

5-HT_{1c} receptor is a prominent serotonin receptor subtype in the central nervous system

(5-HT_{1c} receptor/serotonin/*in situ* hybridization/central nervous system/neurotransmission)

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ABSTRACT Neurons in rat central nervous system (CNS) that express 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA have been localized by *in situ* hybridization histochemistry. The 5-HT_{1c} receptor is expressed in a wide variety of cortical and subcortical neurons including hippocampal pyramidal neurons, neurons within most of the central monoaminergic cell groups, neurons in thalamic sensory relay nuclei, and neurons involved in the central processing and regulation of nociceptive transmission. Therefore, the 5-HT_{1c} receptor is a prominent but poorly characterized central subclass of serotonin (5-HT) receptor. The distribution of the 5-HT_{1c} receptor within the CNS is considerably more widespread than that of the structurally and functionally related 5-HT₂ receptor.

The monoamine serotonin (5-hydroxytryptamine; 5-HT) functions as a neurotransmitter in the mammalian central and peripheral nervous systems (1). Within the brain, serotonergic neurons originate primarily in the raphe nuclei of the brainstem (2). The axons of these neurons project to most areas of the central nervous system (CNS) (3, 4), where they regulate a wide variety of sensory, motor, and cortical functions (5). The diverse actions of 5-HT are mediated by interactions with several distinct subclasses of 5-HT receptors. These multiple 5-HT receptors have been defined on the basis of their ligand-binding profile and include 5-HT_{1a}, -b, -c, and -d; 5-HT₂; and 5-HT₃ subclasses (6-8). Moreover, individual 5-HT receptor subtypes interact with distinct guanine nucleotide binding proteins and trigger different second-messenger pathways. Activation of the 5-HT_{1a} receptor results in an inhibition of adenylate cyclase, whereas activation of the 5-HT_{1c} and 5-HT₂ receptors activates phosphatidylinositol-specific phospholipase C, causing the release of the second messengers 1P₃ and diacyl glycerol (9, 10).

The diverse physiologic actions of 5-HT may not only derive from the activation of different intracellular signaling pathways but also from the expression of the individual receptor subtypes in distinct regions of the brain. Selective pharmacologic ligands have been used to determine the regional distribution of 5-HT receptors in the mammalian CNS. 5-HT_{1a} receptors are widely expressed in cortical and subcortical areas, whereas 5-HT₂ receptors are detected at highest levels in the cerebral cortex (11, 12). The 5-HT_{1c} subtype was first detected in choroid plexus epithelial cells (13-15) and is the only 5-HT receptor subtype expressed by these cells. However, the distribution of 5-HT_{1c} receptors in other regions of the nervous system has been difficult because there are no selective ligands for this receptor subclass; most ligands that bind to 5-HT_{1c} receptor also interact with 5-HT₂ receptors.

Recently, cDNA clones encoding the 5-HT_{1a}, 5-HT_{1c}, and 5-HT₂ receptors have been isolated and sequenced (16-18). The deduced amino acid sequences reveal that the 5-HT receptors share sequence and structural similarities with the family of guanine nucleotide-binding protein-coupled receptors thought to traverse the membrane seven times (19). The 5-HT_{1c} and 5-HT₂ receptors are highly conserved in their primary structure and define a new subfamily of receptors, whereas the 5-HT_{1a} receptor is more closely related to the subfamily of adrenergic receptors. In this paper, we have used *in situ* hybridization techniques to identify the site of synthesis of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA within the rat CNS. We find that neurons that express 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA are widely distributed in the brain and spinal cord, indicating that this receptor subtype is likely to play a prominent and previously unappreciated role in the central action of 5-HT. The distribution of labeled neurons implicates the 5-HT_{1c} receptor, in particular in the processing and integration of sensory information and in the regulation of central monoaminergic systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

