

## **Sazetidine-A Is a Potent and Selective Agonist at Native and Recombinant $\alpha 4\beta 2$ Nicotinic Acetylcholine Receptors**

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Abbreviations: nAChR, nicotinic acetylcholine receptor

## ABSTRACT

Sazetidine-A has been recently proposed to be a “silent desensitizer” of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs), implying that it desensitizes  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs without first activating them. This unusual pharmacological property of sazetidine-A makes it, potentially, an excellent research tool to distinguish between the role of activation and desensitization of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs in mediating the CNS effects of nicotine itself, as well as those of new nicotinic drugs. Surprisingly, we found that sazetidine-A potently and efficaciously stimulates nAChR-mediated dopamine release from rat striatal slices, which is mediated by  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  and  $\alpha 6\beta 2^*$  subtypes of nAChR. The agonist effects on native striatal nAChRs prompted us to re-examine the effects of sazetidine-A on recombinant  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs in more detail. We expressed the two alternative stoichiometries of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR in *Xenopus* oocytes and investigated the agonist properties of sazetidine-A on both  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  and  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs. We found that sazetidine-A potently activated both stoichiometries of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR: it was a full agonist on  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  nAChRs, whereas it had an efficacy of only 6% on  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs. In contrast to what has been published before, we therefore conclude that sazetidine-A is an agonist of native and recombinant  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs while showing differential efficacy on  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs subtypes.

Neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) are ligand-gated ion channels, expressed throughout the central and peripheral nervous system. Molecular cloning has provided evidence for the existence of at least nine different types of nAChR  $\alpha$  subunits ( $\alpha 2$ - $\alpha 10$ ) and three different types of nAChR  $\beta$  subunits ( $\beta 2$ - $\beta 4$ ), in the nervous system. Some of these subunits form homo-pentameric receptors when expressed in heterologous expression systems ( $\alpha 7$ ,  $\alpha 8$  and  $\alpha 9$ ), while other subunits assemble into hetero-pentameric structures with various combinations of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  subunits. Different subunit combinations yield functional nAChRs that differ considerably in their functional and pharmacological properties (Luetje and Patrick, 1991; Papke, 1993; Chavez-Noriega et al., 1997). The predominant subtype of nAChR in the central nervous system contains  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunits ( $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$ ) (Flores et al., 1992; Piciotto et al., 2001). The asterisk indicates that besides  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunits there may be additional subunits co-assembled in native  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  receptors. These  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs are possible targets for drugs to treat pain, nicotine addiction, attention deficit disorders and diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's (Lloyd and Williams, 2000; Jensen et al., 2005). The exact subunit composition of  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs in the brain is still largely unknown.

Epibatidine, a chemical originally isolated from the skin of the Equadorian poison-arrow frog *Epipedobates tricolor*, has been shown to act as a nAChR agonist and to cause profound analgesic effects (Badio and Daly, 1994). However, apart from showing strong analgesic effects, epibatidine also causes a wide range of severe side effects, possibly because of its lack of subtype specificity, which makes it far too toxic to be considered for clinical use (Rupniak et al., 1994; Sullivan et al., 1994a,b; Boyce et al., 2000). In the last few years, significant efforts have been directed towards the discovery of new nAChR-based analgesics with improved safety profiles.

One focus has been on selectivity, i.e. trying to identify nAChR agonists that selectively activate those nAChR subtypes that are involved in causing the positive analgesic effect (mainly  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$ ), but don't activate those nAChRs (e.g.  $\alpha 3\beta 4$ ,  $\alpha 1\beta 1\gamma\epsilon\delta$ ) that are involved in mediating the most severe side effects (Ji et al., 2007). Also, variations in potency and efficacy of selective  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR agonists have been explored. On these lines, sazetidine-A, has been recently reported to bind selectively and with high affinity to  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs (Xiao et al., 2006). The reported functional properties of this compound are, however, uncommon. It has been shown that sazetidine-A can potently desensitize  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs without activating them. It has been suggested that sazetidine-A could represent a new class of nicotinic cholinergic drugs with a novel mechanism of action, branded as "silent desensitizers". On the other hand, recent reports suggest *in vivo* efficacy strikingly similar to more classical  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  agonists. For example, in rats that were trained to discriminate nicotine from saline it was shown that sazetidine-A fully substitutes for nicotine as discriminative stimulus in a drug discrimination assay (Xiao et al., 2007). Furthermore, sazetidine-A was found to be more potent and efficacious than epibatidine in the formalin test for persistent pain (Cucchiari et al., 2007). Because of the intriguing discrepancy between the *in vitro* and *in vivo* reports, we decided to characterize sazetidine's *in vitro* pharmacological properties in more detail. Surprisingly, we found that sazetidine-A is a potent agonist on native  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs mediating dopamine release from rat striatal slices. Further *in vitro* characterization of the compound on distinct human recombinant  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR stoichiometries revealed that the receptors with the  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  stoichiometry, are also potently and efficaciously activated by sazetidine-A. Our results, showing that sazetidine-A is a potent agonist at native and

recombinant  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs, reconcile the apparent discrepancy between *in vitro* and *in vivo* results previously reported.

