

Commentary

The Golgi Apparatus and the Pathogenesis of Alzheimer's Disease

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Alois Alzheimer was the first to correlate the development of the most common form of dementia in middle to late life with the presence of pathological changes that are still considered the hallmark of this disease, ie, neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) and amyloid deposits. Despite an exponential increase in important discoveries, particularly during the last 10 years, the mechanisms leading to the development of these tissue alterations are still largely obscure and often marred in controversy. In this issue, Stieber et al¹ have shifted the focus from NFTs and amyloid deposits to the Golgi apparatus (GA). To understand how this study relates to previous investigations on the pathogenesis of Alzheimer's disease (AD), a brief review of the classical lesions, NFTs and amyloid deposits, is first presented.

NFTs

A milestone in our understanding of the structure and chemical composition of NFTs was the discovery that the main constituent of the characteristic paired helical filaments (PHFs) is hyperphosphorylated tau, one of the microtubule-associated proteins (reviewed in ref. 2). Normal adult tau normally associates with microtubules by its tandem repeat region. Hyperphosphorylation of tau would make this interaction impossible. Lack of binding of tau to microtubules would result in destabilization of these cytoskeletal elements with obvious adverse effects on axoplasmic flow. At the same time, the unassociated hyperphosphorylated tau would self-assemble into PHFs, and, by precipitating to form NFTs, would further damage neurons. There is recent evidence that the hyperphosphorylated state of tau may de-

pend more on deficient phosphatase activity than on abnormally high phosphorylation.^{3,4}

Although tau constitutes the main component of NFTs, additional proteins have been shown to participate in the formation of NFTs including α 1-antichymotrypsin, ubiquitin, heparan sulfate proteoglycans, fibroblast growth factor (FGF), and apolipoprotein E.^{5,6} Recent studies suggest that aluminum may facilitate the precipitation of hyperphosphorylated tau as well as the co-precipitation of the other protein components (reviewed in ref. 5). Aluminum may act by binding to domains on phosphorylated tau containing phosphorylated Ser or other residues, and it can regulate phosphorylation and dephosphorylation of tau. Aluminum is also known to facilitate changes in protein conformation by inducing β -pleated sheet structures. Binding of aluminum, therefore, would further favor aggregation and hamper proteolysis of the abnormal tau.⁵ Despite such important advancements in our understanding of tau pathophysiology, it is still unknown whether the various alterations outlined above have any cause-effect relationship with the disease itself.

Amyloid Deposits

The second hallmark lesion in AD is the amyloid plaque. In parallel with researchers in the tau field, several groups working on amyloid have produced important advancements in our understanding of morphological, biochemical, and molecular mechanisms leading to the deposition of this abnormal material in AD brains. The first important discovery was the isolation of amyloid β protein by Glenner and

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Wong⁷ from meningeovascular amyloid. Subsequent studies determined that amyloid accumulating in neuropil and in vessels is similar, differing only in the length of fragments from about 40 to 42–43 residues long. It has also been determined that these fragments of varying length derive from the proteolytic breakdown of a larger glycoprotein called amyloid β -protein precursor (β APP) (for extensive reviews see refs. 8 to 10). This protein is encoded on chromosome 21 and alternate transcripts are recognized. The protein has the general structure of a membrane receptor with a long extracellular N-terminal, a *trans* membrane domain, and a short intracellular C-terminal. Recent studies have shown that cleavage at different sites produce fragments of different lengths.^{8–10} The $A\beta$ fragment comprises the first 11–15 residues of the transmembrane domain and extends 28 amino acids into the N-terminal domain. Most recent studies in this field have tried to explain how the precursor protein is processed inside the cell in order to generate and secrete the $A\beta$ fragment. At first, investigators thought that the generation of the $A\beta$ fragment was a highly abnormal process that required some sort of injury to the plasma membrane in order to allow cleavage inside the transmembrane domain. Recently, however, soluble $A\beta$ fragments have been demonstrated in the medium of both untransfected and β APP-transfected cells, as well as in the cerebro-spinal fluid and serum of control patients, indicating that generation of soluble $A\beta$ fragments may be a normal event.^{11–14} If so, then, what determines the neurotoxicity of $A\beta$? A number of contradictory studies have suggested either a neurotoxic effect, no effect, or a trophic effect on neurons by $A\beta$. It appears, however, that any effect may depend on the physical conformation of the molecule, since neurotoxic effects may be best observed when $A\beta$ is in an aggregated, β -pleated conformation (reviewed in ref. 9).

