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# **Problems and Concepts in Developmental Neurophysiology**

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# **Cellular Properties of Convulsant-Treated Neocortical Neurons in the Rat during Postnatal Development**

John J. Hablitz and Bernd Sutor

Postnatal development of the neocortex has been described in numerous anatomic studies. The increases in somatic volume, dendritic arbor, and spine complexes that occur in the first few postnatal weeks have been documented by Golgi staining techniques (8,24,25), and information about the maturation of synaptic elements has been provided by electron microscopy (15,25,40). However, cellular interactions and neuronal integration have not been studied extensively in the immature rat brain. Electrophysiologic studies, using intracellular injection of the fluorescent dye Lucifer Yellow, have shown that dye coupling, thought to be an indicator of electrotonic coupling, is extensive in immature rat neocortex and declines rapidly between birth and 10 days of age (5). Developmental studies of cerebellar nuclear cells (9) and rabbit hippocampal pyramidal neurons (28,29) indicate that most intrinsic membrane conductances mature within the first postnatal week. Inhibitory and excitatory postsynaptic potentials have been observed in intracerebellar nuclei neurons on the second postnatal day (9). Despite these indications that basic cellular and synaptic responses are established early, distinct differences in patterns of epileptiform discharge exist between the immature and mature brain. Recordings of paroxysmal activity from epileptogenic foci in the immature brain *in vivo* have shown that synaptic potentials and interictal spike discharges last longer and are more variable in size than those recorded from similar foci in the mature brain (26). Foci in the developing brain have a lower rate of spontaneous discharge (2), and seizure episodes, which are prominent in the mature brain (22), are not typically observed in the developing cortex (11). Recent experiments on hippocampal slices prepared from neonatal animals (28,35) have shown that there is



a seizure-prone period between postnatal days 9 and 19. In the present study, we examined the response of neocortical slices from rats 8–21 days old to convulsant drugs to determine whether there was a significant age-dependent variation in the pattern of epileptiform discharge. We also characterized the membrane properties of neurons in this age range.

Neocortical slices were prepared using standard techniques (34,41) and were maintained in an interface type of chamber. Slices were allowed to recover for a period of 1 hr prior to the addition of 50  $\mu\text{M}$  picrotoxin to the perfusate. Intracellular recordings were made from superficial strata (layers II–IV) of anterior somatosensory cortex.

### Cellular Properties of Immature Neurons

The neurons in slices from immature animals had an average resting membrane potential (RMP) of  $-66 \pm 4$  mV ( $N = 33$ ) and an input resistance ( $R_N$ ) of  $38 \pm 21$  M $\Omega$  ( $N = 33$ ). The value for the RMP was lower than that obtained from mature animals ( $-76 \pm 8$  mV,  $N = 113$ ), but the difference was not statistically significant.  $R_N$  tended to be larger in immature than in mature neurons ( $R_N = 20 \pm 7$  M $\Omega$ ,  $N = 95$ ), but the great variability in seemingly good impalements of neonatal neurons makes this difference difficult to evaluate. Action potential duration (measured at half-maximal amplitude) was longer in neurons from immature animals ( $1.9 \pm 1.4$  msec,  $N = 26$  vs.  $0.8 \pm 0.2$  msec,  $N = 95$  for the mature group). This did not seem to be due to impalement injury, since there was no correlation between spike height and membrane potential. Broad, overshooting spikes were observed in neurons with stable, high resting potentials and high input resistances.

Neocortical neurons *in vivo* (4) and *in vitro* (23,32) are known to fire repetitively in response to depolarizing current pulses and to show adaptation during long current pulses. As shown in fig. 12.1A, similar behavior was observed in neurons from immature rat cortex. Individual action potentials were followed by an afterhyperpolarization (AHP). This AHP, which was very pronounced in immature neurons, became deeper with succeeding spikes and appeared to mediate the observed adaptation. Typically, trains of action potentials were followed by a short, rapid AHP and a more slowly decaying, long-lasting AHP. These slow AHPs, similar to those described by Connors et al. (5), were 2–5 mV in amplitude and lasted as long as 900 msec.

