

# Neurosteroidogenesis Today: Novel Targets for Neuroactive Steroid Synthesis and Action and Their Relevance for Translational Research

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Neuroactive steroids are endogenous neuromodulators synthesised in the brain that rapidly alter neuronal excitability by binding to membrane receptors, in addition to the regulation of gene expression via intracellular steroid receptors. Neuroactive steroids induce potent anxiolytic, antidepressant, anticonvulsant, sedative, analgesic and amnesic effects, mainly through interaction with the GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor. They also exert neuroprotective, neurotrophic and antiapoptotic effects in several animal models of neurodegenerative diseases. Neuroactive steroids regulate many physiological functions, such as the stress response, puberty, the ovarian cycle, pregnancy and reward. Their levels are altered in several neuropsychiatric and neurological diseases and both preclinical and clinical studies emphasise a therapeutic potential of neuroactive steroids for these diseases, whereby symptomatology ameliorates upon restoration of neuroactive steroid concentrations. However, direct administration of neuroactive steroids has several challenges, including pharmacokinetics, low bioavailability, addiction potential, safety and tolerability, which limit its therapeutic use. Therefore, modulation of neurosteroidogenesis to restore the altered endogenous neuroactive steroid tone may represent a better therapeutic approach. This review summarises recent approaches that target the neuroactive steroid biosynthetic pathway at different levels aiming to promote neurosteroidogenesis. These include modulation of neurosteroidogenesis through ligands of the translocator protein 18 kDa and the pregnane xenobiotic receptor, as well as targeting of specific neurosteroidogenic enzymes such as 17 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 10 or P450 side chain cleavage. Enhanced neurosteroidogenesis through these targets may be beneficial not only for neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease and age-related dementia, but also for neuropsychiatric diseases, including alcohol use disorders.

**Key words:** neuroactive steroids, 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, translocator protein 18 kDa, pregnane xenobiotic receptor, 17 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 10, P450 side chain cleavage, Alzheimer's disease, alcoholism

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## Introduction

Neuroactive steroids are endogenous neuromodulators that rapidly alter neuronal excitability by binding to membrane receptors (1).

They can be synthesised in the brain *de novo* from cholesterol, in which case they have been termed neurosteroids (2), or can reach the brain from peripheral steroidogenic organs, such as adrenals and gonads, and are locally metabolised (i.e. aromatisation of



allosterically modulate binding to GABA and benzodiazepine recognition sites (7). At nanomolar concentrations,  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP enhances affinity of GABA for its receptor, whereas, at micromolar concentrations, it directly activates the receptor channel.  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THDOC modulate both synaptic and extrasynaptic GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors, albeit with higher potency at extrasynaptic receptors that contain  $\delta$  subunits (5,6).  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP also modulates serotonin type 3 receptors, neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors and voltage-activated calcium channels, although with micromolar potency (8). Another site of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP action, the nuclear pregnane xenobiotic receptor (PXR) has been recently identified (9). By contrast, the sulphated derivative of pregnenolone inhibits GABA release, and binds with high affinity to and promotes trafficking of NMDA receptors, thus exerting excitatory actions (10). It is still unclear how neuroactive steroids act on their membrane receptor targets, and whether this is through paracrine or autocrine mechanisms or by intracellular lateral diffusion through the cell membrane (11). Furthermore, in addition to the action of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP at the aforementioned pharmacodynamics targets, it may also have homeostatic pharmacokinetic effects through its actions at nuclear PXR (9).

### Pharmacological properties

Neuroactive steroids exert several psychopharmacological actions, such as anxiolytic, antidepressant, anticonvulsant, sedative, anesthetic, analgesic and amnesic effects, likely as a result of their actions on GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors (12–18). Moreover,  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP promotes the sexual behaviour of female rodents (19). Neuroactive steroids also possess rewarding properties in rodents (20,21), and can modulate ethanol or cocaine intake (22–24). Indeed, acute administration of several drugs of abuse, such as alcohol, nicotine, morphine,  $\gamma$ -hydroxy-butyric acid or  $\Delta^9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol, increases brain and plasma concentrations of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP and/or its precursors progesterone and pregnenolone in rats or mice (25–30), and this increase is assumed to contribute to their rewarding effects.

In addition to these psychopharmacological effects, neuroactive steroids exert neuroprotective, neurotrophic and anti-apoptotic effects in animal models of traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, peripheral neuropathy, cerebral ischaemia, stroke and seizure disorder, and also neurodegenerative diseases such as multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and Nieman–Pick type C disease (31–44). More recently, an anti-tumour effect of progesterone has been reported in experimental models of glioblastoma multiforme (45).

### Physiological significance

Neuroactive steroid concentrations fluctuate in response to physiological conditions such as stress, development, ovarian cycle, pregnancy and post-partum, and their fluctuations have been associated with changes in GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor plasticity.

Neuroactive steroids are increased in rats and humans following acute stress and this effect may represent a homeostatic mechanism to restore the altered hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA)

axis function (46,47). The neuroactive steroid response to stress is a complex phenomenon that involves adaptations in GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor plasticity and appears to differ across species (23,48).

Neuroactive steroid concentrations also fluctuate across development. Brain levels of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP are elevated in the embryonic rat, decrease around birth, show a transient increase on days 10–14 and remain low until puberty (49). The onset of puberty is associated with a rapid elevation in  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels and a marked increase in extrasynaptic  $\alpha 4\beta\delta$  GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors, the main target of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP, through which this steroid is considered to increase excitability, and thus exert the 'paradoxical effect' of increasing anxiety in pubertal female mice (50).

Moreover, neuroactive steroids fluctuate across the ovarian cycle: progesterone and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels are increased in mouse brain during dioestrus (51) and in women's plasma during the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle (52). These changes are accompanied by increased expression of the  $\delta$  subunit and decreased expression of the  $\gamma 2$  subunit of the GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor, with a subsequent increase in tonic inhibition and decreased seizure susceptibility and anxiety (53).

Levels of progesterone and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP increase markedly during pregnancy in both rats and women (54,55) and decrease immediately prior to parturition in rats, before returning to baseline levels 2 days after delivery (54). These abrupt changes in steroid concentrations were associated with changes in GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor subunit expression that were considered to contribute to post-partum depressive symptoms (54,56,57).

Pharmacological treatments with steroids, which affect brain  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels, modify GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor plasticity. Steroid withdrawal from long-term exposure of progesterone or  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP markedly increases hippocampal  $\alpha 4$  and  $\delta$  subunit expression, with subsequent changes in receptor function, sensitivity to benzodiazepines and increased anxiety and seizure susceptibility (58). Long-term administration of ethinyl-oestradiol and levonorgestrel, two of the synthetic steroids most frequently used in hormonal contraceptives, decreased cerebral cortical and hippocampal pregnenolone, progesterone and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP concentrations and these changes were associated with increased expression of the GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor  $\gamma 2$  subunit, as well as increased anxiety-like behaviour in adult female rats (59–61). Neonatal administration of  $\beta$ -oestradiol-3-benzoate to female rats, a treatment that affects sexual differentiation of the brain (62), induces a marked and persistent decrease in the cerebrocortical and hypothalamic concentrations of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in adulthood, which is associated with compensatory changes in GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor subunit expression (63,64). Similarly, changes in  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP milieu during development, induced by neonatal finasteride administration, increase the expression of hippocampal  $\alpha 4/\delta$  GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors and induce anxiety-like behaviour in adulthood (65).