## Materials and Methods

**Sazetidine-A.** Sazetidine-A (Fig. 1) was synthesized as described (Xiao et al., 2006) with modification on the step of Sonogashira coupling reaction. Thus, a mixture of (*s*)-5-bromo-3-[[1-(*t*-butoxycarbonyl)-2-azetidinyl]-methoxy]pyridine (1.213 g, 3.53 mmol), potassium carbonate (1.22 g, 8.84 mmol), triphenylphosphine (148 mg, 0.57 mmol), copper(I) bromide (81 mg, 0.57 mmol) and palladium on carbon (100 mg) in 1,2-dimethoxyethane (14 ml) and water (14 ml) was stirred at room temperature for 30 min under N<sub>2</sub>, then 5-hexyn-1-ol (867mg, 8.84 mmol) was added to the mixture. The reaction was heated to reflux for 68 hrs. The reaction was diluted with EtOAc, the organic layer was separated and the aqueous layer was extracted with EtOAc twice. The combined organic layers were washed with brine, dried over Na<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>, filtered and concentrated. The residue was purified by chromatography (silica gel) eluting with EtOAc/hexanes 50-80% to afford (*s*)-5-(5-hexyn-1-ol)-3-[[1-*t*-(butoxycarbonyl)-2-azetidiny]-methoxy]pyridine as a colorless oil (1.162 g, 91.2%). <sup>1</sup>H NMR data match the reported data on this compound. Deprotection of (*s*)-5-(5-hexyn-1-ol)-3-[[1-*t*-(butoxycarbonyl)-2-azetidiny]-methoxy]pyridine provided Sazetidine-A. The purity of the final product is 100% as measured by liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry. An alternative batch of sazetidine-A was purchased from Alexis Biochemicals (Nottingham, U.K.).

**[<sup>3</sup>H]Epibatidine Binding to  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  and  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  nAChRs stably expressed in HEK-293 cells.** Membrane Preparation: HEK293 cell lines stably expressing the nicotinic  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  or  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  receptors were maintained in D-MEM/F-12 3:1 (3 part of Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium in 1 part of Nutrient Mix F-12 medium; Invitrogen,

Carlsbad, CA) supplemented with 5% fetal bovine serum (Invitrogen), 250 µg/ml geneticin and 20 mM Hepes (Invitrogen). Membranes from large-scale cell production were prepared as described (Smith et al., 2007). Briefly, cell pastes were homogenized in 4 volumes of buffer (50 mM Tris.HCl, 150 mM NaCl and 5 mM KCl, pH 7.4). The homogenate was centrifuged twice (40,000 x g, 10 minutes, 4°C), and the pellets were re-suspended in 4 volumes of Tris-HCl buffer after the first spin and 8 volumes after the second spin. The resuspended homogenate and the supernatant were centrifuged again (100 x g, 10 minutes, 4°C and 40,000 x g, 20 minutes, 4°C, respectively), and the pellet was resuspended in Tris.HCl buffer supplemented with 10% w/v sucrose. The membrane preparation was stored in 1 ml aliquots at -80°C until tested. The protein concentration of the membrane preparation was determined using a BCA protein assay reagent kit (Pierce, Rockford, IL).

Nicotinic receptor radioligand binding Scintillation Proximity Assay (SPA). SPA radioligand binding assays were modified from methods described previously (Badio and Daly, 1994; Gerzanich et al, 1995). Both  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  and  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  assays were performed in 96-well plates in a final volume of 250 µl Tris-HCl buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl, 150 mM NaCl, 5 mM KCl, pH 7.4) using the following conditions: 2 nM of [<sup>3</sup>H]-epibatidine (53 Ci/mmol; Amersham, Piscataway, NJ); 1 mg/well of wheatgerm agglutinin scintillation proximity assay (WGA-SPA) beads (GE Health Sciences, Piscataway, NJ); and 5 µg/well of membrane protein. Non-specific binding (< 10% for both assay types) was determined using 100 µM of unlabeled epibatidine. Reactions were allowed to equilibrate for 3 h at room temperature prior to reading on a Wallac counter (Perkin Elmer). Data were analyzed as  $K_i$  values using a four-parameter logistic curve fitting program (ActivityBase v5.3.1.22).

**[<sup>3</sup>H]Dopamine and [<sup>3</sup>H]noradrenaline release from rat native tissue.** Male Lister hooded rats (250–350 g) were killed by exposure to CO<sub>2</sub> followed by cervical dislocation. Striata from two rats or hippocampi from three rats were dissected and chopped three times at 150 μm using a McIlwain tissue chopper, each time rotating the tissue through 60°. Slices were dispersed in Krebs bicarbonate buffer (118 mM NaCl, 2.4 mM KCl, 2.4 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>·2H<sub>2</sub>O, 1.2 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 1.2 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>·7H<sub>2</sub>O, 25 mM NaHCO<sub>3</sub>, 10 mM glucose, 1 mM ascorbic acid, gassed with 5% CO<sub>2</sub>/95% O<sub>2</sub> for 1 h, pH 7.4), including 10 μM pargyline, and were incubated with [<sup>3</sup>H]dopamine (20–23 μCi/ml; 50 nM) or [<sup>3</sup>H]noradrenaline (56–60 μCi/ml; 100 nM) for 30 min at 37°C. After loading, slices were washed with Krebs buffer containing 1 μM nomifensine and 10 μM pargyline. After the final wash, slices were resuspended in Krebs buffer, and a 100 μl aliquot was placed in each well of a 96-well GF/C filter plate (Millipore). Buffer was removed to waste, and 70 μl of buffer was added to each well before incubation at 37°C for 5 min, after which the buffer was removed into a 96-well collection plate. Slices were then stimulated for 5 min with agonist (70 μl/well), after which the stimulating buffer was removed into another 96-well collection plate. Optiphase Supermix (Wallac) scintillation fluid (170 μl) was added to each well of the collection plates before the plates were heat-sealed and radioactivity was quantified using a Wallac 1450 Microbeta 96-well plate counter (Wallac Oy, Turku, Finland, counting efficiency 25%). Radioactivity remaining in the slices was measured by digestion of the tissue in 1 M HCl for 1 h with release quantified as above. Release of [<sup>3</sup>H]dopamine or [<sup>3</sup>H]noradrenaline was expressed as a fraction of the total radioactivity contained within the slices at the time of stimulation. Data points are shown as mean ± SEM of at least three independent experiments (each with four or more replicates). Curves were fitted using the four-

