

Review

Cannabinoids and prefrontal cortical function: Insights from preclinical studies

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Abstract

Marijuana use has been associated with disordered cognition across several domains influenced by the prefrontal cortex (PFC). Here, we review the contribution of preclinical research to understanding the effects of cannabinoids on cognitive ability, and the mechanisms by which cannabinoids may affect the neurochemical processes in the PFC that are associated with these impairments. In rodents, acute administration of cannabinoid agonists produces deficits in working memory, attentional function and reversal learning. These effects appear to be largely dependent on CB₁ cannabinoid receptor activation. Preclinical studies also indicate that the endogenous cannabinoid system may tonically regulate some mnemonic processes. Effects of cannabinoids on cognition may be mediated via interaction with neurochemical processes in the PFC and hippocampus. In the PFC, cannabinoids may alter dopaminergic, cholinergic and serotonergic transmission. These mechanisms may underlie cognitive impairments observed following marijuana intake in humans, and may also be relevant to other disorders of cognition. Preclinical research will further enhance our understanding of the interactions between the cannabinoid system and cognitive functioning.

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Keywords: Cannabinoids; Prefrontal cortex; Working memory; Attention; Behavioural flexibility; Dopamine; Acetylcholine; Serotonin; Animal models

Contents

1. Introduction	681
2. Localisation of cannabinoid effects to the PFC	681
2.1. Cannabinoid receptor distribution	681
2.2. Alterations in prefrontal neural activity	682
3. Preclinical investigations of the effects of cannabinoids on cognitive function	683
3.1. Working memory	683
3.2. Locus of cannabinoid-induced disruption of working memory performance	683
3.3. Attention	684
3.4. Behavioural flexibility	685
3.5. The endocannabinoid system and cognition	685
4. Alterations in frontal neurochemical systems	686
4.1. Dopamine, GABA and glutamate	686
4.2. Acetylcholine	688

Abbreviations: Anandamide, arachidonylethanolamide (AEA); 2-AG, 2-arachidonoyl-glycerol; CP55,940, [1 α ,2 β ,-(R)5 α]-(-)-5-(1,1-dimethylheptyl)-2-[5-hydroxypropyl)cyclohexyl]phenol; HU-210, (6aR,10aR)-3-(1,1'-Dimethylheptyl)-6a,7,10,10a-tetrahydro-1-hydroxy-6,6-dimethyl-6H-dibenzo[b,d]pyran-9-methanol; SR141716A (rimonabant/Acomplia), N-(piperidine-1-yl)-5-(4-chlorophenyl)-1-(2,4-dichlorophenyl)-4-methyl-1H-pyrazole-3-carboxamide hydrochloride; Δ^9 -THC, Δ^9 -tetrahydrocannabinol; WIN55212-2, R-(+)-[2,3-dihydro-5-methyl-3[morpholinyl)methyl]pyrrolo[1,2,3-de]-1,4-benzoxazinyl)-(1-naphthalenyl)methanone mesylate.

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4.3. Serotonin	688
5. Summary and future directions	689
References	689