The molecular underpinnings for the steroid-induced plasticity of GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors are not quite understood. A recent study reported increased phosphorylation and membrane trafficking of  $\alpha 4$  subunit-containing GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors promoted by  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THDOC (66), a novel mechanism by which neuroactive steroids may affect GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor expression and function.

**Table 1.** Preclinical and Clinical Evidences for Dysregulation of Neurosteroidogenesis in Neuropsychiatric and Neurologic Disorders

Disease	Experimental studies	
	Mouse/rat	Human
<b>Neuropsychiatric disorders</b>		
Anxiety disorders	Anxiolytic-like effects of $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in several animal models (12,68) Anxiolytic-like effects of TSPO ligands in animal models (117)	Increased serum levels of $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP and $3\alpha,5\beta$ -THP, and decreased $3\beta,5\alpha$ -THP levels in patients with panic disorder (68) No change in $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels in patients with generalised anxiety disorders (68) Decreased TSPO expression in platelets and lymphocytes (104) Anti-panic effects of TSPO ligands in experimental induced anxiety (117)
Depression	Antidepressant-like effects of $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP (13) Decreased brain $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels in animal models of depression, and normalisation by antidepressant treatment (75–77)	Decreased cerebrospinal fluid and serum $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels, and normalisation by antidepressant drugs (214,215) Decreased serum levels of pregnenolone, progesterone, $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP, $3\alpha,5\beta$ -THP, DHEA, $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -androsterone and $3\alpha,5\beta$ -androsterone in women with a history of depression (69)
Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)	Progesterone withdrawal model of PMDD associated with a up-regulation of extrasynaptic $\alpha 4/\delta$ GABA <sub>A</sub> receptors and decreased sensitivity to benzodiazepines (58)	Symptoms start at ovulation, paralleling the rise in progesterone and $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels, and severity reaches its maximum at the neuroactive steroid peak (70) Administration of progesterone or $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP exacerbates negative mood symptoms in PMDD patients (70)
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	Decreased brain $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels in the socially isolated mouse model of PTSD (78) Ganaxolone improves behavioural deficits in the socially isolated mouse model of PTSD (216)	Decreased cerebrospinal fluid $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels (217) Decreased TSPO expression in platelets (104)
Bipolar disorder	–	Increased pregnenolone and DHEA levels in posterior cingulate and parietal cortex (72) Increased plasma progesterone and $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels (218) Decreased TSPO expression in platelets (104)
Schizophrenia	Increased cerebral cortical $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels following olanzapine and clozapine administration in rats (80)	Increased pregnenolone and DHEA levels in posterior cingulate and parietal cortex (72) Decreased $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels in parietal cortex (72) Decreased TSPO expression in platelets (104) Pregnenolone treatment improves cognition and negative symptoms in patients with schizophrenia (81)
Addiction	$3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP has rewarding properties (20,21,219) Neuroactive steroids have ethanol-like discriminative stimulus properties (22,102,191) Acute administration of psychoactive drugs with abuse liability increases neuroactive steroid levels (25–30) Neuroactive steroids modulate ethanol and cocaine intake (22,204,205,220–222) Overexpression of P450scc in the ventral tegmental area increases $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP and reduces ethanol reinforcement and consumption (161)	Increased plasma $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels in adolescents following alcohol intoxication (195,196) Decreases serum $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP and $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THDOC levels during alcohol withdrawal (73) Neuroactive steroids mediate subjective effects of ethanol (198,200)
<b>Neurological disorders</b>		
Epilepsy	Anticonvulsant effects of $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in several animal models (14,84)	Clinical trials with ganaxolone (82) and progesterone (83) $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP treatment for pediatric super-refractory status epilepticus (223)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Disease	Experimental studies	
	Mouse/rat	Human
Alzheimer's disease	Decreased neuroactive steroid precursors in brain of 3×TgAD mice (88) Neuroprotective and neurotrophic effects of 3α,5α-THP in 3×TgAD mice (42,94) Up-regulation of glial TSPO (104) TSPO ligands reverse Alzheimer's disease related neuropathology in 3×TgAD mice (116) Progesterone administration increases progesterone and 3α,5α-THP levels in the cortex of APP <sup>swe</sup> +PSEN1 <sup>Δe9</sup> mice; it also improves cortically-mediated but not hippocampal-mediated cognitive tasks (156,157) Increased 17β-HSD10 expression in brains of Alzheimer's disease mouse models (179)	Decreased prefrontal cortex 3α,5α-THP levels, which are inversely correlated with neuropathological disease stage (89) Decreased plasma 3α,5α-THP levels in people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease (154) Elevated glial TSPO expression appears early in disease and co-localises with neuropathology (121) Increased expression of 17β-HSD10 in activated astrocytes (164)
Parkinson's disease	3α,5α-THP restores tyrosine hydroxylase neurones and improves motor performance in 1-methyl-4-phenyl-1,2,3,6-tetrahydropyridine-treated mice (43)	Decreased dihydroprogesterone and 3α,5α-THP levels in plasma and liquor (90)
Multiple sclerosis	Decreased expression of 3α-HSD and 3α,5α-THP levels in brain of mice with experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (39) 3α,5α-THP treatment attenuates experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis neuropathology in mice (39) Neuroactive steroid levels in rats are altered in a brain region and sex dependent manner (85)	Decreased 5α-reductase expression and 3α,5α-THP levels in the white matter (39) Increased TSPO expression in white matter lesions correlates with brain damage (104) Increased levels of neuroactive steroid precursors and decreased levels of dihydroprogesterone, 3α,5α-THP, and dihydrotestosterone in plasma and cerebrospinal fluid of male patients (86)
Niemann–Pick type C disease	Decreased steroidogenic enzymes expression, as well as pregnenolone and 3α,5α-THP brain levels in Niemann–Pick type C disease mice (44) Neuroprotective effect of 3α,5α-THP in Niemann–Pick type C disease mice (44)	–
Diabetic neuropathy	Decreased brain and peripheral neuroactive steroid levels in rats with streptozotocin-induced diabetes (92) Neuroprotective effects of progesterone, dihydroprogesterone and 3α,5α-THP in streptozotocin-induced diabetic neuropathy in rats (96)	–
Traumatic brain injury	Neuroprotective effects of progesterone and 3α,5α-THP in rats (31) Progesterone and DHEA levels correlate with neurological recovery from traumatic brain injury in mice (91)	Negative outcome of clinical trials with progesterone (224)
Stroke	Neuroprotective effects of progesterone and 3α,5α-THP in mice (97)	Increased TSPO expression in primary lesion and remote areas (104)

APP<sup>swe</sup>+PSEN1<sup>Δe9</sup>, amyloid precursor protein and presenilin 1 Δ exon 9 mutation; DHEA, dehydroepiandrosterone; HSD, hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase; 17β-HSD10, 17β-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 10; TgAD, transgenic Alzheimer's disease; 3α,5α-THP, (3α,5α)-3-hydroxypregnan-20-one; 3α,5α-THDOC, (3α,5α)-3,21-dihydroxypregnan-20-one; TSPO, translocator protein 18 kDa.