The most dramatic advances, in the last few years, have come from the discovery of several genetic forms of the disease which depend on either mutations or different allelic combinations of different genes in different chromosomes. At the time of this writing, chromosomes 21, 19, and 14 have been found to be implicated in different forms of the disease. Chromosome 21 harbors the gene for β APP, and several missense mutations in this gene have been associated with familial AD with early onset. This has been interpreted as one strong argument in favor of the amyloid hypothesis for AD (reviewed in ref. 8). More recently, the identification of the apoprotein E gene on chromosome 19 as a risk factor in late-onset familial¹⁵ and sporadic AD¹⁶ has been the

spark to ignite a series of important studies around the world. Briefly, it has been found that the $\epsilon 4/\epsilon 4$ allelic combination predisposes patients to the development of an earlier onset and more severe form of AD¹⁷ while the $\epsilon 3/\epsilon 2$, and even more so, the $\epsilon 2/\epsilon 2$ allelic combinations would be protective.¹⁸ These studies are important because they dovetail with those on tau and amyloid. It has been shown, in fact, that apo $\epsilon 4$ has more binding affinity for $A\beta$ than $\epsilon 3$, thus possibly favoring its precipitation and the formation of insoluble deposits. It has been suggested that apo $\epsilon 4$ may act as a pathological chaperon, inducing conformational changes particularly on $A\beta$, that would result in the formation of β -pleated sheet structures, thus facilitating their aggregation and precipitation (reviewed in ref. 19). In addition, apo $\epsilon 4$ appears to have no propensity to bind tau, whereas apo $\epsilon 3$ would have affinity for it, thus preventing its phosphorylation and self-assembly into PHFs.²⁰ From these studies, apoprotein ϵ type 4 appears to constitute double jeopardy. On the one hand, it facilitates the aggregation of $A\beta$, while, on the other, it would lack the ability of protecting tau from phosphorylation, thus favoring self-assembly of hyperphosphorylated tau, formation of NFTs, and lack of microtubule stabilization. There is general agreement, however, that while the expression of apoprotein $\epsilon 4$ constitutes a risk factor for the development of AD, it cannot be considered a causative factor, by itself.

Controversy still reigns in regard to the role of NFTs and amyloid deposits in the pathogenesis of AD. Numerous studies have shown that synaptic loss and the presence of NFTs are the best parameters to correlate with the severity of dementia.^{21,22} On the other hand, others argue that amyloid deposition is the only characteristic change of AD since NFTs may also deposit in other diseases without dementia.⁸ Alternatively, both NFTs and amyloid deposits may represent the end result of earlier, more subtle pathological processes. Tau, β APP, and all enzymes involved in their processing and final packaging are normally expressed in neurons. It is possible that alterations at some stage in their synthetic pathway may constitute early events in AD, important for understanding the constellation of pathological changes outlined above.

The paper by Stieber et al¹ in this issue of the Journal is highly relevant to this concept, because it explores the role of the GA in the pathogenesis of AD. The GA has a crucial function in the processing, transport, modification, and targeting of cellular proteins,²³ and it has been shown that the size of the GA has direct relationship with the level of activity of the

cell.²⁴ Previous work by these investigators, in collaboration with the Amsterdam group of Swaab et al,²⁵ had shown a significant reduction in the size of the GA in the large neurons of the nucleus basalis of Meynert before any decrease in size of the same neurons could be observed. This indicated that the overall activity of neurons in the nucleus basalis of Meynert was severely depressed.²⁵ In a later paper, these authors showed that a population of neurons without NFTs showed atrophy of the GA, indicating that decreased activity in these neurons was not necessarily related to the presence of NFTs.²⁶ In this issue, Stieber et al¹ report that, in AD, the GA is fragmented and atrophic in a population of neurons without NFTs. This lack of correlation between NFTs and fragmentation of the GA is not surprising, given that a similar lesion of the GA has been observed in neurons and other cells in conditions other than AD. Fragmentation of the GA has been, in fact, documented in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS),²⁷ in transgenic mice expressing one of the mutations in Cu,Zn superoxide dismutase (SOD) discovered in familial amyotrophic lateral sclerosis,²⁸ and, experimentally, in cells treated with microtubule depolymerizing agents.²⁹

The observation of a fragmented and atrophic GA may be significant for the pathogenesis of AD, because many axonal and presynaptic terminal proteins are processed through the organelle, and they are transported via the fast component of axoplasmic flow.³⁰ Furthermore, a recent study of the intracellular trafficking of β APP has disclosed a prominent association of this protein with Golgi elements and with medium-sized, invaginated vesicles in both dendrites and axons.³¹ In addition, when primary cultures of rat hippocampal neurons were treated with brefeldin A, a fungal metabolite which produces a redistribution of proteins of the GA into endoplasmic reticulum (ER), with a block in protein transport, the distribution of β APP immunoreactivity changed, indeed, from Golgi elements to a distribution more characteristic of the ER. In keeping with these findings, immunoblot analysis showed inhibition of β APP secretion and accumulation of full length β APP, thus supporting a crucial role for the GA in β APP maturation and processing.³¹ These studies support earlier findings by Haass et al¹⁴ which implicated the GA in the processing of $A\beta$ as well. As previously mentioned, these authors found that $A\beta$ could be released after normal processing of the precursor protein in tissue culture cells, because it was found together with other related peptides in the medium of cells transfected with cDNAs coding for β APP. Importantly, they also showed inhibition of $A\beta$ genera-

tion in cultures treated with brefeldin A, thus implicating the transport of the precursor protein through the GA as a necessary step for the production of $A\beta$. By pharmacologically manipulating the system these authors determined that the production of $A\beta$ and other fragments is dependent on an acidic environment. Lysosomes, however, did not appear to play an important role in this system, whereas data suggest the existence of an alternative secretory cleavage that could take place in late Golgi vesicles.¹⁴

