

Handbook of
Neurochemistry

SECOND EDITION

Volume 8
NEUROCHEMICAL SYSTEMS

Edited by
Abel Lajtha

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Preface

The content of Volume 8 of the *Handbook of Neurochemistry* is a perfect example and sample of what occupies neurochemists in the late 1980s. What occupies them are questions, concepts, and technology that either did not start with the nervous system, or rapidly moved out of its exclusivity (see, for instance, chapters on neurotensin, beta-lipotropin, behavioral and neurochemical effects of ACTH, cholecystokinin, etc.). Thus, the neurochemist is more and more seen as a biochemist occupied by questions, concepts, and technology that are not unique to the nervous system, even though the ultimate substrate of these questions, as well as the ultimate functions so studied and occasionally explained, are of the nervous system.

Look at the case of the hypothalamic hypophysiotropic peptides, also called hypothalamic releasing factors, or hypothalamic releasing hormones. These are all small-to-medium-size polypeptides originally characterized in extracts of the hypothalamus on the basis of bioassays directed at studying their effects on one or another of the secretions of the adenohypophysis. We know now that TRFs (See Chapter 8), the thyrotropin and prolactin releasing factor, somatostatin, the hypothalamic inhibitor of the secretion of growth hormone, as well as LRF, the hypothalamic decapeptide stimulating the secretion of pituitary gonadotropins, are to be found in parts of the brain other than the hypothalamus, where their function is obviously not hypophysiotropic. Such is also the case for CRF—the corticotropin and beta-endorphin releasing factor. Our original statement about the uniquely hypothalamic location of the growth hormone releasing factor—GRF, somatocrinin, has recently been challenged by colleagues using polyclonal antisera different from those used by us, and they may well be right.

Furthermore, we know that these peptides, first of the hypothalamus, then of the brain, are also found in the spinal cord, peripheral nerves, and in various tissues of the gastrointestinal tract including the pancreas, and, in some forms with relatively minor structural variation, the skin of amphibians and even in various anatomical structures of invertebrates.

Similarly, all the biologically active peptides originally characterized in the gastrointestinal tract, the lungs, the kidney, and the teguments (of amphibians) have been recognized as such or with minor structural variations in the brain, the spinal cord, and the peripheral nervous system of mammals.

There is excellent evidence that in all locations we are dealing with the same polypeptide sequence or molecule.

In one location, these peptides will be called hormones, and will be called neuromediators or neuromodulators in other locations. I have already alluded to the fact that the hypothalamic hypophysiotropic peptides are also called hypothalamic hormones. We obviously have a problem of terminology. Should we ignore it?

The word hormone was originally introduced into the literature by Ernest Henry Starling on June 20, 1905, in the first of his Croonian Lectures delivered before the Royal College of Physicians in London on "The Chemical Correlation of the Functions of the Body". Starling frames the thinking within which the definition of hormones will appear: "The chemical adaptation or adaptations of the body, like those which are carried out through the intermediation of the central nervous system, can be divided into two main classes: 1) those which are involved in consequence of changes impressed upon the organism as a whole from without; and 2) those which, acting entirely within the body, serve to correlate the activities, in the widest sense of the term, of the different parts and organs of the body." Then, after some discussion of the first category, he moves on to the second and says the following: "These chemical messengers, however, or hormones (from *ormao*, I excite, or arouse) as we might call them, have to be carried from the organ where they are produced to the organ which they affect, by means of the bloodstream, and the continually recurring physiological needs of the organism must determine their repeated production and circulation through the body".

Most of the substances which we call hormones to this day do meet these criteria; this is the case for the secretory products of all the endocrine glands. These circulate far and wide from their organ of production to the receptors of their target organs, where they somehow excite, stimulate, or cause some positive effect in the cells of that tissue. Physiologically meaningful levels of these hormones can now be measured by all sorts of exquisitely sensitive methods in the peripheral blood with the added feature that there is always a demonstrable arterial/venous difference in the concentration of these substances when measured in the inflow or outflow blood to and from the organ known to be the source of the hormone in question.