### Pathological significance and therapeutic implications

Neurosteroidogenesis is impaired in several neuropsychiatric and neurodegenerative diseases (Table 1). For example, a reduction in the concentrations of several neuroactive steroids (3α,5α-THP, 3α,5β-THP, 3α,5α-THDOC, 3α,5α- and 3α,5β-androsterone), or their precursors (pregnenolone, progesterone, DOC, DHEA), was reported in serum and/or cerebrospinal fluid of patients with major depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder, post-traumatic stress

disorder, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, as well as in abstinent alcoholics (67–74). Likewise, brain concentrations of progesterone and 3α,5α-THP are altered in animal models of anxiety/depression (75–77) and post-traumatic stress disorder (78). Moreover, patients with male pattern hair loss treated with the 5α-reductase blocker finasteride report increased symptoms of depression and show altered levels of pregnenolone, progesterone, dihydroprogesterone, 3α,5α-THP, testosterone, dihydrotestosterone, 3α,5α- and 3α,5β-androstadiol, and 17β-oestradiol even after drug discontinuation

(79). It is not clear whether the impaired neurosteroidogenesis contributes to the disease outcome or whether it is the result of altered brain homeostasis. Interestingly, pharmacological treatment not only with antidepressants such as fluoxetine, reboxetine, venlafaxine, imipramine or mirtazapine, but also with antipsychotics such as clozapine and olanzapine, or mood stabilisers such as carbamazepine or lithium, restores central and peripheral concentrations of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in rats and humans (68), suggesting that neuroactive steroids may contribute to the therapeutic efficacy of antidepressant medications.

Impaired neurosteroidogenesis has also been reported in patients with schizophrenia and it has been suggested that elevations of pregnenolone and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP may contribute to the therapeutic efficacy of clozapine and olanzapine (80). Indeed, adjunct treatment with pregnenolone improves cognition and negative symptoms in patients with schizophrenia (81), suggesting that neuroactive steroids contribute to schizophrenia pathophysiology.

Given their anticonvulsant properties, neuroactive steroids have also been proposed as therapeutic agents for epilepsy. Clinical trials with ganaxolone are under way in subjects with epilepsy (82). Progesterone treatment is effective at reducing seizures among women with catamenial epilepsy and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP mediates these effects (83). Neuroactive steroids are preferred over classical benzodiazepine treatment because of their lack of anticonvulsant tolerance and because of their neuroprotective properties that contribute to reduced neuroexcitotoxicity and neuronal damage (84).

The discovery of the neuroprotective, neurotrophic and anti-inflammatory properties of neuroactive steroids has prompted numerous investigations into their therapeutic potential for neurodegenerative diseases. Impaired neurosteroidogenesis has been found in animal models, as well as in humans with multiple sclerosis (39,85,86), Alzheimer's disease (42,87–89), Parkinson's disease (90), traumatic brain injury (91) and diabetes (92), suggesting that neuroactive steroids may contribute to the neuropathological processes of these diseases (93). Indeed, the reduction in  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP content correlated with severity of Alzheimer's disease in humans (89). Thus, restoring neuroactive steroid concentrations may represent a useful therapeutic approach for these neurodegenerative disorders. Several preclinical studies have been successful in this respect. For example,  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP promotes neurogenesis, improves learning and memory and ameliorated the pathology burden in the triple transgenic Alzheimer's disease ( $3\times$ TgAD) mouse model (42,94,95).  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP has also shown therapeutic efficacy in animal models of multiple sclerosis (39), Parkinson's disease (43), Niemann–Pick type C disease (44), diabetic neuropathy (96), traumatic brain injury (31) and stroke (97).

Taken together, this evidence suggests that neuroactive steroids may have therapeutic utility in several neuropsychiatric and neurologic disorders. However, direct administration of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP has several challenges that limit its therapeutic use. These include a short half-life (98), low bioavailability and poor solubility in aqueous formulations (which limits its oral administration) (99), development of tolerance (100), side effects such as sedation (98), memory impairment (101) and addiction potential (20,21,102). Thus, different approaches aiming to target the neuroactive steroid biosynthetic pathway have been explored. This review summarises recent

advances in neurosteroidogenesis and highlights the importance of modulating neuroactive steroid synthesis as a putative therapeutic approach for neuropsychiatric and neurodegenerative diseases that affect millions of people worldwide.

### Translocator protein as a therapeutic target for Alzheimer's disease

The TSPO is a five transmembrane structure located at the outer and inner mitochondrial membrane contact sites, the expression of which is enriched in steroidogenic organs (103). Activation of TSPO by synthetic TSPO ligands elicits pleiotropic neuroprotective and cognitive benefits, mechanistically linked to the regulation of mitochondrial function, including the facilitation of mitochondrial cholesterol import for steroidogenesis (104). Numerous endogenous ligands of TSPO have also been identified, including diazepam binding inhibitor, triakontatetrapeptide, phospholipase A2 and protoporphyrin IX, which also have the ability to stimulate mitochondrial cholesterol import and neurosteroidogenesis (104–106). Recent studies using TSPO knockout mice indicate that TSPO function in steroidogenesis may be tissue-specific, playing a crucial role in the adrenal but not the testes (107–111). Although the role of TSPO in steroidogenesis in the brain remains to be addressed using similar models, numerous studies have demonstrated the ability of TSPO ligands to increase neuroactive steroid hormone production in the brain by increasing cholesterol supply to P450<sub>scc</sub> at the inner mitochondrial membrane, which is the rate-limiting step in neurosteroidogenesis (112–118).

Alzheimer's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder that leads to memory loss and cognitive impairment; it is characterised by the accumulation of  $\beta$  amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles in the brain (119). Age-related depletion of neuroactive steroid levels is an established risk factor for Alzheimer's disease, with neuroactive steroids having numerous beneficial effects in animal models of Alzheimer's disease, including reducing the accumulation of the toxic  $\beta$  amyloid (A $\beta$ ) peptide, assumed to be the toxic principle driving Alzheimer's disease degenerative cascades (119). TSPO ligands that stimulate the synthesis of protective neuroactive steroids directly in the brain offer a novel therapeutic approach aimed at harnessing the protective actions of neuroactive steroids for the prevention and/or treatment of Alzheimer's disease.

In the brain, TSPO is predominantly expressed in astrocytes and microglia, with low levels also observed in neurones following injury or during repair (120). TSPO is a sensitive marker of gliosis, becoming markedly up-regulated in glial cells during ageing, following injury and in Alzheimer's disease (104). Although TSPO expression is closely linked to gliosis, the specific role of TSPO in glial function remains poorly understood. In Alzheimer's disease, elevated glial TSPO expression is observed early in the disease process and co-localises with degeneration and neuropathology (121). Consequently, TSPO ligands are also under widespread investigation as potential inflammatory biomarkers for *in vivo* PET imaging in Alzheimer's disease, leading to the development of many new-generation, safe TSPO ligands with the potential to be repurposed for Alzheimer's disease therapy.

The translocator protein forms part of a complex with the VDAC and ANT, and has been implicated in mitochondrial cholesterol import (104). Mitochondrial cholesterol import is the rate-limiting step in neuroactive steroid formation. Once localised at the inner mitochondrial membrane, cholesterol is converted to pregnenolone, the precursor to all other neuroactive steroids (Fig. 1). TSPO has a cholesterol recognition amino acid consensus sequence at the C-terminal identified as a cholesterol binding site (122), which is proposed to play a functional role in mediating the transportation of cholesterol across the hydrophilic intermembrane space. Structural studies indicate that ligand binding stabilises the tertiary structure of TSPO facilitating cholesterol import (123). A common polymorphism at the C-terminal of human TSPO results in conformational changes interfering with the cholesterol binding site (124), which is associated with impaired cholesterol binding and metabolism (122) and a reduced ability to produce pregnenolone (125). In addition to cholesterol import, TSPO has also been implicated in other important mitochondrial functions, including mitochondrial respiration and ATP production (126), which may also contribute to the protective actions of TSPO ligands.