parameter Hill equation using Sigmaplot 9.0.  $\alpha$ -Conotoxin MII was purchased from Tocris (Bristol, U.K.), dihydro- $\beta$ -erythroidine and mecamylamine were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (Poole, U.K.).

***Xenopus* oocyte expression and electrophysiological recordings.** Stage V and VI *Xenopus* oocytes were prepared using standard procedures (Chávez-Noriega et al., 1997). Human  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunit cDNAs, ligated into the pCI (Promega) expression vector, were dissolved in distilled water at a concentration of 1  $\mu\text{g}/\mu\text{l}$  (spectrophotometric and agarose gel electrophoresis determinations). Mixtures of  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  cDNA at 1:10, 10:1 ratios were injected into the nuclei of oocytes in a volume of 18.4 nl/oocyte, using a Nanoject Automatic Oocyte Injector (Drummond, Broomall, PA). The total amount of cDNA injected per oocyte was kept constant at 2 ng. After injection, oocytes were incubated at 18 °C for 2 - 5 days in a modified Barth's solution containing 88 mM NaCl, 1 mM KCl, 2.4 mM NaHCO<sub>3</sub>, 0.3 mM Ca(NO<sub>3</sub>)<sub>2</sub>, 0.41 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>, 0.82 mM MgSO<sub>4</sub>, 15 mM Hepes and 5 mg/l neomycin (pH 7.6). Recordings were performed 3 - 5 days post-injection. Oocytes were placed in a 0.1-ml recording chamber and perfused with modified Ringer solution (in mM: NaCl 150, KCl 2.8, Hepes 10, BaCl<sub>2</sub> 1.8; pH 7.2, adjusted with NaOH) at a rate of 10 ml/min. We chose a nominally Ca<sup>2+</sup>-free solution in order to minimize the contribution to the response of Ca<sup>2+</sup>-gated chloride channels that are endogenous to the *Xenopus* oocyte and may be activated by Ca<sup>2+</sup> entry through the nAChRs. Oocytes were impaled by two agarose-cushioned microelectrodes filled with 3 M KCl (0.5-2.0 M $\Omega$ ) and voltage-clamped at -60 mV using a Geneclamp 500B amplifier and PCLAMP 6 software (Axon Instruments, CA, U.S.A.). Typically, traces were filtered at 1kHz during recording and digitized at 0.5 - 5kHz using the DigiData 1200

interface (Axon Instruments, CA). All experiments were carried out at room temperature. Agonist concentration-response curves were obtained by normalizing agonist-induced responses to the control responses induced by 1 mM ACh (a near-maximum effective concentration at receptors obtained with 10:1  $\alpha 4$  to  $\beta 2$  cDNA transfecting ratios and an  $EC_{100}$  concentration at receptors expressed by oocytes injected with 1:10  $\alpha 4$ : $\beta 2$  cDNA ratios). A minimum interval of 4 minutes was allowed between agonist applications, as this was found to be sufficient to ensure reproducible recordings.

Concentration-response curves were fitted by a non-linear least-squares algorithm according to the equation:

$$i = i_{\max} / (1 + \{EC50/[conc]\}^n) \quad [1]$$

in which  $i_{\max}$  is the maximum obtainable peak current, EC50 is the concentration of the agonist that elicits 50% of the maximum obtainable peak current, and n is the slope factor. Results are expressed as mean  $\pm$  S.D.

## Results

**Radioligand binding assays.** The binding selectivity of sazetidine-A for human recombinant  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  versus human recombinant  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  nAChRs was evaluated in competition experiments utilizing [ $^3\text{H}$ ]epibatidine as the radioligand. Using standard saturation binding methods, the  $K_d$  values of epibatidine for  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  and  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  membranes were determined to be 0.24 nM and 0.37 nM, respectively. Sazetidine-A displaced [ $^3\text{H}$ ]epibatidine binding to  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  with a mean relative  $\text{IC}_{50}$  of  $2.6 \pm 1.2$  nM, a calculated mean  $K_i$  of  $0.26 \pm 0.11$  nM, and a mean Hill coefficient of  $0.85 \pm 0.03$ . On the other hand, sazetidine-A displaced [ $^3\text{H}$ ]epibatidine binding to  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  with a mean relative  $\text{IC}_{50}$  of  $365 \pm 59$  nM, a calculated mean  $K_i$  of  $54 \pm 5$  nM, and a mean Hill coefficient of  $0.85 \pm 0.11$  (Fig. 2). We therefore confirmed previously published binding results (Xiao et al., 2006) showing that sazetidine-A binds with significantly higher affinity to  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  than  $\alpha 3\beta 4$ , and extended this finding to human receptors. It is worth noting, though, that the selectivity ratios between human receptors (this paper) seem to be smaller than that for rat receptors (Xiao et al. 2006). Species specificity issues, specifically between human and rat  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  nAChRs, have recently been highlighted by our laboratory (Young et al., 2007).

