Fluoxetine is neuroprotective in slow-channel congenital myasthenic syndrome

Haipeng Zhu,1, Gary E. Grajales-Reyes,1, Vivianette Alicea-Vázquez, Jose G. Grajales-Reyes, KaReisha Robinson, Peter Pytel, Carlos A. Báez-Pagán, Jose A. Lasalde-Dominicci, Christopher M. Gomez

aDepartment of Neurology, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
bSchool of Medicine, Washington University, St. Louis, MO, USA
cDepartment of Pathology, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
dDepartment of Biology, The University of Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico, USA

Abstract

The slow-channel congenital myasthenic syndrome (SCS) is an inherited neurodegenerative disease that caused mutations in the acetylcholine receptor (AChR) affecting neuromuscular transmission. Leaky AChRs lead to Ca2+ overload and degeneration of the neuromuscular junction (NMJ) attributed to activation of cysteine proteases and apoptotic changes of synaptic nuclei. Here we use transgenic mouse models expressing two different mutations found in SCS to demonstrate that inhibition of prolonged opening of mutant AChRs using fluoxetine not only improves motor performance and neuromuscular transmission but also prevents Ca2+ overload, the activation of cysteine proteases, calpain, caspase-3 and 9 at endplates, and as a consequence, reduces subsynaptic DNA damage at endplates, suggesting a long term benefit to therapy. These studies suggest that prolonged treatment of SCS patients with open ion channel blockers that preferentially block mutant AChRs is neuroprotective.

Introduction

The slow-channel congenital myasthenic syndrome (SCS) is a degenerative neuromuscular disorder characterized by generalized fatigability, weakness, and wasting of face and limb muscles caused by point mutations in the muscle acetylcholine receptor (AChR). Mutant AChRs lead to disturbed gating, prolonged channel open times, postsynaptic Ca2+ overload, and degeneration of the neuromuscular junction (NMJ) (Engel et al., 1982; Gomez et al., 1996, 2002a, 2002b). Previously, we showed that mutant AChRs are leaky and lead to Ca2+ overload of the postsynaptic region in conjunction with Ca2+ release from internal stores through the sarcoplasmic reticulum-resident type 1 inositol 1,4,5-triphosphate receptor (IP3R1) channel (Zayas et al., 2007; Zhu et al., 2011). Localized Ca2+ overload gives rise to both functional and structural impairment of the NMJ and neuromuscular transmission (Zhu et al., 2011, 2013, 2014; Groshong et al., 2007). Therefore, prevention of prolonged opening of a mutant AChR channel is a logical strategy in treatment of SCS.

Recently, both quinidine, and the anti-depressant, fluoxetine, have been shown to be of benefit in SCS by preferentially blocking mutant AChRs, apparently normalizing prolonged synaptic currents (Fukudome et al., 1998; Harper et al., 2003). Fluoxetine reduces the prolonged opening of mutant AChR channels in vitro by several fold compared to wild-type and improves neuromuscular transmission in SCS (Harper et al., 2003; Chaouch et al., 2012; Colomer et al., 2006). These reports demonstrate that inhibition of mutant AChR channel with fluoxetine functionally improves muscle strength and performance in SCS patients.

Detailed quantitative and structural outcome studies are difficult in humans. In this study, we used a well-established transgenic mouse model of SCS (mSCS) to assess the long-term benefits of fluoxetine treatment in functional and structural aspects of the NMJ. We showed that fluoxetine treatment remarkably attenuates the characteristic decrements of compound muscle action potentials associated with SCS and functionally improves quantitative measures of gait in mSCS. More importantly fluoxetine reduces Ca2+ overload at

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endplates, decreases activation of caspase-3 and -9 at the NMJ, and diminishes DNA damage in subsynaptic nuclei. These studies provide experimental evidence for the long-term, neuroprotective benefit of fluoxetine in SCS.