When hyperpolarizing current pulses were applied, distinct differences were observed between neurons from immature and adult animals. Results suggested that neurons could be grouped into two broad categories, namely  $<16$  days of age and  $>16$  days of age. Neurons from animals  $<16$  days of age typically showed the type of behavior illustrated in fig. 12.1B. A marked, time-dependent inward rectification was noted with hyperpolarizing current pulses. This appeared as a sag in the voltage records (fig. 12.1B) that began 5–20 msec after

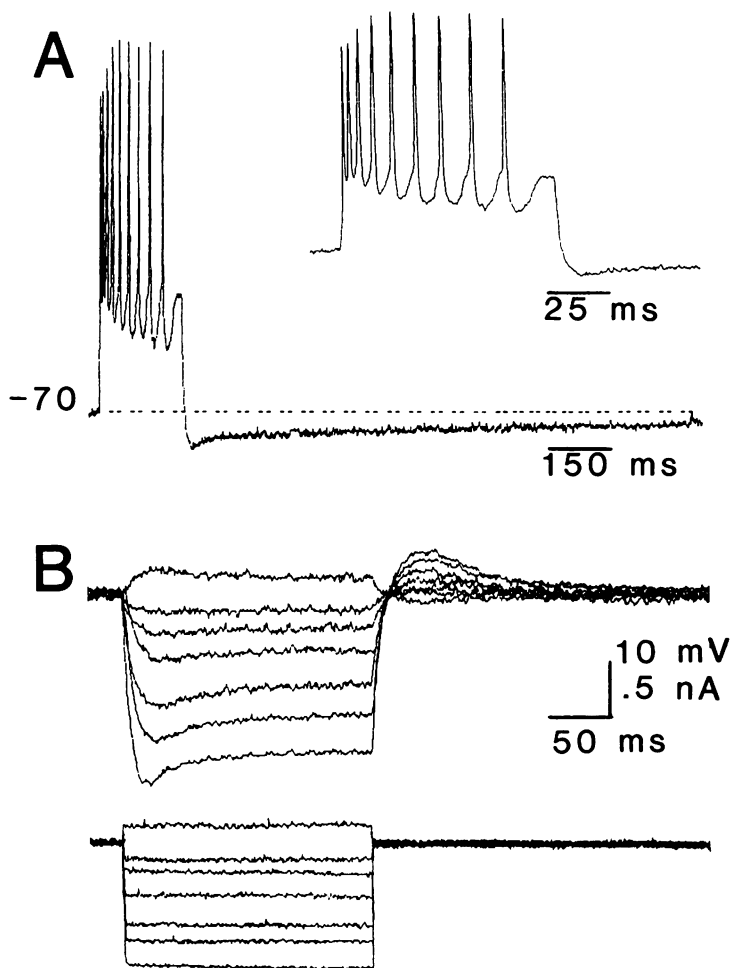


Fig. 12.1. Response of a neuron from a 10-day-old animal to hyperpolarizing and depolarizing current pulses. A: Example of repetitive firing and afterhyperpolarization (AHP) produced by a strong depolarizing current pulse. Inset shows action potentials at a higher sweep speed. B: Superimposed voltage responses (upper traces) to current pulses of varying amplitude (lower traces). Hyperpolarizing pulses produce responses that reach a peak and then sag to a steady-state level. Rebound depolarizations are seen at pulse offset. Same cell and resting potential (RMP) as in A.

the onset of the current pulse and reached a steady state in 40–90 msec. Some sag was observed with hyperpolarizing currents that caused membrane potential changes of 10 mV, suggesting that the current underlying this response was activated at values near rest. This type of behavior was seen in more than 80 percent of the neurons in the <16-days-of-age group. Sagging was less preva-

lent in the older animals, although it was occasionally observed in neurons from mature cortex.

Another prominent feature of the response of neocortical neurons to hyperpolarizing current pulses in the <16-days-of-age group was the rebound depolarization observed at pulse offset. This response was graded (fig. 12.1B) and could exceed threshold for spike initiation. Depolarizations associated with pulse offset were seen in 60 percent of the cells in the <16-days-of-age group. Two pieces of evidence suggested that this depolarization was a separate process from the one responsible for the hyperpolarizing sag. First, some cells with prominent sags did not show anodal break depolarizations, and second, alterations in membrane potential had differential effects on the two responses.

