

REVIEW ARTICLE

Caspases in retinal ganglion cell death and axon regeneration

Chloe N Thomas¹, Martin Berry¹, Ann Logan¹, Richard J Blanch^{1,2,3} and Zubair Ahmed^{1,3}

Retinal ganglion cells (RGC) are terminally differentiated CNS neurons that possess limited endogenous regenerative capacity after injury and thus RGC death causes permanent visual loss. RGC die by caspase-dependent mechanisms, including apoptosis, during development, after ocular injury and in progressive degenerative diseases of the eye and optic nerve, such as glaucoma, anterior ischemic optic neuropathy, diabetic retinopathy and multiple sclerosis. Inhibition of caspases through genetic or pharmacological approaches can arrest the apoptotic cascade and protect a proportion of RGC. Novel findings have also highlighted a pyroptotic role of inflammatory caspases in RGC death. In this review, we discuss the molecular signalling mechanisms of apoptotic and inflammatory caspase responses in RGC specifically, their involvement in RGC degeneration and explore their potential as therapeutic targets.

Cell Death Discovery (2017) 3, 17032; doi:10.1038/cddiscovery.2017.32; published online 3 July 2017

BULLET POINTS

- Caspase-mediated cell death can occur in normal physiology and pathology.
- Retinal ganglion cells undergo caspase-mediated apoptosis.
- Pyroptosis, a specialised form of inflammatory programmed cell death, mediated by inflammatory caspases, can occur in retinal ganglion cells.
- Inhibition of caspases with pharmacological or genetic inhibitors promotes retinal ganglion cell survival.

INTRODUCTION

Retinal ganglion cells (RGCs) in the ganglion cell layer (GCL) of the inner retina form axons of the optic nerve (ON), which partially decussate at the optic chiasm, project in the optic tract and synapse in the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) as well as the superior colliculus, pretectal nucleus and hypothalamus. Optic radiations relay visual information from the LGN to the visual cortex.¹ The neural retina is an outgrowth of the central nervous system (CNS); consequently after injury, there is limited endogenous axon regeneration and lost RGCs are not replaced, leading to irreversible visual loss.

Caspases, a family of cysteine aspartate proteases, have roles in neuronal pruning during development, inducing RGC death (through apoptosis and pyroptosis) after trauma and disease and promoting RGC axon regeneration. Such processes are attenuated by endogenous and pharmacological inhibitors as well as gene knockdown using short interfering RNA (siRNA) to both understand signalling mechanisms and develop therapeutics to prevent RGC death and promote axon regeneration.

Here we review caspases in apoptotic and pyroptotic RGC death, the novel role of caspases in RGC axon regeneration and the neuroprotective success of caspase-targeting interventions.

CASPASES

Caspases are cysteine aspartate proteases that can be divided into two major phylogenetic subfamilies, either interleukin (IL)-1 β -converting enzyme (inflammatory) or mammalian counterparts

of CED-3 (apoptotic) caspases.^{2,3} Caspases are the main components of the apoptotic signalling cascade, although they do also have other non-apoptotic roles, including inflammation.^{4,5} Caspases are activated by proximity-induced dimerisation, within protein complexes, feedback loops and pro-enzyme cleavage.^{6,7}

Apoptotic caspases

Caspases induce apoptosis through initiator and executioner family members: initiator caspases (caspase-2, -8, -9 and -10) activate executioner caspases (caspase-3, -6 and -7) through catalytic cleavage of their activation domain.^{5,8} Activated executioner caspases then hydrolyse or cleave proteins leading to cellular apoptosis.²

Caspases can be activated through the canonical intrinsic or extrinsic apoptotic pathways (Figure 1). The extrinsic pathway is activated through ligand-activation of tumour necrosis factor (TNF) receptor members⁹ including Fas/CD95 receptor, successive recruitment of adaptor proteins, such as Fas-associated protein with death domain (FADD)^{9,10} and subsequently pro-caspase-8.¹¹ Interactions between Fas/CD95, FADD and caspase-8 form the death-induced signalling complex (DISC)^{9,12} and initiate caspase-8 activation,^{11,12} which sequentially cleaves and activates executioner caspase-3, -6 and -7.⁵ Additionally, caspase-8 can cleave the B-cell lymphoma (Bcl)-2 protein family member BH3 interacting domain death agonist (Bid) into truncated Bid (tBid), which stimulates mitochondrial outer membrane permeabilisation (MOMP), releasing apoptogenic factors,¹³ including Cytochrome C, apoptotic protease activating factor 1 (Apaf-1), second mitochondria-derived activator of caspase/direct inhibitor of apoptosis-binding protein with low pI (Smac/DIABLO), high-temperature requirement (Htr) A2 (also known as Omi), endonuclease-G and apoptosis-inducing factor.^{14,15}

The intrinsic pathway is mitochondria-dependent and activated by intracellular insults, including DNA damage and loss of extracellular membrane integrity, causing MOMP.¹³ Mitochondrial-derived Cytochrome C complexes with Apaf-1, recruits and activates pro-caspase-9 in a protein complex termed the apoptosome,^{16,17} allowing successive activation of

¹Neuroscience and Ophthalmology, Institute of Inflammation and Ageing, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK and ²Academic Department of Military Surgery and Trauma, Royal Centre for Defence Medicine, Birmingham, UK.

Correspondence: Z Ahmed (z.ahmed.1@bham.ac.uk)

³These two authors are joint senior authors.

Received 23 February 2017; revised 31 March 2017; accepted 23 April 2017; Edited by R Killick

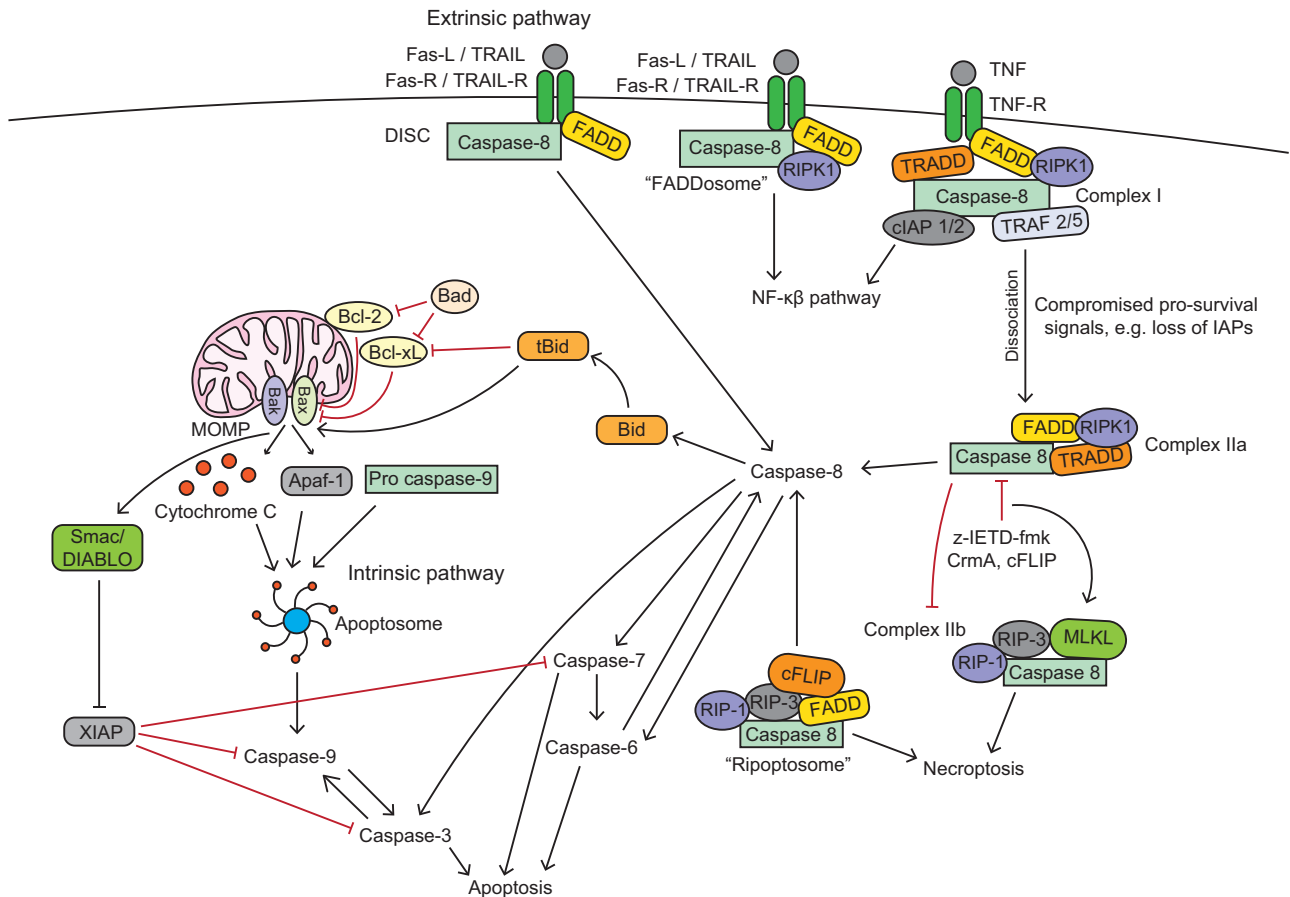


Figure 1. Apoptotic caspases in the canonical intrinsic and extrinsic pathways. Death receptor activation mediates the extrinsic pathway. Fas-R and TRAIL-R recruit FADD^{9,10} and pro-caspase-8,¹¹ forming the DISC,^{9,12} leading to proximity-induced caspase-8 activation^{11,12} and downstream activation of executioner caspase-3, -6 and -7.⁵ Caspase-8 can also activate the intrinsic pathway through truncating BH3-interacting domain death agonist (Bid) into tBid, which then promotes Bak and Bax mitochondrial membrane insertion, increasing MOMP and releasing apoptogenic factors,¹³ including Apaf-1, Cytochrome C and second mitochondria-derived activator of caspase/direct inhibitor of apoptosis-binding protein with low pI (Smac/DIABLO).^{14,15} Cytochrome C, Apaf-1 and pro-caspase-9 form the septameric apoptosome complex,^{16,17} which activates caspase-9 and successively downstream executioner caspases. Smac/DIABLO indirectly promotes apoptosis by opposing XIAP inhibition of caspase-3, -7 and -9.²² Caspase-8 can also form complex I at the TNF receptor, which upregulates the NF- κ B survival inflammatory pathway; however, if survival signals are compromised (for example, IAPs) then complex I dissociates from the receptor forming complex IIa, which initiates caspase-8-dependent apoptosis.¹⁹ Caspase-8 inhibits complex IIb formation and necroptosis and caspase-8 inhibition (for example, through z-IETD-fmk) induces complex IIb formation, causing necroptosis.²⁰ The 'ripiptosome' complex forms after cellular IAPs (cIAPs) or XIAP inhibition, causing caspase-8-dependent apoptosis and necroptosis.^{23,24}

downstream executioner caspases.¹⁶ TNF cell surface death receptors and different intracellular complexes also mediate cell death (Figure 1). After TNF-R stimulation, receptor interacting protein kinase (RIPK) 1, TNF-R1-associated death domain protein (TRADD), TNF-R associated factor (TRAF 2/5) and cellular inhibitor of apoptosis (cIAP 1/2) are recruited and form membrane-associated complex I.¹⁸ TNF-R primarily drives inflammatory gene transcription through the nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of B cells (NF- κ B) pathway. Reduced pro-survival signals at the TNF-R (for example, loss of IAPs), dissociates complex I causing RIPK1, TRADD, FADD and caspase-8 to form complex IIa, which initiates apoptosis by caspase-8 auto-activation.¹⁹ Caspase-8 also represses necroptosis (regulated necrosis; mediated by RIPK1 and RIPK3), thus, if caspase-8 is compromised or inhibited, for example, through mammalian inhibitors (CrmA and cFLIPs), pharmacological inhibition (e.g., z-VAD-fmk or z-IETD-fmk) or gene loss, then necroptosis ensues.²⁰ Necroptosis activation requires RIPK1, RIPK3 and mixed lineage kinase domain-like protein (MLKL), which form complex IIb.²¹ X-linked IAP (XIAP) directly inhibits caspase-3, -7 and -9²² and inhibition of cIAPs and XIAP causes complex II (the 'ripiptosome'; (RIPK1-RIPK3-FADD-caspase-8-

cFLIP),^{23,24} which drives caspase-8-mediated apoptosis or caspase-independent necroptosis without the need for receptor ligation.