**Material and methods**

**Materials**

Chemical reagents were purchased from Sigma Chemical Co. Cell culture materials were obtained from Gibco BRL Co. Laminin, Texas Red conjugated alpha-bungarotoxin (αBT) (TxR-αBT), and fluorescence-tagged secondary antibodies were purchased from Invitrogen Co. Secondary antibodies with horseradish peroxidase (HRP) were provided by GE Healthcare Bioscience Co. Primary antibodies were used to the following targets: phosphorylated H2AX (Ser139; 1:500; Millipore) and cleaved caspase-3 and -9 (1:200; Cell Signaling).

**Animals and tissue preparation**

4–6 month-old male wild type FVB mice and SCS transgenic mice (mSCS; αL269F and αS268F) were used in this study (Gomez et al., 1997). Both were derived by targeted expression of the respective mutant cDNA to muscle using the muscle creatine kinase promoter (Gomez et al., 1997). Both αL269F and αS268F mutations have been reported in patients with SCS (Gomez et al., 1998, 2002b). The clinical electrophysiological and pathological features of the transgenic mouse lines have been described in detail elsewhere (Gomez et al., 1997, 2002a; Zayas et al., 2007; Vohra et al., 2006). All drug treatments and surgical procedures followed the animal care and use protocols established by Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). Mice were anesthetized using ketamine and xylazine (Mulder and Mulder, 1979).

**Drug administration**

Fluoxetine hydrochloride (Sigma) in saline (0.9% w/v; Fisher Thermoscientific, Lake Forest, US) was administered intraperitoneally at the series of concentration of 2.4, 4.8, 7.2 and 9.6 μg/g daily to different mSCS groups for 9 days, respectively. Excess drug of mSCS mice was treated in vitro with fluoxetine as 0.3, 0.9 and 1.5 μM.

**Tissue staining and imaging**

Motor endplates in the serial sectioned TA muscle (tibialis anterior) were localized using a histochemical stain for cholinesterase (Koelle and Friedenwald, 1949) and Ca²⁺-overloaded endplates were detected by glyoxyal bis 2 hydroxyanil (GBHA) stain as described in (Kashwia and House, 1964; Koelle and Friedenwald, 1949). For immunohistochemistry, tissues sections were fixed in a 1:1 methanol-acetone mixture at −20 °C for 30 min, air dried for 20 min, and incubated with blocking solution for 1 h at RT, followed by overnight incubation with primary antibody at 4 °C. After washing, fluorescent secondary antibody in PBS-T (phosphate buffered saline and 0.05% Tween-20) for 1 h at RT. Confocal fluorescence microscopy was carried out under a TCS laser scanning microscope (Leica, Deerfield, IL). Optical sections of 0.5 μm were scanned for the z-axis. Image J was used to quantify the percentage of specific expression of antibody in NMJs of each sample.

**Quantitative studies in tissue sections**

Quantitation of the proportion of labeled NMJs in the TA muscle cryosections was carried out using sequential alternate sections stained for cholinesterase and test label (GBHA, pH2X and caspase 3 and 9) as described previously (Gomez et al., 1997, 2002a), using Image J (v5.3) for analysis.

**Caspase-3 and caspase-9 activities in muscle were measured using a firefly luciferase-based assay (Calpain-Glo™ Protease Assay; Caspase-Glo® 3/7 and 9 Assays; Promega). Muscle samples were homogenized as previously described (Lee et al., 2008) except for the addition of 10 mM NH₄Cl and 10 mM 3-methyladenine to the homogenization buffer to stabilize lysosomes and the proteasome complexes. Protein samples (20 μg) were analyzed by luminometer (Turner BioSystems, Inc) in triplicate.

**Electromyography (EMG)**

Compound muscle action potentials (CMAPs) were detected and calculated as described previously using a Nicolet VikingQuest (Nicolet Biomedical, Inc) (Groshong et al., 2007).