In the case of the hypothalamic peptides involved in the control of pituitary functions, there is reliable evidence that they can be demonstrated by bioassay or radioimmunoassay in the effluent blood from the hypothalamus when tapped in the portal vessels along the pituitary stalk. There is also no doubt that there is a difference in the concentrations found in the hypothalamic portal blood when compared to peripheral blood. This, however, is where the problems begin in calling these substances hormones. Reliable methodology shows that the peripheral levels of circulating thyrotropin releasing factor (TRF) or gonadotropin releasing factor (LRF) are so low as to be of no physiological significance. In the case of somatostatin, the matter is even more complex. First, somatostatin is universally an inhibitor (of one secretion or another), and thus can hardly be called a "hormone", a name that etymologically implies "stimulation, excitation". But perhaps more important, it is now well recognized

that somatostatin has a ubiquitous distribution (though not random) ranging from the central nervous system to multiple locations of the gastrointestinal tract and the pancreas as we discussed above. Immunoreactive and bioactive somatostatin, in fact forms of somatostatin of various molecular sizes, can be demonstrated to circulate in peripheral blood (jugular vein in laboratory animals, antecubital vein in man), but in concentrations that appear to be far below what can be calculated to be its binding or affinity constants. There is, however, excellent evidence that much larger concentrations of immunoreactive and bioactive somatostatin can be shown in more localized circulation such as in the effluent vein of the pancreas, where we know that somatostatin is present in the delta cells. There is also good evidence that these local plasma concentrations of local somatostatin can vary considerably as a function of physiological or experimental situations (absorption of meals, injection of various peptides, such as cholecystokinin, or endorphins, or drugs such as opiates, or arginine). If TRF, LRF, and somatostatin are to be called hormones and considered as such, then it must be said that they do not qualify as the classical hormones.

But things are even more complex. We know now that immunoreactive, as well as bioactive, TRF, LRF, somatostatin, the "gut hormones" cholecystokinin (see Chapter 5), VIP (vasoactive intestinal peptide), gastrin, etc., are found within discrete neurons, either in the cell body or in peripheral endings from which they certainly have to be released for physiological purposes which are not well understood at the moment. In such circumstances and setups, neither TRF, LRF, nor somatostatin or any of the other "gut hormones" behaves as, or meets the criteria of, hormones. They seem to be involved in localized controls. It is probably also the case when trying to understand how pancreatic somatostatin could modify the secretion of insulin and glucagon by the nearby cells of the islets.

Because of their neuronal locations, TRF, LRF, somatostatin (and perhaps the other biologically active peptides such as neurotensin, endorphins, enkephalins, VIP, etc.) have been proposed as neurotransmitters, as are catecholamines or acetylcholine. But somatostatin is not a neurotransmitter when released by the delta cells of the endocrine pancreas to affect the glucagon secretion by a nearby alpha cell, reaching either through gap junctions or extracellular space. Noradrenalin in and out of neurons is the neurotransmitter, while adrenalin is the hormonal form in and from the adrenal medulla, with the small amounts of noradrenalin found in the adrenal medulla leaving us in a quandary.

It is thus obvious that the current terminology is wanting. Either we have to redefine what it is that we mean by hormone or some additional terminology has to be proposed.

The question is what to do with these ubiquitous molecules which have local effects that can range from angstroms to microns (gap junctions, extracellular spaces) in and from cells which include neurons, to centimeters, when dealing with local either splanchnic or pituitary locations. Such substances do not fit in well with the definition of a hormone or of a neurotransmitter. We have the word *paracrine*, as originally proposed by Feyrter to describe pre-