The rebound depolarization observed here has also been described in cerebellar nuclear cells (14). In those cells, repetitive spiking was observed when large-amplitude current pulses were used. In our experiments, rebound spiking was rare when pulses were applied with the cell held at its resting membrane potential, although one or occasionally two action potentials were seen at the offset of the pulse. However, the amplitude of the rebound depolarization and the number of resulting action potentials could be altered by manipulating the membrane potential with steady currents. A particularly dramatic example is shown in fig. 12.2. A subthreshold rebound depolarization was seen when a

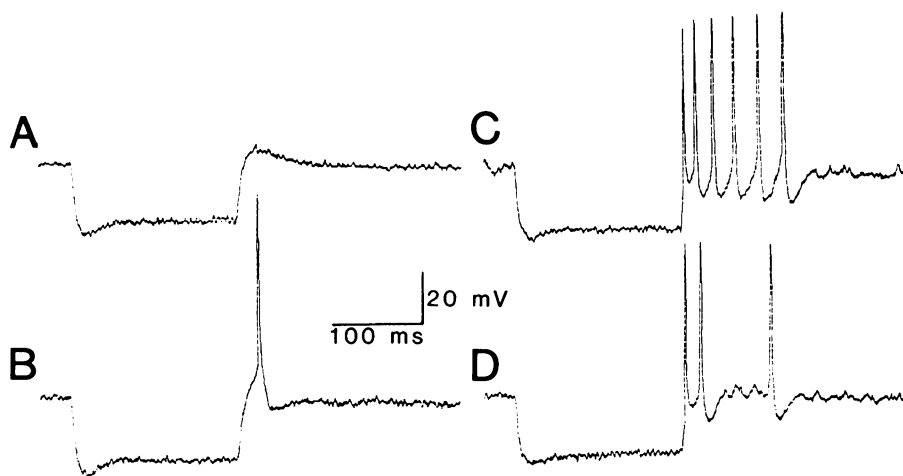


Fig. 12.2. Effect of alterations in membrane potential on rebound depolarization. A: Subthreshold depolarization occurs at pulse offset in the absence of applied steady current (RMP =  $-65$  mV). B: Single action potential is evoked when cell is depolarized by 5 mV. C: Train of action potentials occurs with depolarization to  $-55$  mV. D: The  $R_N$  and the number of rebound discharges decrease as the cell is depolarized further to  $-50$  mV. A hyperpolarizing current pulse of 0.6 nA was used in all traces.

hyperpolarizing current step was applied at the resting potential (fig. 12.2A). When the cell was depolarized, the same current pulse produced a rebound depolarization that triggered an action potential (fig. 12.2B). Further depolarization resulted in the elicitation of a train of action potentials (fig. 12.2C), although the hyperpolarizing sag was no longer observed. A decrease in  $R_N$  and in the number of rebound action potentials was observed with additional depolarization (fig. 12.2D). Such pronounced rebound depolarizations were never observed in neurons from adult animals.

### Convulsant-Induced Epileptiform Activity in Mature and Immature Neocortex

Convulsant-treated neocortical slices from mature guinea pigs display epileptiform activity consisting of large depolarizations that trigger bursts of fast action potentials (10). These paroxysmal depolarizing shifts (PDSs) were stereotyped, although the latency to onset varied with the stimulus strength. We have made similar observations in mature rat neocortical neurons. Figure 12.3