TSPO ligands have been shown to promote nerve regeneration, increase neuronal survival, reduce oxidative damage, inhibit apoptosis, attenuate gliosis and decrease A $\beta$  accumulation in animal models of traumatic brain injury, excitotoxicity, axotomy and neuropathy, inflammatory disease and Alzheimer's disease (104,116,120). For example, in rats, the TSPO ligand, Ro5-4864, reduced reactive gliosis and neuronal loss following kainate acid-induced excitotoxicity (127). *In vitro* evidence indicates that TSPO ligands act directly on glia to reduce inflammatory responses (128,129), with the TSPO ligand, PK11195, decreasing pro-inflammatory cytokine production in cultured human microglia in response to lipopolysaccharide stimulation. Chronic inflammation and glial dysfunction contribute to the pathological degenerative cascade in Alzheimer's disease, and anti-inflammatory drugs have shown therapeutic promise for Alzheimer's disease (130). In the 3 $\times$ TgAD mouse model, the TSPO ligand, Ro5-4864, has been shown to reduce gliosis, as well as lower accumulation of A $\beta$  and improve functional behavioural outcomes (116). Interestingly, protection against Alzheimer's disease-related pathology was associated with increased brain levels of the protective neuroactive steroids in young adult but not aged animals, suggesting that neuroactive steroid regulation may not be essential for the TSPO-mediated protective effects in this model.

TSPO ligands also have diverse neuropsychiatric benefits, including anxiolytic, anti-depressive and cognitive-enhancing properties commonly attributed to their ability to increase levels of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, progesterone and testosterone (104,116,131). Consequently, TSPO ligands may offer symptomatic therapeutic opportunities for a range of neurological disorders, including Alzheimer's disease. For example, the new generation TSPO ligand, XBD-173, reduced anxiety-related behaviour in both rats and humans (117,132). Mechanistically, the anxiolytic effect of XBD-173 was linked to enhanced GABA neurotransmission as a result of increased production of the neuroactive steroid 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, which is an allosteric GABA $_A$  receptor modulator (117). Neuroactive steroids have well defined,

potent and broad cognitive, behavioural and psychological benefits, including improved mood, and reduced anxiety and depression; this is coupled with a favourable side-effect profile, including the absence of sedation, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms or motor impairment (104). Therefore, neurosteroidogenic TSPO ligands may also be therapeutically useful for the treatment of not only the cognitive, but also the neuropsychiatric symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, including anxiety, agitation, depression, apathy and aggression. The treatment of neuropsychiatric symptoms in Alzheimer's disease is difficult and currently available therapies are not particularly effective in the management of these symptoms (133). These neuropsychiatric symptoms drive institutionalisation; therefore, improvement of currently offered pharmacotherapies has the potential to be valuable in terms of patient and caregiver quality of life.

TSPO offers a promising therapeutic target for Alzheimer's disease, with diverse neuroprotective and psychological benefits identified. Furthermore, many new generation, safe TSPO ligands have been developed for *in vivo* imaging in humans, which may also prove therapeutically useful in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. However, determination of the key mechanism(s) of action of TSPO is critical for identifying the most efficacious TSPO ligands, optimally translating preclinical findings into clinical use, and rationally developing new TSPO ligands for therapeutic use (131). The recent development of numerous TSPO knockout mouse models will prove invaluable for addressing the role of TSPO in both normal and diseased states, as well as confirming the specificity of drug action.

### Pregnane xenobiotic receptor (PXR): a novel target for neuroactive steroid synthesis and action

Neuroactive steroids can have rapid and robust actions in the central nervous system for behaviour. One model utilised to determine the requisite role that the production of pregnane steroids such as 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP has in the brain for behaviours has focused on reproductive endpoints. Several molecules, including TSPO, P450 $_{scc}$ , StAR, 3 $\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase and 5 $\alpha$ -reductase, are downstream of cholesterol in the pregnane neurosteroidogenesis pathway (134–137). Pharmacologically blocking these at any point in this pathway reduces 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP formation in the brain and abolishes the lordosis response of female rodents (138). More recently, the PXR has been identified as a potential factor upstream of cholesterol metabolism. PXR is a nuclear receptor that binds steroids, such as 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, and influences the transcription of cytochrome P450 enzymes that are involved in metabolism of many factors, including cholesterol and steroids (139–141). Although PXR is generally regarded for its role in the liver, it has been identified in brain regions, involved in motivation, affect and cognition, such as the ventral tegmental area, hippocampus and cortex in mammals (9,142–145). PXR is required for production of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and its actions for lordosis in the VTA, as well as for anxiety-related behaviours in the hippocampus (9,143,144,146–149). Indeed, these effects of PXR may involve the well-known targets of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, such as NMDA and GABA $_A$  receptors (149). A question of interest is the role of PXR in other brain targets of steroids for behavioural plasticity, such as that underlying cognitive performance.

Pregnane steroids can enhance cognitive performance in young female rodents. Increased production of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP with oestrous cycle fluctuations or replacement of progesterone or  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP to ovariectomised rodents is associated with better performance in hippocampal and cortical tasks, such as the object recognition task, as well as increased  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in these regions (150). These effects persist in the absence of progestin receptors, which are not a typical target of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP, but not with genetic knockout of  $5\alpha$ -reductase (151,152). We have been examining the cognitive sequelae of rats with PXR knockout, on a Sprague-Dawley background, generated by Sage Labs (Cambridge, UK). In the object recognition task, PXR-replete rats perform at chance ( $50 \pm 2\%$  of object investigation time exploring the novel object); however, rats lacking functional PXR perform below chance ( $40 \pm 2\%$  of time exploring the novel object). Thus, the capacity to form  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP may be critical for object memory among young female rodents.