cisely the suspected secretory activities of what we now know to be the peptide-secreting cells of the gut. The etymology of the word is obvious and implies a local or nearby use or function for what is being secreted. I personally think that the word paracrine is excellent and should be used often in relation to the problem we are discussing here. But paracrine is an adjective, and to my knowledge Feyrter, in his difficult German, used it exclusively as such, referring to paracrine secretory cells and paracrine secretion. We could perhaps coin the word "parahormone" or "parhormone", but neither is euphonic or easy to pronounce in either French or English, or German for that matter. Several years ago I proposed the word *cybernin*, from the Greek "kurbenetes", meaning "pilot" or "rudder" of a boat, implying the local nature of the command or information involved. This is also the root of the well-known word cybernetics, even though I could never ascertain whether Norbert Wiener implied any localization (of information) when he decided to use the word (according to Littré, the word "cybernétique" was coined by Ampère to define "la partie politique qui s'occupe des moyens de gouverner"). I never pushed very hard for the implantation of the word *cybernin*, feeling that it was another word, another root, without a clearly defined mission. The word, however, is being used by more and more people, thus appearing to fulfill a role. So, how should we use it? First of all, what is a *cybernin*? A *cybernin* is a polypeptide biosynthesized, processed, and released by a cell or group of cells, that represents information that will affect the function of another cell or group of cells in the vicinity of the first cell or group of cells. Such a simple definition excludes all steroids, prostaglandins, or molecules such as cyclic-AMP. Would beta-endorphin, ACTH, which certainly are hormones when secreted by the pituitary, be considered as *cybernins* when relating to their presence in hypothalamic neurons and when released either at nerve endings from these neurons (a statement which is only a proposal at the moment, albeit a logical one) or when released in the portal vessels of the pituitary of the median eminence and as measured in the down-flow blood along the pituitary stalk? The answer is yes. I would say that, in these circumstances, beta-endorphin and ACTH are seen, act, and should be considered, as *cybernins*. When we describe their action it will be referred to as a *cybernin* action rather than a hormonal action. Somatostatin will act as a *cybernin* when it modifies the secretion of insulin and glucagon in nearby pancreatic cells and originates from pancreatic delta cells; it will also be acting as a *cybernin* when proceeding to the adenohypophysis, inhibiting the secretion of growth hormone, when originating from the hypothalamus. I would prefer to consider somatostatin as a *cybernin* rather than as a neurotransmitter if it can be shown that it is actually released at some axonal or dendritic ending and that it modifies the response of another neuron to any one of the classical neurotransmitters. In fact, the word *cybernin* may turn out to be the optimal noun for the adjective paracrine. The polypeptidic growth factors recently proposed by Sporn and Todaro as "autocrine" secretions in the ultimate of paracrine function could also be considered as *cybernins*.

The success of any nomenclature is based on need. The need for the use of the word *cybernin* is probably not compelling. However, since the words hormone, neuromediator, mediator, modulator, are either too restrictive or too

vague in their definition or implied use, maybe there will be some feeling of comfort in the use of the word *cybernin*.

I have discussed above the ubiquity of these biologically active peptides. There is also evidence, though not so widely established, that the "receptor" molecules for these peptides in their ubiquitous locations are identical or share extensive common binding properties for related ligands. Thus what is specific (for the nervous system) if are neither the ligands, nor the receptors? There is evidence that not even the post-receptor-binding *type* of response is. What *may be* specific is the final result of the activation of a highly specialized neuron. What *is* specific finally is the functional response as seen in a system of neurons. And while (neuro)chemistry is necessary to understand the function of each cellular unit of that system, (neuro)chemistry does not tell us what will be the function of that system or how that function will take place. This is where the power, the immense power of reductionism as we know it currently comes to a halt, a pause, possibly a standstill—an "impossibility to proceed owing to exhaustion", says the Oxford dictionary. Rather than accepting this latest meaning of the word I'd rather use it as implying standing still, as in wait of some new paradigm, a true revolution in science, according to the terminology of Thomas Kühne. How else could we engage in the neurochemical study of sleep while at the same time attempting to characterize sleep peptides?

Perhaps one of those new ways will be found in the emerging studies of what I will simply call nonlinear dynamics to refer to the mode of thinking or the concept that complexity when it reaches such a height that it is seen as chaos or apparent randomness can still generate its own periodic order. Physicists, chemists, and mathematicians like Haken, Prigogine, and Thom have all proposed mathematics to support this vastly novel way of thinking for the biologist and have already shown the powerful predictive value of such mathematics in "explaining" the emergence of complex biological structures in embryogenesis, complex periodic functions in multicompartmental biological systems, etc. Psychiatrists like Mandell have already proposed that such thinking could lead to new approaches to understand normal and abnormal patterns of behaviour, in some ways defining normal brain functions and behaviour from the absence of the characteristics of mental disorders.