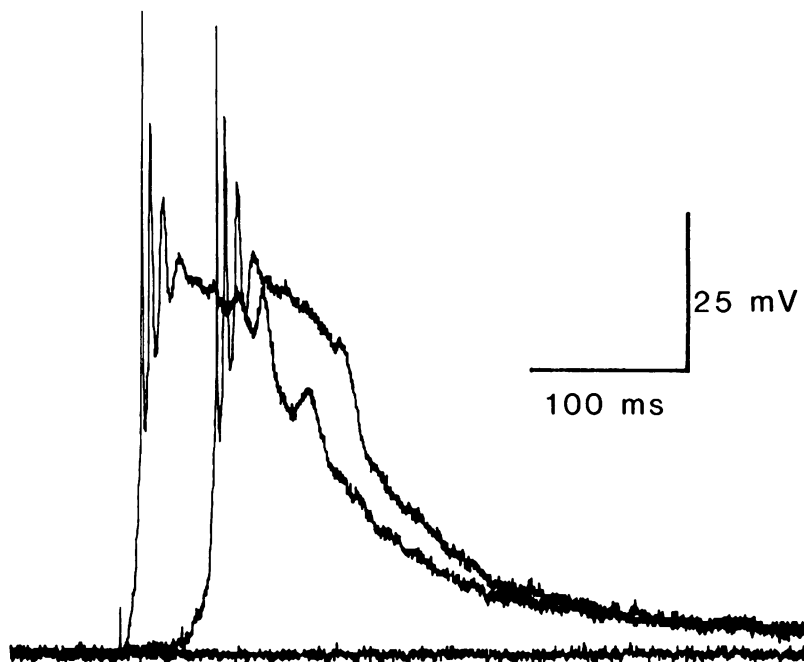


Fig. 12.3. Examples of synaptically evoked PDSs in a neocortical neuron from an adult rat. Responses were evoked 15 min after starting perfusion with a saline containing  $10 \mu\text{M}$  bicuculline. Three stimuli of increasing strength were applied. The charges delivered to the stimulating electrode were 3.75, 5.0, and 6.25 nC. The resting membrane potential of this cell was  $-78 \text{ mV}$ .

shows the neuron's response to three intracortical stimuli of increasing intensity. The first stimulus was below threshold and did not evoke a detectable response. The second stimulus evoked an excitatory postsynaptic potential that led to a PDS at a latency of 19 msec. Further increases in the strength of stimulation evoked a PDS that rose rapidly from the baseline after a delay of 4 msec. In agreement with the report of Gutnick et al. (10), no spontaneous epileptiform activity was observed in neocortical slices from mature animals.

In contrast to slices from mature animals, two patterns of spontaneous epileptiform activity were observed in convulsant-treated slices from immature brain. Similar activity could be triggered by a single shock applied intracortically or to the pial surface. The first pattern was seen in slices from 8- to 15-day-old rats and consisted, in extracellular recordings, of paroxysms of repetitive spike discharges superimposed on a 3- to 5-mV, slow negative potential. Spontaneous paroxysms were 10–30 sec in duration, and the intervals between these events varied from 30 to 180 sec in different preparations. Similar episodes could be evoked by electrical stimulation of intracortical fibers, the pial surface, or the subjacent white matter. Intracellular recordings showed that each paroxysm was accompanied by a membrane depolarization and sustained firing. Examples of such activity from two neurons are shown in fig. 12.4. A single stimulus was used to evoke the discharge shown in fig. 12.4A; the responses in fig. 12.4B occurred spontaneously. The observed depolarization was associated with an increase in conductance, as indicated by the decreased voltage transient in response to a constant-current hyperpolariz-

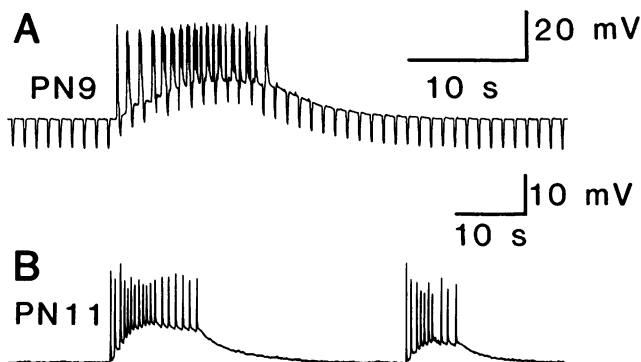


Fig. 12.4. Intracellular recordings of epileptiform responses in the <16-day group. A: Recording from a neuron from a 9-day-old rat (PN9). A single orthodromic stimulus triggered the response shown. The negative deflections are the voltage responses to 150-msec, 0.4-nA hyperpolarizing current pulses. RMP was  $-62$  mV. B: Spontaneous epileptiform events recorded in a postnatal day 11 (PN11) neuron. RMP was  $-62$  mV. Chart recorder tracings are shown in A and B; full height of action potentials is not shown.

ing step (fig. 12.4A). It should be noted that the paroxysmal bursts were not followed by an AHP.