Caspase-8 also acts as a non-enzymatic scaffold in the assembly of a pro-inflammatory 'FADDosome' (caspase-8-FADD-RIPK1) complex, inducing NF- κ B-dependent inflammation.²⁵

Uniquely, caspase-2 can act as both an initiator and an executioner caspase, depending on the apoptotic stimuli and does not fit into either the classically described intrinsic or extrinsic apoptotic pathways (Figure 2)^{26,27}; its structure resembles that of an initiator caspase due to its caspase recruitment domain but can act as an executioner caspase in response to multiple triggers, including DNA damage, heat shock, endoplasmic reticulum and oxidative stress.²⁸⁻³² DNA damage induces PIDDosome formation: a protein complex that consists of adaptor protein RIP-associated ICH-1 homologous protein with a death domain (RAIDD)³³ and p53-induced protein with a death domain (PIDD),^{30,34,35} which recruit and activate pro-caspase-2. Caspase-2 can also be activated at the DISC. Caspase-2 can also mediate apoptosis directly from the mitochondrial compartment.³⁶

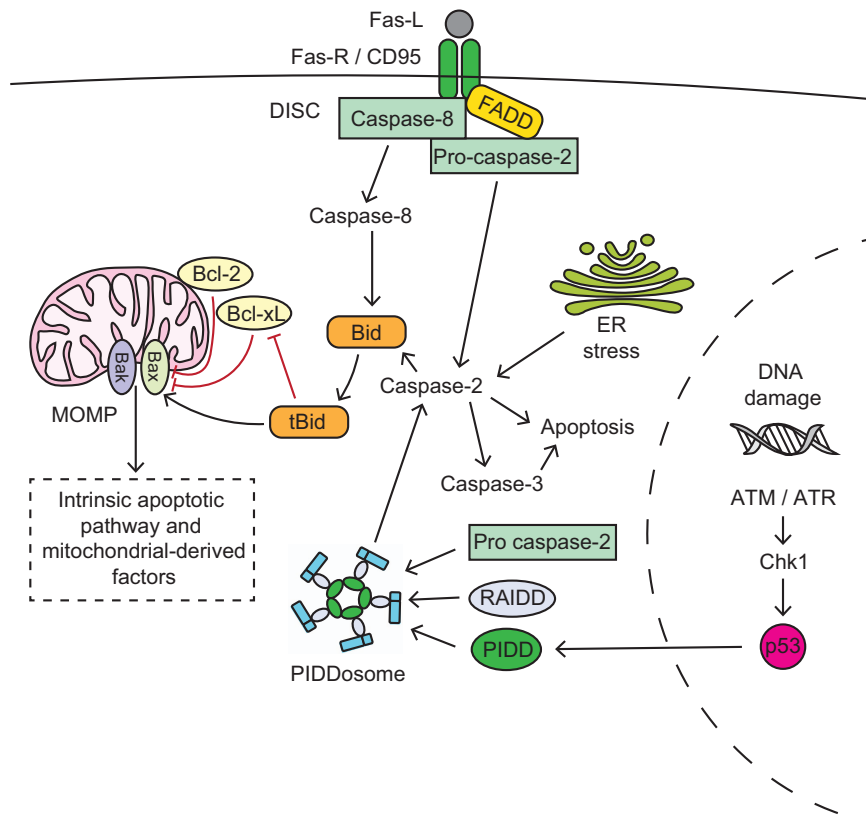


Figure 2. Activation mechanisms of caspase-2. Caspase-2 is activated through DNA damage, upregulation of p53 and formation of the PIDDosome protein complex, which includes p53-induced protein with death domain (PIDD), RIP-associated ICH-1 homologous protein with death domain (RAIDD) and pro-caspase-2.^{30,33–35} Caspase-2 is also activated by endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress and at the Fas-R within the DISC, alongside Fas-associated protein with death domain (FADD) and caspase-8.^{28–32} Active caspase-2 cleaves and activates caspase-3, cleaves BH3 interacting domain death agonist (Bid; which initiates MOMP and the intrinsic apoptotic pathway) or initiates apoptosis directly.

Inflammatory caspases

Inflammatory caspases (-1 or -11 in mice and -1, -4 and -5 in humans) can be activated in the inflammasome protein signalling complex (Figure 3).^{4,37,38} Inflammasomes are large multimeric protein complexes that sense pathogen- and host-derived danger signals and typically comprise of a Nod-like receptor (NLR), adaptor protein apoptosis-associated speck-like protein containing a CARD (ASC) and caspase-1.^{37–39} The main functions of the inflammasome are to activate caspase-1 to cleave precursor cytokines IL-1 β and IL-18 into their mature active forms and induce pyroptosis (a lytic form of cell death). Active caspase-1 also cleaves gasdermin-D into its cytotoxic N-terminal fragment, which forms a plasma membrane pore, releasing pro-inflammatory cytokines.^{40–42} Inflammasome activation is a two-step process: initial inflammasome priming is required for transcriptional upregulation of machinery including Nod-like-receptor pyrin domain containing 3 (NLRP3) and pro-IL-1 β ,^{37,38} followed by the trigger, such as a pathogen-associated molecular pattern (PAMP) or a damage-associated molecular pattern (DAMP), which induces inflammasome assembly and activation.

The canonical NLRP3 inflammasome can be activated by PAMPs (for example, *Staphylococcus aureus*) and host-derived DAMPs (e.g., ATP, phagolysosomal rupture, cathepsins release, ion flux, calcium influx, mitochondrial reactive oxygen species and oxidised mitochondrial DNA).^{38,43} Potassium efflux has been proposed as a universal trigger for NLRP3 activation,⁴⁴ including P2X7 receptor-mediated potassium pore opening, pannexin-1 and pore-forming toxins.⁴⁴ However, potassium efflux is not a common mechanism for all activation pathways.^{45,46}

Caspase-11, -4 and -5 can be activated by bacterial lipopolysaccharide-induced oligomerisation,⁴⁰ cleaving gasdermin-D

and indirectly activating the NLRP3 inflammasome via pannexin-1 and potassium efflux.⁴⁷ NLRP3 inflammasome can also be activated by caspase-8 – which also directly cleaves IL-1 β .^{48,49} MLKL translocates to the cell membrane and disrupts it, triggering potassium efflux and assembly of the NLRP3 inflammasome.⁵⁰ MLKL activation also provides a mechanism for processing and release of IL-1 β independently of gasdermin-D.⁵⁰

ANTICASPASE TREATMENTS: PHARMACOLOGICAL, GENE KNOCKDOWN AND SIRNA TECHNIQUES

A number of specific and broad-spectrum caspase inhibitors are based upon the amino-acid sequence of caspase substrate cleavage sites, acting as pseudoenzymes for active caspases and therefore competitive inhibitors. Broad-spectrum inhibitors include Boc-D-fmk, Q-VD-Oph (inhibits caspase-1, -2, -3, -6, -8 and -9), z-VAD-fmk (inhibits all caspases but caspase-2 very weakly).^{51–54} Specific caspase substrate cleavage sites include WEHD (caspase-1), YVAD (caspase-1), VDVAD (caspase-2), DEVD (caspase-3), LEVD (caspase-4), VEID (caspase-6), LETD (caspase-6), IETD (caspase-8 and -10) and LEHD (caspase-9).^{53,55,56} Caspase peptide inhibitors are linked to chemical groups that improve permeability, efficacy and stability of the compound. Peptides linked to aldehydes (or nitriles or ketones) are reversible inhibitors (e.g., Ac-DEVD-CHO) and bind to the catalytic site but do not irreversibly chemically alter the enzyme, whereas peptides linked to halmethylketones (chloro or fluoro) (e.g., z-VAD-fmk) bind irreversibly. The chemical group -fmk is non-specific.^{56,57}

Cross-reactivity with 'off-target' caspases limits interpretation of many studies using these inhibitors. The sequence DEVD (caspase-3) also binds to caspase-6, -7, -8 -9 and -10, similarly

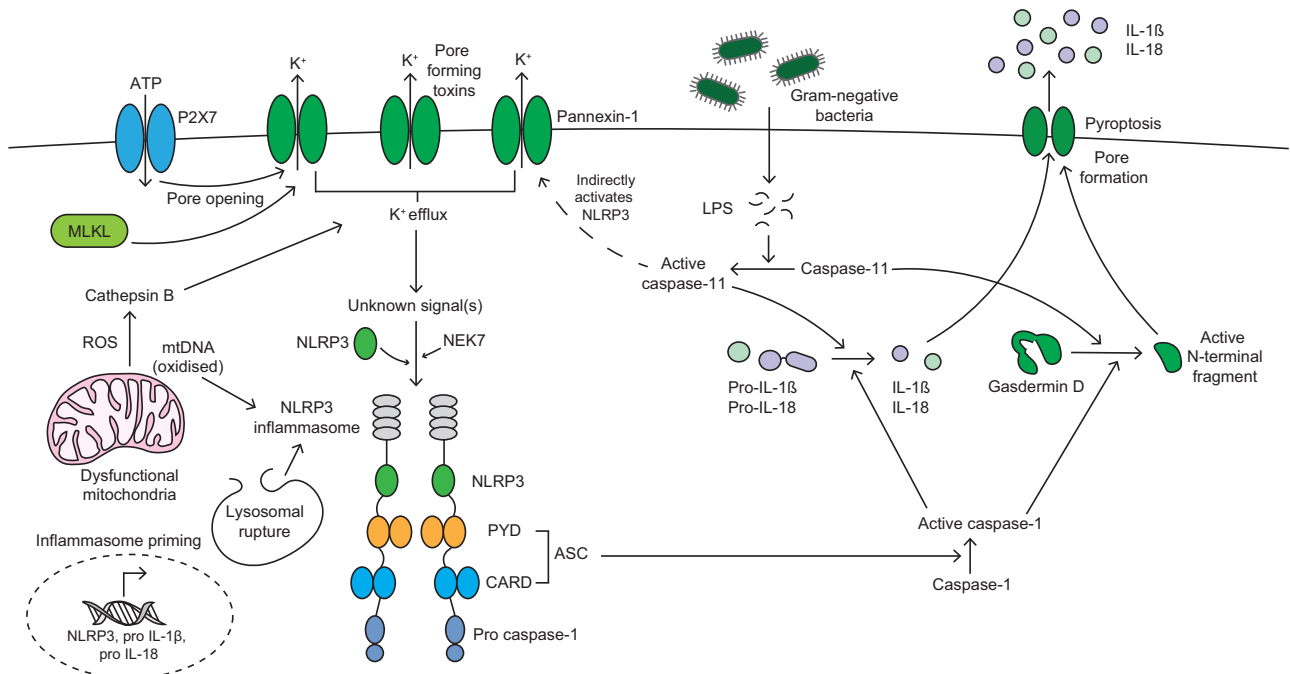


Figure 3. Inflammatory caspase-1 is activated within the inflammasome protein complex,^{4,37,38} which typically consists of a Nod-like receptor (NLR; such as Nod-like-receptor pyrin domain containing 3 (NLRP3)), adaptor protein apoptosis-associated speck-like protein containing a CARD (ASC) and caspase-1.³⁷⁻³⁹ Initial inflammasome priming is required for transcriptional upregulation of inflammasome machinery, such as NLRP3, pro-IL-1 β and pro-IL-18.^{37,38} A second signal then induces inflammasome assembly and activation. The NLRP3 inflammasome is activated by lysosomal rupture, reactive oxygen species (ROS), oxidised mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and cathepsin B.^{38,43} Potassium (K⁺) efflux is a common NLRP3-activation mechanism, induced by P2X7-mediated pore opening, pore-forming toxins, pannexin-1 or MLKL-mediated pore opening.⁴⁴ The NLRP3 inflammasome activates caspase-1, which cleaves precursor cytokines IL-1 β and IL-18 into their active forms and gasdermin-D into its N-terminal fragment. The N-terminal fragment of gasdermin-D forms a plasma membrane pore facilitating pro-inflammatory cytokines release and inducing pyroptosis.⁴⁰⁻⁴² Gram-negative bacterial lipopolysaccharide (LPS) can activate caspase-11,⁴⁰ which also cleaves gasdermin-D cleavage and indirectly activates the NLRP3 inflammasome via pannexin-1.⁴⁷

VDVAD (caspase-2) binds caspase-3 and -7 and LETD (caspase-6) binds caspase-3, -8 and -9.^{55,58,59} VEID has a stronger efficacy for caspase-3 than its target caspase-6, IETD has a stronger efficacy for caspase-3 and -6 than its target caspases -8 and -10 and LEHD has a stronger efficacy for caspase-8 and -10 than their intended substrate IETD, and LEHD also binds caspase-3 and -6.^{55,58,59} In addition, z-VAD-fmk also binds other cysteine proteases, such as calpains and cathepsins.⁵¹

Caspase activity can also be modulated by siRNA-mediated gene knockdown, dominant-negative proteins and conditional and global gene knockout. RNA interference technology may cause alternative signalling induced by short RNA species and off-target effects, thus appropriate controls are still critical.⁶⁰

CASPASES AND RGC DEATH

Caspase-dependent RGC death occurs after eye and brain injuries, in retinal and optic nerve degenerative disorders^{61,62} and during development.^{63,64} Common mechanisms of degeneration between different conditions could lead to broadly translatable therapeutics. Caspase involvement in RGC death in animal models, primary cell culture and human postmortem specimens are highlighted in this section. Relative efficacy of neuroprotection is shown for direct caspase inhibitors in Table 1 and upstream indirect inhibitors in Table 2.

