Late $I_{Na}$ in the Heart
Physiology, Pathology, and Pathways

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In this issue of Circulation, Glynn and colleagues1 make an important contribution to our understanding of the physiological and pathophysiological roles of late sodium current ($I_{Na}$) in the heart, with a focus on a key pathways regulating late $I_{Na}$ amplitude. They conducted well-designed and detailed studies with 2 new genetically engineered mouse lines: an S571A mouse that ablates phosphorylation by Ca$^{2+}$/calmodulin-dependent kinase II (CaMKII)$^{2}$ selectively at serine 571 (S571) in the cardiac Na channel pore-forming protein Scn5a and an S571E mouse that mimics phosphorylation at S571. S571 was shown previously to be a target for phosphorylation by CaMKII, and this phosphorylation enhanced late $I_{Na}$. The present studies in “knock-in” mice expressing either S571A or S571E have distinct advantages over earlier studies in heterologous expression systems, including cultured myocyte models, because they allow the study of whole-animal and organ phenotypes and cellular and molecular biophysical properties in a more native environment. These new in vivo studies reveal that, despite the extensive network of CaMKII properties in a more native environment. These new in vivo studies reveal that, despite the extensive network of CaMKII targets, phosphorylation of S571 selectively regulates late $I_{Na}$ and, in particular, enhanced late $I_{Na}$ in failing heart.

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**What Are the Signaling Pathways That Regulate Late $I_{Na}$? How Do They Interact?**

Two pathways that enhance late $I_{Na}$ act by posttranslational modification of Scn5a involve CaMKII-dependent phosphorylation$^{10}$ and neuronal nitric oxide synthase–dependent nitrosylation.$^{11}$ A third pathway that may involve direct phosphorylation of Scn5a or other regulatory protein involves phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K), which acts to suppress late $I_{Na}$. The CaMKII pathway is currently the most studied and best defined with the key phosphorylation site affecting late $I_{Na}$ known to be S571. The neuronal nitric oxide synthase pathway appears to involve direct nitrosylation of the Scn5a channel, but the Cys sites have not yet been determined. Whether and how these different pathways interact are unknown. Are they independent and additive? Do they share common features? It is not known whether the PI3K pathway acts directly by phosphorylation of Scn5a or whether it may somehow involve the CaMKII or neuronal nitric oxide synthase or other pathways. Although these questions were not directly addressed in the present study, it is interesting to note that the S571A mouse retains a significant proportion of wild-type late $I_{Na}$ (Figure 2 in Glynn et al$^{1}$), suggesting a component of late $I_{Na}$ that is not regulated by the S571 site. The S571 mouse models should be useful for addressing other questions about pathway interactions. For example, would inhibition of the PI3K pathway result in an increase in late $I_{Na}$ in the S571A model? If not, this...
would support the idea that PI3K activation ultimately acts by suppressing phosphorylation of S571. In addition to the abovenamed pathways, protein kinase C–dependent phosphorylation at S1503 altered \( I_{Na} \) kinetics in a way that enhances a type of late \( I_{Na} \) called window current,\(^{11} \) and protein kinase C inhibition blocked increased late \( I_{Na} \) caused by calcium loading the cell,\(^{12} \) suggesting roles for protein kinase C that may interact with the CaMKII pathway. The S571A and S571E models will be useful tools to further define the relationships and relative importance among these pathways.

What Signaling Pathways Are Involved in Inherited and Acquired Diseases With Increased Late \( I_{Na} \)?