***In Situ* Hybridization.** Adult rats were perfused with 4% paraformaldehyde as described (20). The brain and spinal cord were removed, post-fixed for 2 hr, and cryo-protected in phosphate-buffered saline containing 20% sucrose at 4°C overnight. The tissue was frozen in M1 embedding matrix, and 12- μ m cryostat sections were cut and thaw-mounted onto slides coated with gelatin and poly(L-lysine). Prehybridization buffer [50% formamide/0.9 M NaCl/10 mM Tris, pH 7.5/1 mM EDTA/250 μ g of tRNA per ml/500 μ g of salmon sperm DNA per ml/5 \times Denhardt's solution (1 \times = 0.02% polyvinylpyrrolidone/0.02% bovine serum albumin/0.02% Ficoll)] was applied to sections, and the slides were then covered with Parafilm and incubated for 1-3 hr at 50°C. Coverslips were then removed, and the slides were dehydrated through graded ethanols. Probe (1-4 \times 10⁶ cpm) was applied to the sections in a 150- μ l volume of hybridization buffer [50% formamide/0.9 M NaCl/10 mM Tris, pH 7.5/1 mM EDTA/50 μ g of tRNA per ml/50 μ g of yeast RNA per ml/10 μ g of salmon sperm DNA per ml/10% dextran sulfate/50 μ g of poly (A) per ml/0.08% bovine serum albumin/1 \times Denhardt's solution]. After hybridization at 50°C overnight, the slides were washed in 2 \times SSC (1 \times = 0.15 M NaCl/0.015 M sodium citrate, pH 7) at room temperature, followed by incubation in 20 μ g of RNase per ml/0.5 M NaCl/10 mM Tris, pH 8, at 37°C for 45 min. High stringency washes were in 2 \times SSC/10 mM 2-mercaptoethanol at 50°C for 1 hr and 0.1 \times SSC/0.05% sodium pyrophosphate/10 mM 2-mercaptoethanol for 3 hr, after which the slides were cooled gradually to room temperature in the same solution overnight. After

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Abbreviations: 5-HT, serotonin (5-hydroxytryptamine); CNS, central nervous system.

dehydration through graded ethanols containing 0.3 M ammonium acetate, the slides were air-dried, dipped in Kodak NTB-2 emulsion, diluted 1:1 with 0.6 M ammonium acetate, and developed after 1–3 weeks.

Probe Synthesis. An RNA expression vector containing the 3-kilobase (kb) coding region of the 5-HT_{1c} receptor cDNA was used to generate single-stranded RNA probes (17) in an *in vitro* transcription reaction containing 1 μ g of linearized DNA template, 25 μ M ³⁵S-substituted UTP (UTP [³⁵S]; 1000 Ci/mmol; 1 Ci = 37 GBq), 40 mM Tris (pH 7.5), 6 mM MgCl₂, 2 mM spermidine, 10 mM NaCl, 10 mM dithiothreitol, 0.5 mM ATP, 0.5 mM CTP, 0.5 mM GTP, 12 units of RNasin, and 10–30 units of either T3 polymerase or T7 polymerase to generate probes of opposite orientation. Reactions were performed at 37°C for 2 hr and unincorporated nucleotides were removed by two sequential ammonium acetate ethanol precipitations. The specific activity of the probes was 0.5–1 $\times 10^6$ cpm/ μ g of RNA.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Specificity of Hybridization. The distribution of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in the brain and spinal cord was determined by *in situ* hybridization. UTP [³⁵S]-labeled antisense RNA transcribed *in vitro* from an RNA expression vector containing a 5-HT_{1c} receptor cDNA was used as probe (17). Hybridization with this antisense probe resulted in intense labeling of epithelial cells of the choroid plexus (Fig. 1*a*), whereas a sense of RNA transcribed from the same cDNA clone gave background levels of labeling (Fig. 1*b*). Treatment of tissue sections with RNase prior to hybridization com-

pletely abolished specific binding of the antisense RNA probe to cells in the choroid plexus and brain (not shown), providing evidence for the specificity of hybridization.

To exclude the possibility of cross-hybridization of the 5-HT probe with mRNAs encoding other structurally related receptors, particularly the 5-HT₂ receptor, we used a 300-base-pair antisense RNA probe derived from the 3' noncoding region of the 5-HT_{1c} receptor cDNA. This probe is unlikely to hybridize with 5-HT₂ receptor mRNA because the nucleotide sequences of the 5-HT_{1c} and 5-HT₂ receptors and of other members of this receptor superfamily diverge considerably at their 3' ends (ref. 19 and unpublished work). The pattern of hybridization detected with antisense RNA probes derived from coding and noncoding regions was identical, indicating that under the present stringent hybridizing conditions, hybridization is selective for 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA. We estimate from RNA blot analysis that the hybridization signal detected in the choroid plexus corresponds to about 40–50 mRNA copies per cell (17). Thus, the sensitivity of the present technique permits detection of 5–10 mRNA copies in neural cells, although in many neurons the intensity of hybridization approached that observed in the choroid plexus.