1. Introduction

In humans, marijuana use or intoxication has been associated with performance deficits across several cognitive domains; impairments in selective and sustained attention, working memory and mental flexibility have been reported amongst other effects (Block and Ghoneim, 1993; Bolla et al., 2002; Fletcher et al., 1996; Ilan et al., 2004; Miller and Branconnier, 1983; Pope et al., 2001; Pope and Yurgelun-Todd, 1996; Solowij, 1995; Solowij et al., 1995, 2002). These effects have been ascribed to the primary psychoactive compound found in marijuana, Δ^9 -tetrahydrocannabinol (Δ^9 -THC), which acts at CB₁ cannabinoid receptors to influence neural transmission in many brain areas (Devane et al., 1988). Several synthetic cannabinoid compounds that are available for research purposes, such as WIN55212-2, CP55,940 and HU-210, also possess agonist activity at CB₁ receptors, where they inhibit adenylyl cyclase activity (Howlett et al., 1988) with varying potencies (Griffin et al., 1998; Selley et al., 1996). Endogenously occurring compounds with action at CB₁ receptors have also been identified. These endocannabinoid compounds include anandamide (AEA) (Devane et al., 1992), and 2-AG (Mechoulam et al., 1995; Sugiura et al., 1995). In addition, Sanofi Synthelabo have developed a CB₁ antagonist, SR141716A (Acomplia/rimonabant) (Rinaldi-Carmona et al., 1994), which is currently under clinical trial for use in aiding cessation of smoking and alcohol consumption, and for helping weight loss in obesity. The application of these pharmacological tools in preclinical investigation has greatly aided neuroscientific understanding of the cannabinoid system, including the mechanisms by which marijuana may adversely affect cognitive function.

Optimal performance of tasks which assess working memory, attention and cognitive flexibility requires effective communication between several interacting brain regions; deficits may, therefore, arise as a consequence of transmissional interference at a variety of loci. To date, preclinical research into the underlying neural basis of the cognitive effects of marijuana has principally focused on the hippocampal system, where stimulation of CB₁ receptors may profoundly affect neural transmission (Gessa et al., 1998b; Katona et al., 1999; Misner and Sullivan, 1999; Shen et al., 1996). However, in recent years, scientific understanding of the pivotal contribution that prefrontal cortical areas make to cognitive processes in normal and disordered states has greatly increased. Due to the growing emphasis of neuroscientific research on the prefrontal cortex (PFC), we felt that it was timely to review the effects of cannabinoid administration on the functionality of this brain area, particularly with respect to preclinical findings.

At the outset, it should be noted that the rodent PFC, the focus of this discussion, is functionally and

anatomically heterogeneous (see Dalley et al., 2004 for review). Of particular relevance are the anterior cingulate, prelimbic and infralimbic regions of the medial PFC, which are implicated in working memory (Delatour and Gisquet-Verrier, 1999), attentional function (Muir et al., 1996) and attentional set-shifting (Birrell and Brown, 2000); these areas constitute the common locus of neurochemical recording during experimental procedures. The orbitofrontal cortex is also of importance, and is involved in processes such as reversal learning (McAlonan and Brown, 2003) and some forms of impulsive behaviour (Chudasama et al., 2003; Winstanley et al., 2004), and response perseveration (Chudasama et al., 2003). Relatively few of the studies that have investigated the effects of cannabinoids on prefrontal function have accounted for this recently recognized topographical complexity, but where findings relate to specific prefrontal subdivisions these anatomical loci are discussed in the text.

Preclinical investigation into the interactions of cannabinoids with prefrontal systems is still in its infancy; at present there is no clear overall mechanistic explanation for the effects of cannabinoids in this area. However, as will be discussed in this review, several lines of research indicate that cannabinoids may modulate prefrontal cortical functionality and resultant cognitive ability. This has raised several interesting and exciting hypotheses for future preclinical research into the role of cannabinoids in prefrontal-dependent cognitive processes in normal and pathological states.

2. Localisation of cannabinoid effects to the PFC

2.1. Cannabinoid receptor distribution

A significant role of the cannabinoid system in modulating prefrontal cortical neurotransmission is first suggested by the abundance of CB₁ receptors in this brain area. Autoradiographic studies employing [³H]CP55,940 have demonstrated CB₁ receptor binding in the frontal cortex of rats (Hajos and Freund, 2002; Herkenham, 1992; Herkenham et al., 1990, 1991; Mailleux and Vanderhaeghen, 1992) and humans (Glass et al., 1997; Mato and Pazos, 2004). In the rat brain, binding of [³H]CP55,940 shows a fairly even distribution across forebrain cortical regions; generally, moderate densities of CB₁ receptors are indicated in cortical layers I and IV and lower binding is observed in the intermediate cortical layers (Herkenham et al., 1991). The presence of CB₁ receptors in cortical areas has been confirmed using immunohistochemistry (Tsou et al., 1998), where the higher levels of cellular resolution available revealed that CB₁ receptors are present on neuronal cell bodies, axons and dendrites (Tsou et al., 1998). Cell bodies which produce CB₁ receptors may also be present in cortical regions, as CB₁ receptor mRNA is also detected in cortical areas (Mailleux and

