

### Inhibition of microglial activation

Evidence that minocycline prevents microglial activation was first provided by Yrjanheikki and colleagues in a model of forebrain ischaemia in gerbils. Decreased microglial activation by minocycline has since been reported in models of Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis, intracerebral haemorrhage, and spinal-cord injury (figure 1). The expression of several molecules associated with microglial activation, including caspase 1 (interleukin-1β-converting enzyme) and inducible nitric oxide synthase, reduced expression after treatment with minocycline. Nevertheless, these reports do not discriminate between a direct effect of minocycline in the inhibition of microglial activation or an indirect effect through reduced neurodegeneration and, consequently, less microglial activation.

### Suppression of free-radical production

The generation of free radicals, leading to lipid and protein peroxidation and damage to membranes is also a common mechanism across a spectrum of diseases. Minocycline depresses the release of oxygen radicals from various cell types, including leucocytes. As mentioned above, the production of nitric oxide is decreased by minocycline through an effect on nitric oxide synthase.
Inhibition of MMPs

Another mechanism for minocycline action that may account for its effect on various neurological diseases is its inhibition of MMPs. Various MMPs are upregulated in neurological disorders, in which they can contribute to demyelination, neurotoxicity, and neuroinflammation.13 Thus, it is relevant that minocycline is a direct inhibitor of MMP enzymatic activity15–17 and can also reduce the production of MMPs by leucocytes.12,18 An effect on MMPs can also affect the transmigration of leucocytes into the CNS, thereby reducing neuroinflammation further. Various inflammatory cell subsets can disrupt CNS functions and produce toxic effects when present in the CNS in large numbers.

Changes in leucocyte function

Besides inhibiting MMPs, leucocyte migration, and neuroinflammation in the nervous system, minocycline also has a direct effect on the activity of leucocytes. Kloppenburg and colleagues50,51 noted that minocycline inhibited T-cell proliferation and reduced their production of inflammatory cytokines. By contrast, the addition of minocycline to activated monocytes led to a dose-dependent increase in the production of tumour necrosis factor α and interleukin 6.51

Other mechanisms

Other mechanisms may also contribute to the activity of minocycline. The drug is a Ca²⁺ chelator and may sequester excess Ca²⁺ released after injury. The decreasing of Ca²⁺ concentrations may prevent activation of calpains and preserve axonal integrity.23 Furthermore, minocycline can inhibit the activation of p38 mitogen-activated protein (MAP) kinase41,52 and thus influence multiple processes that would otherwise reduce cell integrity. The antibiotic activity of minocycline is unlikely to account for its effectiveness in neurological diseases, since infection is not a component of these animal models, and because minocycline derivatives without antimicrobial action can also affect some of the above processes.49

In summary, among several activities, minocycline impairs microglial activation, neuroinflammation, and apoptosis (figure 2), which are all common to many neurological diseases. The early appearance of these mediators of injury may help account for the apparent transient need for giving minocycline in the first few days after damage, such as in spinal-cord injury. Although many of the benefits of minocycline are likely to be derived from its action in the CNS, its effects on T cells15,50,51 and other leucocyte subsets could also happen in the periphery (figure 3).

Relation of animal data to human diseases

Most reports in animals have used systemic injections of minocycline with doses ranging from 10 to 100 mg/kg (mean 50 mg/kg). If translated directly to a 70 kg average human being, this equates to a mean of 3·5 g per individual, which is more than ten times higher than the average of 200 mg minocycline daily taken by human patients for other indications. At a first glance, this implies that animals have been exposed to much higher doses than human beings. However, animals often require higher doses of drugs (per kg bodyweight) than human beings, because of the higher rate of liver metabolism in small animals, particularly rodents. Indeed, it has been found that the half-life of minocycline in rodents is about 2–3 h,22,23 whereas in human beings the half-life is about 15 h.53 Thus, many animal studies using a single daily administration of minocycline have probably underdosed animals despite achieving significant results.22,23 Another pharmacokinetic consideration is the use of intraperitoneal administration in animals in many studies,
and the fact that minocycline is a weakly acidic solution. Indeed, it has been proposed that intraperitoneal minocycline (pH 5) produces abdominal irritation that leads to a stress response and the release of endogenous corticosteroids, which may ultimately account for its beneficial properties. We have addressed these issues and have shown that the intraperitoneal injection of saline at pH 5, or of corticosteroid, cannot reproduce the beneficial effects of minocycline in spinal-cord injury in mice.

In summary, higher doses of minocycline are necessary in animals than in patients particularly because of its very short half-life in rodents. In short-term experiments (days), animals may have been underdosed despite an impressive functional outcome; this observation invites optimism in the outcome of minocycline use in patients with neurological diseases.