The second pattern of spontaneous epileptiform activity was seen in convulsant-treated slices from animals 16–21 days old. Extracellular recordings showed paroxysmal activity consisting of 3–10 spike discharges followed by a sustained, slow, negative-potential shift. This slow potential could last as long as 180 sec and could reach amplitudes of up to 30 mV. Paroxysmal events recurred spontaneously at intervals of 4–11 min, over periods of hours. Spontaneous PDSs and slow, negative-potential shifts were not observed in picrotoxin-treated slices from animals over 30 days of age, although PDSs could still be evoked by stimulation.

Intracellular recordings in the 16- to 21-day group revealed that each paroxysmal event began with a membrane depolarization similar to that observed in the <16-day group. Examples from two neurons are shown in fig. 12.5. Such depolarizations (onset indicated by the single arrow in fig. 12.5A and B) were associated with bursts of repetitive action potentials. This was followed, at a varying latency, by a large, sustained membrane depolarization (fig. 12.5A and B, double arrow). This depolarization, termed a long-lasting depolarization (LLD) slowly declined and was followed, in fig. 12.5A, by an AHP. Fig. 12.5B shows a similar pattern, except that the LLD is followed by an afterdepolarization. Complete recovery of baseline values for resting potential and  $R_N$  was achieved after several minutes. The downward deflections in fig. 12.5 represent the voltage displacement in response to hyperpolarizing current pulses and monitor neuronal  $R_N$ . It can be seen that the paroxysmal event was associated with a complicated series of changes in  $R_N$ . Decreases in  $R_N$  occurred during the initial depolarization, which only partially recovered prior to

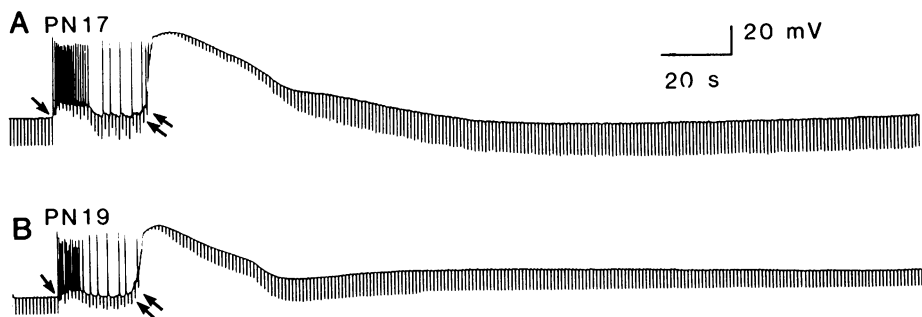


Fig. 12.5. Specimen records of spontaneous epileptiform discharges in the 16- to 21-day-old group. A: Chart-recorder tracings of a burst of PDSs (single arrow) followed by a long-lasting depolarization (double arrow) in a postnatal day 17 (PN17) neuron. Downward deflections are voltage responses to a 0.3-nA hyperpolarizing current pulse. RMP was  $-82$  mV. B: Similar recording, but from a postnatal day 19 (PN19) neuron. Current pulse, 0.3 nA; RMP,  $-63$  mV.

the onset of the LLD. During the peak of the LLD,  $R_N$  was virtually immeasurable, indicating a large conductance increase.  $R_N$  recovered slowly over time as the LLD declined but then apparently increased over control values during the afterpotentials. However, in other neurons, LLDs were followed by an AHP associated with a decrease in  $R_N$ . The significance of these changes in  $R_N$  during the afterpotentials is unclear, however, since adequate electrode compensation was difficult to maintain during and immediately after the LLD; this probably resulted from the changes in extracellular resistivity associated with the shrinkage of the extracellular space that occurred during LLDs (13).