Distribution of 5-HT_{1c} mRNA in Cortical Regions. Within the CNS, the most intense hybridization was detected in hippocampal pyramidal neurons (Fig. 1*c* and *d*; Table 1). Pyramidal neurons in the ventral region of CA1, CA2, and CA3 were heavily labeled, whereas 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA was not detected in the dorsal anterior region of the hippocampus or in the dentate gyrus (Figs. 2*a* and 3*a*). The abrupt transition in 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA expression in pyramidal

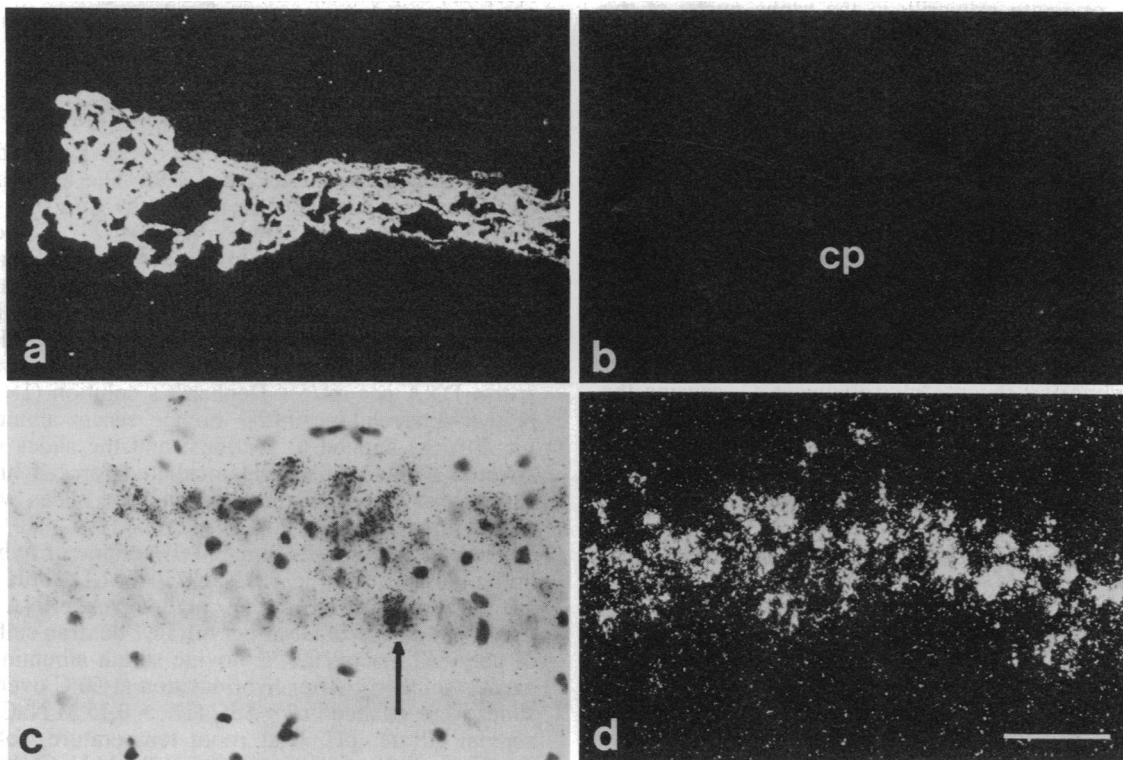


FIG. 1. Localization by *in situ* hybridization of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in choroid plexus epithelial cells and hippocampal pyramidal neurons. (a) Intense labeling of choroid plexus epithelial cells is observed after hybridization with a 3-kb single-stranded antisense RNA probe for the 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA. Adjacent cerebellar and midbrain tissue exhibits background levels of labeling. (b) Background grain density in choroid plexus (cp) is observed after hybridization of an adjacent section to that shown in *a* with sense-strand RNA probe derived from the same 5-HT_{1c} receptor cDNA. (c) Labeling of a subset of hippocampal pyramidal neurons with 5-HT_{1c} receptor RNA probe. Pyramidal neurons in the CA2/CA3 region were identified on the basis of their morphology in Nissl-stained sections. Unlabeled pyramidal neurons are clearly visible adjacent to a single heavily labeled pyramidal neuron (arrow). (d) Dark-field micrograph showing pyramidal neurons in the CA1/CA2 region with clusters of grains over virtually all pyramidal neurons in this region. Exposure time was 17 days. (Bar = 800 μ m in *a* and *b*; 100 μ m in *c* and *d*.)

Table 1. Distribution of neuronal cell bodies synthesizing 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA

Neuronal cell body	Signal	Neuronal cell body	Signal
Olfactory system		Midbrain	
Anterior olfactory n.	++	Superior colliculus	+
Taenia tecta	++	Inferior colliculus	++
Primary olfactory cortex	+++	Central grey	++
Endopiriform n.	++	Substantia nigra, pars reticulata	++
Amygdala		Substantia nigra, pars compacta	+++
Anterior amygdaloid area	++	Ventral tegmental area	+
Central amygdaloid n.	++	Retrorubral field	++
Lateral amygdaloid n.	+++	Interpeduncular n.	+
Medial amygdaloid n.	++	Parabigeminal n.	++
Basal amygdaloid n.	++	Pontine oral reticular n.	++
Anterior cortical amygdaloid n.	++	Linear raphe n.	++