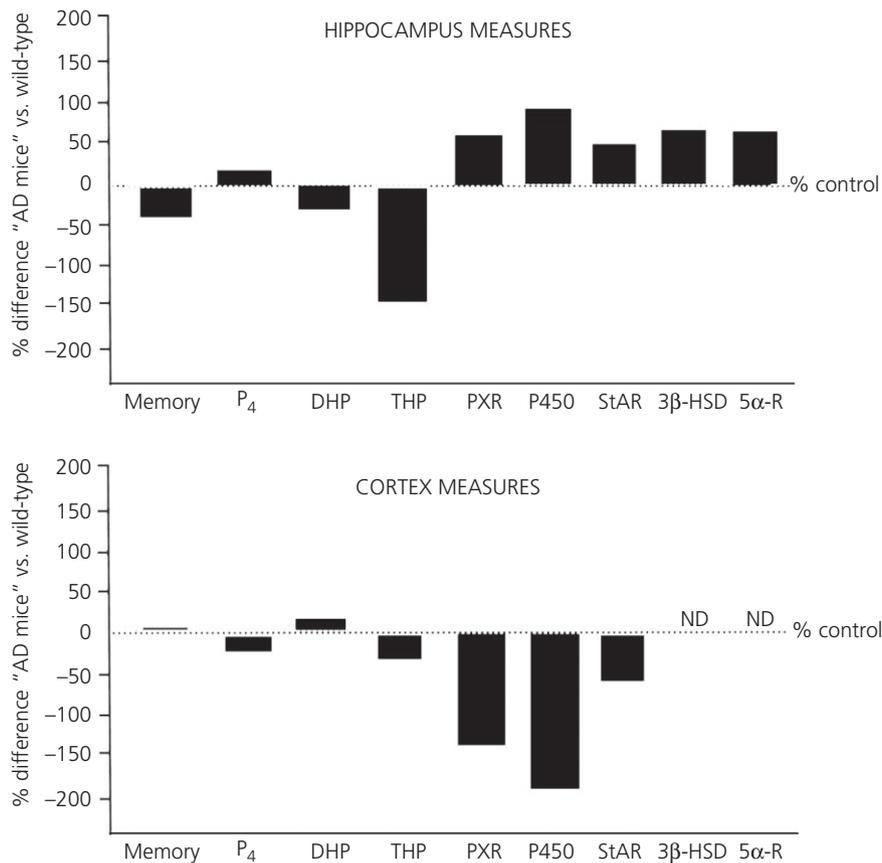
With ageing, there is a different pattern of effects of pregnane steroids in the hippocampus and cortex for cognitive performance, suggesting greater responses to progesterone decline and replacement in the cortex. For example, in addition to an age-related decline in reproductive success, there is a decline in  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels in frontal cortex of female rats (153). Variability in the cognitive response in this rat model of reproductive senescence or 'menopause' is associated with  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels in the cortex (153). Thus,  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP can have pro-cognitive effects in healthy systems, although the target and patterns of these effects may be sensitive to ageing; a question is whether pregnane steroids can improve hippocampal and cortical function in both healthy and compromised systems.

Another approach for investigating the role of pregnane neurosteroidogenesis as a critical target is to assess effects in age-related dementia. We, and others, have shown that people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease or dementia have lower circulating levels of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP than do nondemented peers matched for age, sex, education and socioeconomic factors (154). We have also used a double transgenic mouse model of early-onset familial Alzheimer's disease that co-overexpresses mutant forms of amyloid precursor protein and presenilin 1  $\Delta$  exon 9 mutation (APPswe+PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9) (155–157). Comparisons were made following ovariectomy at 6 months of age and the administration of chronic s.c. pellets of placebo (cholesterol) or progesterone for 6 months. In this mouse model, genetic mutations cause them to develop  $\beta$ -amyloid deposits after 5 months of age and, by 9 months old, severe plaque deposits build up in the cortex and hippocampus (155). APPswe+PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9, compared to wild-type mice, demonstrated a poorer performance on hippocampally-mediated tasks (worse object placement performance and more depressive behaviour in the forced swim task); progesterone improved responding in the wild-type but not the APPswe+PSEN1e9 mice in these tasks (156,157) (Fig. 2). Baseline differences were not observed in cortically-mediated tasks (object recognition or T maze) between the mouse strains, and progesterone improved performance of both wild-type and APPswe-PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9 mice in both of these tasks (156,157) (Fig. 2). Additionally, progesterone, compared to vehicle, increased progesterone and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in the cortex of both wild-

type and APPswe+PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9, whereas it only increased  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in the hippocampus of wild-type mice (156,157). Thus, these data suggest that progesterone does not improve the behaviour of APPswe-PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9 mice in hippocampally-mediated tasks. APPswe-PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9 mice also show deficiencies in their capacity to form  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP in the hippocampus. However, in the prefrontal cortex, they were able to form  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP, and wild-type and APPswe-PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9 mice performed similarly in these tasks, with progesterone administration improving their overall performance.

Studies in people that have been diagnosed with probable Alzheimer's disease and using other Alzheimer's disease mouse models suggest that there may be faulty metabolism effects in Alzheimer's disease relating to pregnane neuroactive steroids, as discussed in the present study and elsewhere (89,99,154). A question of interest is the importance of PXR acting upstream of cholesterol for these effects. Levels of PXR, as well as downstream enzymes required to  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP formation, such as P450sc, StAR,  $3\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase and  $5\alpha$ -reductase, were measured by western blotting in the hippocampus and frontal cortex of behaviourally-assessed wild-type and APPswe+PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9 mice. The greatest increases in expression among the APPswe+PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9 mice, compared to their wild-type controls, was for PXR, P450sc,  $3\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase and  $5\alpha$ -reductase in the hippocampus (Fig. 2). A different pattern was observed in the cortex, with the greatest reductions in expression being for PXR and P450sc (Fig. 2). This pattern of effects complements the behavioural effects observed, as well as pregnane steroid levels in the hippocampus and cortex (Fig. 2), and suggests the important additional consideration of neurosteroidogenic enzyme expression and activity in relation to behaviour and steroid levels in future studies. For example, an important follow-up study would be to assess levels of  $3\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase. The findings showing that  $5\alpha$ -reductase was increased in the hippocampus of the APPswe+PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9 mice, with little difference in progesterone and dihydroprogesterone levels but a large decrease in  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels, suggest that perhaps  $3\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase activity is altered in the transgenic mice. Of further interest is the role of PXR in models of successful cognitive ageing, as well as neurodegeneration.

There may be beneficial effects of low body mass index and regular fasting to protect against Alzheimer's disease and promote longevity, albeit this is a controversial notion. Although speculative, it may be that a low body mass index and/or fasting reduces burdens associated with switching from gluconeogenesis and lipolysis and demands for clearance, which would involve PXR and related factors, such as liver X receptor (42,158,159). A consideration about protein aggregation is that faulty cholesterol metabolism may ultimately result in a neuropathological process. How PXR is related to pro-cognitive and protective effects of pregnane and other steroids and/or pro-hormones for  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP is of interest. It may be that PXR is acting in the central nervous system, much as in the liver, to regulate metabolising enzymes, receptors and efflux transporters, promoting homeostasis and brain health. Further investigations to directly address this are needed.