Endogenous caspase activity and inhibition in RGC

Development. Caspase-dependent apoptosis is important in pruning neuronal, including RGC, numbers after normal developmental overproduction,^{63,65} causing an ~50% reduction in RGC

numbers shortly after cell birth, which can be prevented by broad-spectrum caspase inhibitor, Boc-D-fmk.^{66,67} Caspase-3 is pivotal in neuronal developmental apoptosis, with active caspase-3 co-localising to terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase dUTP nick end labelling (TUNEL)-positive RGC in 2–6-day chick embryos,⁶⁷ and caspase-3 inhibition, using z-DEVD-fmk, reducing TUNEL-positive cells by ~50% and increasing RGC numbers, axons and GCL thickness.⁶⁷ Moreover, BARHL2, a member of the *Barh* gene family, which suppresses caspase-3 activation, is essential for developmental preservation of normal complement of RGC subtypes.⁶⁸

Supporting this, caspase-3 knockout mice express a brain-specific phenotype with excessive neuronal numbers and cellular disorganisation, dying at 1–3 weeks of age.^{3,69} Similarly, caspase-9 knockout results in a selective CNS phenotype, characterised by severe brain malformations and high perinatal lethality without gross abnormality of other body parts.^{70,71} Caspase-2 (NEDD2) gene expression is elevated during neurogenesis and down-regulated in the mature brain and retina.^{72,73} However, caspase-2 knockout mice develop normally and lack overt phenotypic abnormalities, with minimal CNS or retinal defects. The role of caspase-2 in RGC neurogenesis is therefore unclear. In more mature mouse retinae, there are no alterations in caspase-3, -6, -7, -8 or -9 expression between 6 and 24 weeks.⁷⁴ However, there was a reduction in cIAP-1 suggesting a possible role for caspases at this stage.⁷⁴

Induced caspase activity and anti-caspase treatment in RGC

Optic neuritis. Multiple sclerosis (MS) is an autoimmune, demyelinating CNS disease and a major cause of non-traumatic disability in young adults. Optic neuritis involves ON inflammation and

Table 1. Treatments directly targeting caspases in RGC degenerative disease

Caspase	Model	Inhibitor	Time at the end of the study (days)	Percentage surviving RGC (% untreated)	Percentage surviving RGC (% treated)	References
Broad spectrum	ONT	z-VAD	14	16.8 ^a	34.5 ^a	61
	75 min raised IOP	Q-VD-OPH	7–21	39–64	63–71	62
Caspase-1	ONT	NLRP3 –/–	3–28	78–13	89–25	108
	NMDA-RGC explants	YVAD-fmk	2	18	12	135
Caspase-2	ONT	z-VDAD-fmk	15	12.3	60	95,96
	ONT	siCASP2	21–84	10–7	95–96	91,116
Caspase-3	Optic neuritis	siCASP2	21	65.5	79.3	81
	ONT	z-DEVD-cmk	7–28	10–34.3	24.3–47.4	61,100,101
Caspase-3 and -6	NMDA-RGC explants	DEVD-fmk	2	18	26	135
	NMDA-RGC explants	DQMD-fmk	2	18	41.6	135
Caspase-6	ONT	SIMA 13a	13	16.8 ^a	37 ^a	61
	ONT	CASP6 DN	21	14.2	39.4	96
Caspase-7	ONT	z-VEID	14	16.8 ^a	48.2 ^a	61
	NMDA-RGC explants	VEID-fmk	2	18	41.6	135
Caspase-8	30 min artery ligation	z-VEID-fmk	14	33.9	46.2	161
	30 min artery ligation	siCASP6	14	30 ^a	48 ^a	161
Caspase-8 and -9	ONT	CASP7 –/–	28	38	76	106
	ONT	z-IETD (+/–) -fmk	14	16.8 ^a	31.5–60.7 ^a	61,97
Caspase-9	ONT	IETD-CHO	14	NA	33.1	97
	NMDA-RGC explants	IETD-fmk	2	18	27	135
Caspase-8 and -9	30 min artery ligation	z-IETD-fmk	14	33.9	42.2	161
	30 min artery ligation	siCASP8	14	30.0 ^a	48.4 ^a	161
Caspase-9	ONT	z-IETD-fmk and z-LEHD-fmk	14	NA	38.7	97
	ONT	z-LEHD- (+/–) fmk	14	16.8 ^a	29.1–34.9 ^a	61,97
	NMDA-RGC explants	LEHD-fmk	2	18	39	135

Specific pharmacological inhibitors, gene knockdown (i.e., siRNA) or gene knockout (–/–) treatment are displayed with the percentage of surviving RGC in untreated and treated retinae. ^aFor calculations, values for uninjured Fluoro-Gold and RBPMS RGC counts not stated in Shabanzadeh *et al.*¹⁶¹ and values for identical animals (Sprague Dawley female adult rats) with Fluoro-Gold and RGC counts per mm² were used from Weishaupt *et al.*⁹⁷

demyelination and is a common presenting feature of MS⁷⁵ associated with visual loss. The extent of visual recovery after acute optic neuritis is influenced by demyelination, axonal loss and RGC death.⁷⁶ The experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE) model is the most common MS animal model induced by myelin oligodendrocyte glycoprotein (MOG) peptide administration causing autoimmunity, inflammation and neurodegeneration.^{77,78} In the EAE rat model cleaved caspase-3 immunolocalised to Fluoro-Gold-labelled RGC suggesting that RGC die by apoptosis,⁷⁷ though in the EAE mouse model only full-length caspase-3 immunostaining is present in the GCL.⁷⁸ RGC NADH dehydrogenase (mitochondrial electron transport chain) overexpression suppresses RGC death, rescuing 88% of RGC and reducing cleaved caspase-3 immunostaining in Thy1-labelled RGC.⁷⁹ Treatment with erythropoietin (EPO) reduces RGC death and active caspase-3 levels, supporting a critical role for caspase-3.⁸⁰ Various regulators upstream of caspase-3 are also neuroprotective (Table 2).

In a refined mouse model of MS, the MOGTCR×Thy1CFP mouse, which develops optic neuritis only, either spontaneously or following induction with Bordetella pertussis toxin,⁸¹ RGC express active caspase-2 and intravitreal injection of a modified siRNA against caspase-2 (siCASP2) protects ~80% of RGC against apoptosis and axonal degeneration,⁸¹ suggesting a critical role for caspase-2 in RGC apoptosis after optic neuritis.

Traumatic optic neuropathy. Traumatic optic neuropathy (TON) is a major cause of visual loss after brain and eye injury. TON can be either direct – when the ON is crushed or severed – or more commonly indirect, when brain or ocular injury causes secondary RGC death or ON injury. Spontaneous recovery occurs in a minority of patients.⁸² However, the most common outcome is permanent blindness, and at present, there is no treatment that

improves outcome.^{83,84} Direct TON can be caused by penetrating injury, such as craniofacial fractures, or direct compression from orbital haemorrhage.⁸⁵ ON transection (ONT) and ON crush (ONC) in animal models can be used to study degenerative mechanisms and evaluate neuroprotective and regenerative therapies.^{86,87}

RGC death after ON injury is progressive and the severity is dependent upon type of lesion and distance from the eye.^{88,89} After direct TON, RGC begin to degenerate 5 days after axotomy,⁹⁰ and 90% die between 7 and 14 days^{86,89,91,92} through caspase-dependent apoptosis.^{93,94} Cleaved caspase-2,^{91,95,96} -8,^{61,97} -9,^{90,98,99} -3,^{90,100–105} -6⁶¹ and -7,^{102,106} as well as inflammatory caspases -11¹⁰⁷ and -1,¹⁰⁸ have all been detected in RGC after crush or axotomy, highlighting the crucial role played by caspases in axotomy-induced RGC death.

Caspase-3 is activated after RGC axotomy,^{90,100–105} and z-DEVD-fmk inhibition reduces RGC death.^{99,101–103,109,110} However, z-DEVD-fmk also inhibits caspase-6, -7, -8 -9 and -10^{55,59} and neither delayed nor multiple treatments of z-DEVD-fmk improved the RGC survival.¹⁰¹ Caspase-3 is also indirectly reduced in RGC-neuroprotective therapies, such as either Rho-associated protein kinase (ROCK) inhibition^{111,112} or treatment with the broad-spectrum histone deacetylase inhibitor, valproic acid.^{113,114} Moreover, a rabbit fluid percussion injury model of indirect TON increases cleaved caspase-3 in retinal lysate, where full-length caspase-3 is localised to RGC and pharmacological inhibition with z-DEVD-fmk is RGC neuroprotective.¹¹⁵

Caspase-7 gene knockout also protects a limited proportion of RGC after axotomy¹⁰⁶ and pharmacological inhibition of caspase-6 and -8, using z-VEID-fmk and z-IETD-fmk or a dominant-negative against caspase-6 (CASP6 DN) provides some RGC neuroprotection and promotes regeneration.⁶¹ Although caspase-6 is localised to RGC and some microglia, regeneration is an indirect effect of ciliary neurotrophic factor (CNTF) production by retinal glia.⁹⁶

Table 2. Treatments that affect targets upstream of caspases and prevent RGC death

Disease	Injury	Treatment	Effect on caspase by treatment	End of the study (days)	Effect on RGC	References
Direct ON injury	ONC	ROCK inhibition	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 immunostaining in GCL and primary RGC culture lysate	14	ROCK shRNA increases RGC survival to 143% of EGFP shRNA control	111,112
	ONC	Calcineurin inhibition	Reduced cleaved caspase-9 protein	—	ND	98
	ONC	Deletion of CHOP	Reduced full-length caspase-3 immunostaining	14	CHOP KO mice had 52% surviving RGC compared with 24% in sham	198
	ONT	Kv1.3 siRNA	Reduced caspase-3 and -9 mRNA expression	14	KV 1.3-1169 siRNA increases RGC survival 3.5-fold compared with control	199
	ONC	Valproic acid (VPA)	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 RGC immunostaining	14	VPA treatment has 44% surviving RGC compared with 27% in vehicle	113,114
Glaucoma	Hypertonic saline injections into limbal vein	Morphine	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 and -8 protein	56	Morphine treatment has 65.9% surviving RGC compared with 17.3% in control	166
	Laser photocoagulation	Cobra venom factor (CVF); complement depletion	Reduced cleaved caspase-8 and -9 protein	42	CVF treatment has 41.5% surviving RGC compared with 28.4% in control	165
	Suture pulley compression	C-Jun N-terminal kinase (C-JNK) inhibitor	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 immunostaining	0.5	C-JNK inhibition has 23.6% of RGC as TUNEL positive compared with 52.4% in vehicle control and 1.49% in uninjured control	167
	Saline injection into anterior chamber	Cyclosporine A (CSA); inhibits cyclophilin D and MPTP	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 protein, immunolocalised to RGC	14	CSA treatment has 93% surviving RGC compared with 77% in ischaemic control	200
	Translimbal photocoagulation laser	Minocycline, tetracycline antibiotic	Reduced caspase-1 and -4 but not caspase-8 and -12 gene expression	8	ND	170,201
Glutamate excitotoxicity	Glutamate – primary rat RGC culture	Pilocarpine (M1 muscarinic receptor agonist)	Reduced caspase-3 gene expression and full-length protein	1	Cell viability is 42% after 1 mM of glutamate, increases by 32% with pilocarpine treatment	153,202
	NMDA administration	Thioredoxin (TRX)	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 and -9 protein	7	TRX treatment has 56.6% surviving RGC compared with 13.4% in control	203
Ischaemic injury	Ischaemic reperfusion injury	Brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF)	Reduced full-length caspase-2 GCL immunostaining	7	BDNF treatment has 69.6% surviving RGC compared with 44.1% in sham	153,154
	Ischaemic reperfusion injury	VPA	Reduced cleaved caspase-12 protein	7	VPA treatment has 83.5% surviving GCL cells compared with 57.5% in sham	157
Branch retinal vein occlusion (BRVO)	Laser photocoagulation	Minocycline, tetracycline antibiotic	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 immunostaining in GCL	7	<i>In vivo</i> OCT imaging shows increased RNFL +GCL thickness 3 days after minocycline. Minocycline has 55.2% RGC compared with 46.8% in saline control	204
	STZ	Somatostatin (SST)	Reduced cleaved caspase-8 and -3 protein	14	Reduced TUNEL cells in GCL, 36.8% in STZ compared with 13.7% in treated control	195
Diabetic retinopathy	STZ	Edaravone (free radical scavenger)	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 protein	28	Reduced TUNEL cells in GCL, 42% in vehicle compared with 9.5% in treated	205
	High glucose primary RGC culture	Erythropoietin (EPO; antioxidant)	Reduced full-length caspase-3 and -9 protein	—	Reduced apoptotic Hoechst 33358-stained cells, 49.1% in high glucose compared with 25.7% in EPO treated	206
Optic neuritis	High glucose primary RGC culture	L-Carnitine (endogenous mitochondrial membrane compound)	Reduced full-length caspase-3 and -9 protein	—	Reduced apoptotic Hoechst 33358 stained cells, 49.1% in high glucose compared with 15.7% in L-Carnitine treated	207
	EAE model	EPO	Reduced cleaved caspase-3 immunostaining	8	EPO treatment has 55% RGC surviving compared with 30% in vehicle control	80
PBI	Blast wave	Compound 49b (beta-adrenergic receptor agonist)	Reduced cleaved caspase-3	3	ND	125

Abbreviations: CHOP, CCAAT/enhancer binding homologous protein; EAE, experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis; MPTP, mitochondrial permeability transition pore; NMDA, N-methyl-d-aspartate; PBI, primary blast injury; ROCK, Rho-associated protein kinase; STZ, streptozotocin; TUNEL, terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase dUTP nick end labelling.