### Extracellular Potassium Changes during Epileptiform Activity in Immature Neocortex

It has been reported that the increases in extracellular potassium ( $[K^+]_o$ ) that occur during epileptiform discharges are enhanced in the immature hippocampus (35). To determine whether similar changes occur in the immature neocortex, ion-sensitive electrodes were used to measure changes in  $[K^+]_o$ . These studies were conducted in collaboration with Dr. Uwe Heinemann, at the Department of Neurophysiology, Max-Planck Institute for Psychiatry, Martinsried FRG. The results of experiments in the <16-day group are shown in fig. 12.6A. It can be seen that  $[K^+]_o$  rapidly increases to more than 20 mM during paroxysmal activity and slowly declines after the epileptiform activity ceases. In contrast, in the >16-day group (fig. 12.6B),  $[K^+]_o$  rises to over 10 mM during epileptiform activity and then abruptly increases again during the slow potential associated with the onset of the LLD. A pronounced undershoot of  $[K^+]_o$  follows, after which there is a return to baseline  $[K^+]_o$  levels over a period of minutes.  $[K^+]_o$  is then stable until the onset of the next paroxysmal event, when the sequence described above is repeated.

### Conclusions

These results demonstrate that several unique types of epileptiform activity occur in neocortical slices from immature rats. Each type of activity occurs preferentially within a restricted time frame and is not seen before slices are exposed to convulsants. Because of its spontaneous nature and long duration, paroxysmal activity in vitro in immature neocortex differs phenomenologically from that observed in slices from mature brain. These characteristics suggest that paroxysmal activity in the immature animal may be a useful model for the study of ictal seizure discharges and perhaps the transition from interictal to ictal discharge.

It is now generally agreed that several factors contribute to the generation of epileptiform discharges. Alterations in the extracellular microenvironment (20,27), electrical coupling (21), endogenous membrane currents (42), and

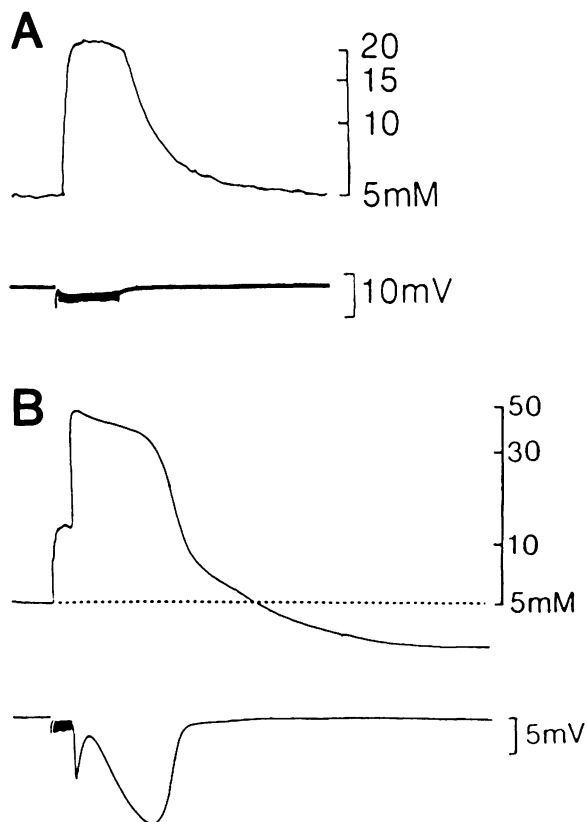


Fig. 12.6. Changes in  $[K^+]_o$  associated with epileptiform discharges in the immature rat neocortex. A: Specimen record of  $[K^+]_o$  changes (upper trace) during epileptiform activity (lower trace) in a slice from a 12-day-old rat. Recordings were made  $600\ \mu\text{m}$  below the pial surface. B: Similar experiment in a slice from a 19-day-old rat. These recordings were made  $750\ \mu\text{m}$  below the pial surface.

synaptically evoked depolarizations (1,12,16) all add to the PDS that accompanies abnormal activity. The relative contribution from each factor is likely to vary according to the type of epileptiform activity expressed, the brain region involved, and the stage of development. The present results indicate that the immature cortex may differ significantly from the adult cortex in certain intrinsic membrane currents and in changes in the extracellular microenvironment induced by epileptiform discharge.