Vanderhaeghen, 1992; Matsuda et al., 1993). In addition, the endocannabinoids anandamide and 2-AG are also present in cortical regions (Bisogno et al., 1999; Di Marzo et al., 2000a–c) as is fatty acid amide hydrolase (FAAH, anandamide amidohydrolase) (Egertova et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 1997; Tsou et al., 1999), the enzyme responsible for anandamide and 2-AG hydrolysis (Beltramo and Piomelli, 2000; Cravatt et al., 1996; and for review see Ueda et al., 1998). These latter findings suggest that the endocannabinoid system may be involved in the tonic modulation of neural transmission in this area. Indeed, the endocannabinoid system has been implicated in the phenomena of depolarisation-induced suppression of excitation (DSE) and inhibition (DSI) in which endocannabinoids released from depolarised neurones act retrospectively on presynaptic terminals to suppress neurotransmitter release (see Diana and Marty, 2004 for review). The physiological significance of these phenomena to behavioural effects in vivo remains to be established. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that stimulation of the prefrontal cortex induces 2-AG mediated suppression of excitation in midbrain dopamine neurones (Melis et al., 2004), which raises the possibility of a role for the endocannabinoid system in regulating dopamine modulation of cortical processing.

Therefore, exogenous cannabinoid compounds are capable of acting in the PFC to affect local neural transmission via CB₁ receptors, and endogenous cannabinoid compounds are appropriately positioned to play a potential role in the normal physiological regulation of frontal neural activity.

2.2. Alterations in prefrontal neural activity

In addition to the localization of cannabinoid receptors to cortical areas, several studies have also demonstrated alterations in PFC metabolic activity occurring in response to cannabinoid administration. In humans, marijuana intake affects prefrontal activity, as evidenced by alterations in regional cerebral blood flow and metabolism (Amen and Waugh, 1998; Block et al., 1999, 2002; Kanayama et al., 2004; Lundqvist et al., 2001; Mathew and Wilson, 1992, 1993; Mathew et al., 1997, 2002; O'Leary et al., 2000, 2002; Volkow et al., 1996). Cannabinoid administration also alters activity in the rodent PFC; using the 2-deoxyglucose mapping technique to measure local rates of cerebral glucose utilization (LCGU), decreases in metabolic activity in the infralimbic and anterior cingulate regions of the PFC following Δ^9 -THC administration have been reported (Freedland et al., 2002; Whitlow et al., 2002). In other studies performed in our laboratory (Brett et al., 2001) and by Margulies and Hammer (1991), Δ^9 -THC appeared to produce differential effects on cortical 2-deoxyglucose uptake with respect to dose; increases in metabolic activity occurred at lower doses (1 mg/kg or less), with decreases occurring at doses above 2 mg/kg. In addition, alterations in frontal cortical activity following cannabinoid administration may also be observed using other imaging techniques; a recent blood-oxygen-level-dependent functional magnetic resonance imaging (BOLD-fMRI) study showed that the potent synthetic cannabinoid agonist HU-210 produced

CB₁ antagonist-sensitive increases in BOLD activity in a number of brain regions including the cingulate cortex (Shah et al., 2004).

