Published in final edited form as:

Biochem Biophys Res Commun. 2008 April 25; 369(1): 182–187.

THE Ca^{2+} ATPase OF CARDIAC SARCOPLASMIC RETICULUM: PHYSIOLOGICAL ROLE AND RELEVANCE TO DISEASES

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Abstract

The Ca^{2+} ATPase of sarcoplasmic reticulum has a prominent role in excitation/contraction coupling of cardiac muscle, as it induces relaxation by sequestering Ca^{2+} from the cytoplasm. The stored Ca^{2+} is in turn released to trigger contraction. We review here experiments demonstrating that in cardiac myocytes Ca^{2+} signaling and contractile activation are strongly altered by pharmacological inhibition or transcriptional downregulation of SERCA. On the other hand, kinetics and intensity of Ca^{2+} signaling are improved by SERCA overexpression following delivery of exogenous cDNA by adenovirus vectors. Experiments on adrenergic hypertrophy demonstrate SERCA downregulation, consistent with its pathogenetic involvement in cardiac hypertrophy and failure, as also shown in other experimental models and clinical studies. Compensation by alternate Ca^{2+} signaling proteins, including functional activation and increased expression of $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$ exchanger and TrpC proteins has been observed. These compensatory mechanisms, including calcineurin activation, remain to be clarified and are a most important subject of current studies.

Keywords

Ca^{2+} transport; sarcoplasmic reticulum; Ca^{2+} signaling in cardiac muscle; excitation-contraction coupling; adrenergic hypertrophy; SERCA as a pathogenetic factor in cardiac diseases

On occasion of Professor Ebashi's visit to the Cardiovascular Research Institute of the University of California in San Francisco, the earliest preparations of vesicular fragments of cardiac sarcoplasmic reticulum (SR) were obtained under his guidance (1). A warm memory remains with us of Professor Ebashi's influence and guidance through many hours in the laboratory, continuing at the end of day with stimulating and inspiring discussions at dinner in various San Francisco restaurants. At that time, SR membrane vesicles were referred to as "Relaxing Factor" since they prevented "superprecipitation" (i.e., contraction analog) of native actomyosin (containing myosin, actin and the troponin complex) upon addition of ATP. It was soon established that this effect was produced by ATP dependent sequestration of Ca^{2+} by the vesicles from the reaction medium. In fact, the same relaxing effect could be produced simply by Ca^{2+} chelation with EGTA added to the medium. The functional behavior of isolated cardiac SR vesicle in vitro turned out to be similar to that exhibited by SR vesicles isolated from skeletal muscle (2,3), due to the Ca^{2+} activated Sarco-Endoplasmic Reticulum ATPase (SERCA) which is a prominent protein component of both preparations. The catalytic and transport cycle of

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SERCA includes ATP utilization by formation of a phosphorylated enzyme intermediate, translocation of bound Ca^{2+} across the SR membrane against a concentration gradient, and final hydrolytic cleavage of Pi from the phosphoenzyme intermediate (4). We review here information presently available on the role of SERCA in physiology and diseases of heart muscle, discovered by several laboratories working in the field, and illustrated by experimental results obtained in our own laboratory.

SERCA and Ca^{2+} signaling in cardiac muscle

The cardiac SR ATPase (SERCA2a) is encoded by the (human nomenclature) ATP2A2 gene, which also yields the SERCA2b isoform found in the endoplasmic reticulum of most cells (5,6). It is by now well established that SERCA2 plays an important role in relaxation of heart muscle, as it sequesters cytosolic Ca^{2+} by active transport into intracellular stores delimited by the SR membranes. The stored Ca^{2+} is in turn released into the cytoplasm upon membrane excitation to induce contraction. This can be convincingly demonstrated on primary cultures of cardiac myocytes, as they provide a rather simple system to study complementary features of SERCA transport activity and cytosolic Ca^{2+} signaling.

The cytosolic Ca^{2+} signaling transients observed in myocytes subjected to electric stimuli include a rapid rise followed by a slower decay (Fig 1). The rapid Ca^{2+} rise does not show significant dependence on temperature, as expected of passive flux through a channel. On the contrary, the rate of decay exhibits strong temperature dependence, similar to that exhibited by the transport activity of isolated SR vesicles (Fig 1). This parallel behavior is consistent with dependence of the decay phase of Ca^{2+} transients on active transport by the SERCA enzyme (7).