**Neurotransmitter release assays.** Binding assays per se cannot predict if a ligand acts as an agonist or an antagonist at a particular receptor. Functional assays with sazetidine-A on native rat nAChRs have therefore been performed in order to answer this specific question. Dopamine release from rat striatal slices is mediated by the activation of native  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  and  $\alpha 6\beta 2^*$  nAChRs (Mogg et al., 2004; Salminen et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2007; Grady et al., 2007). We found that sazetidine-A acts as a

potent and efficacious agonist in evoking [<sup>3</sup>H]-dopamine release from rat striatal slices (EC<sub>50</sub> = 1.1 ± 0.3 nM, and E<sub>max</sub> = 96 ± 6 %; n=3; Fig. 3A). Both the nicotinic antagonists mecamylamine (n=3) and dihydro-β-erythroline (n=3) inhibited sazetidine-A-evoked dopamine release, demonstrating the nicotinic nature of the sazetidine-A-evoked response. α-Conotoxin MII is a nicotinic antagonist that distinguishes between α4β2\* and α6β2\* nAChRs. α4β2\* nAChRs are resistant to 100 nM of the toxin, whereas α6β2\* nAChRs are fully blocked by the same toxin concentration (Salminen et al., 2004). At the concentration of 100 nM α-conotoxin MII reduced the E<sub>max</sub>, but had no significant effect on the EC<sub>50</sub> of sazetidine-A. The estimates of EC<sub>50</sub> and E<sub>max</sub> values in the presence of 100 nM α-conotoxin MII are 0.27 ± 0.5 nM and 49 ± 1 % (n=3), respectively, indicating that 52% of the sazetidine-A induced DA release is mediated by α-conotoxin MII-resistant (α4β2\*) nAChRs and that 48% of the sazetidine-A-induced DA release is mediated by α-conotoxin MII-sensitive (α6β2\*) nAChRs.

Noradrenaline release from rat hippocampal slices is mediated by the activation of native α3β4\* nAChRs (Luo et al., 1998; Anderson et al., 2000). We found that sazetidine-A also evoked noradrenaline release, however with much lower potency and lower efficacy (EC<sub>50</sub> = 4.5 ± 2.6 μM, and E<sub>max</sub> = 55 ± 7 %; n=3) than it evoked dopamine release from striatal slices. The nicotinic antagonists mecamylamine and dihydro-β-erythroline both inhibited sazetidine-A-evoked [<sup>3</sup>H]-dopamine release (Fig. 3B), confirming that sazetidine-A effects are mediated by nAChR activation, rather than by other means. These neurotransmitter release experiments from native rat tissues demonstrate that sazetidine-A is a potent agonist

of native rat  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  and  $\alpha 6\beta 2^*$  receptors, but a weak agonist of native  $\alpha 3\beta 4^*$  nAChRs.

In order to verify that the agonist effects of sazetidine-A observed are not due to the specific batch of sazetidine-A used, we also tested another, commercially available sazetidine-A. The EC<sub>50</sub> and E<sub>max</sub> values obtained with this new source of sazetidine-A were  $0.85 \pm 0.28$  nM and  $94 \pm 3\%$  (n=3) in the dopamine release assay from striatal slices, and  $24 \pm 6$   $\mu$ M and  $38 \pm 3\%$  (n=3) in the noradrenaline release assay from hippocampal slices (data not shown), respectively. These data are consistent with the data obtained with the sazetidine-A we synthesized in house.

### **Oocyte expression experiments.**

Based on the intriguing new finding described above, we decided to revisit the functional properties of sazetidine-A with the aim of a) confirming that the agonist effects on  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs we saw were not specific to the rat but also translate to the human receptors, and b) understand better the biophysical basis for the absence of agonism previously reported (Xiao et al. 2006). We chose to use the *Xenopus* oocyte expression system, combined with the two-electrode voltage clamp technique, because this is a very sensitive technique that can also detect very partial agonism. In addition, the oocyte expression system can be used to study different subunit stoichiometries of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR simply by varying the  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunit cDNA ratio that is injected prior to the experiments.  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  and  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs can then be studied in isolation and, importantly, have previously been shown to have distinct pharmacology (Zwart et al. 2006; Moroni et al., 2006). Fig. 4a shows the concentration-dependence of the peak amplitudes of currents induced by sazetidine-A on both subtypes of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR. Various concentrations of sazetidine-A, and the

maximally effective concentration of 1 mM ACh (Moroni et al, 2006) were alternately applied in order to control for rundown of the response. Sazetidine-A-induced current amplitudes were normalized to the amplitude of 1 mM ACh-induced currents. Mean concentration-response curves calculated from the parameters obtained by fitting eqn. [1] to the data of individual experiments are depicted in Fig. 4a. The mean EC<sub>50</sub>, slope factor and E<sub>max</sub> of the concentration-response curves for sazetidine-A (n = 3) are  $6.1 \pm 1.2$  nM,  $1.0 \pm 0.1$  and  $98 \pm 9$  % for  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  nAChRs, and  $2.4 \pm 1.2$  nM,  $1.3 \pm 0.4$  and  $5.8 \pm 1.1$  % for  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs, respectively. Fig. 4b shows examples of currents induced by 1 mM ACh and 100 nM sazetidine-A, which are maximally effective concentrations for the two agonists at  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  nAChRs. Clearly, sazetidine-A is able to evoke currents of approximately the same size as those induced by ACh. On the other hand, Fig. 4c shows examples of currents induced by 1 mM ACh and 1  $\mu$ M sazetidine-A, which are maximally effective concentrations for the two agonists at  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs. These traces highlight that sazetidine-A is a very poorly efficacious agonist at  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs.

