Computer Simulation of Excitation-Contraction Coupling in Cardiac Muscle. A Study of the Regulatory Role of Calcium Binding to Troponin C

A MICHAILOVA AND V SPASSOV

Institute of Biophysics Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
1113 Sofia Bulgaria

Abstract. The influence of a change of troponin concentration as well of a change of binding and dissociation of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions to the regulatory protein troponin C on the time course of isometric tension has been studied using a mathematical model developed to investigate excitation-contraction coupling in cardiac muscle cells. The numerical simulations show that peak amplitude, rate of force development, time to peak tension and relaxation time depend significantly on the above parameters even in the case when the equilibrium dissociation constant remains unchanged. The obtained results might be useful for the planning of new experiments in the view of the fact that no similar data have been reported for cardiac muscle cells as yet.

Key words: Excitation-contraction coupling Mammalian cardiac muscle Computer model — Huxley's mathematical approach to the sliding mechanism

Introduction

Numerous mathematical models have been developed to investigate the properties of the Ca\(^{2+}\) signalling system as well as the contractile and mechanical processes in the heart muscle (Wong 1971, 1981, Robertson et al 1981, Cannell and Allen 1984, Mihailova and Petrov 1984, DiFrancesco and Noble 1985, Backx et al 1989, Stern and Lakatta 1992, Michailova and Spassov 1992, 1993 Langer and Peskoff 1996). The models could explain, confirm or reject some physiological and pharmacological hypotheses, and simulate different contractile events. However, no experimental or theoretical data are available on how the time course of isometric tension depends on changes of troponin concentration as well as on changes of association and dissociation of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions with and from the regulatory protein troponin C.

*Correspondence to Velin Spassov, TPC 15 The Scripps Research Institute 10550 North Torrey Pines Road La Jolla CA 92037, USA E-mail spassov@zippy.scripps.edu
We included the binding and dissociation of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions to and from troponin C in the excitation-contraction coupling model (Michailova and Spassov 1992), more over it was assumed that in mammalian cardiac muscle the concentration of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions bound to Ca\(^{2+}\) specific sites on troponin C could be the activation function in Huxley's mathematical approach to the sliding mechanism (Huxley 1957). We simulated different mechanical cardiac-muscle responses (isometric contractions at different muscle length and frequency of stimulation, tension voltage relationship, tension-duration relationship, force-frequency relationship, action potential-tension relationship) to test the correctness of the model (Michailova and Spassov 1992 1993). The obtained qualitative results corroborate our assumption that the concentration of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions bound to Ca\(^{2+}\) specific sites on troponin C could be an important regulatory factor in actin-myosin interactions and the subsequent production of force in Huxley's mathematical approach to the sliding mechanism.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how changes in troponin concentration and changes of the association and dissociation of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions with and from troponin C influence the time course of isometric tension in response to a single and rhythmic applied action potential, using the mathematical model developed by Michailova and Spassov (1992).

Materials and Methods

In cardiac muscle cells depolarization of the sarcolemma causes influx of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions through voltage dependent channels and induces the release of larger amounts of stored Ca\(^{2+}\) from the sarcoplasmic reticulum by 'calcium-induced calcium release' mechanism. The released Ca\(^{2+}\) together with Ca\(^{2+}\) ions entering through the sarcolemma, bind to troponin C and initiate a sequence of protein interactions that permit activation of the actin-myosin cross-bridge cycle, causing contraction.

We described these biophysical and physiological processes in living cardiac muscle by a system of equations (Michailova and Spassov 1992, Eqs 1-18). In contrast to Wong (1981) we included in the model the non-linear differential Eq (4) to describe the association and dissociation of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions with and from troponin C:

\[
\frac{d\gamma(t)}{dt} = k_{on}(\text{trop} - \gamma(t))X_{SP}(t) - k_{off}\gamma(t) \tag{4}
\]

where \(\gamma(t)\) is the concentration of Ca\(^{2+}\) ions bound to Ca\(^{2+}\) specific sites on troponin C, \(X_{SP}(t)\) is the Ca\(^{2+}\) concentration in the sarcoplasm, \(\text{trop}\) is the troponin concentration, \(k_{on}, k_{off}\) are velocity constants.

The inclusion of Eq (4) and the use of \(\gamma(t)\) as the activation function in Huxley's model enable to study theoretically how changes of the association and dissociation constants of Ca\(^{2+}\) binding to troponin C \((k_{on}, k_{off})\) as well as changes...
of troponin concentration \((trop)\) influence the time course of isometric tension.

Details of the system of equations (1–18) and the values of parameters that provide for optimal performance of the model have been presented in the paper by Michailova and Spassov (1992). Gill's modifications of Runge-Kutta fourth order algorithm (Ralston and Wilf 1960) and Julian's computational procedure (Julian 1969) are used to solve Eqs (1–18).