**Electrophysiology**

Two-electrode voltage clamp (TEVC) recordings of excised mouse diaphragm were performed as described (Gomez et al., 1997, 2002b; Zhu et al., 2011). Briefly, after dissection diaphragm muscle was continuously perfused with a Tyrode’s solution with a composition (in mM): 137 NaCl, 2.8 KCl, 1.8 CaCl₂, 1.1 MgCl₂, 11.9 NaHCO₃, 0.33 NaH₂PO₄, and 1.2 dextrose, pH 7.4 and pinned to a Sylgard (Dow Corning Corporation, Midland, MI) chamber containing the Tyrode’s solution and bubbled with a mixture of 95% O₂ and 5% CO₂.

Intracellular potentials and currents were recorded using an Axon900A (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, CA) amplifier and borosilicate microelectrodes were prepared using the Flaming/Brown Micropipette Puller Model P-87 (Sutter Instruments), filled with a solution 3 M KCl and were later beveled using the BV-10 Micro-Pipette Beveler (Sutter Instruments) to improve morphology and clamp efficiency with a resistance ranging from 5 to 15 MΩ choosing the lowest in resistance for the current electrode. Using the TEVC, miniature endplate currents (MEPCs) were recorded at a holding potential of −70 mV. The output of the recording instrument was filtered at 1 kHz analog to digital converter using a Digidata 1440A (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, CA). Currents were digitized at 100 μs per point and stored, captured and analyzed using pClamp 10.3 software (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, CA). The miniature end plate currents were analyzed using the mini analysis program (Synaptosoft Inc., Fort Lee New Jersey). Finally, the amplitude, time constant and frequency for the recorded MEPCs were fitted and graphed to address the open channel blocker effect of fluoxetine on SCS panel. Endplates from untreated αL269F SCS transgenic mice with WT-like miniature kinetics were excluded from further analysis.

**Treadmill gait analysis**

Mouse gait analysis was performed via the DigiGait Imaging System (Mouse Specifics, Inc., Boston) as described previously (Zhu et al., 2011). Briefly, mice walked on a motor-driven treadmill with a transparent treadmill belt. A high frame rate camera was focused on the ventral plane of the mice as they walked within an acrylic chamber, ~5 cm wide by ~25 cm long. Due to the remarkable reduction of muscle strength in mSCS, brake time was primarily selected as the most sensitive metric to demonstrate functional improvement of treated muscle in mSCS. The treadmill speed was set to 25 cm/s. Approximately 5 s of video was collected for each walking mouse to provide ~20 sequential strides. The right hind limb from every mSCS was measured at pre- and post-treatment with fluoxetine, in which mSCS administrated with saline was selected as control group.
Fluoxetine treatment corrects altered mSCS εL269F nAChR kinetics. Two-electrode voltage clamp (TEVC) recordings of quantal activity for wild type and εL269F mice diaphragms treated acutely with fluoxetine at concentrations of 0.3, 0.9 and 1.5 μM. A. The decay time constant in control SCS transgenic mice was 55.60 ± 17.95 ms whereas 52.48 ± 22.26 in 0.3 μM treatment, 54.56 ± 22.04 in 0.9 μM treatment and 22.80 ± 13.59 in 1.5 μM treatment. B. The MEPC time constant was dramatically reduced in SCS transgenic mice with 1.5 μM treatment. C. Decay phases were resolved into two exponents (τ1 and τ2) with τ2 showing a concentration dependent reduction. n = 4, *p < 0.05, Student’s t-test. D and E. Neither mean amplitude nor the frequency of MEPCs recorded from εL269F mice was affected by fluoxetine. n = 4; Student’s t-test.

Decremental responses in rsEMG in mSCS with fluoxetine treatment. Left. Compound muscle action potentials (CMAP) recorded during repetitive stimulation (rsEMGs) in WT, untreated mSCS and mSCS treated with fluoxetine. Decremental responses were seen in mSCS while reduced decremental responses were shown in mSCS (εL269F) with fluoxetine treatment of 7.2 and 9.6 μg/g. Middle. εL269F mice with 2.4 μg/g fluoxetine reduced decrement to 13.6 ± 2.5% whereas decrement was 10.3 ± 3.2% with 4.8 μg/g fluoxetine; 4.0 ± 1.7% with 7.2 μg/g fluoxetine, and 2.8 ± 1.0% with 9.6 μg/g treatment, compared with 19.7 ± 2.3% in untreated εL269F mice. Right. To treated δS268F, decrement was 10.9 ± 1.2% after 4.8 μg/g fluoxetine, 6.8 ± 0.5% after 7.2 μg/g, and 4.2 ± 0.6% after 9.6 μg/g treatment, compared with 18.8 ± 3.1% in untreated δS268F mice. n = 7; ***p < 0.001, all comparisons were analyzed by Student’s t-test.
**Results**