## Discussion

The most striking finding of this investigation is that, contrary to previous reports (Xiao et al. 2006), sazetidine-A is a potent and efficacious agonist of both human recombinant and rat native  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs.

Addition of sazetidine-A to rat striatal slices potently and efficaciously stimulated dopamine release, an effect blocked by the nicotinic antagonists dihydro- $\beta$ -erythroidine and mecamylamine. Interestingly, 100 nM of the nicotinic antagonist  $\alpha$ -conotoxin MII, which distinguishes  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs from  $\alpha 6\beta 2^*$  nAChRs, reduced the Emax of the concentration-response curve of sazetidine-A by approximately 48%, indicating that about half of the sazetidine-A-induced dopamine release is mediated by  $\alpha 6$  subunit-containing nAChRs. Thus, besides being an agonist of  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs, sazetidine-A is also a potent agonist on  $\alpha 6$  subunit-containing nAChRs.

Especially the agonistic effects on  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs were quite surprising, specifically because in SH-EP1 cells, stably transfected with recombinant human  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs, sazetidine-A does not induce any measurable agonistic effect (Xiao et al., 2006). In contrast, prolonged (but not acute) applications of low concentrations of sazetidine-A potently desensitized  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs expressed in the same cells, an effect more typically associated with agonists. This led the authors to suggest that sazetidine-A is a “silent-desensitizer” of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs (Xiao et al., 2006).

In order to identify the molecular basis for this apparent discrepancy we performed more electrophysiological experiments. In the *Xenopus laevis* oocyte expression system the expression of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs subtypes with high- and low-sensitivity to ACh can be manipulated by transfecting the oocytes with cDNAs encoding the  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunits in different ratios (Zwart and Vijverberg, 1998;

Zwart et al., 2006; Moroni et al., 2006). When  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunits are injected in the 1:10  $\alpha 4$ : $\beta 2$  ratio the oocytes will express a homogeneous population of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs with high sensitivity to ACh, whereas injection of  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  subunits in the 10:1 ratio results in the expression of a homogeneous population of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs with low sensitivity to ACh. When sazetidine-A was tested on both  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR subtypes, it was found to be a potent and efficacious agonist of the  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs that have high sensitivity to ACh. It must be stressed, however, that sazetidine-A also potently activated the second isoform of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs with low sensitivity to ACh, but with very low efficacy.

The question then arises as to why Xiao et al. (2006) did not observe any agonist effect of sazetidine-A on their heterologously expressed  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs. First of all, the fact that recombinant  $\alpha 4$  and  $\beta 2$  nAChR subunits assemble in more than one  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR stoichiometry was totally neglected and the subtypes of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs expressed in SH-EP1 cells were not verified. This is an important factor, because potencies and efficacies of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR ligands depend heavily on the subunit stoichiometry of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs (Zwart and Vijverberg, 1998; Nelson et al., 2003; Zhou et al., 2003; Khiroug et al., 2004; Lopez-Hernandez et al., 2004; Karadsheh et al, 2004; Briggs et al., 2006; Moroni et al., 2006; Zwart et al., 2006; Tapia et al., 2007). One possibility is that the SH-EP1 cells used by Xiao et al. (2006) express mainly  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs that have low affinity for ACh. In combination with the poorly sensitive biochemical rubidium efflux assay utilized, the very partial agonist effect of sazetidine-A on the low affinity subtype of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR might have been missed. However, two reports from another laboratory show concentration-response curves for ACh in the same human  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  SH-EP1 cell line using a rubium

efflux assay with EC50 values of about 1  $\mu\text{M}$  (Eaton et al., 2003; Kuo et al., 2005), suggesting that these cells might express  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  nAChRs which have high affinity for ACh. A patch clamp study on the same cells revealed an intermediate EC50 for ACh of about 10  $\mu\text{M}$  and a shallow slope factor of 0.6, suggesting that these cells express a mixture of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs with high- and low-sensitivity for ACh (Wu et al., 2004). All together, it looks like that different labs find different pharmacological properties with the same cell line. An explanation for this could be that cell culture conditions vary between labs. It is known that the proportion of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs with high- and low-affinity for ACh depends on cell culture conditions, like e.g. temperature during incubation of the cells (Nelson et al., 2002; Zwart et al., 2006). Along these lines, it might be possible that the major difference between the present findings on  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs expressed in *Xenopus* oocytes and the previously published data with this compound (Xiao et al., 2006) on  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs expressed in a mammalian cell line might be due to differences in expression system used.

Our results help to understand and reconcile the recent reports on *in vivo* effects of sazetidine-A showing that it acts as a quite typical  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR agonist in both drug discrimination (Xiao et al., 2007) and analgesic (Cuchiaro et al., 2007) assays. Although the contribution of additional subunits in native  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs has not been excluded, the results are consistent with the hypothesis that *in vivo* effects of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR agonists are mediated by native  $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$  nAChRs that have an  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  stoichiometry.