Amygdalohippocampal area	+	Median raphe n.	+
Thalamus		Dorsal raphe n.	++
Anteromedial thalamic n.	+	Dorsal tegmental n.	++
Laterodorsal thalamic n.	++	Midbrain reticular formation	++
Lateral posterior thalamic n.	++	Anterior pretectal area	+++
Central medial thalamic n.	++	Olivary pretectal area	++
Centrolateral thalamic n.	+	Posterior pretectal area	++
Intermediodorsal thalamic n.	+	Brainstem	
Paraventricular thalamic n., ant.	++	Locus ceruleus	++
Paraventricular thalamic n., post.	+	Central grey, pons	++
Posterior thalamic nuclear group	+	Pontine raphe n.	++
Paratenial thalamic n.	+	Raphe magnus	++
Lateral habenular n., caudal	+++	Raphe pallidus	+
Subthalamic n.	++++	Raphe pontis	+
Zona incerta	+	Raphe obscurus	+
Medial geniculate n.	++	Vestibular n.	+++
Hypothalamus		Prepositus hypoglossal n.	+
Anterior hypothalamic n.	++	n. of the solitary tract	++
Supraoptic hypothalamic n.	++	n. ambiguous	++
Suprachiasmatic n.	++	Parabrachial n.	++
Lateral hypothalamic area	++	Superior olive	++
Periventricular hypothalamic n.	+	Inferior olive	++++
Dorsomedial hypothalamic n.	+	Caudal pontine reticular n.	++
Supramammillary n.	+	Parvocellular reticular n.	+++
Lateral mammillary n.	+	Gigantocellular reticular n.	++++
Premammillary n., ventral	+	Reticular n. of the medulla	+++
Septohypothalamic n.	+	Paramedial reticular n.	+++
Preoptic area	+	Lateral reticular n.	+++
Hippocampus		Gracile n.	+
CA1 pyramidal layer, ventral	++++	Cuneate n.	+
CA2 pyramidal layer, dorsal	+++	Cerebellum	
CA2 pyramidal layer, ventral	++++	Deep cerebellar nuclei	+
CA3 pyramidal layer, ventral	++++	Spinal cord	
Subiculum, dorsal	+	Lamina V	+++
Subiculum, ventral	++++	Lamina VII	++

Grain densities were determined over neuronal cell bodies. Weak hybridization signals over neurons were designated +; moderate-intensity hybridization signals, ++; intense hybridization, +++; and intense hybridization over all neurons within a given region equivalent to that of choroid plexus, +++++. Nomenclature is from the atlas of Paxinos and Watson (21). n. = nucleus.

neurons can be observed most clearly in sections cut in a horizontal plane (Fig. 3a). The restricted expression of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in the hippocampus suggests that 5-HT may exert different physiological functions within distinct hippocampal areas. 5-HT_{1a} and 5-HT_{1b} receptors have been identified physiologically on pyramidal neurons (22, 23), although there is no evidence that these two receptor subtypes are expressed on segregated subsets of pyramidal neurons.