In rodents, the effects of drugs on regional neural activity may also be indexed by the alternative approach of examining alterations in immediate early gene (IEG) protein and mRNA expression levels, as regional IEG transcription is rapidly altered in response to a variety of stimuli (for review see Morgan and Curran, 1989). This technique has also been used to map the effects of cannabinoid administration on neural activity in different brain regions of the rat brain (Mailleux et al., 1994; Miyamoto et al., 1996; Porcella, et al., 1998). Amongst other localized effects, these studies have shown that administration of Δ^9 -THC increases mRNA encoding the IEGs zif-268, c-fos and c-jun (Mailleux et al., 1994) and FosB protein (Porcella, et al., 1998) in the cingulate area of the rat PFC, although effects in other prefrontal areas were not described. We have extended these studies to demonstrate marked Δ^9 -THC-induced increases in mRNA encoding

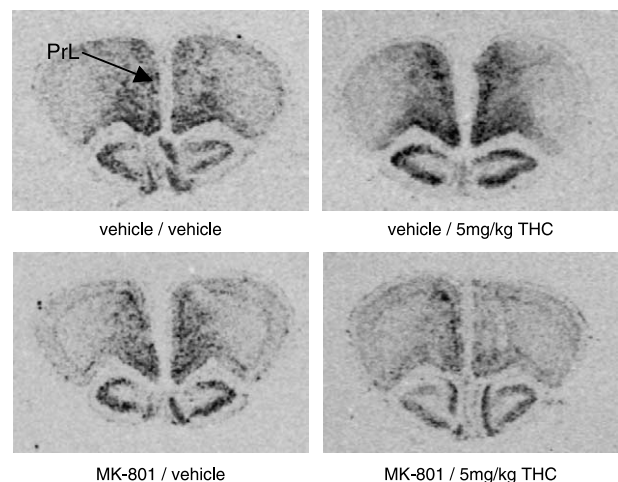
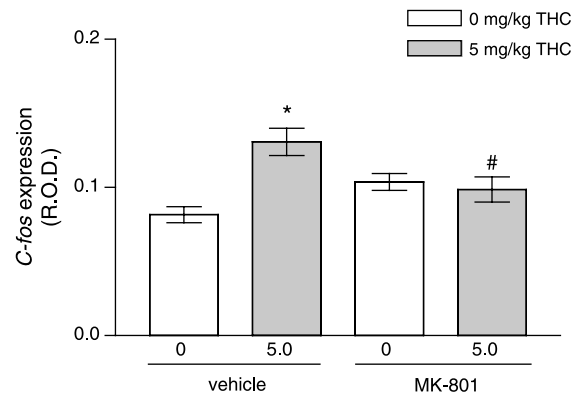


Fig. 1. Δ^9 -THC significantly increases immediate early gene expression in the rat prefrontal cortex; blockade by MK-801. The graph and associated autoradiogram images illustrate the significant increase in *c-fos* expression in the prefrontal subdivision of the rat prefrontal cortex that occurs 75 min following i.p. administration of 5 mg/kg Δ^9 -THC (THC) relative to saline (vehicle)-treated control rats (* p <0.05). This effect was not apparent when rats received 0.1 mg/kg MK-801 (dizocilpine) i.p. 10 min prior to Δ^9 -THC administration, and *c-fos* expression was significantly lower in Δ^9 -THC-treated rats that had received MK-801 compared to vehicle (saline) pretreated rats (# p <0.05).

a variety of IEGs, belonging to different families, in both the medial prefrontal cortical areas (prelimbic and anterior cingulate cortices) and also in the ventral and lateral orbital cortices of the rat brain (Egerton et al., 2001). In addition, pretreatment with MK-801 revealed that these effects were dependent on activation of the *N*-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) subtype of glutamate receptors (Egerton et al., previously unpublished data). The ability of Δ^9 -THC administration to increase IEG mRNA expression in the PFC is illustrated in Fig. 1, using *c-fos* expression in the prelimbic subdivision as an example.