**Fluoxetine lowers the εL269F MEPC time constant in vitro**

We investigated the effect of fluoxetine on neuromuscular transmission in mSCS mice using TEVC by acutely exposing voltage-clamped muscle fibers to a range of physiological fluoxetine concentrations (Amsterdam et al., 1997; Goodnick, 1991; Grajales-Reyes et al., 2013), 0.3, 0.9 and 1.5 μM by bath application. As reported previously, decay phases of MEPCs from untreated mSCS mice were nearly eight-fold longer than control mice and MEPC amplitudes were reduced by 31%. After application of fluoxetine MEPCs showed a concentration-dependent reduction in the time constant (τ), which averaged to 55.60 ± 17.95, 52.48 ± 22.26, 54.56 ± 22.04 and 22.80 ± 13.59 ms, in mock-treated, 0.3, 0.9 and 1.5 μM respectively (Figs. 1 A, B). The decay phases could be resolved into two exponents (τ1 and τ2) with τ1 showing a concentration dependent reduction, which averaged in a control SCS transgenic mouse 83.82 ± 14.99 ms, whereas 78.20 ± 23.57 in 0.3 μM treatment, 75.17 ± 15.47 in 0.9 μM treatment and 56.75 ± 10.63 in 1.5 μM treatment (Fig. 1 C). Fluoxetine concentrations that reduced MEPC decay time by 3.3-fold did not affect the MEPC amplitude (Fig. 1D). Similarly, the MEPC frequencies remained unaffected by the treatment since no significant difference could be detected between the untreated and fluoxetine-treated at three concentrations (Fig. 1E). These results suggest that fluoxetine treatment in vitro significantly reduces open time of mutant nAChR channels without influencing other physiological properties.

**Fig. 3.** Fluoxetine treatment improves motor function in mSCS (εL269F). A. Right hindlimb motor time interval parameters measured in motorized treadmill (DIGiGait®) in WT and mSCS and mSCS treated fluoxetine. Functional parameters termed “swing”, “brake” and “propel” are time intervals for three components of normal leg movements recorded while doing walking, as defined in methods are identical between left and right hindlimbs in WT mice. All three parameters are symmetrically and significantly increased at right hindlimbs in pre-treated mSCS mice and control mSCS treated with saline (mSCS-saline) in comparison to WT. After fluoxetine treatment, brake time from the identical pre-treated hindlimbs is significantly reduced in treated mSCS whereas no statistical difference is found in the time of propel and swing. n = 7; ***p < 0.001, Student’s t-test. B. Mean hindlimb stride length in WT and mSCS and mSCS treated fluoxetine. The average stride length for both limbs in mSCS (4.46 ± 0.18) and mSCS-saline (4.65 ± 0.31) is significantly longer than WT (3.67 ± 0.24). Fluoxetine treatment reduces mean stride length to 3.0 ± 0.17 in treated mSCS, n = 7; ***p < 0.001, Student’s t-test. C. Mean step frequency in WT and mSCS and mSCS treated with fluoxetine. The average step frequency for both limbs in mSCS (5.18 ± 0.62) and mSCS control (5.58 ± 0.35) is significantly lower than WT (6.38 ± 0.34). Fluoxetine treatment increases mean step frequency to 6.88 ± 0.4 in treated mSCS. n = 7; ***p < 0.001, Student’s t-test.