The cerebral cortex contained few neurons that expressed 5-HT_{1c} mRNA (Fig. 2a and b). However, prominent hybridization was detected in the retrosplenial and anterior cingulate cortex (Figs. 2b and 3b). These two cortical regions have been implicated in spatial learning and memory (24). Therefore, the alterations in cognitive function that occur

after administration of lysergic acid diethylamide and other related compounds (25) may be mediated in part by binding to these cortical 5-HT_{1c} receptors. In other areas of the cerebral cortex, hybridization to layer 5 cells was detected in somatosensory and auditory cortex (Fig. 2b). The regional distribution of 5-HT₂ receptor mRNA determined by RNA blot analysis indicates that the highest density of this receptor is found in the cerebral cortex, with 5- to 10-fold lower levels in other regions of the brain (26). These observations, together with the present findings, implicate both 5-HT_{1c} and 5-HT₂ receptors in the serotonergic regulation of cortical function.

Distribution of 5-HT_{1c} mRNA in Subcortical Regions. In contrast to the 5-HT₂ receptor, the 5-HT_{1c} receptor is also expressed at high levels in many subcortical areas (see Table

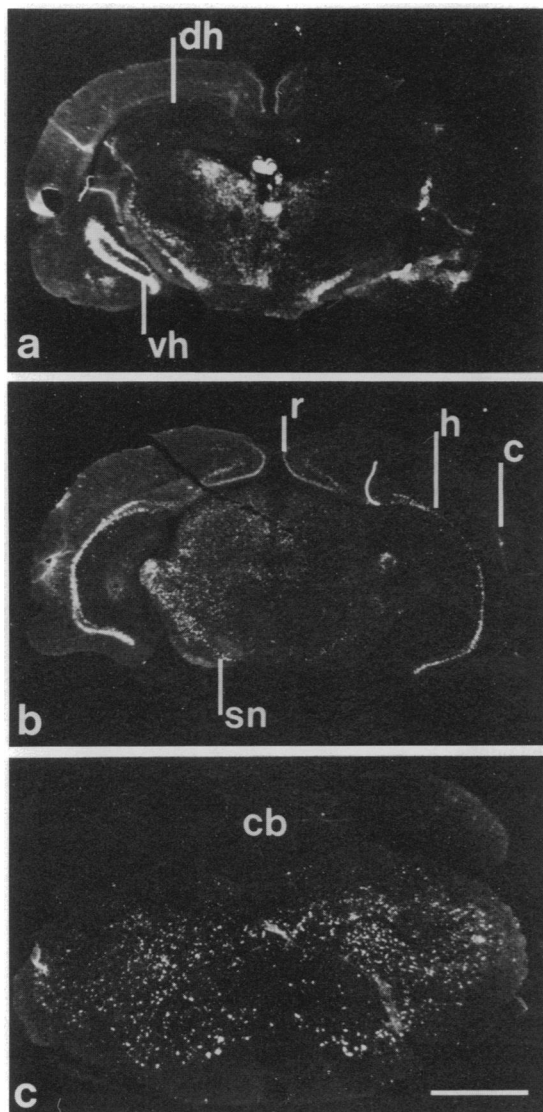


FIG. 2. Discrete localization of 5-HT_{1c} mRNA in adult rat brain. (a) A coronal section through the diencephalon showing the distribution of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA. Intense labeling of pyramidal neurons is detected in ventral hippocampus (vh), whereas the dorsal hippocampus (dh) at the same rostral-caudal level is unlabeled. (b) A coronal section through the mesencephalon showing the distribution of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in CA1 and CA2 hippocampal pyramidal neurons (h). Intensely labeled neurons are present in the substantia nigra (sn) and the central grey region. Some layer 5 cortical neurons (c) are also labeled. (c) A coronal section through the medulla showing grains over cells in the raphe obscurus and raphe pallidus and throughout the reticular core. The cerebellum (cb) is unlabeled. (Bar = 3 mm in a, 3.5 mm in b, and 1.8 mm in c.)