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## Figure legends

**Fig. 1.** Chemical structure of sazetidine-A.

**Fig. 2.** Receptor binding experiments. Sazetidine-A displaces the radioligand [3H]epibatidine from its binding sites on  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs (filled circles) and  $\alpha 3\beta 4$  nAChRs (open circles). Data are expressed as mean  $\pm$  S.E.M. for three experiments.

**Fig. 3.** Nicotine and Sazetidine-A-induced neurotransmitter release. A) Nicotine evokes dopamine release from rat striatal slices in a concentration-dependent manner ( $EC_{50} = 36 \pm 8$  nM;  $E_{max} 104 \pm 3\%$ ;  $n=3$ ). B) Sazetidine-A evokes dopamine release from rat striatal slices in a concentration-dependent manner (squares). Sazetidine-A-evoked dopamine release is prevented in the presence of the nicotinic receptor antagonists dihydro- $\beta$ -erythroidine (100  $\mu$ M; diamonds) and mecamylamine (10  $\mu$ M; triangles).  $\alpha$ -Conotoxin MII (0.1  $\mu$ M; circles) reduces the  $E_{max}$  of Sazetidine-A by 48%, but does not affect its  $EC_{50}$ . C) Nicotine evokes noradrenaline release from rat hippocampal slices in a concentration-dependent manner ( $EC_{50} = 6.0 \pm 2.4$   $\mu$ M;  $E_{max} 101 \pm 5\%$ ;  $n=3$ ). D) Sazetidine-A evokes noradrenaline release from rat hippocampal slices in a concentration-dependent manner (squares). Sazetidine-A evoked noradrenaline release is prevented in the presence of the nicotinic receptor antagonists dihydro- $\beta$ -erythroidine (100  $\mu$ M; diamonds) and mecamylamine (10  $\mu$ M; triangles).

**Fig. 4.** Agonist effects of sazetidine-A on oocytes heterologously expressing  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs that have high sensitivity to ACh ( $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$ ) and  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChRs that have

low sensitivity to ACh ( $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$ ). A. Concentration-response curves of sazetidine-A to evoke ion currents in oocytes expressing  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  nAChRs (squares) and in oocytes expressing  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs (circles). The inset shows the agonist concentration-response curve of sazetidine-A on  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs, showing that sazetidine-A is a potent, but partial agonist on this subtype of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR. B. Ion currents evoked by maximum-effective concentrations of ACh and sazetidine-A in oocytes expressing  $\alpha 4(2)\beta 2(3)$  nAChRs, showing that sazetidine-A is a full agonist on this subtype of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR. C. Ion currents evoked by maximum-effective concentrations of ACh and sazetidine-A in oocytes expressing  $\alpha 4(3)\beta 2(2)$  nAChRs, showing that sazetidine-A is a partial agonist on this subtype of  $\alpha 4\beta 2$  nAChR.

