

Classical and Nonclassical Cannabinoids: Mechanism of Action—Brain Binding

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INTRODUCTION

Following characterization and publication by Gaoni and Mechoulam (1964) of the structure of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (delta-9-THC), researchers enthusiastically pursued new therapeutants for 17 years, based on this active principle from marijuana. These research efforts culminated with the marketing of delta-9-THC (Marinol) by Unimed and nabilone (Cesamet) by Lilly and clinical investigation of levonantradol from Pfizer and nabilan from SISA (figure 1). Delta-9-THC and nabilone are approved as an antiemetic for cancer patients being treated with chemotherapy. Levonantradol was studied both as an antiemetic and an analgetic, and nabilan was studied as an analgetic. This chapter will briefly review the research at Pfizer, Inc. related to discovery of the synthetic cannabinoid CP-55,940 as an analgetic in rodents and continuing research at St. Louis University Medical School responsible for the discovery of a mechanism of action and brain-binding site for this compound.

DISCUSSION

At the outset of these research efforts, two key points of information in the cannabinoid literature provided a basis for the discovery of a unique class of nonclassical cannabinoids. First, 9-nor-9-beta-hydroxyhexahydrocannabinol (HHC) was prepared (Wilson and May 1975) and found to exhibit analgetic activity in rodents, with equal potency to morphine (Wilson et al. 1976; Bloom et al. 1977). These results provided a novel chemical target from which potent, nonopiate analgetics could be discovered. Second, published and presented research supported a contention that significant biological activity was present in naturally occurring and synthetic cannabinoids only if they contained the rigid benzopyran ring system present in

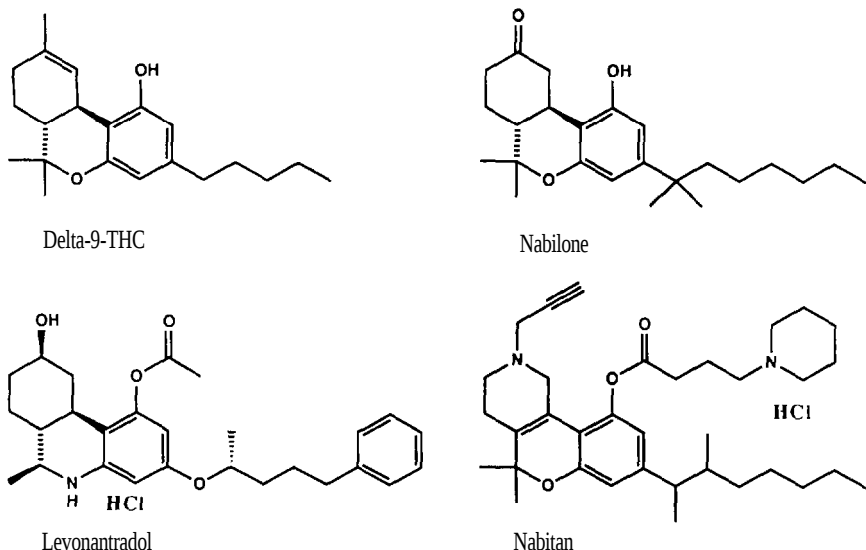


FIGURE 1. *Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol and derived drugs*

delta-9-THC (Mechoulam and Ederly 1973; Razdan 1987; Mechoulam et al. 1987). This second point was inconsistent with several hypotheses that we had formulated to pursue a mechanism-based approach to the development of drugs based on HHC. Therefore, an early research objective was to directly challenge the need for incorporation of a benzopyran ring in cannabinoid-based drugs. An additional benefit from this structure-activity relationship (SAR) test was that it allowed synthesis of a greater diversity of structurally novel compounds than may have been anticipated from previous studies. This point was also necessarily important for the successful discovery and development of a drug based on HHC. Delta-9-THC and structurally related biologically active cannabinoids present a broad spectrum of activities in animals and, where tested, in man. Such a plethora of effects by a compound would usually contraindicate its use as a drug. The ultimate objective of this research was to structurally isolate the various pharmacophores present in delta-9-THC and HHC and then rebuild compounds with high specificity and potency of action. To achieve progress on this major objective, it was not fortuitous that we hypothesized that the cannabinoids must produce their biological effects on subtypes of an as-yet-unknown specific receptor system.