The dependence of cytosolic Ca^{2+} signaling on transport by SERCA can be demonstrated directly by inhibiting its catalytic and transport activity (8) with thapsigargin (TG), a plant derived sesquiterpene lactone. Specific inhibition of SERCA is obtained in situ by exposing cardiac myocytes to nanomolar concentrations of TG in the culture medium (Fig 2). Such low concentrations of TG inhibit specifically SERCA activity, without apparent effects on cell growth or other cell characteristics (9). An alternative experimental approach is downregulation of SERCA expression by the use of short interfering RNA (10), with consequent reduction of overall transport activity (Fig 2). Additional evidence is obtained in myocytes subjected to adrenergic hypertrophy (9), as significant reduction of SERCA expression is produced relative to general protein expression. In all cases, reduction of Ca^{2+} transport activity, due to either SERCA inhibition or down regulation, results in pronounced alterations of cytosolic transients and marked slowing of the decay phase (Fig 3). It is of interest that SERCA inhibition with TG in myocytes, is followed by compensatory increase in $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$ exchange activity (Fig 4), as a compensatory mechanism to eliminate cytosolic Ca^{2+} through the plasma membrane. In fact, if $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$ exchange is prevented by placing the myocytes in Na^+ free medium, the basal ("diastolic") level of cytosolic Ca^{2+} , between consecutive stimuli, is progressively increased (Fig 4).

As a further demonstration of SERCA involvements in Ca^{2+} transient kinetics, faster decay of the transients can be obtained by SERCA overexpression, encoded by exogenous cDNA. For this purpose, we have used adenoviral vectors for efficient introduction of exogenous SERCA cDNA in cardiac myocytes, under control of constitutive or cardiac cell specific promoters (11). Most importantly, it can be shown by the use of diverse SERCA isoforms and specific antibodies (12), that the protein encoded by the exogenous cDNA is targeted exactly to the same membrane location as the protein encoded by the endogenous gene (Fig 5). In all cases, the resulting effect on Ca^{2+} transients is a shorter decay phase, as expected from a faster Ca^{2+} removal from the cytoplasm (Fig 6).

Physiologic and pathogenetic role of SERCA in excitation-contraction coupling

An intriguing question is whether, in addition to kinetic effects, the maximal level of Ca^{2+} stored within the lumen of the SR is affected by changes in overall SERCA activity. Assuming the same internal volume delimited by the SR membrane, the maximal Ca^{2+} concentration that can be possibly reached in the lumen of SR depends on Ca^{2+} dissociation constant from the ATPase inward oriented Ca^{2+} binding sites following utilization of ATP. In principle, this limit is independent of the overall Ca^{2+} transport velocity. On the other hand, if the frequency of consecutive Ca^{2+} release stimuli is increased, the time interval between stimuli becomes a limiting factor, and the overall transport velocity then determines the level of maximal filling. This is in fact observed when myocytes are subjected to trains of stimuli with progressively shorter intervals, whereby the amount of released Ca^{2+} becomes progressively smaller, as it is limited by the luminal Ca^{2+} load reached within the short interval. In this case, compensation is obtained by overexpression of exogenous SERCA, as a greater number of SERCA molecules allows a higher overall transport velocity and a more effective filling of the SR lumen within a limited time interval between stimuli (Fig 7).

With regard to the relevance of Ca^{2+} transport to contractile activity, it has been clearly shown that specific inhibition of SERCA by TG *in situ*, interferes (13) with the contractile response of cardiac myocytes to membrane excitation. This effect is certainly relevant to cardiac pathology. In fact, many experimental and clinical studies indicate that inadequate function of the Ca^{2+} transport ATPase (SERCA2) and the consequent alterations of cytosolic Ca^{2+} signaling are pathogenetic features of cardiac hypertrophy and failure (14–24). Even expression of SERCA isoforms with higher than normal Ca^{2+} affinity can lead to cardiac hypertrophy and failure (25).

An important feature of SERCA2 is its regulation by phospholamban in cardiac muscle, as originally described by Kirchberger et al. (26) and subsequently studied extensively in several laboratories, especially by E.G. Kranias (27). Phospholamban is a small protein that interacts with the transmembrane and stalk regions of the SERCA protein. The functional effect resulting from this interaction is a displacement of the ATPase activation curve to a higher Ca^{2+} concentrations range, therefore yielding lower activity at relevant cytosolic Ca^{2+} concentrations (28). This effect is overcome by phospholamban phosphorylation following adrenergic activation of protein kinase, thereby providing an elegant explanation for the increased cardiac contraction upon sympathetic discharge. Numerous and elegant studies with transgenic animals have shown convincingly that phospholamban is a key determinant of cardiac function and dysfunction (29). In addition, specific mutations in the human phospholamban gene may result in severe cardiomyopathies (30).