In addition, combined caspase-8 and -9 inhibition provides additive survival benefits compared with single inhibition,^{90,97,102} which may suggest either that both intrinsic and extrinsic apoptotic pathways are activated following direct optic nerve injury or that there are increased off-target effects. Inhibition of caspase-8 can also promote caspase-independent RGC death, such as necroptosis.²⁰

Recent studies have indicated a pivotal role of caspase-2 in apoptotic RGC injury.^{91,95,96,116,117} After ON axotomy and crush, active caspase-2 is exclusively localised to RGC, and its inhibition using siRNA provides significant neuroprotection.^{91,95,96} For example, intravitreal administration of either siCASP2⁹¹ or the pharmacological inhibitor z-VDVAD-fmk⁹⁵ protect 98% and 60% of RGC, respectively, for up to 30 days and >95% of RGC are protected from death for 12 weeks if siCASP2 is injected every 8 days.¹¹⁶ Pharmacological inhibition with z-VDVAD-fmk also inhibits caspase-3 and -7,⁵⁹ though activation of these caspases was not affected. The siCASP2 is being developed by Quark Pharmaceuticals Inc. and is currently in Phase III clinical trials for ischaemic optic neuropathy and glaucoma.¹¹⁶

NLRP3-induced neuroinflammation promotes RGC death after partial ONC.¹⁰⁸ NLRP3 expression is upregulated in retinal microglia and NLRP3 inflammasome activation upregulates retinal cleaved caspase-1 and IL-1 β , which is prevented in NLRP3 knockout mice, in which RGC are protected against axotomy-induced RGC death.¹⁰⁸ The P2X7 ionotropic ATP-gated receptors are implicated in RGC degeneration; P2X7-mediated potassium efflux induces NLRP3 inflammasome formation and caspase-1 activation.⁴⁴ P2X7 receptor-deficient mice displayed delayed RGC loss and reduced phagocytic microglia at early time points after RGC axotomy.¹¹⁸ Intravitreal administration of a selective P2X7 receptor antagonist A438079 delayed RGC death, suggesting P2X7 receptor antagonism as a potential therapeutic strategy.¹¹⁸ Caspase-11 expression is also upregulated in RGC after ONC and ONT.¹⁰⁷

Primary ocular blast injury. Although direct ON injury results in rapid RGC degeneration, indirect blast-induced TON is delayed and progressive. After explosive blast, the sonic blast-wave causes primary blast injury (PBI), which can cause indirect TON.^{119,120} Secondary blast injury causes direct and indirect TON, when explosively propelled fragments impact the eye, head and ON. Blast injury represents a significant threat to military personnel in modern warfare causing visual loss.^{121,122} Multiple studies have demonstrated increased cleaved caspase-3 in the GCL and ON between 3 and 72 h after whole animal^{123,124} and direct local ocular blast exposures.¹²⁵ Moreover, caspase-3 activation displays a cumulative effect after multiple exposures,¹²⁴ which is comparable to repeated exposure in combat, potentially leading to worse structural and functional visual outcomes.¹²⁶ Additionally, an alternative model using trinitrotoluene (TNT) explosives detected active caspase-3 exclusively in photoreceptors and not RGC.¹²⁷ Other apoptotic markers, such as Bax, Bcl-xL and Cytochrome C are also elevated in the retina up to 24 h after blast injury.¹²⁵ DBA/2J mice lack ocular regulatory mechanism of immune privilege in the anterior chamber,¹²⁸ and are thus used as a closed globe injury model to approximate features of open globe injury, without complications of infection.¹²⁹ In this model, full-length inflammatory caspase-1 is immunolocalised to the inner nuclear layer (INL) and GCL in control retinæ, but immunostaining declines after blast injury,¹²⁹ suggesting caspase-1 cleavage. However, necroptotic markers RIPK1 and RIPK3 have increased retinal expression, with RIPK1 localised to outer nuclear layer (ONL), INL and Müller glia and RIPK3 in the ONL, INL and GCL 3 and 28 days post-ocular PBI.¹³⁰ These findings suggest potential activation of necroptotic or pyroptotic death pathways.

Although caspase activation immediately follows blast injury, RGC death does not occur until later time points,¹³⁰ with retinal

nerve fibre layer (RNFL) thickness unchanged for 3 months postblast.^{131,132} Axonal degeneration at 28 days after ON demyelination¹³⁰ suggests that, as in direct TON, ON degeneration may precede RGC death.¹³³ Research into blast-induced RGC degeneration is in its infancy. However, roles for apoptotic and potentially inflammatory caspases in RGC death are apparent.

Excitotoxicity-induced RGC death. Excitatory neurotransmitter glutamate is linked to retinal degeneration, for example, in glaucoma, through overactivation of *N*-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptors, calcium overload and subsequent mitochondrial dysfunction. Excitotoxicity-induced RGC death is caspase dependent; broad-spectrum caspase inhibition preserves GCL cells.¹³⁴ Intravitreal caspase-3, -6, -8 and -9 inhibitors, DEVD-fmk, VEID-fmk, IETD-fmk and LEHD-fmk respectively, significantly protect RGC, but caspase-1 and -4 inhibition, using YVAD-fmk, does not,¹³⁵ suggesting that excitotoxicity-induced RGC death is apoptotic but not pyroptotic. The greatest RGC neuroprotection is provided by DEVD-fmk, which inhibits caspase-3 and also -2, -6, -7, -8, -9 and -10. The latter, LEHD-fmk (intended for caspase-9), is most specific for caspase-3 and -8 and also inhibits -6 and -10.^{58,59,135}

The IQACRG amino-acid sequence is conserved in the active site of caspase-1, -2, -3, -6 and -7 and the synthetic peptide, with amino-acid sequence IQACRG, acts as an enzymatically inactive caspase mimetic, thus binds to caspase substrates as a pseudo-enzyme and protects them from proteolysis by caspases. Treatment with IQACRG caspase mimetic protects RGC from excitotoxicity-induced death both *in vivo* and in primary culture.¹³⁶

Light-induced retinopathy. Light exposure can cause light-induced retinal damage (LIRD) and blindness,^{137,138} and a light-toxicity animal model induces photoreceptor and caspase-dependent RGC apoptosis.¹³⁹ Cleaved caspase-3 is elevated in RGC 6 h after toxic light exposure and reaches a peak after 3 days,^{140–142} co-localising with increased staining for Ras homologue enriched in the brain (RHEB), cyclic AMP response element modulator-1 (CREM-1), transcription initiator factor IIB (TFIIB), pyruvate kinase isozyme type M2 (PKM2), SYF2 pre-mRNA splicing factor (SYF2) and RNA-binding motif protein, X-linked (RBMX), which are all involved in cell death pathways.^{140–145} Nuclear factor of activated T cells, cytoplasmic 4 (NFATc4) (a component of T-cell activation and a regulator of the immune response) are also co-localised with cleaved caspase-3, caspase-8 and Fas-L in RGC, suggesting that NFATc4 may upregulate Fas-L and participate in RGC apoptosis.¹⁴⁶ Intravitreal mitogen-activated protein kinases/extracellular signal-regulated kinases (MAPK/ERK) inhibitor reduces PKM2 and active caspase-3 protein expression, suggesting that light-induced RGC apoptosis is in part dependent on MAPK/ERK pathway.¹⁴¹ Together, these studies show that RGC apoptosis is correlated with caspase-3 cleavage but not that RGC death in LIRD is caspase-3 dependent.

Ischaemic RGC death. Retinal ischaemia is a common cause of visual impairment and sight loss¹⁴⁷ and can be experimentally induced by clamping or ligation of the ophthalmic artery, raising intraocular pressure (IOP) or bilateral common carotid artery occlusion.^{148–151} The degree of RGC loss after ischaemic injury is dependent upon the length of ischaemic interval and is progressive. For example, after 45 min of ligation, ischaemia induces ~50% of RGC to degenerate over a 2-week period, whereas 120 min induces death of 99% over 3 months.¹⁵¹

Ischaemic RGC degeneration is caspase dependent, evidenced by neuroprotection with broad-spectrum caspase inhibitors (Q-VD-OPH and Boc-aspartyl-fmk).⁶² In Thy1-positive RGC, full-length caspase-2 expression is increased 1,¹⁵² 6,^{153,154} 24^{152,154} and 72 h¹⁵² after ischaemia and antisense oligonucleotide inhibitor of caspase-2 (antisense Nedd-2 oligonucleotide 5'-QGCTCG GCGCCGCAATTCCAGL-3') protected inner retinal thickness at 7

days.¹⁵² Brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) is also RGC neuroprotective and reduced caspase-2 expression.¹⁵³ Full-length caspase-3 immunolocalised to the GCL 4 h after injury¹⁵⁵ and preinjury intravitreal siRNA caspase-3 injection was RGC neuroprotective,¹⁵⁶ though other studies have found full-length caspase-3 to be exclusively in the INL and ONL.¹⁵² Valproic acid, a broad-spectrum histone deacetylase inhibitor, protects RGC after ischaemic reperfusion (I/R) injury caused by raised IOP,^{113,114,157} reducing cleaved caspase-3 and -12 expression.^{114,157}

Pannexin-1 is a mammalian cell membrane channel-forming protein that acts as a diffusional pathway for ions and small molecules. Pannexin-1 facilitates neurotoxicity in the ischaemic brain and retinal pannexin-1 gene knockout suppresses inflammasome-mediated caspase-1 activation and IL-1 β production 3 h after ischaemic injury and reduces RGC degeneration at 14 days.¹⁵⁸ Administration of YVAD-fmk (caspase-1, -4 and -5) protects inner retinal morphology in some, but not all, studies,^{152,154,155} leaving the role of caspase-1 in question. P2X receptor stimulation induces ATP influx, potassium ion efflux and downstream NLRP3 inflammasome and caspase-1 activation.^{37,38} During stimulated ischaemia (oxygen/glucose deprivation) of human organotypic retinal cultures, P2X receptor stimulation causes RGC death, suggesting possible involvement of NLRP3 inflammasome and caspase-1.¹⁵⁹

RGC axon degeneration after central retinal artery occlusion is mediated by the mitochondrial intrinsic apoptotic pathway¹⁶⁰ – cytosolic Bax, a pro-apoptotic Bcl-2 family member, levels are decreased at 3 and 6 h post injury, whereas mitochondrial Bax levels are elevated at 3, 6 and 24 h, suggesting that Bax translocates to the mitochondria.¹⁶⁰ In addition, cytosolic Cytochrome C levels are elevated at 3 h post injury but not at 6 and 24 h, and cleaved caspase-9 levels are elevated at 3 h.¹⁶⁰

RGC are protected by intravitreal caspase-6 and -8 inhibitors (z-VEID-fmk and z-IETD-fmk) and siRNA against caspase-6 and -8 (siCASP6 and siCASP8) after I/R injury.¹⁶¹ Two different siRNA were used for each caspase making off-target effects unlikely. Caspase-6 inhibition may act indirectly by increasing retinal glial CNTF production.⁹⁶ Two weeks after ischaemia, z-VEID-fmk (caspase-6, but also -3 and -7) and z-IETD-fmk (caspase-8 but also -3, -6, and -10) protect only a small proportion of RGC, whereas both siCASP8 and siCASP6 administration elevate RGC survival by ~ 60%.¹⁶¹ This suggests that small peptide inhibitors are less effective, as they act as a competitive inhibitor for the caspase substrates, whereas siRNA gene knockdown reduces caspase gene expression and could affect non-apoptotic caspase roles, such as caspase-8 in complex IIb, 'FADDosome', 'rioptosome' and inflammasome formation.²⁰

Glaucoma. Glaucoma is a complex, multifactorial disease affecting > 60 million people worldwide¹⁶² and is associated with raised IOP causing RGC death. Genetic background¹⁶³ and age¹⁶⁴ are also associated with disease development. Glaucoma is currently treated by IOP control; however, there is an unmet clinical need for a neuroprotective treatment.