A program written in Fortran by the authors is used to obtain the numerical solutions. The simulations were run on a 486 personal computer.

Results

The initial values of the rate constants for \(Ca^{2+}\) binding to troponin C \((k_{on} = 0.39\) \(1/\mu\text{mol} \cdot \text{s}\) \(k_{off} = 19.6/\text{s}\)) were taken from the work of Holroyde et al (1980). The concentration of troponin \((trop = 70 \mu\text{mol/l})\) corresponds to that used by Wei and Yue (1986). In the study, the value of each of the parameters \(k_{on}, k_{off}\) and \(trop\) was varied at fixed values of all the other parameters used.

Figure 1a shows a three-dimensional plot of the isometric tension \((Pn)\) as a function of troponin concentration \((trop)\) and time \((t)\) in response to a single applied action potential. The model simulations show that a decrease of \(trop\) leads to a decrease of the peak amplitude \((P_{max})\) and of the rate of force development \((dP/dt)\) while the time to peak isometric tension \((t_{max} = 0.2 \text{s})\) and the relaxation time \((t_r = 0.6 \text{s})\) remain almost unchanged. If the muscle is rhythmically stimulated \((60/\text{min})\) a decrease of \(trop\) leads to a decrease of the steady-state peak amplitude \((P_s)\) (Fig 1b).

From the results shown in Fig 2a it follows that \(P_{max}\) and \(t_r\) increase in response to a single applied stimulus if the on-rate velocity constant \((k_{on})\) increases. Figure 2a also illustrates that the time to peak isometric tension \((t_{max})\) remains unchanged \((t_{max} = 0.2 \text{s})\) for values of \(k_{on} (0.001 \text{ l/\mu mol/s} < 1 \text{l/\mu mol/s})\) and increases to 0.3 s for values of \(k_{on} > 1 \text{l/\mu mol/s}\). In the case of rhythmic stimulation an increase of \(k_{on}\) leads to an increase of the steady-state peak amplitude \((P_s)\) (Fig 2b). Figure 2b also shows that the resting value of the isometric tension \((Pn_0 = 0.25)\) is not reached if the value of on-rate constant is too high \((k_{on} = 100 \text{l/\mu mol/s})\).

A decrease of the off-rate velocity constant \((k_{off})\) causes an increase of \(P_{max}\) and \(t_r\) in response to a single stimulus (Fig 3a). For values of \(k_{off} (10^4/\text{s} < 10^2/\text{s})\) \(t_{max}\) remains unchanged \((t_{max} = 0.2 \text{s})\), and it increases to 0.3 s for the values of \(k_{off} < 10/\text{s}\). If the muscle is rhythmically stimulated a decrease of \(k_{off}\) leads to an increase of the steady-state peak amplitude \((P_s)\) (Fig 3a). The results of simulations (Fig 3b) show that the resting value of isometric tension \((Pn_0 = 0.25)\) is not reached if the value of off-rate constant is too low \((k_{off} = 0.01/\text{s})\).