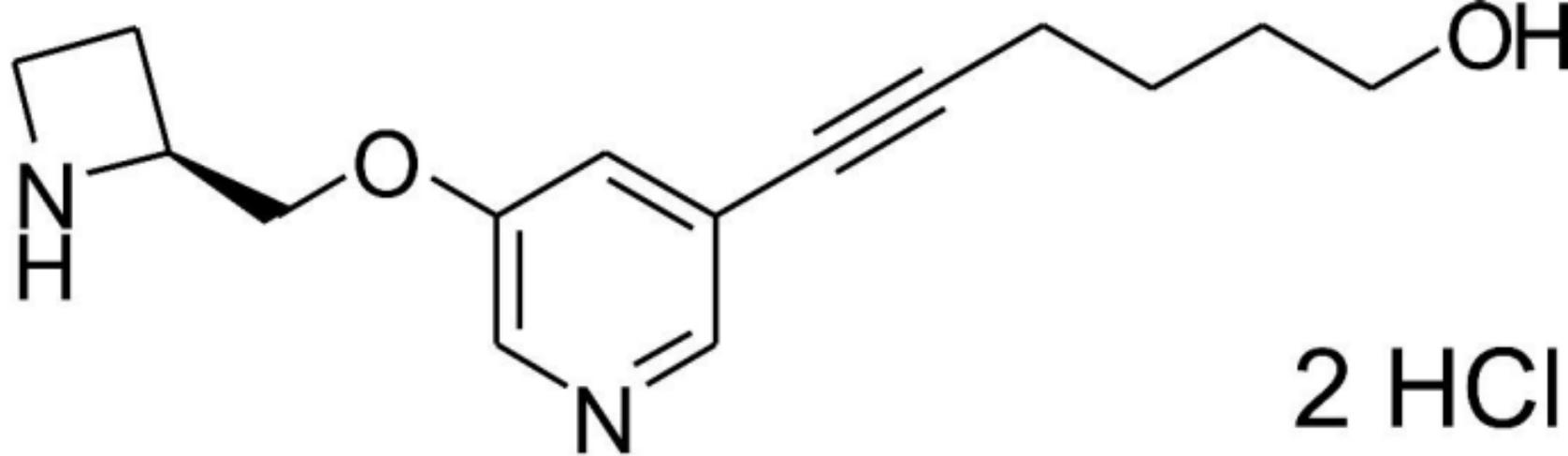


Figure 1

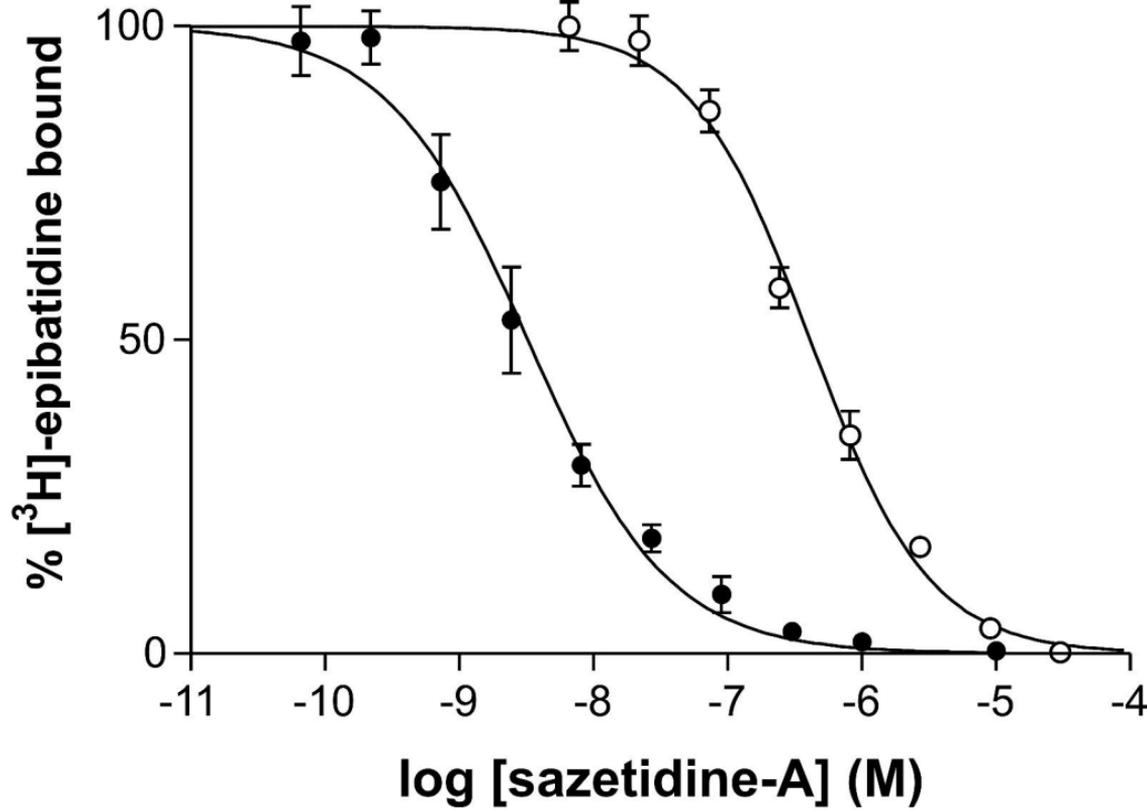


Figure 2

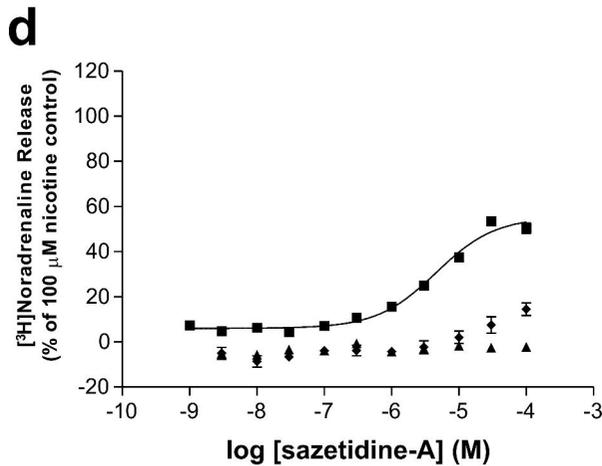
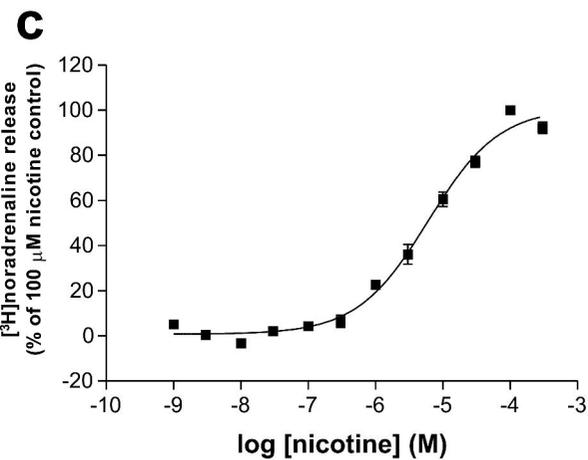
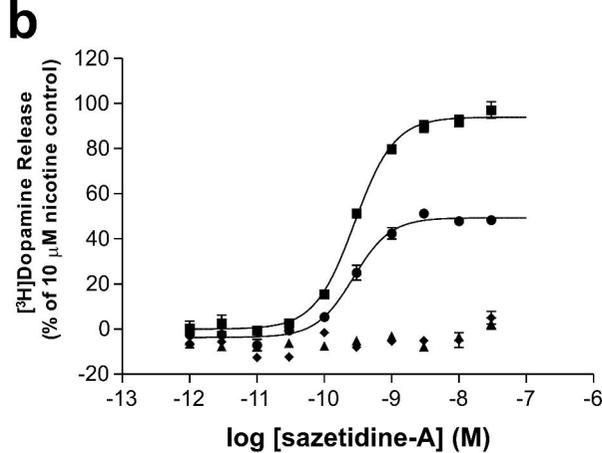
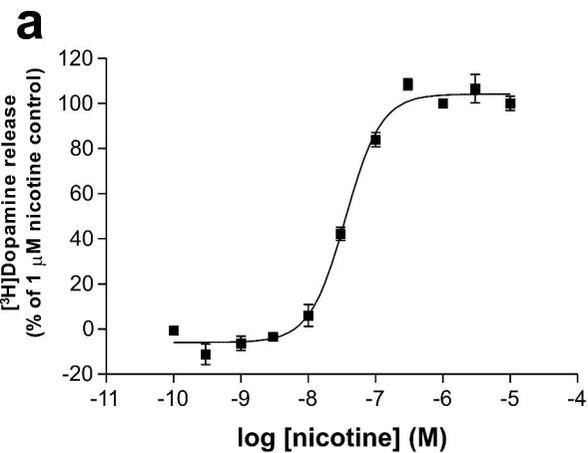