And this is where so much of the subject matter of this volume comes back in focus: Many of the molecules discussed here have already been shown to affect the amplitude or frequency of one or another of these nonlinear dynamics events as observed in the central nervous system. Perhaps here will be found a new generation of still reductionist questions, unless some genial holist takes us away from modern obscurantism in its glorious achievements.

Roger Guillemin

Contents

Chapter 1

Thyroid Hormones

Jacques Nunez

1. Introduction	1
2. Thyroid Function and the Development of Neuroendocrine Control	2
2.1. Thyroid Hormone Synthesis	3
2.2. Thyroid Hormone Secretion	4
2.3. Hormonal Control of Thyroid Function	5
2.4. Ontogenesis of the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Thyroid Axis	6
3. Thyroid Hormone Effects on Cell Acquisition and Neuronal Differentiation	8
3.1. Cell Division and Cell Acquisition	9
3.2. Cell Migration and the Development of the Neuropil	10
3.3. Synaptogenesis and Development of Nerve Cell Transmitters	12
3.4. Myelination	12
4. Uptake, Metabolism, and Mechanism of Action of Thyroid Hormones	14
4.1. Transport and Uptake of Thyroid Hormones by the CNS	15
4.2. The Concept of "Active Form" and the Peripheral Conversion of Thyroxine to Triiodothyronine	16
4.3. Thyroid Hormone Binding Proteins and Receptors	17
4.4. Thyroid Hormones and Protein Synthesis	19
4.5. The Role of the Cytoskeleton during Brain Differentiation	19
5. Neonatal Thyroid Screening and Replacement Therapy	22
6. Conclusions	22
References	23

Chapter 2

Mechanisms of Gonadal Steroid Actions on Behavior

Thomas C. Rainbow and Bruce S. McEwen

1. Introduction	29
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2. Activational Effects of Gonadal Steroids on Behavior	30
2.1. Genomic Mechanisms of Steroid-Activated Behaviors	32
2.2. Target Cells for the Activation of Feminine Sexual Behavior	34
2.3. Identification of Proteins	35
3. Organizational Actions of Gonadal Steroids on Behavior	40
4. Organizational and Activational Effects of Gonadal Steroids and Their Relevance for the Study of Memory Formation	43
References	44

Chapter 3

Adrenocortical Hormone Action

E. Ronald de Kloet and H. Dick Veldhuis

1. Introduction	47
2. Function of Adrenocortical Hormones	48
3. Steroid-Cell Interaction	49
3.1. Cellular Uptake	49
3.2. Intracellular Biotransformation of Steroids	51
3.3. Activation of the Receptor and Transformation to Its DNA-Bind- ing State	51
3.4. Translocation of the Steroid-Receptor Complex and Initiation of Genomic Effect	52
3.5. Steroid-Nerve Cell Interaction	53
4. Adrenal Steroid Receptors in Brain	54
4.1. Cellular Localization of Corticosterone	54
4.2. Cellular Localization of Mineralocorticoids and Dexamethasone	54
4.3. Competition for Cell Nuclear Localization of Corticosterone	58
4.4. Cell Nuclear Uptake <i>in Vitro</i> in Tissue Slices	58
4.5. Binding of Adrenal Steroids to Soluble Receptors	59
4.6. Heterogeneity in Adrenal Steroid Receptor Systems	60
4.7. Fractionation of Adrenal Steroid Receptor Sites	62
4.8. Corticoid Receptors and CBG-like Proteins	63
5. Regulation of the Adrenal Steroid Receptor System	64
5.1. Neurotropic Substances	64
5.2. Compensatory Changes in Number of Steroid Receptor Sites	66
5.3. Ontogeny and Aging	67
6. Effects of Adrenal Steroids on Brain Chemistry	68
6.1. Neurotransmitters	69
6.2. Neuropeptides	73
6.3. Proteins	73
6.4. Enzymes	74

6.5. Morphology	74
6.6. Other Actions	75
7. Control of Brain Function by Adrenal Steroids	75
7.1. Neuroendocrinology	76
7.2. Behavior	78
8. Concluding Remarks	81
References	82