In summary, the alterations in both metabolic activity and IEG expression following cannabinoid administration indicate that cannabinoid compounds may alter neural activity in the PFC. As the PFC controls key aspects of cognitive performance, deregulation of neural activity in this area following cannabinoid administration may precipitate cognitive deficits that are associated with marijuana intake.

3. Preclinical investigations of the effects of cannabinoids on cognitive function

Preclinical investigation of the effects of cannabinoids on cognitive functions ascribed to the PFC is possible as anatomical homology exists between the PFC of the rodent and primate brain, although the degree of this homology varies according to the anatomical criteria used for regional definition (Groenewegen and Uylings, 2000; Uylings and van Eden, 1990; Brown and Bowman, 2002; Ongur and Price, 2000; Preuss, 1995; Rose and Woolsey, 1948). Importantly, several aspects of cognitive performance can be behaviourally assessed in rats using careful experimental designs and species-appropriate measurements (for review, see Brown and Bowman, 2002; Sarter, 2004). Through this approach, understanding of the extent and limitations of regional functional homology which exists across species has greatly increased in recent years (Birrell and Brown, 2000; Brown and Bowman, 2002; Dalley et al., 2004). As outlined below, preclinical research has greatly contributed to neuroscientific understanding of the effects that cannabinoids may exert over several aspects of cognition, and the mechanisms by which these impairments may be mediated.

3.1. Working memory

The disruptive effect of cannabinoids on mnemonic processes has been the topic of extensive preclinical research. Overall, studies have shown that, whilst cannabinoids may markedly impair aspects of short-term working memory, long-term or reference memory appears to be relatively unaffected (for review, see Lichtman et al., 2002). These findings are in accordance with the deficits in short-term memory that have been reported in marijuana users (Macavoy and Marks, 1975; Miller and Brannonier, 1983; Pope et al., 2001).

In rats, the effects of cannabinoids on working memory performance have been investigated using both maze-based and instrumental tasks. Performance of maze-based tasks requires

effective use of spatial cues; these tasks utilize the navigational behaviours of rodents normally used for foraging or to escape from predators (Olton, 1987). Cannabinoids disrupt spatial working memory in maze-based tasks that are driven by motivation to locate a food reward, such as in the T-maze (Jentsch et al., 1997; Nava et al., 2000, 2001), or the 8-arm radial maze (Braidia and Sala, 2000; Inui et al., 2004; Lichtman et al., 1995; Lichtman and Martin, 1996; Mishima et al., 2001, 2002; Molina-Holgado et al., 1995; Nakamura et al., 1991). Similarly, cannabinoid-induced spatial working memory deficits are also evidenced in water maze tasks (Fadda et al., 2004; Ferrari et al., 1999; Hill et al., 2004; Varvel et al., 2001), where animals must use spatial cues to navigate whilst swimming in order to find a hidden platform in a pool of water (Morris, 1984).

Instrumental working memory tasks include the delayed match to sample (DMTS) or delayed non-match to sample (DNMS) paradigms. During these tasks, the animal is initially presented with a sample stimulus (sample phase), then, following a delay period, both the original sample stimulus and a novel stimulus are presented. Usually by pressing a lever, the rat must indicate either the sample (match) stimulus or the novel (non-match) stimulus according to the task rule. Disruptive effects of cannabinoids on working memory performance have been observed using DMTS or DNMS tasks in rats (Deadwyler et al., 1990; Hampson and Deadwyler, 1999a,b, 2000; Heyser et al., 1993; Mallet and Beninger, 1998; Miyamoto et al., 1995) and monkeys (Schulze et al., 1988; Winsauer et al., 1999; Zimmerberg et al., 1971).