Initial research leading to the discovery of levonantradol provided substantial understanding of the SAR in the pyran ring portion of HHC (Johnson et al. 1981; Johnson and Melvin 1986). Using analgesia as an endpoint, it was shown that the pyran oxygen atom in HHC could be replaced by carbon,

(McIlhenny et al. 1981; Yaksh 1981). The nonclassical cannabinoids, including 2, exhibit varying degrees of cannabimimetic activity, in addition to analgetic and antiemetic effects (Weissman et al. 1982; Koe et al. 1985; Little et al. 1988). The enhanced analgetic effect of 2 over 1 was attributed to the introduction of a potential new receptor binding element (hydroxypropyl), which interacted with a previously unutilized site at the proposed cannabinoid analgetic receptor. To gain support for the identification of a new binding element, compound 2 was modified in various ways to induce stable conformations of the hydroxypropyl unit. It was argued that such a conformationally restricted binding element would provide maximum biological potency when matched to its binding site at the receptor.

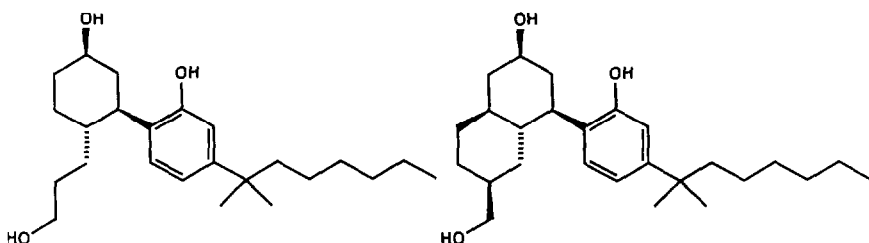


FIGURE 3. *Compound 2 (CP-55,940) and the rigid derivative 3 (CP-55,244)*

Ultimately, a conformationally restricted derivative of 2 was synthesized with a hydroxymethyl-containing decalin ring (Johnson and Melvin 1986). Compound 3 (CP-55,244), a single enantiomer, showed enhanced analgetic potency (2 to 13 times) over 2 and a strong stereochemical preference for an axial vs. equatorial hydroxymethyl group (31 to 53 times) (figure 3). The enantiospecificity of analgetic activity for 3 was dramatically increased to greater than 5000 times vs. 209 times for 2 and 3 times for 1, implying a very specific receptor fit. These findings supported the conclusion that the hydroxypropyl functionality on 2 was a significant new contributor to receptor binding.

The less rigid bicyclic cannabinoid prototype illustrated by compound 1 was extended to two other interesting modifications. SP-1, the active form of the prodrug nabitan (Razdan et al 1976; Razdan and Howes 1983), possesses a unique N-propargyl group in place of the alcohol in 6a, 10a-dehydro HHC and utilizes a 1,2-dimethylheptyl C-3 chain. Removal of the pyran ring in SP-1 provided compound 4, which was still equipotent with HHC as an analgetic but lost potency on some endpoints vs. SP-1 (1 to 8 times) (figure 4). Optimum timing for drug administration was not taken into

consideration. A similar relationship also held true for the fully saturated piperidine ring derivative of 4 (Melvin et al. 1984b).