Figure 3

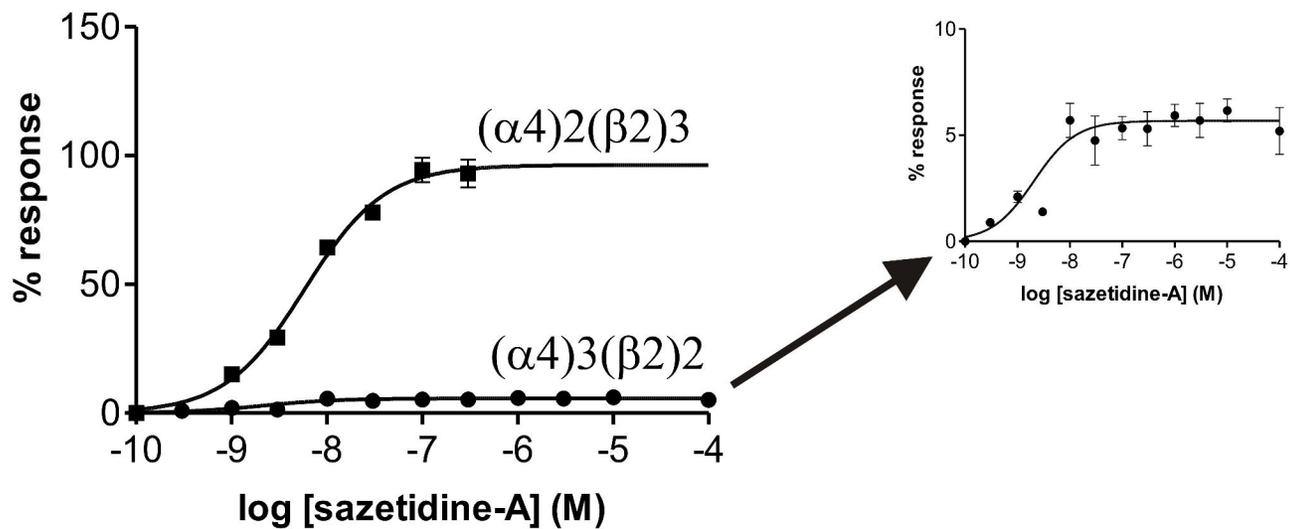
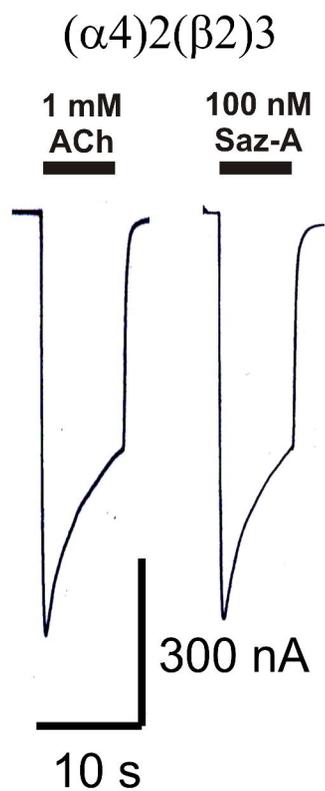
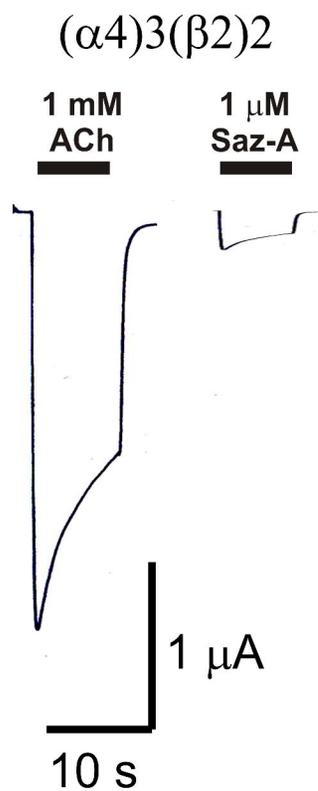
**a****b****c**

Figure 4