Acute severe IOP elevation induces I/R injury, but models use less severe IOP elevation to simulate glaucoma, include the photocoagulation laser model,¹⁶⁵ injection of hypertonic saline solution,¹⁶⁶ injection of paramagnetic microspheres into the anterior chamber, suture-pulley compression,¹⁶⁷ intracameral transforming growth factor beta (TGF- β) injection¹⁶⁸ and AAV-TGF- β transfection to induce trabecular meshwork fibrosis.¹⁶⁹

Apoptotic caspases -3, -8 and -9 are cleaved in RGC after a period of elevated IOP^{166,167,170–176} and inflammatory caspases -1, -4 and -12 are also upregulated.¹⁷⁰

In response to acute elevated IOP, NLRP3 inflammasome and IL-1 β production are induced,^{177,178} mediated through high-mobility group box-1 (HMGB1) via the NF- κ B pathway.¹⁷⁸ HMGB1 promotes NLRP3 and ASC elevation leading to caspase-1

maturation. Caspase-8 acts upstream of the NF- κ B HMGB1-caspase-8 pathway and induces the activation of NLRP3 and IL-1 β production.¹⁷⁸ Toll-like receptor 4 (TLR4) activation increases macrophage caspase-8 expression upregulating IL-1 β though the NF- κ B pathway¹⁷⁸ and causes RGC death through the extrinsic pathway. Caspase-8 inhibition, using intravitreal z-IETD-fmk, reduces RGC death through NLRP1 and NLRP3 downregulation, though inhibition of a direct effect of caspase-8 (or other caspases) inhibition on the extrinsic apoptotic pathway is not excluded. Caspase-8 inhibition completely suppresses retinal IL-1 β expression, but caspase-1 inhibition, using z-YVAD-fmk, does not, suggesting that caspase-8 regulates IL-1 β expression through caspase-1-dependent and -independent pathways.¹⁷⁷

Primary open-angle and normal-tension glaucoma patients display serum autoantibodies against retinal and ON antigens.^{179–182} A 'glaucoma-like' syndrome, without direct damage to the retina or ON, has been induced using immunisation of ON homogenate causing RGC degeneration,^{179,183} with increased GCL full-length caspase-3 expression at 14 and 22 days after immunisation.¹⁷⁹ However, RGC numbers did not decline until 22 days after immunisation.¹⁷⁹

Diabetic retinopathy. RGC degenerate early in the disease process in the human diabetic retinopathy (DR) retinae demonstrated by scanning laser polimetry showing reduced RNFL thickness in DR patients compared with healthy controls.^{184–186} TUNEL-positive RGC are increased in diabetic rats and in human postmortem retinae¹⁸⁷ and cleaved caspase-3, caspase-9, Fas and Bax localise to RGC.^{188,189}

Diabetes mellitus develops in the Akita, insulin gene mutation (Ins2) mouse, after streptozotocin (STZ; toxic to β cells) administration, and in the Otsuka Long-Evans Tokushima fatty rats (OLETF; develop insulin resistance).^{190–193} In STZ diabetic mice, retinal caspase activity (assessed with a variety of non-specific substrates) is increased 8 weeks after induction and GCL counts are reduced by 20–25% 14 weeks after induction, with TUNEL positivity and cleaved caspase-3 in the GCL, suggesting RGC apoptosis.^{192,194} Caspase-2, -8 and -9 activity (using substrate sequences VDVAD, IETD and LEHD) transiently increases initially. By 4 months, caspase-3 activity increases and caspase-1, -3, -4 and -5 activities remain elevated,¹⁹⁴ corroborated by elevated cleaved caspase-8 and -3 levels in whole retinal lysates¹⁹⁵ and caspase-3 GCL immunolocalisation.¹⁹⁶ In primary retinal explants exposed to high glucose media, there are more cleaved caspase-3- and -9-positive RGC compared with explants in normal glucose media.¹⁹⁷

CASPASES AND RGC AXON REGENERATION

In addition to promoting RGC survival, caspases promote RGC axon regeneration after ON injury. Pharmacological inhibition of caspase-6 and -8, using z-VEID-fmk and z-IETD-fmk, provide RGC neuroprotection and promote limited RGC axon regeneration,⁶¹ with few axons extending > 1000 μ m beyond the lesion site. Similarly, few RGC axons regenerated through the lesion site with inhibition of caspase-6 by a dominant negative (CASP6 DN)⁹⁶; however, combined suppression of caspase-2 and -6 using siCASP2 and CASP6 DN promoted significant regeneration, with an average of 195 \pm 9 axons growing beyond 1000 μ m.⁹⁶ Although caspase-6 is localised to RGC and some microglia, the neuroprotective and pro-regenerative effects of caspase-6 inhibition are mediated indirectly by CNTF upregulation in retinal glia and are blocked by suppression of gp130 and the JAK/STAT pathway.⁹⁶ These studies reveal a novel non-apoptotic role for caspases and warrants further investigation.

CONCLUSION

Postmitotic CNS neurons, including RGC, do not regenerate their axons after trauma or injury; hence RGC trauma or disease can lead to permanent visual loss. Understanding the signalling pathways in RGC injury is vital for the development of therapeutic interventions, such as pharmacological inhibitors, RNA interference technology or gene therapies. Caspases, a family of cysteine aspartate proteases, mediate RGC death in physiology, such as during development, as well as trauma and disease, and their inhibition can prevent RGC death. Caspase-3 is implicated during RGC developmental pruning, whereas most apoptotic and inflammatory caspases are implicated in trauma and disease, with siRNA knockdown of caspase-2 providing the greatest neuroprotection after axotomy. Non-apoptotic roles of caspases, such as inflammatory pyroptotic death or facilitating formation of necroptotic complexes are also critical in RGC death. Caspases also have a novel role in RGC axon regeneration; in particular, caspase-6 inhibition mediates regeneration indirectly through CNTF upregulation in retinal glia. Understanding the key pathways for caspase-dependant RGC death is fundamental to the development and effective translation of neuroprotective treatments from preclinical studies to clinical practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was funded by a Fight for Sight PhD studentship ref.: 1560/1561.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Berry M, Ahmed Z, Lorber B, Douglas M, Logan A. Regeneration of axons in the visual system. *Restor Neurol Neurosci* 2008; **26**: 147–174.
- Nicholson DW. Caspase structure, proteolytic substrates, and function during apoptotic cell death. *Cell Death Differ* 1999; **6**: 1028–1042.
- Nicholson DW, Thornberry NA. Caspases: killer proteases. *Trends Biochem Sci* 1997; **22**: 299–306.
- Jimenez Fernandez D, Lamkanfi M. Inflammatory caspases: key regulators of inflammation and cell death. *Biol Chem* 2015; **396**: 193–203.
- Fan T-J, Han L-H, Cong R-S, Liang J. Caspase family proteases and apoptosis. *Acta Biochim Biophys Sin (Shanghai)* 2005; **37**: 719–727.
- Parrish AB, Freel CD, Kornbluth S. Cellular mechanisms controlling caspase activation and function. *Cold Spring Harb Perspect Biol* 2013; **5**.
- Cullen SP, Martin SJ. Caspase activation pathways: some recent progress. *Cell Death Differ* 2009; **16**: 935–938.
- Kumar S. Caspase function in programmed cell death. *Cell Death Differ* 2007; **14**: 32–43.
- Kischkel FC, Hellbardt S, Behrmann I, Germer M, Pawlita M, Krammer PH *et al*. Cytotoxicity-dependent Apo-1 (Fas/Cd95)-associated proteins form a death-inducing signaling complex (Disc) with the receptor. *EMBO J* 1995; **14**: 5579–5588.
- Chinnaiyan AM, O'Rourke K, Tewari M, Dixit VM. FADD, a novel death domain-containing protein, interacts with the death domain of Fas and initiates apoptosis. *Cell* 1995; **81**: 505–512.
- Wajant H. The Fas signaling pathway: more than a paradigm. *Science* 2002; **296**: 1635–1636.
- Muzio M. Signalling by proteolysis: death receptors induce apoptosis. *Int J Clin Lab Res* 1998; **28**: 141–147.
- Kuwana T, Smith JJ, Muzio M, Dixit V, Newmeyer DD, Kornbluth S. Apoptosis induction by caspase-8 is amplified through the mitochondrial release of cytochrome c. *J Biol Chem* 1998; **273**: 16589–16594.
- Kroemer G, Galluzzi L, Brenner C. Mitochondrial membrane permeabilization in cell death. *Physiol Rev* 2007; **87**: 99–163.
- Nickells RW. Variations in the rheostat model of apoptosis: what studies of retinal ganglion cell death tell us about the functions of the Bcl2 family proteins. *Exp Eye Res* 2010; **91**: 2–8.
- Li P, Nijhawan D, Budihardjo I, Srinivasula SM, Ahmad M, Alnemri ES *et al*. Cytochrome c and dATP-dependent formation of Apaf-1/caspase-9 complex initiates an apoptotic protease cascade. *Cell* 1997; **91**: 479–489.
- Adams JM, Cory S. Apoptosomes: engines for caspase activation. *Curr Opin Cell Biol* 2002; **14**: 715–720.
- Vanden Berghe T, Linkermann A, Joann-Lanhouet S, Walczak H, Vandenabeele P. Regulated necrosis: the expanding network of non-apoptotic cell death pathways. *Nat Rev Mol Cell Biol* 2014; **15**: 135–147.
- Micheau O, Tschopp J. Induction of TNF receptor I-mediated apoptosis via two sequential signaling complexes. *Cell* 2003; **114**: 181–190.
- Feltham R, Vince JE, Lawlor KE. Caspase-8: not so silently deadly. *Clin Transl Immunology* 2017; **6**: e124.
- Dondelinger Y, Declercq W, Montessuit S, Roelandt R, Goncalves A, Bruggeman I *et al*. MLKL compromises plasma membrane integrity by binding to phosphatidylinositol phosphates. *Cell Rep* 2014; **7**: 971–981.
- Scott FL, Denault JB, Riedl SJ, Shin H, Renatus M, Salvesen GS. XIAP inhibits caspase-3 and -7 using two binding sites: evolutionarily conserved mechanism of IAPs. *EMBO J* 2005; **24**: 645–655.
- Tenev T, Bianchi K, Darding M, Broemer M, Langlais C, Wallberg F *et al*. The Ripoptosome, a signaling platform that assembles in response to genotoxic stress and loss of IAPs. *Mol Cell* 2011; **43**: 432–448.
- Feoktistova M, Geserick P, Panayotova-Dimitrova D, Leverkus M. Pick your poison: the Ripoptosome, a cell death platform regulating apoptosis and necroptosis. *Cell Cycle* 2012; **11**: 460–467.
- Henry CM, Martin SJ. Caspase-8 acts in a non-enzymatic role as a scaffold for assembly of a pro-inflammatory "FADDosome" complex upon TRAIL stimulation. *Mol Cell* 2017; **65**: 715–29 e5.
- Guo Y, Srinivasula SM, Druilhe A, Fernandes-Alnemri T, Alnemri ES. Caspase-2 induces apoptosis by releasing proapoptotic proteins from mitochondria. *J Biol Chem* 2002; **277**: 13430–13437.
- Lassus P, Opitz-Araya X, Lazebnik Y. Requirement for caspase-2 in stress-induced apoptosis before mitochondrial permeabilization. *Science* 2002; **297**: 1352–1354.
- Ho LH, Read SH, Dorstyn L, Lambrusco L, Kumar S. Caspase-2 is required for cell death induced by cytoskeletal disruption. *Oncogene* 2008; **27**: 3393–3404.
- Tu S, McStay GP, Boucher LM, Mak T, Beere HM, Green DR. In situ trapping of activated initiator caspases reveals a role for caspase-2 in heat shock-induced apoptosis. *Nat Cell Biol* 2006; **8**: 72–U24.
- Tinel A, Tschopp J. The PIDDosome, a protein complex implicated in activation of caspase-2 in response to genotoxic stress. *Science* 2004; **304**: 843–846.
- Sidi S, Sanda T, Kennedy RD, Hagen AT, Jette CA, Hoffmans R *et al*. Chk1 suppresses a caspase-2 apoptotic response to DNA damage that bypasses p53, Bcl-2, and caspase-3. *Cell* 2008; **133**: 864–877.
- Upton JP, Austgen K, Nishino M, Coakley KM, Hagen A, Han D *et al*. Caspase-2 cleavage of BID is a critical apoptotic signal downstream of endoplasmic reticulum stress. *Mol Cell Biol* 2008; **28**: 3943–3951.
- Duan H, Dixit VM. RAIDD is a new 'death' adaptor molecule. *Nature* 1997; **385**: 86–89.
- Lin Y, Ma W, Benchimol S. Pidd, a new death-domain-containing protein, is induced by p53 and promotes apoptosis. *Nat Genet* 2000; **26**: 122–127.
- Bouchier-Hayes L, Green DR. Caspase-2: the orphan caspase. *Cell Death Differ* 2012; **19**: 51–57.
- Lopez-Cruzan M, Sharma R, Tiwari M, Karbach S, Holstein D, Martin CR *et al*. Caspase-2 resides in the mitochondria and mediates apoptosis directly from the mitochondrial compartment. *Cell Death Discov* 2016; **2**: 16005.
- Vanaja SK, Rathinam VA, Fitzgerald KA. Mechanisms of inflammasome activation: recent advances and novel insights. *Trends Cell Biol* 2015; **25**: 308–315.
- Broz P, Dixit VM. Inflammasomes: mechanism of assembly, regulation and signalling. *Nat Rev Immunol* 2016; **16**: 407–420.
- Franchi L, Eigenbrod T, Munoz-Planillo R, Nunez G. The inflammasome: a caspase-1-activation platform that regulates immune responses and disease pathogenesis. *Nat Immunol* 2009; **10**: 241–247.
- Kayagaki N, Stowe IB, Lee BL, O'Rourke K, Anderson K, Warming S *et al*. Caspase-11 cleaves gasdermin D for non-canonical inflammasome signalling. *Nature* 2015; **526**: 666–671.
- Shi J, Zhao Y, Wang K, Shi X, Wang Y, Huang H *et al*. Cleavage of GSDMD by inflammatory caspases determines pyroptotic cell death. *Nature* 2015; **526**: 660–665.
- He WT, Wan H, Hu L, Chen P, Wang X, Huang Z *et al*. Gasdermin D is an executor of pyroptosis and required for interleukin-1 β secretion. *Cell Res* 2015; **25**: 1285–1298.
- Menu P, Vince JE. The NLRP3 inflammasome in health and disease: the good, the bad and the ugly. *Clin Exp Immunol* 2011; **166**: 1–15.
- Munoz-Planillo R, Kuffa P, Martinez-Colon G, Smith BL, Rajendiran TM, Nunez G. K (+) efflux is the common trigger of NLRP3 inflammasome activation by bacterial toxins and particulate matter. *Immunity* 2013; **38**: 1142–1153.
- Gaidt MM, Ebert TS, Chauhan D, Schmidt T, Schmid-Burgk JL, Rapino F *et al*. Human monocytes engage an alternative inflammasome pathway. *Immunity* 2016; **44**: 833–846.