The evidence indicating that deficiencies of SERCA2 expression, function and regulation may be a significant factor in the pathogenesis of cardiac hypertrophy and failure (14–24), has led to attempts to relieve related shortcomings by over-expression through introduction of *exogenous* SERCA cDNA (31–37). On the other hand, it is now becoming apparent that regulation of *endogenous* expression is an important factor to be considered. In the experimental setting, it is clear that myocytes undergoing adrenergic hypertrophy (38) under-express SERCA, as the enzyme does not seem to be included in the hypertrophy transcriptional program (9). In addition, alterations of cytosolic Ca^{2+} homeostasis trigger over-expression of other Ca^{2+} handling proteins such as $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$ exchanger and the TRPC proteins (10). Calcineurin, a Ca^{2+} /calmodulin activated phosphatase and transcriptional activator (39,40) that plays an important role in heart development and remodeling (41,42), is likely to be involved in adaptive responses to alterations of cytosolic Ca^{2+} homeostasis (43–45). However, the consequences of its activation are likely to be interwoven with additional mechanisms of

transcriptional regulation (46) that may enhance or counteract the overall effect, directing it to expression of specific proteins, and excluding others. Presently, clarification of adaptive mechanisms for up- and down-regulation of endogenous SERCA and other Ca^{2+} handling proteins is a most promising endeavor in order to gain understanding and hopefully improving treatment of cardiac hypertrophy and failure.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Continuous support by the National Institutes of Health (Heart, Blood and Lung Institute) is gratefully acknowledged.

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Fig 1. Temperature dependence of cytosolic Ca^{2+} transients and active Ca^{2+} transport by cardiac SR vesicles

The Ca^{2+} transients were recorded using a fluorescence indicator in cultured neonatal rat myocytes (A). ATP dependent Ca^{2+} active transport (B) was measured with homogenized myocytes using radioactive tracer (7).

Fig 2. Protein levels and ATP dependent Ca^{2+} transport in homogenates of myocytes exposed to 20 μM PE, siSERCA2 or 10 nM TG
Control myocytes (1) are compared to myocytes exposed to PE for three (2) or seven days (3), or siSERCA2 for three days (4), or 10 nM TG (5) for three days. Protein levels were measured by Western blotting and compared to the levels of GAPDH protein. ATP dependent calcium transport was measured using homogenates of cultured cardiac myocytes, harvested after 3 or 7 days of treatment as specified above (9).

Fig 3. Alteration of Ca^{2+} signaling kinetics in myocytes exposed to PE, SERCA2 short interfering RNA or TG

The myocytes were exposed to 20 μM PE for seven days, or to siSERCA2 for three days, or to 10 nM TG for three days. Cytosolic Ca^{2+} transients were measured in single cells using fluo-4. The cells were subjected to field stimulation (1 Hz pulsing). Each trace represents the average of transients obtained from 30 to 70 cells over 5 different preparations. The fluorescence signal was normalized to the maximal change per each transient (9).

Fig 4. Compensatory increase in $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$ exchange activity following SERCA inhibition by TG in cardiac myocytes

Control myocytes (upper panel) and myocytes exposed to 10 nM TG for three days (lower Panel) were subjected to a series of voltage clamp depolarizations to -10 mV at 2 sec intervals. Ca^{2+} transients were then measured in Na^+ free bathing solution, thereby eliminating $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$ exchange. It is clear that, in the absence of $\text{Na}^+/\text{Ca}^{2+}$ exchange, the myocytes with inhibited SERCA show a progressive increase of the basal cytosolic Ca^{2+} level as a consequence of consecutive stimuli (9).

Fig 5. Intracellular targeting of SERCA1 gene product following delivery of exogenous cDNA by means of adenovirus vector under control of cardiac cell specific promoter
Colocalization of exogenous SERCA1 with endogenous SERCA2 is demonstrated by specific immunostaining for endogenous SERCA2 (A and D), exogenous SERCA 1 (B and E), and combined staining for SERCA2 and SERCA1 (C and F). Scale bars correspond to 10 μ m (12).

Fig 6. Ca^{2+} signaling transients in control cardiac myocytes, and following overexpression of exogenous SERCA

Cytosolic Ca^{2+} transients were measured in chicken embryo or neonatal rat myocytes using fluo-4. Myocytes overexpressing exogenous SERCA1 or SERCA2 (following infection with adenovirus vectors) are compared with control myocytes. The cells were subjected to field stimulation (1 Hz pulsing). Each trace represents the average of transients obtained from 15–30 cells over 3–5 different preparations. The fluorescence signal was normalized to the maximal change per each transient (12).

Fig 7. Ca²⁺ signaling transients (A) following stimuli at progressively shorter intervals in control myocytes and following overexpression of exogenous SERCA. It is shown that the amount of released Ca²⁺ is reduced (B) as the interval between consecutive stimuli is shorter, indicating a time limit for Ca²⁺ refilling of SR stores between stimuli. This limit is significantly overcome by overexpression of exogenous SERCA1 (7)