The GA, therefore, has been recognized for its central role in the formation of both precursor protein and its soluble fragments, including $A\beta$. In this context, the results of the study by Stieber et al¹ raise the intriguing possibility that atrophy and malfunction of the GA may precede and/or cause the accumulation of the $A\beta$ peptide. These results correlate with previous findings suggesting that the characteristic lesion in aging and AD is neuronal atrophy rather than degeneration caused by NFT.²⁵

This hypothesis, linking a putative malfunction of the GA with accumulation of $A\beta$, is consistent with a recent *in vitro* observation by Xu et al,³² who tested one important pathway of β APP cleavage through the formation of secretory vesicles from *trans*-Golgi network. It was already known that activated protein kinase C (PKC) stimulates the pathway leading to soluble APP instead of its potentially amyloidogenic fragments.³³ Since most β APP codistributes with a marker of the *trans*-Golgi network, these authors explored the possibility that PKC could redistribute β APP from the *trans*-Golgi environment to the post-Golgi vesicular compartment where it could undergo processing. They found that activation of endogenous PKC increases the formation of secretory vesicles containing APP from the *trans*-Golgi network, thus implicating important regulatory influences on the normal secretory pathway of β APP, which involves the Golgi apparatus.³² These results correlate with genetic studies outlined earlier. Among the families with mutations in the β APP gene, a Swedish family showed an abnormally high proportion of β APP being processed through the amyloidogenic pathway, thus producing abnormally high levels of $A\beta$ protein.^{34,35} These abnormal levels could be normalized *in vitro* by activation of PKC, which shifts the processing of β APP toward the non-amyloidogenic pathway.³⁶ These studies again implicate a role for the *trans*-Golgi pathway in the normal processing of the protein.

A very recent discovery by Sherrington et al³⁷ adds further support to a possible primary role of the GA in the pathogenesis of AD. These authors have shown a linkage between a very aggressive form of

AD and chromosome 14q24.3. One of the genes isolated from this region, designated *S182*, encodes a protein with seven transmembrane domains, in which five different nucleotide changes were consistently found in seven pedigrees with a particularly aggressive form of early-onset AD. Interestingly, members of the same families without AD, and numerous nonrelated normal individuals, never showed any of those missense mutations. The product of this gene has striking similarities to the *Caenorhabditis elegans* sperm integral membrane protein SPE-4, which appears to be involved in the formation of a specialized Golgi-derived organelle during spermatogenesis in this worm. Such organelle appears to be involved in transport and storage of polypeptides, both soluble and membrane-bound. The corresponding S-182 protein is likely to have similar functions and it could be involved, eg, in the transport and budding of membrane-bound vesicles during transit in the GA.³⁷ The authors speculate that mutations in this protein could hamper both transport and processing of β APP, as well as cause abnormal interactions with other proteins such as tau. It would be interesting indeed to study the GA in neurons and other cells from these patients.

Another issue raised again by this paper is a possible link between FGF and AD. MG-160, the integral membrane glycoprotein of the GA, against which antibodies used in this paper were raised, binds to basic FGF (bFGF; reviewed in ref. 38). The GA, therefore, may be involved in regulatory and secretory functions for endogenous bFGF. Although Stieber et al¹ have not succeeded in showing accumulation of endogenous FGFs in NFTs and amyloid deposits, other authors have documented binding of bFGF to neuritic plaques and extracellular NFTs.^{39,40} Early functional alterations of the GA, as shown by its atrophy and fragmentation, could be responsible for the abnormal processing and regulation of FGF, resulting in its abnormal deposition. The role of FGFs in AD deserves further study, because, if indeed FGFs are sequestered by NFTs and amyloid plaques, neurons may be deprived of important trophic support.

The paper by Stieber et al¹ raises two questions which may be answered when valid animal models of AD become available. The first question is whether neurons with fragmented GA eventually develop NFTs, or whether these are separate and unrelated pathogenetic mechanisms. The second question is whether neurons with fragmented GA have indeed a defect in their ability to process β APP and if this could be responsible for the elevated levels of the β -amyloid peptide. Additional insights into the etiology and pathogenesis of AD may be gained if the

disease is analyzed from the perspective of the Golgi apparatus and its multiple functions. As succinctly stated by Farquhar and Palade,²¹ the Golgi apparatus complex is at the center stage of the cell.

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