1). Neurons in a variety of thalamic and midbrain relay nuclei that convey sensory input to cortical structures exhibited strong hybridization (Fig. 2 a and b). Prominent labeling was observed in the medial geniculate nucleus (Fig. 3d) and the posterior thalamic subnuclei, which was consistent with a role for the 5-HT_{1c} receptor in the serotonergic regulation of somatic and auditory sensory inputs. In addition, essentially all of the nuclei involved in the afferent and efferent connections of the limbic system expressed 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA (Table 1).

There is also a striking expression of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in monoaminergic cell groups (Table 1). A high density of neurons in the pars compacta of the substantia nigra expressed 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA (Fig. 3e). Since most neurons in this region are dopaminergic (26), a substan-

tial number of dopaminergic neurons must express 5-HT_{1c} receptors. Previous studies have implicated serotonergic systems in the regulation of dopaminergic function (27), and our observations indicate that these actions may be mediated in part by the 5-HT_{1c} receptor. Activation of the 5-HT_{1c} receptor in a variety of cell types triggers inositolphospholipid hydrolysis and the mobilization of internal Ca²⁺ (10). Thus, one function of the 5-HT_{1c} receptor may be to enhance dopamine release, either locally from dopaminergic dendrites within the substantia nigra or distally from the axon terminals of nigral neurons in the corpus striatum. Neurons in most other dopaminergic cell groups also exhibited 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA (Table 1). Therefore, the 5-HT_{1c} receptor-mediated regulation of dopaminergic function may contribute more generally to the interactions between these two monoaminergic systems.

The most prominent noradrenergic cell group, the locus ceruleus, also contained a high proportion of neurons expressing 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA (Fig. 3f). Similarly, neurons within serotonergic cell groups in the brainstem expressed the 5-HT_{1c} receptor. Labeled neurons were prominent in each of the raphe nuclei and in adjacent reticular nuclei (Fig. 2c; Table 1). The expression of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in these nuclei suggests that this receptor subtype may function as an autoreceptor on serotonergic neurons (28). 5-HT_{1a} and 5-HT_{1b} receptors have previously been identified as autoreceptors on serotonergic neurons on the basis of electrophysiological studies (29). Therefore, the 5-HT_{1c} receptor may function both in the autoregulation of serotonergic neurons and in the modulation of other central monoaminergic systems.

Finally, it is notable that several neuronal cell groups implicated in the processing of afferent sensory information and in the central regulation of nociception and pain express 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA. The periaqueductal gray is the site of origin of excitatory neurons that project to brainstem nuclei and activate descending raphe-spinal neurons that terminate on ascending spinothalamic tract neurons in laminae of the dorsal horn (30). Neurons in each of these three cell groups express 5-HT_{1c} mRNA. Therefore, the central actions of 5-HT in the endogenous regulation of pain transmission (31, 32) may be mediated in part by interactions with the 5-HT_{1c} receptor subtype.

Neuronal Localization of 5-HT Receptor Subtypes. A more precise definition of the functional role of 5-HT_{1c} receptor requires localization of the receptor on the neuronal surface. Although in rat there are no selective ligands for the 5-HT_{1c} receptor (11), mesulergine is a relatively selective 5-HT_{1c} receptor ligand in human brain (25). Several regions of the human brain appear to express high levels of 5-HT_{1c} binding sites (33, 34), whereas our studies indicate that the corresponding areas in rat brain do not contain a high density of neurons expressing 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA. In these regions, 5-HT_{1c} receptors may be located on the terminals of afferent neurons that originate in other regions of the brain. The generation of antibodies to the rat brain 5-HT_{1c} receptor will permit a more definitive localization of the 5-HT_{1c} receptor. The identification of neurons that synthesize 5-HT_{1c} receptors, taken together with the cellular location of the receptor, now permits physiological analysis of the role of this receptor in brain function.