**Fluoxetine improves neuromuscular transmission and functional recovery in SCS transgenic mice**

Weakness and fatigability in SCS and other NMJ disorders arise from impaired synaptic transmission associated with decremental compound muscle action potential (CMAP) amplitudes evoked by repetitive stimulation (rsEMG). mSCS mice expressing different SCS mutations exhibit decremental responses to rsEMG (Gomez et al., 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Zhu et al., 2011). We investigated whether fluoxetine treatment would improve decrement in rsEMG. 9 days after fluoxetine treatment, we found a dose-dependent reduction in decrement of rsEMG in mSCS mice. Treatment of εL269F mice with 2.4 μg/g fluoxetine led to a mean decrement of 13.6 ± 2.5%; with a dose of 4.8 μg/g the decrement was 10.3 ± 3.2%; with 7.2 μg/g, the decrement was 4.0 ± 1.7% and with 9.6 μg/g mean decrement was 2.8 ± 1.0%, compared with 19.7 ± 2.3% in untreated εL269F mice. Similar results were also seen in treated δS268F, in which reduction of decrement was 10.9 ± 1.2% after 4.8 μg/g, 6.8 ± 0.5% after 7.2 μg/g, and 4.2 ± 0.6% after 9.6 μg/g treatment, compared with 18.8 ± 3.1% in untreated δS268F mice (Fig. 2; n = 7; p < 0.001).

To investigate whether fluoxetine treatment led to improved motor performance in mSCS muscle, we used a computerized, video-assisted treadmill (DIGiGait®, MouseSpecifics), which allows comparison of motor behavior using individual limb of each mouse with several performance parameters, including: “brake time”, “stride length”, and “stride frequency”. Previous studies showed that “brake time” was the most sensitive parameter for detection of improved muscle function in mSCS εL269F with different treatments (Zhu et al., 2011). We tested whether fluoxetine treatment of mSCS εL269F mice, the more severely affected mouse line, improved motor function, with evaluations standardized to the right hind limb. We found that fluoxetine treatment significantly reduced brake time, to nearly half of pre-treatment measurements (23 ± 4 vs 37 ± 3 ms; p < 0.001) to a level comparable to that of WT mice (Fig. 3A; n = 7). The stride length in untreated mSCS mice was 4.5 cm compared with 3.7 cm in WT mice (n = 6; p < 0.001). Fluoxetine treatment significantly reduced the mean stride length to 3.0 cm at the highest dose (Fig. 3B; n = 7; p < 0.001). The mean stride frequency in mSCS mice was 5.2 s⁻¹ compared with 6.4 s⁻¹ in WT mice (n = 7; p < 0.001). Fluoxetine increased the mean stride frequency to 6.9 s⁻¹ in mSCS (Fig. 3C; n = 7; p < 0.001). These findings demonstrate the functional benefit of fluoxetine treatment to the neuromuscular system by improved neuromuscular transmission.
in SCS, although tissue studies are needed to explore the neuroprotective effect of fluoxetine.

**Fluoxetine inhibits pathological Ca\(^{2+}\) overload at endplates in mSCS**

Based on the effect of fluoxetine on mutant AChR gating we hypothesized that this drug would reduce pathological accumulation of postsynaptic Ca\(^{2+}\) at the NMJ (Gomez et al., 2002a; Zhu et al., 2011). We administered fluoxetine intraperitoneally daily to mSCS mice (εL269F and δS268F) over a range of doses (2.4, 4.8, 7.2, and 9.6 μg/g). Control mSCS mice were treated with saline or not at all. Nine days later, we examined Ca\(^{2+}\) overload in TA muscle sections using the glyoxal bis 2-hydroxyanil (GBHA) histochemical stain (Kawabuchi, 1982; Leonard and Salpeter, 1979). Ca\(^{2+}\) was present at mSCS endplates, but not in WT TA muscle (Fig. 4; left). After a 9-day treatment of εL269F, Ca\(^{2+}\)-overloaded endplates were significantly decreased in 7.2 μg/g (15.8 ± 2.3%) and 9.6 μg/g (11.9 ± 4.2%), compared with 38.2 ± 6.6% in control group (Fig. 4; middle; n = 5; p < 0.001). Similar results were also observed in δS268F mice, in which GBHA-labeled endplates were reduced to 17.4 ± 0.8% and 6.1 ± 1.7%, respectively. Other doses have no effects on mSCS muscle. These results suggest that reducing open time of mutant AChRs significantly reduces Ca\(^{2+}\) overload at NMJs in mSCS muscle.