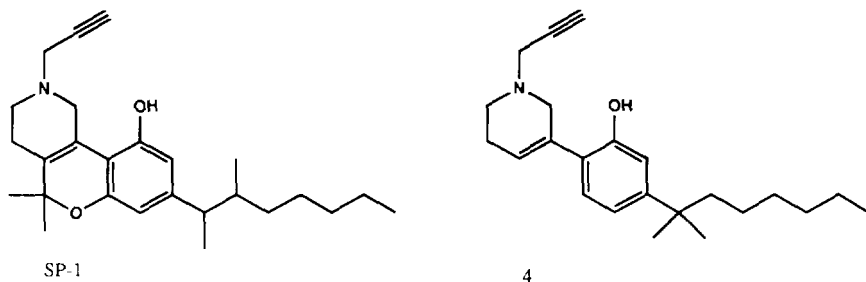


FIGURE 4. Relationship of SP-1 and compound 4

Cannabidiol (CBD) is the natural pyran-ring-opened derivative of delta-9-THC (Mechoulam and Shvo 1963). The pharmacology of CBD has been broadly studied, showing that it lacks analgetic activity and is a relatively weak cannabimimetic (Mechoulam et al. 1970; Dewey 1986; Razdan 1986; Consroe and Snider 1986). We speculated that the inactivity of cannabidiol was a result of an unfavorable steric interaction between the bulky isopropenyl group and a phenolic hydroxyl. Unlike 1, 2, or 3, cannabidiol cannot readily adopt a conformation that would overlap its vinyl methyl (possibly oxidized to hydroxymethyl), phenol, and C-3 chain with those of delta-9-THC. Since it was already shown that the pyran ring was not necessary for biological activity, it seemed unlikely that the simple presence of a second phenol in cannabidiol would be so deleterious. Syntheses of compound 5 would test this idea, since 5 contains both phenols of cannabidiol but lacks the isopropenyl group (figure 5). As predicted, compound 5 and its axial alcohol isomer exhibited analgetic activity comparable to that of 1 and its isomer (Melvin et al. 1984a).

With support and direction from accumulating research data, biological studies were initiated to investigate the mechanism of action for the analgetic synthetic cannabinoids. Earlier studies had demonstrated that active cannabinoids, in particular delta-9-THC and desacetyllevonantradol, were reversible inhibitors of adenylate cyclase activity in membranes from neuroblastoma cells (N18TG2) (Howlett 1984; Howlett 1985; Howlett 1987).

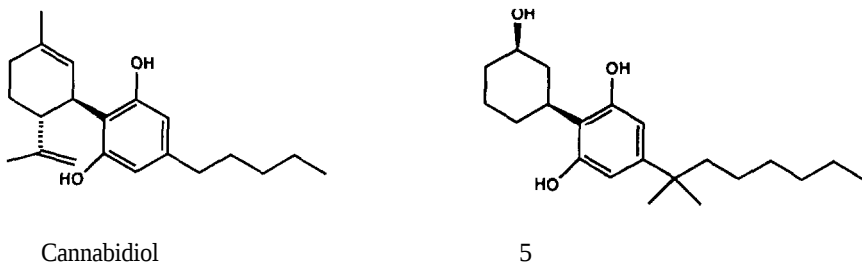


FIGURE 5. Relationship of cannabidiol and diphenol 5

Table 1 demonstrates the potent inhibition of adenylate cyclase and the high degree of enantiospecificity of the nonclassical cannabinoids and levonantradol (Howlett et al. 1988). The inhibition of neuroblastoma adenylate cyclase is exhibited by all analgetically active cannabinoids with a significant degree of correlation for potency, enantiospecificity and stereospecificity. Further work supports a conclusion that actual enzyme inhibition by cannabinoids occurs via interaction with a Gi protein complex (Howlett et al. 1986). The receptor mechanism whereby cannabinoids inhibit adenylate cyclase is distinct from that by which the opiates act (Devane et al. 1986). It is tentatively concluded that the mechanism whereby cannabinoids exhibit *in vivo* analgetic activity is identical to their *in vitro* inhibition of adenylate cyclase (Howlett et al. 1988).

TABLE 1. Inhibition of adenylate cyclase activity in vitro

Compound	K_{inh} (nM)*	
	(-) Enantiomer**	(+) Enantiomer**
1	79	135
2	25	>5,000
3	5	>10,000
Levonantradol	100	>5,000
Desacetyllevonantradol	7	—
Delta-9-THC	430	—

*Inhibition of secretin-stimulated activity. Data is from a mean of at least three determinations.

**In all cases studied to date, the (-) rotation has been exhibited by the enantiomer with absolute configuration 6aR,10aR (using HHC as an example) and this is the absolute configuration in which all structures in this manuscript are drawn.

The original premise driving research to segregate the various biological activities of cannabinoids, i.e. that the effects of cannabinoids are the result of direct interaction with a discrete receptor(s), was initially pursued in rat brain (Devane et al. 1988). A potent, stable cannabinoid radioligand was needed for this research. Compound 2 (CP-55,940) was chosen and tritium labeled in the C-3 chain by catalytic reduction of the olefinic precursor 6 (figure 6) (Devane et al. 1987).