Figure 4a represents a three-dimensional plot of the isometric tension \((Pn)\) as a function of the on-rate velocity constant \((k_{on})\) and time \((t)\) in response to a
Figure 1. (a) Isometric tension as a function of time at different values of troponin concentration ($trop$) in response to a single applied action potential. (b) Model responses to a rhythmically applied action potential: (1) $trop = 10 \mu\text{mol/l}$, (2) $trop = 40 \mu\text{mol/l}$, (3) $trop = 70 \mu\text{mol/l}$ $P_n$ normalized isometric muscle tension, $t$ time, Frequency 60/min, $k_{on} = 0.39 \text{l/\mu\text{mol s}}$, $k_{off} = 19.6/\text{s}$
Figure 2. (a) Isometric tension as a function of time at different values of the on-rate velocity constant ($k_{on}$) in response to a single applied action potential (b) Model responses to a rhythmically applied action potential (1) $k_{on} = 0.01 \mu$mol s, (2) $k_{on} = 1 \mu$mol s, (3) $k_{on} = 100 \mu$mol s Frequency 60/min $i_{top} = 70 \mu$mol/l $k_{off} = 19.6/s$
Figure 3. (a) Isometric tension as a function of time at different values of the off-rate velocity constant ($k_{off}$) in response to a single applied action potential. (b) Model responses to a rhythmically applied action potential: (1) $k_{off} = 0.01/s$, (2) $k_{off} = 10/s$, (3) $k_{off} = 100/s$. Frequency, 60/min; $trop = 70 \mu mol/l$; $k_{on} = 0.39 l/\mu mol.s$. 
Figure 4. (a) Isometric tension as a function of time at different values of the on-rate velocity constant \( k_{on} \) in response to a single applied action potential with the equilibrium dissociation constant unchanged \( (K_d = k_{off}/k_{on} = \text{const}) \). (b) Model responses to a rhythmically applied action potential and \( K_d = \text{const} \) (1) \( k_{on} = 0.39 \times 10^{-2} \) l/\( \mu \)mol s, \( k_{off} = 19.6 \times 10^{-2} \) s, (2) \( k_{on} = 0.39 \times 10^{-1} \) l/\( \mu \)mol s, \( k_{off} = 19.6 \times 10^{-1} \) s, (3) \( k_{on} = 0.39 \) l/\( \mu \)mol s, \( k_{off} = 19.6 \) s. Frequency, 60/mm, trop = 70 \( \mu \)mol/l.
single applied action potential but the equilibrium dissociation constant remains unchanged \( (K_d = k_{off}/k_{on} = \text{const}) \). An increase of both \( k_{on} \) and \( k_{off} \) \( (K_d = \text{const}) \) leads to an increase of the peak amplitude \( P_{\text{max}} \) for values of \( k_{on} \) in the interval \((0.39 \times 10^{-1} \text{ l/\mu mol s} - 0.39 \text{ l/\mu mol s}) \) and \( k_{off} \) \((19.6 \times 10^{-4}/s - 19.6/s) \) and to a decrease of \( P_{\text{max}} \) for values of \( k_{on} > 0.39 \text{ l/\mu mol s} \) and \( k_{off} > 19.6/s \) (Fig. 4a). The time to peak isometric tension decreases to \( t_{\text{max}} = 0.2 \text{ s} \) for values of \( k_{on} \) \((0.39 \times 10^{-2} \text{ l/\mu mol s} - 0.39 \text{ l/\mu mol s}) \) and \( k_{off} \) \((19.6 \times 10^{-4}/s - 19.6/s) \), and remains unchanged \( (t_{\text{max}} = 0.2 \text{ s}) \) if \( k_{on} > 0.39 \text{ l/\mu mol s} \) and \( k_{off} > 19.6/s \) (Fig. 4a). If the muscle is rhythmically stimulated the steady-state peak amplitude \( (P_{\text{ss}}) \) increases for values of \( k_{off} \) \((0.39 \times 10^{-2} \text{ l/\mu mol s} - 0.39 \text{ l/\mu mol s}) \) and \( k_{off} \) \((19.6 \times 10^{-2}/s - 19.6/s) \). The testing value of isometric tension \( (P_{\text{ss}} = 0.25) \) could not be reached for the lower values of the rate constants \( (k_{on} = 0.39 \times 10^{-2} \text{ l/\mu mol s} - 19.6 \times 10^{-2}/s \text{ and } k_{off} = 19.6 \times 10^{-1}/s) \).

**Discussion**

The model results (Figs 1–3) suggest that the characteristics of the isometric tension (peak amplitude, rate of force development, time to peak tension, relaxation time) undergo significant changes if the tropomycin concentration \( (trop) \) and the association and dissociation constants of \( \text{Ca}^{2+} \) binding to tropomycin \( C \) \( (k_{on}, k_{off}) \) are varied. An interesting model result (Fig. 4) is also that the characteristics of isometric tension depend significantly on the values of the rate constants \( (k_{on}, k_{off}) \) even at unchanged value of the equilibrium dissociation constant \( (K_d = k_{off}/k_{on} = \text{const}) \).

These theoretical predictions could help to throw more light upon the dependence of excitation-contraction coupling on the \( \text{Ca}^{2+} \) binding to tropomycin \( C \) and could be useful to plan new experiments in the view of the fact that such data have not yet been reported for cardiac muscle cells. They also may serve as reference point in efforts to explain the reasons for some muscle diseases or the effects of action of several pharmacological agents. For example, if it were possible to block a part of the specific calcium binding sites on tropomycin \( C \) the effect is expected to be mainly on the magnitude of the developed muscle force (Fig. 1). However, variations of the rate constants due to possible structural or environmental changes show a more complicated picture: the effect is not only on the peak amplitude of tension but also on the rate of force development and on the peak and the relaxation time (Figs 2, 4).

It is important to stress that cardiac cell is not homogenous and the spatial gradients of free Ca\(^{2+}\) can thus affect the calculated force time course. In recent years some aspects of the subcellular Ca\(^{2+}\) concentration gradients have been addressed in computer models of cardiac excitation-contraction coupling (Backx et al 1989 Stern and Lakatta 1992 Amstutz et al 1996 Langer and Peskoff 1996) We do not see any principal difficulties in the future to extend the present model taking into account not only time dependence but also three dimensional distribution of calcium concentration.

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