- 46 Wolf AJ, Reyes CN, Liang W, Becker C, Shimada K, Wheeler ML *et al*. Hexokinase is an innate immune receptor for the detection of bacterial peptidoglycan. *Cell* 2016; **166**: 624–636.
- 47 Yang D, He Y, Munoz-Planillo R, Liu Q, Nunez G. Caspase-11 requires the pannexin-1 channel and the purinergic P2X7 pore to mediate pyroptosis and endotoxic shock. *Immunity* 2015; **43**: 923–932.
- 48 Lawlor KE, Khan N, Mildenhall A, Gerlic M, Croker BA, D'Cruz AA *et al*. RIPK3 promotes cell death and NLRP3 inflammasome activation in the absence of MLKL. *Nat Commun* 2015; **6**: 6282.
- 49 Allam R, Lawlor KE, Yu ECW, Mildenhall AL, Moujalled DM, Lewis RS *et al*. Mitochondrial apoptosis is dispensable for NLRP3 inflammasome activation but non-apoptotic caspase-8 is required for inflammasome priming. *EMBO Rep* 2014; **15**: 982–990.
- 50 Gutierrez KD, Davis MA, Daniels BP, Olsen TM, Ralli-Jain P, Tait SW *et al*. MLKL activation triggers NLRP3-mediated processing and release of IL-1 β independently of gasdermin-D. *J Immunol* 2017; **198**: 2156–2164.
- 51 Rozman-Pungercar J, Kopitar-Jerala N, Bogoy M, Turk D, Vasiljeva O, Stefe I *et al*. Inhibition of papain-like cysteine proteases and legumain by caspase-specific inhibitors: when reaction mechanism is more important than specificity. *Cell Death Differ* 2003; **10**: 881–888.
- 52 Caserta TM, Smith AN, Gultice AD, Reedy MA, Brown TL. Q-VD-OPH, a broad spectrum caspase inhibitor with potent antiapoptotic properties. *Apoptosis* 2003; **8**: 345–352.
- 53 Callus BA, Vaux DL. Caspase inhibitors: viral, cellular and chemical. *Cell Death Differ* 2007; **14**: 73–78.
- 54 Ekert PG, Silke J, Vaux DL. Caspase inhibitors. *Cell Death Differ* 1999; **6**: 1081–1086.
- 55 McStay GP, Salvesen GS, Green DR. Overlapping cleavage motif selectivity of caspases: implications for analysis of apoptotic pathways. *Cell Death Differ* 2008; **15**: 322–331.
- 56 Chauvier D, Ancri S, Charriat-Marlangue C, Casimir R, Jacotot E. Broad-spectrum caspase inhibitors: from myth to reality? *Cell Death Differ* 2007; **14**: 387–391.
- 57 Schotte P, Declercq W, Van Huffel S, Vandenabeele P, Beyaert R. Non-specific effects of methyl ketone peptide inhibitors of caspases. *FEBS Lett* 1999; **442**: 117–121.
- 58 Berger AB, Sexton KB, Bogoy M. Commonly used caspase inhibitors designed based on substrate specificity profiles lack selectivity. *Cell Res* 2006; **16**: 961–963.
- 59 Pereira NA, Song Z. Some commonly used caspase substrates and inhibitors lack the specificity required to monitor individual caspase activity. *Biochem Biophys Res Commun* 2008; **377**: 873–877.
- 60 Jackson AL, Linsley PS. Recognizing and avoiding siRNA off-target effects for target identification and therapeutic application. *Nat Rev Drug Discov* 2010; **9**: 57–67.
- 61 Monnier PP, D'Onofrio PM, Magharious M, Hollander AC, Tassew N, Szydłowska K *et al*. Involvement of caspase-6 and caspase-8 in neuronal apoptosis and the regenerative failure of injured retinal ganglion cells. *J Neurosci* 2011; **31**: 10494–10505.
- 62 Patil K, Sharma SC. Broad spectrum caspase inhibitor rescues retinal ganglion cells after ischemia. *Neuroreport* 2004; **15**: 981–984.
- 63 Bahr M. Live or let die - retinal ganglion cell death and survival during development and in the lesioned adult CNS. *Trends Neurosci* 2000; **23**: 483–490.
- 64 Cellerino A, Bahr M, Isenmann S. Apoptosis in the developing visual system. *Cell Tissue Res* 2000; **301**: 53–69.
- 65 Perry VH, Henderson Z, Linden R. Postnatal changes in retinal ganglion cell and optic axon populations in the pigmented rat. *J Comp Neurol* 1983; **219**: 356–368.
- 66 Chavarria T, Baleriola J, Mayordomo R, de Pablo F, de la Rosa EJ. Early neural cell death is an extensive, dynamic process in the embryonic chick and mouse retina. *ScientificWorldJournal* 2013; **2013**: 627240.
- 67 Mayordomo R, Valenciano AI, de la Rosa EJ, Hallbook F. Generation of retinal ganglion cells is modulated by caspase-dependent programmed cell death. *Eur J Neurosci* 2003; **18**: 1744–1750.
- 68 Ding Q, Chen H, Xie X, Libby RT, Tian N, Gan L. BARHL2 differentially regulates the development of retinal amacrine and ganglion neurons. *J Neurosci* 2009; **29**: 3992–4003.
- 69 Kuida K, Zheng TS, Na S, Kuan C, Yang D, Karasuyama H *et al*. Decreased apoptosis in the brain and premature lethality in CPP32-deficient mice. *Nature* 1996; **384**: 368–372.
- 70 Hakem R, Hakem A, Duncan GS, Henderson JT, Woo M, Soengas MS *et al*. Differential requirement for caspase 9 in apoptotic pathways *in vivo*. *Cell* 1998; **94**: 339–352.
- 71 Kuida K, Haydar TF, Kuan CY, Gu Y, Taya C, Karasuyama H *et al*. Reduced apoptosis and cytochrome c-mediated caspase activation in mice lacking caspase 9. *Cell* 1998; **94**: 325–337.
- 72 Kumar S, Tomooka Y, Noda M. Identification of a set of genes with developmentally down-regulated expression in the mouse brain. *Biochem Biophys Res Commun* 1992; **185**: 1155–1161.
- 73 Kojima M, Asahi M, Kikuchi H, Hashimoto N, Noda M, Hoshimaru M. Expression of Nedd2/ICH-1 (caspase-2) in the developing rat retina. *Neurosci Res* 1998; **31**: 211–217.
- 74 Kisiswa L, Albon J, Morgan JE, Wride MA. Cellular inhibitor of apoptosis (ciAP1) is down-regulated during retinal ganglion cell (RGC) maturation. *Exp Eye Res* 2010; **91**: 739–747.
- 75 Compston A, Coles A. Multiple sclerosis. *Lancet* 2008; **372**: 1502–1517.
- 76 Talman LS, Bisker ER, Sackel DJ, Long DA Jr., Galetta KM, Ratchford JN *et al*. Longitudinal study of vision and retinal nerve fiber layer thickness in multiple sclerosis. *Ann Neurol* 2010; **67**: 749–760.
- 77 Meyer R, Weissert R, Diem R, Storch MK, de Graaf KL, Kramer B *et al*. Acute neuronal apoptosis in a rat model of multiple sclerosis. *J Neurosci* 2001; **21**: 6214–6220.
- 78 Horstmann L, Schmid H, Heinen AP, Kurschus FC, Dick HB, Joachim SC. Inflammatory demyelination induces glia alterations and ganglion cell loss in the retina of an experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis model. *J Neuroinflammation* 2013; **10**: 120.
- 79 Talla V, Koilkonda R, Porciatti V, Chiodo V, Boye SL, Hauswirth WW *et al*. Complex I subunit gene therapy with NDUFA6 ameliorates neurodegeneration in EAE. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2015; **56**: 1129–1140.
- 80 Sattler MB, Merkler D, Maier K, Stadelmann C, Ehrenreich H, Bahr M *et al*. Neuroprotective effects and intracellular signaling pathways of erythropoietin in a rat model of multiple sclerosis. *Cell Death Differ* 2004; **11**(Suppl 2): S181–S192.
- 81 Lidster K, Jackson SJ, Ahmed Z, Munro P, Coffey P, Giovannoni G *et al*. Neuroprotection in a novel mouse model of multiple sclerosis. *PLoS ONE* 2013; **8**: e79188.
- 82 Wu N, Yin ZQ, Wang Y. Traumatic optic neuropathy therapy: an update of clinical and experimental studies. *J Int Med Res* 2008; **36**: 883–889.
- 83 Wormald R, Dickersin K, Cochrane E, Vision G. Evidence-based ophthalmology. *Ophthalmology* 2013; **120**: 2361–3 e1.
- 84 Levin LA, Beck RW, Joseph MP, Seiff S, Kraker R. The treatment of traumatic optic neuropathy: the International Optic Nerve Trauma Study. *Ophthalmology* 1999; **106**: 1268–1277.
- 85 Sarkies N. Traumatic optic neuropathy. *Eye (Lond)* 2004; **18**: 1122–1125.
- 86 Berry M, Carlile J, Hunter A. Peripheral nerve explants grafted into the vitreous body of the eye promote the regeneration of retinal ganglion cell axons severed in the optic nerve. *J Neurocytol* 1996; **25**: 147–170.
- 87 Berry M, Carlile J, Hunter A, Tsang W, Rosenstiel P, Rosustrel P *et al*. Optic nerve regeneration after intravitreal peripheral nerve implants: trajectories of axons regrowing through the optic chiasm into the optic tracts. *J Neurocytol* 1999; **28**: 721–741.
- 88 Villegas-Perez MP, Vidal-Sanz M, Rasminsky M, Bray GM, Aguayo AJ. Rapid and protracted phases of retinal ganglion cell loss follow axotomy in the optic nerve of adult rats. *J Neurobiol* 1993; **24**: 23–36.
- 89 Berkelaar M, Clarke DB, Wang YC, Bray GM, Aguayo AJ. Axotomy results in delayed death and apoptosis of retinal ganglion cells in adult rats. *J Neurosci* 1994; **14**: 4368–4374.
- 90 Cheung ZH, Chan YM, Siu FK, Yip HK, Wu W, Leung MC *et al*. Regulation of caspase activation in axotomized retinal ganglion cells. *Mol Cell Neurosci* 2004; **25**: 383–393.
- 91 Ahmed Z, Kalinski H, Berry M, Almasieh M, Ashush H, Slager N *et al*. Ocular neuroprotection by siRNA targeting caspase-2. *Cell Death Dis* 2011; **2**: e173.
- 92 Agudo M, Perez-Marin MC, Lonngren U, Sobrado P, Conesa A, Canovas I *et al*. Time course profiling of the retinal transcriptome after optic nerve transection and optic nerve crush. *Mol Vis* 2008; **14**: 1050–1063.
- 93 Garcia-Valenzuela E, Gorczyca W, Darzynkiewicz Z, Sharma SC. Apoptosis in adult retinal ganglion cells after axotomy. *J Neurobiol* 1994; **25**: 431–438.
- 94 Rabacchi SA, Bonfanti L, Liu XH, Maffei L. Apoptotic cell-death induced by optic-nerve lesion in the neonatal rat. *J Neurosci* 1994; **14**: 5292–5301.
- 95 Vigneswara V, Berry M, Logan A, Ahmed Z. Pharmacological inhibition of caspase-2 protects axotomized retinal ganglion cells from apoptosis in adult rats. *PLoS ONE* 2012; **7**: e53473.
- 96 Vigneswara V, Akpan N, Berry M, Logan A, Troy CM, Ahmed Z. Combined suppression of CASP2 and CASP6 protects retinal ganglion cells from apoptosis and promotes axon regeneration through CNTF-mediated JAK/STAT signalling. *Brain* 2014; **137**(Pt 6): 1656–1675.
- 97 Weishaupt JH, Diem R, Kermer P, Krajewski S, Reed JC, Bahr M. Contribution of caspase-8 to apoptosis of axotomized rat retinal ganglion cells *in vivo*. *Neurobiol Dis* 2003; **13**: 124–135.
- 98 Grosskreutz CL, Hanninen VA, Pantcheva MB, Huang W, Poulin NR, Dobberfuhl AP. FK506 blocks activation of the intrinsic caspase cascade after optic nerve crush. *Exp Eye Res* 2005; **80**: 681–686.