**Fig. 2.** Behaviour, pregnane steroid concentrations and expression patterns in the hippocampus (top) and cortex (bottom) for 12-month-old transgenic mice that co-overexpress mutant forms of amyloid precursor protein and presenilin 1  $\Delta$  exon 9 mutation (APP<sup>swe</sup>+PSEN1 $\Delta$ e9; a murine model of early-onset familial Alzheimer's disease; AD) compared to their age-matched wild-type controls ( $n = 4-6$ ). For all measures, mice had data collected at 12 months of age, following 6 months of continuous progesterone (P<sub>4</sub>) administration via s.c. implanted pellets (25 mg, 90-day release at 6 months of age and then 9 months of age; purchased from Innovative Research of America, Sarasota, FL, USA). Behaviour: Performance in a memory task assessing the hippocampus (object placement) and cortex (object recognition) is depicted and based upon comparing the Alzheimer's disease mice to wild-type controls; methods and raw data in (146). Pregnan steroid concentrations: Levels of P<sub>4</sub>, dihydroprogesterone (DHP), and (3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ )-3-hydroxypregnan-20-one (THP) were measured using radioimmunoassay of dissected out hippocampus and cortex; methods and raw data in (146). Protein expression: Expression patterns in hippocampus and cortex were determined by western blotting of specific proteins: pregnane xenobiotic receptor (PXR), cytochrome P450-dependent side chain cleavage (P450scc), steroidogenic acute regulatory protein (StAR), 3 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase (3 $\beta$ -HSD) and 5 $\alpha$ -reductase (5 $\alpha$ -R). The mean of relative intensity (relative density of protein of interest to actin control) in hippocampus and cortex of Alzheimer's disease mice were compared to that determined in wild-type controls. A standard western blotting protocol (146) was employed to assess these factors in hippocampus and prefrontal cortex tissues [a description of tissue collection from animal subjects, brain storage, dissection and preparation is also described in (146)]. Protein concentration for each sample was determined with a Nanodrop spectrometer (NanoDrop, Wilmington, DE, USA). Samples of equal protein concentrations were then prepared for loading on to NuPAGE Bis-Tris Mini Gels (4–12% sodium dodecylsulphate-polyacrylamide) by combining them with 2.5  $\mu$ l of NuPAGE LDS (4 $\times$ ) sample buffer, 1  $\mu$ l of NuPAGE Reducing Agent (10 $\times$ ) and 6.5  $\mu$ l of deionised water (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA). Electrophoresis was then conducted with running gels with 1 $\times$  MOPS running buffer with one lane reserved for the protein ladder and one for the positive control (liver homogenate). Protein was then transferred to nitrocellulose using 1 $\times$  NuPAGE Transfer buffer. The blots were blocked in 5% milk phosphate-buffered saline–10% tween solution. All blots were probed with primary antibodies (Ab) at 4  $^{\circ}$ C overnight. Primary (1 $^{\circ}$ ) Ab for PXR, P450, StAR and 5 $\alpha$ -reductase were purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Santa Cruz, CA, USA); 3 $\beta$ -HSD was received from Dr Penning, and actin was purchased from Sigma (St Louis, MO, USA). The secondary (2 $^{\circ}$ ) Ab was a Goat Anti-Mouse Ig (H+L) Horseradish Peroxidase Conjugate (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA). Concentrations of Ab were: PXR (1 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 1000; 2 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500); P450 (1 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500; 2 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500); StAR (1 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 1000; 2 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500); 3 $\beta$ -HSD (1 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500; 2 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500); 5 $\alpha$ -reductase (1 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 1500; 2 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500); and actin (1 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 500; 2 $^{\circ}$  Ab concentration 1 : 2500). Blots were probed with 2 $^{\circ}$  Ab for 1 h on a shaker at room temperature (Bio-Rad). Results were visualised using DuoLuX Chemiluminescent/Fluorescent Substrate Kit for Peroxidase (Vector Laboratories, Inc., Burlingame, CA, USA), imaged on a ChemiDoc XRS (Bio-Rad) and analysed using ImageJ (NIH, Bethesda, MD, USA). Expression was not detected (ND) for 3 $\beta$ -HSD in either group or for 5 $\alpha$ -reductase in the wild-type controls, albeit Alzheimer's disease mice showed a 2.0 relative intensity. Relative intensity values in the hippocampus (mean  $\pm$  SEM) for PXR (wild-type 0.4  $\pm$  0.2; AD 1.0  $\pm$  0.2), P450 (wild-type 0.3  $\pm$  0.1; AD 1.4  $\pm$  0.3), StAR (wild-type 0.6  $\pm$  0.1; AD 1.0  $\pm$  0.3), 3 $\alpha$ -HSD (wild-type 0.4  $\pm$  0.2; AD 0.8  $\pm$  0.5) and 5 $\alpha$ -reductase (wild-type 0.5  $\pm$  0.2; AD 1.0  $\pm$  0.7). Relative intensity values in the cortex (mean  $\pm$  SEM) for PXR (wild-type 2.2  $\pm$  1.2; AD 1.0  $\pm$  0.3), P450 (wild-type 1.7  $\pm$  0.8; AD 0.6  $\pm$  0.1), StAR (wild-type 1.4  $\pm$  0.8; AD 0.9  $\pm$  0.2), 3 $\alpha$ -HSD (wild-type ND; AD ND) and 5 $\alpha$ -reductase (wild-type ND; AD 2.0  $\pm$  1.2).

## Roles of 17 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 10 (17 $\beta$ -HSD10) in neurosteroidogenesis

The circulating lipoprotein is a major source for neurosteroidogenesis, even though cholesterol can be *de novo* synthesised from acetate in neurones and other brain cells. The molecular mechanism for lipoprotein transport into brain cells and for 'free' cholesterol transport into mitochondrion has been reviewed recently (160). StAR on the outer mitochondrial membrane plays a key role in importing cholesterol into mitochondrion. StAR interacts with a complex machinery, of which the translocator protein TSP0 serves as a downstream portal for cholesterol to move to the inner mitochondrial membrane where the side chain of cholesterol is cleaved by P450scc. As a result, cholesterol is converted to soluble pregnenolone. Because this is a rate-limiting step, overexpression of this side chain cleavage enzyme would generally elevate neuroactive steroid levels (161). Pregnenolone can be further oxidised to progesterone under the catalysis of 3 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase or exit the mitochondrion without active transport. It was reported previously (162) that, in the rat brain, 3 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase is also present in the endoplasmic reticulum. However, the mitochondrion appears to possess a more favourable environment for an oxidative reaction catalysed by 3 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase because the ratio of NAD<sup>+</sup>/NADH in mitochondrion is approximately two orders of magnitude greater than that in the endoplasmic reticulum. It was also reported previously (116) that TSP0 ligands elicit pleiotropic neuroprotective and cognitive benefits. Whether these effects are linked to the regulation of neuroactive steroid synthesis remains to be determined.

Pregnenolone and progesterone become substrates for P450c17 in the endoplasmic reticulum, where they are converted to DHEA and androstenedione, respectively. As shown in Fig. 1, DHEA can be oxidised to androstenedione under the catalysis of 3 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase, and then be further converted to testosterone or oestrone, and subsequently to more potent androgen (5 $\alpha$ -dihydrotestosterone) and oestrogen (17 $\beta$ -oestradiol), respectively. On the other hand, progesterone can be oxidised to DOC under the catalysis of 21-hydroxylase. Progesterone and DOC are reduced by NADPH in the endoplasmic reticulum under the catalysis of 5 $\alpha$ -reductase and then by AKR1C2 sequentially to form 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC, respectively. 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, as well as 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC, facilitates affective and motivated social behaviour through nongenomic targets, such as GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors, glutamate and dopamine receptors (5, 6, 9). Human AKR1C2 (3 $\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type III) plays almost no actual role in the oxidation of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and/or 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC because its catalytic efficiency is sevenfold less than that for its backward reduction and only one-seventh of its oxidative reaction catalysed by 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 (163). A more unfavourable factor for its oxidation in the endoplasmic reticulum is the disparity of redox coenzyme concentrations (e.g. the concentration of NADPH is at least one order of magnitude higher than that of NADP<sup>+</sup>). It is unfeasible for 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and/or 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC to be effectively inactivated by an oxidative reaction catalysed by AKR1C2 (3 $\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type III). Abnormal

levels of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and/or 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC would certainly be harmful to brain functions. This puzzle was never really solved by implication of 3 $\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase catalyzing a reverse reaction between 5 $\alpha$ -DHP and 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP (95). Indeed, it was already noted (163,164) and emphasised (165–168) that mitochondrial 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 is essential for the maintenance of homeostasis of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and/or 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC (Fig. 1). 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and/or 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC metabolism is mainly controlled by a dual enzyme molecular switch, comprising 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 and 3 $\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type III (AKR1C2) localised in distinct subcellular compartments, mitochondria and endoplasmic reticulum, respectively (164,168). With regard to the role of 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 in the metabolism of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 had been twisted to ABAD (A $\beta$ -binding alcohol dehydrogenase) for unknown reasons (95).