Enhanced late \( I_{Na} \) occurs in numerous inherited cardiac disorders (mutations in the Scn5a complex for LQT3, LQT9, LQT19, LQT12) and in acquired conditions (hypertrophy, heart failure, ischemia, diabetes mellitus) and can arise as a result of changes in metabolites and other molecules (acidosis, carbon monoxide, reactive oxygen species, and drugs [PI3K inhibitors]).\(^{9} \) The detailed mechanisms for the causes of late \( I_{Na} \) in disease and the pathways involved have been investigated in only a few of these diseases. Activation of the neuronal nitric oxide synthase pathway to increase late \( I_{Na} \) has been implicated in the pathogenesis of LQT9 involving caveolin3 mutations\(^{13} \) and LQT12 involving α1-syntrophin mutations.\(^{11} \) An important finding in the present study\(^{1} \) is that stress-induced heart failure in the S571A mouse failed to increase the increased late \( I_{Na} \) seen in wild-type mice,\(^{1} \) strongly supporting the idea that phosphorylation of S571 via the CaMKII pathway is required for the late \( I_{Na} \) in this model of heart failure. Further experiments in this model could extend these important insights into the role of the CaMKII pathway in causes of late \( I_{Na} \). For example, would late \( I_{Na} \) be enhanced by ischemia, carbon monoxide, reactive oxygen species, or PI3K inhibitors in the S571A mouse? If not, this would provide evidence that they all work through the CaMKII pathway.

Is Physiological Late \( I_{Na} \) (in Contrast to the Enhanced Late \( I_{Na} \) Found in Inherited and Acquired Disorders) Important for Regulating Excitability and Contractility in the Absence of Disease?

Most studies of late \( I_{Na} \) have been conducted in models of pathologically enhanced late \( I_{Na} \), but late \( I_{Na} \) is also present in normal hearts (usually 0.2%–0.5% of peak \( I_{Na} \)). Is this physiological late \( I_{Na} \) important for normal electrophysiology and regulation of contractility? Might drugs that block too much of the late \( I_{Na} \) lead to undesired effects? The recognition that late \( I_{Na} \) plays a role in normal cardiac physiology goes back ≈50 years, when it was shown that the selective Na+ channel blocker tetrodotoxin shortened the AP plateau in normal myocytes.\(^{19} \) However, in normal rabbit and rat hearts, specific late \( I_{Na} \) blockers had no important effects on contractility and conduction.\(^{21} \) Small but significant decreases in ejection fraction were observed in the S571A mouse,\(^{1} \) supporting the idea that CaMKII-dependent late \( I_{Na} \) has importance in regulating contractility in the normal heart. However, “S571A APD [AP duration] was not significantly different than WT [wild-type] at baseline,”\(^{1} \) suggesting modest if any effects on electrophysiology. It is possible that the complex pathways for regulation of late \( I_{Na} \) evolved to deal exclusively with stress or pathological conditions, but it is more likely that these physiological levels of late \( I_{Na} \) are under tight regulatory control for important reasons related to normal cardiac physiology. More studies are needed on this less well-studied issue.

Can Pathologically Enhanced Late \( I_{Na} \) Be Better Selectively Targeted on the Basis of Pathway Mechanism?

The authors of the present study\(^{1} \) emphasized how CaMKII-dependent S571 phosphorylation specifically regulates late \( I_{Na} \) and may represent an attractive target for blocking pathologi- cal late \( I_{Na} \). Currently used drugs such as flecainide, amiodarone, and ranolazine are all pore blockers and would presumably block late \( I_{Na} \) regardless of the mechanism generating late \( I_{Na} \).\(^{6} \) Their selectivity to block late \( I_{Na} \) over peak \( I_{Na} \) appears to derive from state-dependent block. Even more selective blockers of late \( I_{Na} \) are in development.\(^{22} \) Regulating the phosphorylation S571 could in theory be a novel and important specific regulator of late \( I_{Na} \), but it is not yet clear if small molecules can be found for this target.

Caveats and Importance

As the authors of the present study\(^{1} \) correctly point out, a mouse model may not be completely translatable to human
physiology. Despite this limitation, this study has generated insights into unanswered questions about the regulatory pathways and characteristics of both pathological and physiological late $I_{Na}$, and the models developed in these studies have the potential to generate more insights.

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Disclosures

None.

References


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