Our findings reveal that the 5-HT_{1c} receptor is a major subclass of 5-HT receptor within the CNS. Similar *in situ* hybridization analysis has not been performed with the cloned 5-HT₂ receptor. However, RNA blot analysis indicates that this receptor is largely restricted to the cerebral cortex (unpublished work). Thus, the 5-HT_{1c} and 5-HT₂ receptor subtypes bind the same ligand and couple to identical signaling systems but exhibit distinct patterns of expression within the CNS. The existence of two distinct but

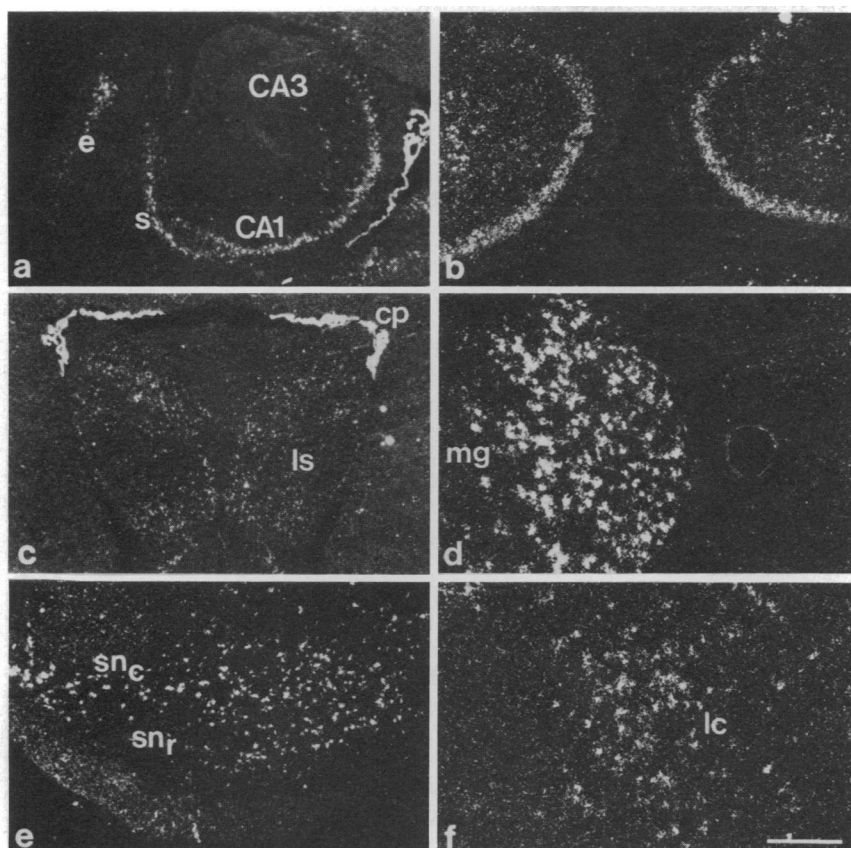


FIG. 3. Cortical and subcortical cell groups expressing high levels of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA. (a) A dark-field photomicrograph of a horizontal section through the ventral portion of the hippocampus showing the expression of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in CA1, CA2, and in some CA3 pyramidal neurons. Neurons in the medial portion of CA3, as well as in CA4 and the dentate gyrus, are not labeled; however, entorhinal cortical neurons (e) and neurons in the subiculum (s) express 5-HT_{1c} mRNA. (b) Coronal section revealing labeled neurons in the retrosplenial cortex. (c) A horizontal section showing neurons expressing 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in the lateral septal nuclei (ls) and choroid plexus (cp). (d) Localization of 5-HT_{1c} receptor mRNA in the medial geniculate nucleus (mg). (e) Localization of neuronal cell bodies expressing 5-HT_{1c} mRNA in the pars compacta (snc) and pars reticulata (snr) of the substantia nigra. (f) A horizontal section through the locus ceruleus (lc) showing the presence of neurons expressing 5-HT_{1c} mRNA. Exposure time was 17 days. (Bar = 700 μ m in a, 500 μ m in b, 600 μ m in c, 400 μ m in d, 300 μ m in e, and 125 μ m in f.)

functionally analogous 5-HT receptor genes may provide a mechanism that permits the differential expression of these two receptors in different neuronal cell populations.

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