The 17 $\beta$ -HSD10, a fascinating protein, is encoded by the *HSD17B10* gene, which was first cloned from the human brain in 1997 (GenBank accession number AF037438). The role of 17 $\beta$ -HSD10, after many debates and criticisms, has been clarified in more recent studies (163–174). It plays essential roles in neurosteroidogenesis, as well as in the isoleucine degradation pathway. This explains why a mutation (or mutations) of this gene, *HSD17B10*, may delay the brain development and/or result in the regression of brain functions even in the absence of A $\beta$  peptide (167,168,174–176).

It was reported previously (165,168–170,177) that 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 can catalyse the oxidative reaction of 17 $\beta$ -oestradiol to oestrone, an inactive oestrogen (Fig. 1). Binding of the oestrogen receptor- $\alpha$  to 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 would inhibit the enzymatic activities of 17 $\beta$ -HSD10, whereas 17 $\beta$ -oestradiol itself facilitates the dissociation of a 17 $\beta$ -HSD10-oestrogen receptor- $\alpha$  complex (178). As is well known, 17 $\beta$ -oestradiol exhibits significant neuroprotective effects. Elevated levels of 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 found in Alzheimer's disease brains (164,165,168,179) may take a part in the pathogenesis of Alzheimer's disease as a result of an imbalance of neuroactive steroid metabolism (164–170,174,177).

It was found that a weak androgen, 3 $\alpha$ -androstenediol, could be effectively converted to the most potent androgen, 5 $\alpha$ -dihydrotestosterone, under the catalysis of 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 (172,173). Mitochondrial 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 plays a key role in the 'back door' androgen synthesis pathway, especially in castrated animals (165,168, 172,173).

17 $\beta$ -HSD10 is involved in the metabolism of several neuroactive steroids, such as 17 $\beta$ -oestradiol, oestrone, 3 $\alpha$ -androstenediol and 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP (Fig. 1). It was demonstrated previously (180) that such neuroactive steroids are able to improve neuronal bioenergetics significantly. Missense mutation(s) would abolish the catalytic activity of 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 in the isoleucine degradation pathway, such that an accumulation of tiglylglycine and 2-methyl-3-hydroxybutyric acid in blood and the excretion of such isoleucine metabolites from urine is a common symptom in patients with 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 deficiency, which was therefore designated as 2-methyl-3-hydroxybutyryl-CoA dehydrogenase deficiency (181). It was also reported (174) that mental retardation did not result from the accumulation of isoleucine metabolite, whereas an imbalance of neuroactive steroid metabolism could be a major cause of neurological handicap associated

with brain-type 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 deficiency patients. Determination of the roles of 17 $\beta$ -HSD10 in neurosteroidogenesis provides further support for this hypothesis.

Among the many factors essential for keeping mitochondria healthy, the homeostasis of neuroactive steroids is particularly significant because of its impact on the bioenergetics of brain cells (180). The abnormality of mitochondrial structure and function underlies pathophysiological basis of neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. Enzymes involved in neurosteroidogenesis are potential therapeutic targets in treatment of neurodegenerative disorders, including brain-type HSD10 deficiency and Alzheimer's disease (168,174–177,179–181), as well as prostate cancer (172,173).

### Divergent neuroactive steroid responses across species: the case of ethanol-induced neurosteroidogenesis

The effects of alcohol on neuroactive steroid concentrations are the most well characterised among species. Pioneering studies in rats showed that systemic administration of ethanol (1–2.5 g/kg) increases plasma, cerebrocortical and hippocampal levels of the neuroactive steroids 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THDOC in Sprague–Dawley rats (25,182) and Sardinian alcohol-preferring rats (183). More recently, Cook *et al.* (184) showed that alcohol differentially affects cellular 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP immunostaining throughout the brain of Wistar rats. Indeed, acute ethanol increased 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP immunoreactivity in the medial prefrontal cortex, the hippocampal CA1 pyramidal cell layer, the polymorph cell layer of the dentate gyrus, the bed nucleus of the stria terminalis and the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus. By contrast, ethanol decreased 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP immunoreactivity in the nucleus accumbens and the central nucleus of the amygdala. No changes were observed in the ventral tegmental area, dorsomedial striatum, granule cell layer of the dentate gyrus or the lateral and basolateral amygdala (184).

The ethanol-induced increase in plasma neuroactive steroids is mediated by the HPA axis because it is no longer observed in hypophysectomised and adrenalectomised rats (27,185–187). However, ethanol has also been found to increase 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP in hippocampal minces from intact and adrenalectomised/gonadectomised rats (188,189), suggesting that it is capable of inducing brain neurosteroidogenesis, independent of peripheral sources. Accordingly, the ethanol-induced increase in cellular 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP immunoreactivity is independent of adrenal activation in the CA1 pyramidal cell layer, dentate gyrus polymorphic layer, bed nucleus of the stria terminalis and paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus of Wistar rats (190). Similarly, ethanol decreases 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP labelling in the nucleus accumbens 'shore' (core-shell border) and central nucleus of the amygdala, independent of adrenal activation. However, in the medial prefrontal cortex, ethanol increases 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP immunoreactivity in sham-operated animals but not in adrenalectomised ones, suggesting that ethanol, directly and independently from peripheral sources, regulates local 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP levels in several subcortical regions, except for the medial prefrontal cortex (190).

Ethanol-induced elevations in neuroactive steroids reach physiologically relevant concentrations that enhance GABAergic transmission and thus contribute to several behavioural effects of ethanol in rats. Neuroactive steroids modulate the anticonvulsant effects of ethanol, as well as sedation, impairment of spatial memory, anxiolytic-like and antidepressant-like actions (23,191). Each of these behavioural responses is prevented by pre-treatment with the neuroactive steroid biosynthesis inhibitor finasteride and/or by prior adrenalectomy. The hypnotic effect of ethanol is partially blocked by adrenalectomy. Moreover, administration of 5 $\alpha$ -dihydroprogesterone, the immediate precursor of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP, to adrenalectomised rats restores the effects of ethanol, showing that brain neuroactive steroid synthesis modulates effects of ethanol. Taken together, these studies suggest that elevations in neuroactive steroids influence many of the GABAergic effects of ethanol *in vivo* and contribute to sensitivity to behavioural effects of ethanol in rats (23,191).

Studies on the neurosteroidogenic effects of ethanol in mice have yielded different results depending on the strains and the experimental conditions used. C57BL/6J mice have higher basal plasma neuroactive steroid levels compared to DBA/2J mice and plasma 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP levels are decreased in C57BL/6J mice and not altered in DBA/2J mice following injection of 2 g/kg ethanol (182). Moreover, acute ethanol administration (1–4 g/kg) failed to alter cerebrocortical and hippocampal levels of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and progesterone in male C57BL/6J and DBA/2J mice, despite inducing a marked increase in brain and plasma corticosterone levels, a measure of HPA axis activation (192). Other studies reported that injection of 2 g/kg ethanol increased whole brain 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP levels in male DBA/2J (193) but not C57BL/6J mice (194), whereas orally consumed ethanol increased whole brain 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP levels in male C57BL/6J mice (194). Overall, these results highlight important species differences with respect to the neurosteroidogenic effects of ethanol between rats and mice.