- 99 Kermer P, Ankerhold R, Klocker N, Krajewski S, Reed JC, Bahr M. Caspase-9: involvement in secondary death of axotomized rat retinal ganglion cells *in vivo*. *Brain Res Mol Brain Res* 2000; **85**: 144–150.
- 100 Kermer P, Klocker N, Bahr M. Long-term effect of inhibition of ced 3-like caspases on the survival of axotomized retinal ganglion cells *in vivo*. *Exp Neurol* 1999; **158**: 202–205.
- 101 Sanchez-Migallon MC, Valiente-Soriano FJ, Nadal-Nicolas FM, Vidal-Sanz M, Agudo-Barriuso M. Apoptotic retinal ganglion cell death after optic nerve transection or crush in mice: delayed RGC loss with BDNF or a caspase 3 inhibitor. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2016; **57**: 81–93.
- 102 Chaudhary P, Ahmed F, Quebada P, Sharma SC. Caspase inhibitors block the retinal ganglion cell death following optic nerve transection. *Brain Res Mol Brain Res* 1999; **67**: 36–45.
- 103 Kermer P, Klocker N, Labes M, Thomsen S, Srinivasan A, Bahr M. Activation of caspase-3 in axotomized rat retinal ganglion cells *in vivo*. *FEBS Lett* 1999; **453**: 361–364.
- 104 He MH, Cheung ZH, Yu EH, Tay DK, So KF. Cytochrome c release and caspase-3 activation in retinal ganglion cells following different distance of axotomy of the optic nerve in adult hamsters. *Neurochem Res* 2004; **29**: 2153–2161.
- 105 Levkovitch-Verbin H, Dardik R, Vander S, Melamed S. Mechanism of retinal ganglion cells death in secondary degeneration of the optic nerve. *Exp Eye Res* 2010; **91**: 127–134.
- 106 Choudhury S, Liu Y, Clark AF, Pang IH. Caspase-7: a critical mediator of optic nerve injury-induced retinal ganglion cell death. *Mol Neurodegener* 2015; **10**: 40.
- 107 Agudo M, Perez-Marin MC, Sobrado-Calvo P, Lonngren U, Salinas-Navarro M, Canovas I *et al*. Immediate upregulation of proteins belonging to different branches of the apoptotic cascade in the retina after optic nerve transection and optic nerve crush. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2009; **50**: 424–431.
- 108 Puyang Z, Feng L, Chen H, Liang P, Troy JB, Liu X. Retinal ganglion cell loss is delayed following optic nerve crush in NLRP3 knockout mice. *Sci Rep* 2016; **6**: 20998.
- 109 Kermer P, Klöcker N, Bähr M. Long-term effect of inhibition of CED 3-like caspases on the survival of axotomized retinal ganglion cells *in vivo*. *Exp Neurol* 1999; **158**: 202–205.
- 110 Liu Y, Yan H, Chen S, Sabel BA. Caspase-3 inhibitor Z-DEVD-FMK enhances retinal ganglion cell survival and vision restoration after rabbit traumatic optic nerve injury. *Restor Neurol Neurosci* 2015; **33**: 205–220.
- 111 Tura A, Schuetttauf F, Monnier PP, Bartz-Schmidt KU, Henke-Fahle S. Efficacy of Rho-kinase inhibition in promoting cell survival and reducing reactive gliosis in the rodent retina. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2009; **50**: 452–461.
- 112 Koch JC, Tonges L, Barski E, Michel U, Bahr M, Lingor P. ROCK2 is a major regulator of axonal degeneration, neuronal death and axonal regeneration in the CNS. *Cell Death Dis* 2014; **5**: e1225.
- 113 Zhang ZZ, Gong YY, Shi YH, Zhang W, Qin XH, Wu XW. Valproate promotes survival of retinal ganglion cells in a rat model of optic nerve crush. *Neuroscience* 2012; **224**: 282–293.
- 114 Zhang ZZ, Qin XH, Tong NT, Zhao XF, Gong YY, Shi YH *et al*. Valproic acid-mediated neuroprotection in retinal ischemia injury via histone deacetylase inhibition and transcriptional activation. *Exp Eye Res* 2012; **94**: 98–108.
- 115 Liu Y, Yan H, Chen S, Sabel BA. Caspase-3 inhibitor Z-DEVD-FMK enhances retinal ganglion cell survival and vision restoration after rabbit traumatic optic nerve injury. *Restor Neurol Neurosci* 2015; **33**: 205–220.
- 116 Vigneswara V, Ahmed Z. Long-term neuroprotection of retinal ganglion cells by inhibiting caspase-2. *Cell Death Discov* 2016; **2**: 16044.
- 117 Vigneswara V, Berry M, Logan A, Ahmed Z. Caspase-2 is upregulated after sciatic nerve transection and its inhibition protects dorsal root ganglion neurons from apoptosis after serum withdrawal. *PLoS ONE* 2013; **8**: e57861.
- 118 Nadal-Nicolas FM, Galindo-Romero C, Valiente-Soriano FJ, Barbera-Cremades M, deTorre-Minguela C, Salinas-Navarro M *et al*. Involvement of P2X7 receptor in neuronal degeneration triggered by traumatic injury. *Sci Rep* 2016; **6**: 38499.
- 119 Blanch RJ, Scott RAH. Primary blast injury of the eye. *J R Army Medical Corps* 2008; **154**: 76.
- 120 Scott R. The injured eye. *Philos T R Soc B* 2011; **366**: 251–260.
- 121 Cockerham GC, Rice TA, Hewes EH, Cockerham KP, Lemke S, Wang G *et al*. Closed-eye ocular injuries in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. *N Engl J Med* 2011; **364**: 2172–2173.
- 122 Warden D. Military TBI during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. *J Head Trauma Rehab* 2006; **21**: 398–402.
- 123 Wang HCH, Choi JH, Greene WA, Plamper ML, Cortez HE, Chavko M *et al*. Pathophysiology of blast-induced ocular trauma with apoptosis in the retina and optic nerve. *Mil Med* 2014; **179**: 34–40.
- 124 Choi JH, Greene WA, Johnson AJ, Chavko M, Cleland JM, McCarron RM *et al*. Pathophysiology of blast-induced ocular trauma in rats after repeated exposure to low-level blast overpressure. *Clin Exp Ophthalmol* 2015; **43**: 239–246.
- 125 Jiang YD, Liu L, Pagadala J, Miller DD, Steinle JJ. Compound 49b protects against blast-induced retinal injury. *J Neuroinflammation* 2013; **10**: 96.
- 126 Weichel ED, Colyer MH, Ludlow SE, Bower KS, Eisman AS. Combat ocular trauma visual outcomes during Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom. *Ophthalmology* 2008; **115**: 2235–2245.
- 127 Zou YY, Kan EM, Lu J, Ng KC, Tan MH, Yao LL *et al*. Primary blast injury-induced lesions in the retina of adult rats. *J Neuroinflammation* 2013; **10**: 79.
- 128 Mo JS, Anderson MG, Gregory M, Smith RS, Savinova OV, Serreze DV *et al*. By altering ocular immune privilege, bone marrow-derived cells pathogenically contribute to DBA/2J pigmented glaucoma. *J Exp Med* 2003; **197**: 1335–1344.
- 129 Bricker-Anthony C, Rex TS. Neurodegeneration and vision loss after mild blunt trauma in the C57Bl/6 and DBA/2J mouse. *PLoS ONE* 2015; **10**: e0131921.
- 130 Bricker-Anthony C, Hines-Beard J, D'Surney L, Rex TS. Exacerbation of blast-induced ocular trauma by an immune response. *J Neuroinflammation* 2014; **11**: 192.
- 131 Mohan K, Kecova H, Hernandez-Merino E, Kardon RH, Harper MM. Retinal ganglion cell damage in an experimental rodent model of blast-mediated traumatic brain injury. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2013; **54**: 3440–3450.
- 132 Dutca LM, Stasheff SF, Hedberg-Buenz A, Ruddy DS, Batra N, Blodi FR *et al*. Early detection of subclinical visual damage after blast-mediated TBI enables prevention of chronic visual deficit by treatment with P7C3-S243. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2014; **55**: 8330–8341.
- 133 Warner N, Eggenberger E. Traumatic optic neuropathy: a review of the current literature. *Curr Opin Ophthalmol* 2010; **21**: 459–462.
- 134 Lam TT, Ablner AS, Kwong JM, Tso MO. N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA)-induced apoptosis in rat retina. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 1999; **40**: 2391–2397.
- 135 Schuetttauf F, Stein T, Choragiewicz TJ, Rejda R, Bolz S, Zurakowski D *et al*. Caspase inhibitors protect against NMDA-mediated retinal ganglion cell death. *Clin Exp Ophthalmol* 2011; **39**: 545–554.
- 136 Seki M, Soussou W, Manabe S, Lipton SA. Protection of retinal ganglion cells by caspase substrate-binding peptide IQACRG from N-methyl-D-aspartate receptor-mediated excitotoxicity. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2010; **51**: 1198–1207.
- 137 Sui GY, Liu GC, Liu GY, Gao YY, Deng Y, Wang WY *et al*. Is sunlight exposure a risk factor for age-related macular degeneration? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Br J Ophthalmol* 2013; **97**: 389–394.
- 138 Fletcher AE, Bentham GC, Agnew M, Young IS, Augood C, Chakravarthy U *et al*. Sunlight exposure, antioxidants, and age-related macular degeneration. *Arch Ophthalmol* 2008; **126**: 1396–1403.
- 139 Marc RE, Jones BW, Watt CB, Vazquez-Chona F, Vaughan DK, Organisciak DT. Extreme retinal remodeling triggered by light damage: implications for age related macular degeneration. *Mol Vis* 2008; **14**: 782–806.
- 140 Shu QM, Xu Y, Zhuang H, Fan JW, Sun ZC, Zhang M *et al*. Ras homolog enriched in the brain is linked to retinal ganglion cell apoptosis after light injury in rats. *J Mol Neurosci* 2014; **54**: 243–251.
- 141 Yang X, Chen H, Zhu M, Zhu R, Qin B, Fang H *et al*. Up-regulation of PKM2 relates to retinal ganglion cell apoptosis after light-induced retinal damage in adult rats. *Cell Mol Neurobiol* 2015; **35**: 1175–1186.
- 142 Sang A, Yang X, Chen H, Qin B, Zhu M, Dai M *et al*. Upregulation of SYF2 relates to retinal ganglion cell apoptosis and retinal glia cell proliferation after light-induced retinal damage. *J Mol Neurosci* 2015; **56**: 480–490.
- 143 Xu Y, Yu SS, Shu QM, Yang L, Yang C, Wang JW *et al*. Upregulation of CREM-1 relates to retinal ganglion cells apoptosis after light-induced damage *in vivo*. *J Mol Neurosci* 2014; **52**: 331–338.
- 144 Sang A, Xu Y, Jin N, Zhou T, Wang J, Zhu J *et al*. Involvement of transcription initiation factor IIB in the light-induced death of rat retinal ganglion cells *in vivo*. *J Mol Histol* 2013; **44**: 11–18.
- 145 Dai M, Liu Y, Nie X, Zhang J, Wang Y, Ben J *et al*. Expression of RBMX in the light-induced damage of rat retina *in vivo*. *Cell Mol Neurobiol* 2015; **35**: 463–471.
- 146 Xu Y, Yang L, Yu SS, Shu QM, Yang C, Wang JW *et al*. Spatiotemporal changes in NFATc4 expression of retinal ganglion cells after light-induced damage. *J Mol Neurosci* 2014; **53**: 69–77.
- 147 Osborne NN, Casson RJ, Wood JP, Chidlow G, Graham M, Melena J. Retinal ischemia: mechanisms of damage and potential therapeutic strategies. *Prog Retin Eye Res* 2004; **23**: 91–147.
- 148 Buchi ER, Suivaizdis I, Fu J. Pressure-induced retinal ischemia in rats: an experimental model for quantitative study. *Ophthalmologica* 1991; **203**: 138–147.
- 149 Hughes WF. Quantitation of ischemic damage in the rat retina. *Exp Eye Res* 1991; **53**: 573–582.
- 150 Yamamoto H, Schmidt-Kastner R, Hamasaki DI, Yamamoto H, Parel JM. Complex neurodegeneration in retina following moderate ischemia induced by bilateral common carotid artery occlusion in Wistar rats. *Exp Eye Res* 2006; **82**: 767–779.
- 151 Lafuente MP, Villegas-Perez MP, Selles-Navarro I, Mayor-Torroglosa S, Miralles de Imperial J, Vidal-Sanz M. Retinal ganglion cell death after acute retinal ischemia