**Fluoxetine prevents cysteine protease activation in mSCS**

We reported previously that both caspase-3/-9 activities in mSCS muscle, we employed a luciferase-based luminogenic caspase substrate assay (Calpain-Glo, Caspase-3/Glo and Caspase-9/Glo, Promega) to study TA muscle homogenates. In untreated εL269F mice, caspase activity was 4.2-fold of WT, whereas caspase-3 and -9 activities were 2.7- and 2.1-fold of WT, respectively. Treatment of εL269F with fluoxetine (9.6 μg/g) significantly reduced calpain activity (by 2.2-fold) and caspase-3 and -9 activities by 1.3-fold, nearly to WT levels (Fig. 5B-left; n = 5; p < 0.01). Similarly, calpain activity in untreated δS268F was 5.5-fold over WT and caspase-3/-9 activities were 3.1- and 2.4-fold over WT, respectively, while after 9.6 μg/g treatment calpain activity was reduced by 2.1-fold, and caspase-3 and -9 activities were reduced by 1.5-fold and 1.2-fold respectively, again similar to WT (Fig. 5B-right; n = 7; p < 0.01). These results suggest that fluoxetine-mediated reduction of Ca\(^{2+}\) overload at endplates significantly diminishes activation and accumulation of cysteine proteases, calpain, caspase-3 and -9 in mSCS muscle.

**Fluoxetine prevents subsynaptic DNA damage in mSCS**

We previously showed that subsynaptic nuclear degeneration in patients with SCS and in mSCS was associated with DNA damage indicated by TUNEL labeling or by phosphorylation of histone H2AX (pH2AX) at ser139, a histone modification that initiates DNA damage repair in association with activation of Ca\(^{2+}\)-activated degenerative enzymes (Zhu et al., 2011; Rogakou et al., 2000; Vohra et al., 2004). Based on the effect of fluoxetine on mutant AChRs, Ca\(^{2+}\) overload and protease activation in mSCS we investigated whether this treatment could reduce histological evidence of DNA damage (Zhu et al., 2011; Rogakou et al., 2000). As noted previously, immunolabeling of pH2AX was present selectively at subsynaptic nuclei of mSCS muscle, labeling approximately 37% and 45% of NMJs in both εL269F and δS268F mice, respectively, and to 14.3 ± 2.7% in control group (p < 0.001). The proportions of active caspase-labeled endplates are roughly equivalent to the proportion of Ca\(^{2+}\)-overloaded endplates in untreated mice.

To detect calpain and caspase-3/-9 activities in mSCS muscle, we employed a luciferase-based luminogenic substrate assay (Calpain-Glo, Caspase-3/Glo and Caspase-9/Glo, Promega) to study TA muscle homogenates. In untreated εL269F mice, calpain activity was 4.2-fold of WT, whereas caspase-3 and -9 activities were 2.7- and 2.1-fold of WT, respectively. Treatment of εL269F with fluoxetine (9.6 μg/g) significantly reduced calpain activity (by 2.2-fold) and caspase-3 and -9 activities by 1.3-fold, nearly to WT levels (Fig. 5B-left; n = 5; p < 0.01). Similarly, calpain activity in untreated δS268F was 5.5-fold over WT and caspase-3/-9 activities were 3.1- and 2.4-fold over WT, respectively, while after 9.6 μg/g treatment calpain activity was reduced by 2.1-fold, and caspase-3 and -9 activities were reduced by 1.5-fold and 1.2-fold respectively, again similar to WT (Fig. 5B-right; n = 7; p < 0.01). These results suggest that fluoxetine-mediated reduction of Ca\(^{2+}\) overload at endplates significantly diminishes activation and accumulation of cysteine proteases, calpain, caspase-3 and -9 in mSCS muscle.