The ethanol-induced changes in 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP content in mice appear to be related to the genetic background of the strain. In the genetic reference population of the C57BL/6J (B6)  $\times$  DBA/2J (D2) (BXD) recombinant inbred strains, basal cerebral cortical 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP levels across selected strains ranged between 1.81 and 3.72 ng/g, whereas ethanol-induced changes in cerebral cortical 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP ranged between +4% and +63% (23). Both basal and ethanol-induced cerebral cortical 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP levels in the BXD strains were correlated with some phenotypes of ethanol intake, suggesting that neuroactive steroid responses to ethanol may be associated with excessive alcohol consumption (23).

The neurosteroidogenic effects of ethanol in humans have been examined in few studies, leading to inconsistent results. Elevated 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP plasma levels were reported in male and female adolescents seen in the emergency room for alcohol intoxication (195,196), which likely resulted in high blood ethanol concentrations. By contrast, laboratory administration of low or moderate doses of ethanol was found not to alter plasma levels of 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP and other GABAergic neuroactive steroids (182,197), and to decrease 3 $\alpha$ ,5 $\alpha$ -THP levels (198) in healthy volunteers. Different ethanol doses, analytic methods for measuring neuroactive steroids,

the age of the subjects or environmental factors that influence neuroactive steroid synthesis in humans may account for these inconsistent results. Indeed, the same dose of ethanol consumed in the human laboratory studies noted above (approximately 80 mg/dl) produced no effect in rats when administered systemically (182), suggesting that dose might be a key factor in the difference between rat and human studies. However, the possibility that ethanol may increase brain levels of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP, without affecting its peripheral concentrations, remains open. Indeed, some subjective effects of ethanol are diminished by prior administration of finasteride (199) or dutasteride (200), two inhibitors of  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP biosynthesis, suggesting that  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP may play a role in the actions of ethanol in humans. Moreover, dutasteride reduced subsequent alcohol consumption in subjects classified as heavy drinkers (200). Similarly, men who took finasteride for the treatment of male pattern hair loss reported a decrease in alcohol consumption, which was greater in those subjects who consumed the most alcohol (201). Taken together, these results further support the hypothesis that neuroactive steroids may mediate sensitivity to alcohol in humans.

Studies on the role of GABAergic neuroactive steroids in alcohol dependence have shown that chronic ethanol consumption in rats induces tolerance to the neurosteroidogenic effects of ethanol and ethanol-dependent rats have a blunted elevation in plasma and brain neuroactive steroid content, likely the result of a blunted HPA axis function (191). In ethanol-dependent C57BL/6J mice, cellular  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP immunoreactivity is increased in the CA3 hippocampus but decreased in the medial prefrontal cortex, ventral tegmental area, nucleus accumbens core, dorsolateral striatum and lateral amygdala (202). Likewise,  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THDOC serum levels are decreased in human alcoholics during alcohol withdrawal and return to normal levels upon recovery (73). Overall, these findings suggest that chronic ethanol consumption leads to a dysregulation in neuroactive steroid biosynthesis, with a blunted neuroactive steroid tone that might attenuate ethanol sensitivity and thus contribute to alcohol dependence. Indeed, the risk of alcohol dependence is associated with polymorphic variation in the enzymes  $5\alpha$ -reductase and  $3\alpha$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase implicated in the conversion of progesterone and deoxycorticosterone to their neuroactive metabolites  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP and  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THDOC, further providing indirect evidence that neuroactive steroids may contribute to alcohol sensitivity in humans (203).

Ethanol-induced elevations of GABAergic neuroactive steroids may protect against the risk for alcohol dependence (191). Diminished elevations of GABAergic neuroactive steroids following ethanol exposure would result in reduced sensitivity to the anxiolytic, sedative, anticonvulsant, cognitive-impairing and discriminative stimulus properties of ethanol. Reduced sensitivity to ethanol is associated with greater risk for the development of alcoholism; thus, the restoration of ethanol sensitivity by re-establishing the neuroactive steroid tone in alcohol-dependent subjects may have therapeutic utility for prevention of alcohol consumption and/or relapse. In agreement, preclinical studies have found that the administration of endogenous (epiallopregnanolone) or synthetic ( $3\alpha,5\beta$ -20-oxo-pregnane-3-carboxylic acid) neuroactive steroids, as

well as of the precursor pregnenolone, reduced ethanol self-administration in alcohol-preferring rats (204,205). Likewise, recombinant adeno-associated serotype 2 vector mediated over-expression of P450scc (i.e. the rate-limiting enzyme in steroid synthesis) in the ventral tegmental area of alcohol preferring rats reduced ethanol reinforcement and consumption (161). This effect was long-lasting and was associated with an increase in  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP immunoreactivity in this brain area, suggesting that GABAergic neuroactive steroids may contribute to ethanol reinforcement. Indeed, P450scc over-expression in the nucleus accumbens, a brain region that plays a key role in ethanol reinforcement, but is insensitive to ethanol-induced neurosteroidogenesis (184), did not alter operant ethanol self-administration or  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP immunoreactivity (190), suggesting that the neuroactive steroid response to ethanol plays a role in the mechanisms that regulate its voluntary consumption. Increased  $3\alpha,5\alpha$ -THP levels modulate the activity of neurones in the ventral tegmental area or influence the action of ethanol upon these cells, thereby reducing ethanol reinforcement and consumption.

Thus, the targeted modulation of neuroactive steroid synthesis through the administration of neuroactive steroid precursors or through increased expression of specific neurosteroidogenic enzymes may represent a useful therapeutic approach for alcoholism, as well as for other neurological or psychiatric diseases associated with altered neurosteroidogenesis. Species differences in the neurosteroidogenic effects of ethanol may be the result of genetic diversity, which is also often observed across individuals of the same species. Thus, it will be important to consider genetic diversity in neuroactive steroid biosynthesis for their therapeutic utility.

## Conclusions

The concept that neuroactive steroids may represent potential protective agents for different pathologies of the central and peripheral nervous system has been explored in detail in several experimental models. However, because steroid receptors are widely expressed in many tissues, a therapeutic strategy that uses exogenous neuroactive steroids could also evoke endocrine side effects. Therefore, alternative strategies, based on pharmacological agents or gene therapy tools, that are able to increase the synthesis of endogenous neuroactive steroids directly in the nervous system have been explored recently. The present review has discussed the potential therapeutic activity elicited by targeting of steroidogenic enzymes, such as  $17\beta$ -HSD10, or P450scc, as well as that elicited by inducers of steroidogenesis, such as the TSPO and PXR. Indeed, even if the role of TSPO in steroid hormone biosynthesis has been challenged recently (108,111,206), the protective effects exerted by ligands of this mitochondrial receptor remain a promising field of research for neurodegeneration occurring in central and peripheral nervous system (207,208). Along this line of thinking, together with PXR, it is important to recall that the activation of liver X receptor was demonstrated to comprise an interesting pharmacological tool. Indeed, liver X receptor in adrenal glands modulates StAR (209), and its activation induces genes involved in cholesterol efflux, promoting cholesterol utilisation (209). Moreover, as recently

demonstrated in an experimental model of diabetes, activation of liver X receptor increases neuroactive steroid levels directly in both the central (210) and peripheral (211) nervous systems. In agreement, activation of liver X receptors exerts protective effects in diabetic peripheral neuropathy (211), global or focal cerebral ischaemia (212), as well as in neurodegenerative diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases (93,213).

Altogether, the observations reported in the present study indicate that the assessment of neurosteroidogenesis and its physiological and pharmacological control may represent a promising topic worthy of further research in preclinical and clinical studies.

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