In the present studies, immature neurons had broad action potentials, displayed marked time-dependent inward rectification that was not prevalent in mature rat neocortical neurons (6,41), and frequently showed rebound depolarizations at the offset of hyperpolarizing pulses. All of these factors could



lead to the increased excitability observed after exposure to convulsant drugs. The broader spikes in neurons from immature animals could, if propagated into synaptic terminals, produce increased transmitter release, leading to greater excitation. Hyperpolarizing inward rectification could, in principle, reduce the effectiveness of hyperpolarizing influences that normally curtail epileptiform discharges (31). Our findings suggest that the rebound depolarization results from activation of a voltage-dependent current. Persistent sodium and calcium currents have been described in neocortical neurons (33), and such currents could contribute to the rebound depolarizations. On the other hand, it is not possible to rule out a mechanism involving a low-threshold calcium current deinactivated by the hyperpolarizing pulse (18). Regardless of its ionic nature, the current underlying the rebound depolarization would enhance neuronal excitability and might contribute to the propensity of immature neocortex to display prolonged epileptiform discharges. More detailed studies are needed to determine whether quantitative differences exist between immature and mature cells with regard to the magnitude and voltage dependence of intrinsic membrane currents.

Another important feature distinguishing immature from mature neocortex is the changes in the extracellular microenvironment that accompany epileptiform discharges. Using ion-sensitive electrodes, we have shown that epileptiform discharges in the immature neocortex are associated with unusually high levels of  $[K^+]_o$  (13). The cause of the higher levels of  $[K^+]_o$  associated with repetitive firing in the early postnatal period is presently unclear. However, similar results have been obtained in the hippocampus (36), which suggests that an elevated ceiling for  $[K^+]_o$  may be a general property of the neonatal period. The sustained increases in  $[K^+]_o$  that were observed could heighten neuronal excitability by several mechanisms, e.g., by a direct depolarizing action, by release of excitatory neurotransmitters, or by reducing the effectiveness of repolarizing potassium currents. Elevation of  $[K^+]_o$  may thus be involved in the maintenance of the prolonged ictal-like epileptiform activity observed in the immature neocortex.

The levels of  $[K^+]_o$  associated with the LLDs observed in the 16- to 21-day-old animals indicate that they represent a type of spreading depression (SD). This interpretation is supported by our observation of a conduction velocity of approximately 4 mm/min for LLDs. SD is a transient pathologic state associated with large changes in intra- and extracellular ion concentrations and movement of water (17). The relationship between SD and epileptiform activity has been examined by numerous investigators. SD has been reported to elicit epileptiform activity (39) as well as to suppress it (30). Paroxysmal discharges can, in turn, both trigger (38) and block (3,37) SD. In the present study, there was a unique relationship between epileptiform activity and SD-like LLDs. A burst of epileptiform discharges would arise from a quiet background and apparently trigger an LLD. A latency of tens of seconds could be observed

between the initiation of burst discharges and the onset of an LLD, suggesting that the SD underlying the LLD was triggered remotely and slowly propagated to the recording site. The present results suggest that different mechanisms are involved in the generation of paroxysmal burst discharges and LLDs. The former were similar in the <16-day group and the 16- to 21-day animals; yet LLDs were observed only in the latter group. Moreover, laminar profiles demonstrated that paroxysmal burst discharges reversed in polarity in deeper cortical layers, whereas the slow potential shifts associated with LLDs did not. Such laminar profiles would be consistent with a neuronal origin for the former but not the latter (7,19). Apparently, during the 16- to 21-day postnatal period studied here, the rat neocortex is susceptible to the triggering of SD by epileptiform discharges. The factors responsible for this have not been determined, but the occurrence of spontaneous recurrent episodes of SD provides a useful model system for study of the SD phenomenon.

In summary, we have shown that neocortical slices from immature rats display several novel patterns of ictal-like epileptiform discharges. Differences in intrinsic membrane currents and  $[K^+]_o$  regulation seem to be responsible, at least in part, for the differences observed in the neonatal period. Studies of developmental differences in synaptic potentials are currently being conducted to determine the role of this factor in epileptogenesis in the immature brain.

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