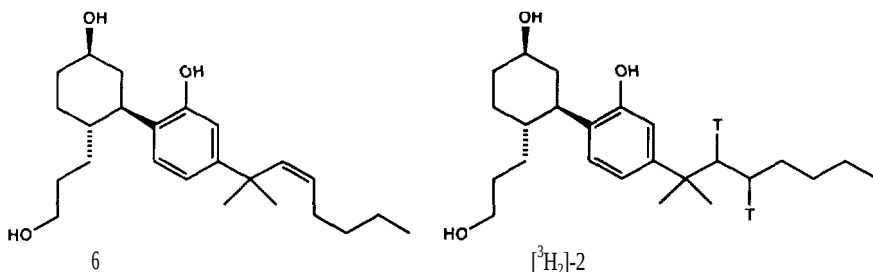


FIGURE 6. Precursor 6 and tritium-labeled 2

Specific binding in rat brain to cortical P2 membranes and synaptosomes from hippocampus plus prefrontal cortex was characterized with tritiated 2. Compound 2 binds to the rat P2 membrane preparation with a $K_i=133\pm11$ pM and a B_{max} of 1.85 pmol/mg of protein. Desacetylleonantradol exhibits a binding $K_i=123\pm34$ pM, while delta-9-THC is approximately tenfold less potent as a ligand with $K_i=1.6\pm0.56$ nM. Conversely, the analgetically inactive cannabidiol gave less than 50 percent displacement of tritiated 2 at 1 μ M.

The analgetically less active enantiomer of 2 showed a fiftyfold weaker affinity with $K_i=3.4\pm1.9$ nM. Together with unreported data and the continuing accumulation of new data, a significant correlation between analgetic potency *in vivo* and binding to the rat brain receptor *in vitro* defined by tritiated 2 has been shown. As was the case for inhibition of neuroblastoma adenylate cyclase, evidence has been obtained suggesting that the brain-receptor site is linked to a G_i protein complex (Devane et al. 1988). Table 2 summarizes the data that corroborate our conclusion that a specific brain receptor has been identified that is responsible for at least the analgetic activity of cannabinoids.

CANNABINOIDS AND THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

With respect to the possible effects of cannabinoids on the immune system, these lipophilic substances can now be evaluated more specifically for their cell receptor effects. This is important because the literature has not clearly

defined an effect of cannabinoids, particularly delta-9-THC, on the immune system of mammals. Several caveats should be considered when reviewing the reported immunological effects of marijuana or delta-9-THC. First, those effects ascribed to the inhalation route of delivery of delta-9-THC from marijuana are not usually controlled for effects resulting from the simple act of smoking a marijuana or generic cigarette. Second, when evaluating a user population of marijuana, it is difficult to control for the use of other potentially immuno-affecting substances such as tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs of abuse. Finally *in vitro* effects on cells are difficult to assess because measurements are frequently conducted under nonphysiological conditions of drug and protein concentrations. Several recent reviews summarize research on the potential effects of marijuana on the immune system (Friedman et al. 1988; Yahya and Watson 1987; Kawakami et al. 1988; Murison et al. 1987; Mishkin and Cabral 1987; Press et al. 1987).

TABLE 2. *Fulfilled requirements for a cannabinoid drug-receptor site interaction*

Receptor Binding of 2 (CP-55,940) to Rat Brain*	
High Affinity	K=133 pM
Rapid Equilibrium	<45 min
Reversible/Saturable	100%/100%
Enantioselective	(-)/(+)=0.02
Functional Activity and Correlation with Analgesia	
High Potency	µg/kg
Enantioselective	(-)/(+)=0.004
SAR Correlatable With Binding	R=0.9

*Assay uses [³H]-2 (CP-55,940) of specific activity ≥50Ci/mmol.

CONCLUSION

Utilizing a nonclassical cannabinoid analgetic as a radioligand, a specific receptor was identified in rat brain. *In vitro* binding of cannabinoids to this receptor and *in vivo* rodent analgetic potency correlate significantly. Additionally, analgetic cannabinoids inhibit neuroblastoma adenylate cyclase activity *in vitro* with a significant correlation to *in vivo* potency. Preliminary data support a further conclusion that inhibition of adenylate cyclase and brain receptor binding both occur via interaction with a single Gi protein complex.

Biological and chemical probes are now available to allow an indepth exploration of the pharmacology and mechanisms of action of the cannabi-

noids. Physiologically relevant receptor subtypes can be searched for, including perhaps peripheral receptors that are associated with pain. Antagonists and mixed agonists-antagonists for these receptors can be pursued, and endogenous binding substances can now be looked for. It is anticipated that worthwhile exploitation of these results will follow in the form of action-specific drugs based on cannabinoids.

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