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Discussion

Detailed studies of the slow-channel syndrome and its transgenic mouse models have revealed a complex cascade of pathological events that ensue from the genetic perturbation of ion channel function, including Ca\(^{2+}\) overload, activation of cysteine proteases and DNA and organellar damage in the subsynaptic region of the NMJ. While each of these pathological steps is a potential therapeutic target, the prospect of a selective pharmacological blockage of mutant AChRs may offer the most disease-specific strategy for intervention.

In this study, we showed that fluoxetine treatment (1.5 μM) in vitro considerably reduces and effectively normalizes prolonged synaptic currents (MEPC decay time) in muscle of mice expressing mutant nAChRs without affecting synaptic current strength (MEPC amplitude). This effect, seen in cultured cells also, has been attributed to the preferential blockade by open channel blockers of ion channels with prolonged open times (Harper et al., 2003). The benefit of such a pharmacological endpoint has been translated to the successful treatment of patients with SCS using fluoxetine (Harper et al., 2003; Colomer et al., 2006; Finlayson et al., 2013).

We investigated for evidence of long term, neuroprotective benefit using transgenic mice. After treating mice for 9 days mouse motor strength for mice expressing either of two SCS mutations was improved in a dose-dependent fashion as assessed using a treadmill test (Fig. 3). This clinical improvement could be attributed at least in part to improvement in neuromuscular transmission as rsEMG demonstrated a dose-dependent improvement in the decremental responses in both transgenic lines (Fig. 2).
While the clinical and electrophysiological findings demonstrate improvement of neuromuscular function in experimental SCS, supporting clinical experience, they do not provide evidence for long-term benefit in SCS, a degenerative disease of the NMJ. Because the principal mediator of the degenerative process appears to be elevated Ca^{2+}, entering from the extracellular space through mutant AChRs, and from internal stores through the IP_{3R} when activated by the binding of Ca^{2+} and IP_{3} (Gomez et al., 2002a; Zhu et al., 2011), we investigated the ability of fluoxetine to reduce subsynaptic Ca^{2+} overload. Fluoxetine had a dose-dependent reduction in the proportion of NMJs in which histological evidence of Ca^{2+} could be detected in mice expressing either SCS mutation (Fig. 4). Furthermore, because Ca^{2+} is implicated in the activation of downstream proteolytic enzymes in degenerative processes, and there is pronounced activation of cysteine proteases in SCS muscle (Zhu et al., 2011, 2013, 2014; Groshong et al., 2007; Vohra et al., 2004, 2006), we tested whether the reduction in endplate Ca^{2+} overload following fluoxetine treatment was accompanied by changes in the elevated activity of proteases. Fluoxetine treatment markedly decreased postsynaptic caspase-3 and -9 activities, and the tissue activities of both these caspases as well as calpain in both transgenic lines in a dose-dependent fashion (Fig. 5). Finally, the endpoint of the degenerative process in SCS is a pronounced organellar damage, leading to an appearance of a localized apoptotic process affecting mitochondria and nuclei. In SCS and its mouse model subsynaptic nuclei in the NMJ are labeled using the TUNEL assay as well as for phosphorylated H2AX, a marker of double stranded DNA damage (Zhu et al., 2013, 2014; Groshong et al., 2007; Vohra et al., 2004, 2006; Rogakou et al., 2000). We found that after nine days of treatment of mSCS mice with increasing doses of fluoxetine there was a dose-dependent reduction in the proportion of subsynaptic nuclei in the NMJ demonstrating DNA damage (Fig. 5).

These findings demonstrate that fluoxetine treatment provides not only for functional improvement, but dramatically reduces the biochemical and cellular measures of degeneration in the neuromuscular system in SCS, consistent with a mechanistic basis of pharmacological correction the genetic perturbation of AChR gating and prevention of the downstream consequences of cationic overload. These results suggest that SCS patients will achieve neuroprotective benefit from long-term with fluoxetine or other open channel blockers.

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