Combination treatment involving minocycline
Few studies have explored the effects of combining minocycline with other drugs to achieve a better response in animals. In a murine model of ALS, in which either minocycline or creatine treatment results in improvement in motor performance and extended survival, combination of these two drugs provided additional neuroprotection. In another study involving a mouse model of ALS, the three-drug combination of minocycline, riluzole (a glutamate receptor antagonist), and nimodipine (a voltage-gated calcium-channel blocker) delayed the onset of disease, slowed the loss of muscle strength, and increased the average longevity of mice by 6 weeks, but this was not compared with minocycline alone.

In our own studies, the combination of minocycline with glatiramer acetate, an immunomodulator currently used to treat patients with multiple sclerosis, provided superior control of disease activity and neuropathology compared with that provided by either drug alone. The combination of minocycline with interferon beta, another therapy for multiple sclerosis, may also lead to improved outcome, because interferon beta is degraded by MMPs, the activity of which is lowered by minocycline. In addition, a mechanism of action of interferon beta may be attributed to the decreased production of MMPs by T lymphocytes, thereby attenuating the ability of these leucocytes to use proteolytic activity to penetrate the CNS. As interferon beta affected the synthesis of MMPs but does not affect enzyme activity directly, the combination of interferon beta with a direct inhibitor of MMP enzyme activity (eg, minocycline) might result in a greater...
Minocycline and neurological diseases

Clinical trials of minocycline in neurology

Reports are emerging of clinical trials of minocycline in neurological diseases. Two open-label phase I trials of minocycline in Huntington’s disease have been published. Bonelli and colleagues reported that minocycline (100 mg/day for 6 months) was well tolerated and safe in 14 patients. Thomas and colleagues similarly reported that minocycline was well tolerated when given to 30 patients with Huntington’s disease for 6 months. In a randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled study of 60 patients with Huntington’s disease, minocycline given for 8 weeks at daily doses of 100 mg and 200 mg was well tolerated and the frequency of adverse events was similar between treatment and placebo groups.

In ALS, two double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled feasibility trials of minocycline have been reported. In the first trial, 19 patients received 200 mg daily or placebo for 6 months, and no significant differences in adverse events were reported. In the second trial, 23 patients received up to 400 mg daily in an 8 month cross-over trial. The mean tolerated dose was 387 mg daily; with higher doses, there was a trend toward more gastrointestinal adverse events and an increase in blood urea nitrogen and liver enzymes.

On the basis of the encouraging results of minocycline that we observed in EAE, we initiated a cross-over trial of minocycline in relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. After a 3-month run-in period, ten patients received minocycline (100 mg twice daily). They had monthly MRI scans and quarterly clinical assessment. The primary endpoint was reduction of gadolinium-enhancing lesions during the first 6 months of treatment compared with the run-in phase. Secondary measures included monitoring of tolerance. Five patients did not have enhancing lesions for the 3 months before treatment and they remained negative during the 6 months of treatment, which is reassuring as it indicates that minocycline did not precipitate MRI lesions. The other five patients had enhancing lesions before treatment on 19 of 20 scans, whereas no enhancements occurred after 2–6 months of therapy. No significant toxic effects were observed. Patients continue to be followed clinically and with annual MRI scans.

Final perspectives

The initial report of the efficacy of minocycline in ischaemic stroke is now supported by many studies describing the effectiveness of minocycline in various animal models of neurological disease. Where comparisons have been made, minocycline has tended to be more effective than doxycycline and tetracycline, which is probably related to its better penetration of the blood–brain barrier. The effectiveness of minocycline in various neurological diseases is likely to relate to its antagonism of the multiple mechanisms that lead to injury in many nervous system diseases, including the alleviation of apoptosis and neuroinflammation. A few reports caution that minocycline exacerbates disease in animal models of neurological disorders, and this has to be noted when considering the risks versus the benefits of minocycline in specific diseases. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that phase I trials of minocycline in Huntington’s disease, ALS, and multiple sclerosis show that minocycline is well tolerated in these patients. The promising results of minocycline in a clinical trial of multiple sclerosis, in which brain lesion activity detected through gadolinium-enhancing MRI lesions was reduced within the first 2 months of starting treatment, invite optimism that the efficacy of minocycline in animals can be extended to human beings. Finally, its widespread availability, oral formulation, and low cost bode well for the combined use of minocycline with existing therapies to improve the prognosis of several neurological disorders.

Search strategy and selection criteria

References for this review were identified by searches of MEDLINE between 1969 and Aug 15, 2004. The search term was “minocycline”. Abstracts and reports from meetings were not included. Only papers published in English were reviewed. The final reference list was generated on the basis of what are perceived by us to be the most appropriate and important references for the review.

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Authors’ contributions

All authors contributed equally to the preparation of this review.

Conflict of interest

VWWY and LMM have received honoraria for speaking engagements from Teva Neuroscience and Serono Canada but these do not pertain to research with minocycline. JW, FG, CP, and SC have no conflicts of interest.

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