Chapter 4

Neurotensin

François B. Jolicoeur, Francis Rioux, and Serge St.-Pierre

1. Introduction	93
2. Distribution of Neurotensin in the Central Nervous System	93
3. Metabolism of Neurotensin in the Central Nervous System	95
4. Electrophysiological Studies	96
5. Neurobehavioral Effects of Central Administration of Neurotensin	96
5.1. Body Temperature	97
5.2. Muscular Tone	98
5.3. Motor Activity	98
5.4. Reactivity to Noxious Stimuli	99
5.5. Other Central Effects	101
6. Structure-Activity Studies	102
7. Interactions of Neurotensin with Dopamine and Other Neurotransmitters	104
7.1. Dopamine	105
7.2. Neuroleptic Properties of Neurotensin	106
7.3. Interactions with Other Neurotransmitters	108
8. Summary	109
References	110

Chapter 5

Cholecystokinin

John E. Morley and Allen S. Levine

1. Introduction	115
2. Central Nervous System Distribution	116
3. Cholecystokinin-Converting Enzymes	118
4. Cholecystokinin Receptors in the Brain	119
5. Direct Effect of Cholecystokinin on Neurons	120
6. Neuropharmacology of Cholecystokinin	120
6.1. Hyperglycemia	121
6.2. Hypothermia	121

6.3. Analgesia	121
6.4. Rotational Syndrome	122
6.5. Central Nervous System Depression and Exploratory Behaviors	122
7. Effects of Cholecystokinin on Pituitary Hormone Release	123
8. Cholecystokinin and Satiety	124
9. Monoamines and Cholecystokinin	127
10. Conclusion	129
References	130

Chapter 6

β -Lipotropin

László Gráf

1. Introduction	137
2. Structure	138
2.1. Amino Acid Sequence	138
2.2. Conformation	142
3. Biological Properties	142
4. Biosynthesis in the Pituitary	145
4.1. Pulse-Chase Studies: The Pathway of the Biosynthesis	145
4.2. Nucleotide Sequencing of Cloned cDNA for the Precursor and Protein Sequencing of the Biosynthetic Intermediates	147
4.3. Proteinases Involved in the Processing of the Precursor and in the Release of the Final Products	150
5. Occurrence in the Pituitary, Periphery, and Brain	151
6. Physiological Significance	153
References	154

Chapter 7

Prolactin

Priscilla S. Dannies

1. Introduction	159
2. Synthesis and Processing of Prolactin	159
3. Regulation of Prolactin Production	161
3.1. Agents That Regulate Prolactin Production by Acting Directly at the Pituitary Gland	161
3.2. Regulation at Levels Other Than the Pituitary Gland	165
4. Physiological Patterns of Prolactin Secretion	165
4.1. Prolactin Secretion in Man	165
4.2. Prolactin Secretion in Rats	166
4.3. Factors That Regulate Physiological Changes in Prolactin Secre- tion	167

5. Intracellular Mechanisms by Which Prolactin Production Is Controlled	168
5.1. Release	168
5.2. Synthesis	169
6. Effects of Prolactin	169
6.1. Prolactin Receptors	170
6.2. Effects of Prolactin	171
7. Pathology	172
8. Conclusion	172
References	172

Chapter 8

Thyrotropin-Releasing Hormone

Chandun Prasad

1. Introduction	175
2. Distribution and Modulation of Endogenous TRH Concentration	175
2.1. In Central Nervous System	175
2.2. In Gastrointestinal Tract and Pancreas	177
2.3. In Body Fluids and Other Tissues	178
3. Metabolism of TRH	179
3.1. Biochemical Pathways	179
3.2. Properties of the Enzymes	181
3.3. Regulation of TRH Metabolism	182
3.4. Possible Physiological Significance of TRH Metabolism	182
4. Multiple Biological Effects of TRH	184
4.1. Behavioral Effects	184
4.2. Endocrine Effects	185
4.3. Cardiovascular Effects	187
4.4. Gastrointestinal Effects	187
4.5. Respiratory and Other Effects	188
5. Thyrotropin-Releasing Hormone as a Possible Neurotransmitter or Neuromodulator	188
5.1. Uneven Distribution in Mammalian Brain and Spinal Cord	188
5.2. Synaptosomal Localization	190
5.3. Uptake and Release	190
5.4. The TRH Receptor	191
5.5. Action of TRH on Neurons	192
5.6. Effect on Putative Neurotransmitter Metabolism	193
6. Discussion	193
References	194