- is an ongoing process whose severity and duration depends on the duration of the insult. *Neuroscience* 2002; **109**: 157–168.
- 152 Singh M, Savitz SI, Hoque R, Gupta G, Roth S, Rosenbaum PS *et al*. Cell-specific caspase expression by different neuronal phenotypes in transient retinal ischemia. *J Neurochem* 2001; **77**: 466–475.
- 153 Kurokawa T, Katai N, Shibuki H, Kuroiwa S, Kurimoto Y, Nakayama C *et al*. BDNF diminishes caspase-2 but not c-Jun immunoreactivity of neurons in retinal ganglion cell layer after transient ischemia. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 1999; **40**: 3006–3011.
- 154 Kurokawa T, Katai N, Kuroiwa S, Shibuki H, Kurimoto Y, Yoshimura N. BDNF suppresses expression of caspase-2 but not of c-Jun in rat retinal ganglion cells after ischemia-reperfusion injury. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 1999; **40**: S481.
- 155 Lam TT, Ablner AS, Tso MO. Apoptosis and caspases after ischemia-reperfusion injury in rat retina. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 1999; **40**: 967–975.
- 156 Ishikawa S, Hirata A, Nakabayashi J, Iwakiri R, Okinami S. Neuroprotective effect of small interfering RNA targeted to caspase-3 on rat retinal ganglion cell loss induced by ischemia and reperfusion injury. *Curr Eye Res* 2012; **37**: 907–913.
- 157 Zhang Z, Tong N, Gong Y, Qiu Q, Yin L, Lv X *et al*. Valproate protects the retina from endoplasmic reticulum stress-induced apoptosis after ischemia-reperfusion injury. *Neurosci Lett* 2011; **504**: 88–92.
- 158 Dvorianchikova G, Ivanov D, Barakat D, Grinberg A, Wen R, Slepak VZ *et al*. Genetic ablation of Pannexin1 protects retinal neurons from ischemic injury. *PLoS ONE* 2012; **7**: e31991.
- 159 Niyadurupola N, Sidaway P, Ma N, Rhodes JD, Broadway DC, Sanderson J. P2X7 receptor activation mediates retinal ganglion cell death in a human retina model of ischemic neurodegeneration. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2013; **54**: 2163–2170.
- 160 Zhang Y, Cho CH, Atchaneeyasakul L, McFarland T, Appukuttan B, Stout JT. Activation of the mitochondrial apoptotic pathway in a rat model of central retinal artery occlusion. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2005; **46**: 2133–2139.
- 161 Shabanzadeh AP, D'Onofrio PM, Monnier PP, Koeberle PD. Targeting caspase-6 and caspase-8 to promote neuronal survival following ischemic stroke. *Cell Death Dis* 2015; **6**: e1967.
- 162 Quigley HA, Broman AT. The number of people with glaucoma worldwide in 2010 and 2020. *Brit J Ophthalmol* 2006; **90**: 262–267.
- 163 Woods RC, Klaver CC, Ramratan RS, van Duijn CM, Hofman A, de Jong PT. Genetic risk of primary open-angle glaucoma. Population-based familial aggregation study. *Arch Ophthalmol* 1998; **116**: 1640–1645.
- 164 Mukesh BN, McCarty CA, Rait JL, Taylor HR. Five-year incidence of open-angle glaucoma: the visual impairment project. *Ophthalmology* 2002; **109**: 1047–1051.
- 165 Jha P, Banda H, Tytarenko R, Bora PS, Bora NS. Complement mediated apoptosis leads to the loss of retinal ganglion cells in animal model of glaucoma. *Mol Immunol* 2011; **48**: 2151–2158.
- 166 Husain S, Abdul Y, Crosson CE. Preservation of retina ganglion cell function by morphine in a chronic ocular-hypertensive rat model. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2012; **53**: 4289–4298.
- 167 Liu HX, Sun H, Liu CY. Interference of the apoptotic signaling pathway in RGC stress response by SP600125 in moderate ocular hypertensive rats. *Chin J Physiol* 2011; **54**: 124–132.
- 168 Hill LJ, Mead B, Blanch RJ, Ahmed Z, De Cogan F, Morgan-Warren PJ *et al*. Decorin reduces intraocular pressure and retinal ganglion cell loss in rodents through fibrolysis of the scarred trabecular meshwork. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2015; **56**: 3743–3757.
- 169 Taylor AW. Primary open-angle glaucoma: a transforming growth factor-beta pathway-mediated disease. *Am J Pathol* 2012; **180**: 2201–2204.
- 170 Levkovitch-Verbin H, Waserzoog Y, Vander S, Makarovsky D, Piven I. Minocycline upregulates pro-survival genes and downregulates pro-apoptotic genes in experimental glaucoma. *Graef Arch Clin Exp* 2014; **252**: 761–772.
- 171 McKinnon SJ, Lehman DM, Kerrigan-Baumrind LA, Merges CA, Pease ME, Kerrigan DF *et al*. Caspase activation and amyloid precursor protein cleavage in rat ocular hypertension. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2002; **43**: 1077–1087.
- 172 Huang W, Dobberfuhr A, Filippopoulos T, Ingelsson M, Fileta JB, Poulin NR *et al*. Transcriptional up-regulation and activation of initiating caspases in experimental glaucoma. *Am J Pathol* 2005; **167**: 673–681.
- 173 Fu QL, Li X, Shi J, Xu G, Wen W, Lee DH *et al*. Synaptic degeneration of retinal ganglion cells in a rat ocular hypertension glaucoma model. *Cell Mol Neurobiol* 2009; **29**: 575–581.
- 174 Kim HS, Park CK. Retinal ganglion cell death is delayed by activation of retinal intrinsic cell survival program. *Brain Res* 2005; **1057**: 17–28.
- 175 Ji JZ, Chang P, Pennesi ME, Yang Z, Zhang J, Li DQ *et al*. Effects of elevated intraocular pressure on mouse retinal ganglion cells. *Vis Res* 2005; **45**: 169–179.
- 176 Hanninen VA, Pantcheva MB, Freeman EE, Poulin NR, Grosskreutz CL. Activation of caspase 9 in a rat model of experimental glaucoma. *Curr Eye Res* 2002; **25**: 389–395.
- 177 Chi W, Li F, Chen H, Wang Y, Zhu Y, Yang X *et al*. Caspase-8 promotes NLRP1/NLRP3 inflammasome activation and IL-1beta production in acute glaucoma. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 2014; **111**: 11181–11186.
- 178 Chi W, Chen H, Li F, Zhu Y, Yin W, Zhuo Y. HMGB1 promotes the activation of NLRP3 and caspase-8 inflammasomes via NF-kappaB pathway in acute glaucoma. *J Neuroinflammation* 2015; **12**: 137.
- 179 Joachim SC, Mondon C, Gramlich OW, Grus FH, Dick HB. Apoptotic retinal ganglion cell death in an autoimmune glaucoma model is accompanied by antibody depositions. *J Mol Neurosci* 2014; **52**: 216–224.
- 180 Grus FH, Joachim SC, Hoffmann EM, Pfeiffer N. Complex autoantibody repertoires in patients with glaucoma. *Mol Vis* 2004; **10**: 132–137.
- 181 Joachim SC, Pfeiffer N, Grus FH. Autoantibodies in patients with glaucoma: a comparison of IgG serum antibodies against retinal, optic nerve, and optic nerve head antigens. *Graefes Arch Clin Exp Ophthalmol* 2005; **243**: 817–823.
- 182 Reichelt J, Joachim SC, Pfeiffer N, Grus FH. Analysis of autoantibodies against human retinal antigens in sera of patients with glaucoma and ocular hypertension. *Curr Eye Res* 2008; **33**: 253–261.
- 183 Joachim SC, Gramlich OW, Laspas P, Schmid H, Beck S, von Pein HD *et al*. Retinal ganglion cell loss is accompanied by antibody depositions and increased levels of microglia after immunization with retinal antigens. *PLoS ONE* 2012; **7**: e40616.
- 184 Ozdek S, Lonneville YH, Onol M, Yetkin I, Hasanreisoglu BB. Assessment of nerve fiber layer in diabetic patients with scanning laser polarimetry. *Eye (Lond)* 2002; **16**: 761–765.
- 185 Takahashi H, Goto T, Shoji T, Tanito M, Park M, Chihara E. Diabetes-associated retinal nerve fiber damage evaluated with scanning laser polarimetry. *Am J Ophthalmol* 2006; **142**: 88–94.
- 186 Chihara E, Zhang S. [Analysis of diabetic optic neuropathy with a topographic laser scanning system]. *Nippon Ganka Gakkai Zasshi* 1998; **102**: 431–435.
- 187 Barber AJ, Lieth E, Khin SA, Antonetti DA, Buchanan AG, Gardner TW *et al*. Neural apoptosis in the retina during experimental and human diabetes - early onset and effect of insulin. *J Clin Invest* 1998; **102**: 783–791.
- 188 Abu El-Asrar AM, Dralands L, Missotten L, Al-Jadaan I, Geboes K. Expression of apoptosis markers in the retinas of human subjects with diabetes. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2004; **45**: 2760–2766.
- 189 Oshitari T, Yamamoto S, Hata N, Roy S. Mitochondria- and caspase-dependent cell death pathway involved in neuronal degeneration in diabetic retinopathy. *Brit J Ophthalmol* 2008; **92**: 552–556.
- 190 Barber AJ, Antonetti DA, Kern TS, Reiter CEN, Soans RS, Krady JK *et al*. The Ins2 (Akita) mouse as a model of early retinal complications in diabetes. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2005; **46**: 2210–2218.
- 191 Gastinger MJ, Kunselman AR, Conboy EE, Bronson SK, Barber AJ. Dendrite remodeling and other abnormalities in the retinal ganglion cells of Ins2(Akita) diabetic mice. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2008; **49**: 2635–2642.
- 192 Martin PM, Roon P, Van Ells TK, Ganapathy V, Smith SB. Death of retinal neurons in streptozotocin-induced diabetic mice. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2004; **45**: 3330–3336.
- 193 Yang JH, Kwak HW, Kim TG, Han J, Moon SW, Yu SY. Retinal neurodegeneration in type II diabetic Otsuka Long-Evans Tokushima fatty rats. *Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci* 2013; **54**: 3844–3851.
- 194 Mohr S, Xi X, Tang J, Kern TS. Caspase activation in retinas of diabetic and galactosemic mice and diabetic patients. *Diabetes* 2002; **51**: 1172–1179.
- 195 Hernandez C, Garcia-Ramirez M, Corraliza L, Fernandez-Carneado J, Farrera-Sinfreu J, Ponsati B *et al*. Topical administration of somatostatin prevents retinal neurodegeneration in experimental diabetes. *Diabetes* 2013; **62**: 2569–2578.
- 196 Li YH, Zhuo YH, Lu L, Chen LY, Huang XH, Zhang JL *et al*. Caspase-dependent retinal ganglion cell apoptosis in the rat model of acute diabetes. *Chin Med J (Engl)* 2008; **121**: 2566–2571.
- 197 Oshitari T, Yoshida-Hata N, Yamamoto S. Effect of neurotrophic factors on neuronal apoptosis and neurite regeneration in cultured rat retinas exposed to high glucose. *Brain Res* 2010; **1346**: 43–51.
- 198 Hu Y, Park KK, Yang L, Wei X, Yang Q, Cho KS *et al*. Differential effects of unfolded protein response pathways on axon injury-induced death of retinal ganglion cells. *Neuron* 2012; **73**: 445–452.
- 199 Koeberle PD, Wang Y, Schlichter LC. Kv1.1 and Kv1.3 channels contribute to the degeneration of retinal ganglion cells after optic nerve transection *in vivo*. *Cell Death Differ* 2010; **17**: 134–144.
- 200 Kim SY, Shim MS, Kim KY, Weinreb RN, Wheeler LA, Ju WK. Inhibition of cyclophilin D by cyclosporin A promotes retinal ganglion cell survival by preventing mitochondrial alteration in ischemic injury. *Cell Death Dis* 2014; **5**: e1105.
- 201 Levkovitch-Verbin H, Waserzoog Y, Vander S, Makarovsky D, Ilia P. Minocycline mechanism of neuroprotection involves the Bcl-2 gene family in optic nerve transection. *Int J Neurosci* 2014; **124**: 755–761.

- 202 Zhou W, Zhu X, Zhu L, Cui YY, Wang H, Qi H *et al*. Neuroprotection of muscarinic receptor agonist pilocarpine against glutamate-induced apoptosis in retinal neurons. *Cell Mol Neurobiol* 2008; **28**: 263–275.
- 203 Inomata Y, Nakamura H, Tanito M, Teratani A, Kawaji T, Kondo N *et al*. Thiorodoxin inhibits NMDA-induced neurotoxicity in the rat retina. *J Neurochem* 2006; **98**: 372–385.
- 204 Sun C, Li XX, He XJ, Zhang Q, Tao Y. Neuroprotective effect of minocycline in a rat model of branch retinal vein occlusion. *Exp Eye Res* 2013; **113**: 105–116.
- 205 Yuan D, Xu Y, Hang H, Liu X, Chen X, Xie P *et al*. Edaravone protect against retinal damage in streptozotocin-induced diabetic mice. *PLoS ONE* 2014; **9**: e99219.
- 206 Wang Y, Zhang H, Liu Y, Li P, Cao Z, Cao Y. Erythropoietin (EPO) protects against high glucose-induced apoptosis in retinal ganglionic cells. *Cell Biochem Biophys* 2015; **71**: 749–755.

- 207 Cao Y, Li X, Shi P, Wang LX, Sui ZG. Effects of L-carnitine on high glucose-induced oxidative stress in retinal ganglion cells. *Pharmacology* 2014; **94**: 123–130.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in the credit line; if the material is not included under the Creative Commons license, users will need to obtain permission from the license holder to reproduce the material. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

© The Author(s) 2017