A large amount of evidence, therefore, suggests that stimulation of the cannabinoid system impairs working memory performance, and that this effect appears to be observed across a variety of behavioural paradigms. Importantly, cannabinoid-induced working memory impairments appear to be dependent on CB₁ receptor activation; several studies have demonstrated that cannabinoid induced working memory impairments are not observed in the presence of the CB₁ antagonist SR141716A (Braidia and Sala, 2000; Lichtman and Martin, 1996; Mallet and Beninger, 1998; Varvel et al., 2001). Whilst cannabinoid-induced working memory deficits may recover on repeated drug administration (Hill et al., 2004), suggesting the occurrence of some degree of tolerance, this process may be dependent on the precise task demands, as tolerance has not been observed using alternative paradigms (Nava et al., 2001). Worsening of impairments on repeated cannabinoid administration has also been reported to occur under some conditions (Miyamoto et al., 1995). Therefore, although acute cannabinoid exposure impairs working memory capacity, further preclinical investigation is required to characterize the degree of persistence of this impairment both during repeated drug exposure and following periods of drug abstinence.

3.2. Locus of cannabinoid-induced disruption of working memory performance

Cannabinoid-induced disruption of working memory has typically been assigned to a principal disruption of

hippocampal rather than prefrontal cortical function (for review, see Lichtman et al., 2002). CB₁ receptors are highly expressed in the hippocampus (Herkenham et al., 1991, 1990) and modulate hippocampal neurotransmission (Gessa et al., 1998b; Katona et al., 1999; Misner and Sullivan, 1999; Shen et al., 1996). Cannabinoid-induced disruption of working memory performance does indeed appear to be intimately associated with hippocampal activity, as performance deficits following cannabinoid administration in DMTS tasks are associated with decreases in hippocampal cell firing during sample phases (Hampson and Deadwyler, 2000; Heyser et al., 1993) and alterations in hippocampal cell firing characteristics during the delay period (Heyser et al., 1993). In addition, deficits in spatial working memory task performance are observed following both systemic and intra-hippocampal administration of the cannabinoid agonist CP55,940 (Lichtman et al., 1995). Finally, cannabinoid-induced impairments in working memory tasks are associated with neurochemical alterations in hippocampal areas (Inui et al., 2004; Nava et al., 2000).

In addition to the important role of the hippocampus, effective performance on working memory tasks may also involve prefrontal cortical functionality. Indeed, impairments in delayed working memory tasks for objects or spatial locations are seen following lesions or transient inactivation of both the hippocampal system (Floresco et al., 1997; Lee and Kesner, 2003a,b; Porter et al., 2000) and the prelimbic area of the PFC (Floresco et al., 1997; Izaki et al., 2001; Kesner et al., 1996; Lee and Kesner, 2003b; Porter et al., 2000). Prefrontal and hippocampal regions cooperate to control behaviour via a direct monosynaptic pathway which projects from the CA1 hippocampus and subiculum to medial and orbital prefrontal cortical areas (Floresco et al., 1997; Izaki et al., 2001; Kesner et al., 1996; Lee and Kesner, 2003b; Porter et al., 2000). The precise contributions of hippocampal and prefrontal areas to differential aspects of task performance are still under investigation (Eichenbaum et al., 1996; Floresco et al., 1996, 1997; Laroche et al., 2000; Newman and Grace, 1999; Seamans et al., 1998; Wall and Messier, 2001). In short, research suggests that the hippocampus may acquire, encode and consolidate new information in short-term memory. Working memory then provides a mechanism by which this information, present in short-term memory, may be represented and manipulated in the PFC, and used, together with motor plans, to direct behavioural response strategies (Doyere et al., 1993; Floresco et al., 1997; Fuster, 1991; Goldman-Rakic, 1987; Goldman-Rakic et al., 1992; Laroche et al., 2000; Lee and Kesner, 2003b; Newman and Grace, 1999; Wall and Messier, 2001). In this context, input from the hippocampus to the PFC may aid organized cortical representation of learned events (Laroche et al., 2000).

As cannabinoid-induced working memory impairments are largely delay-dependent (Hampson et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2004), it has been suggested that these compounds act in the hippocampus to particularly affect memory consolidation or storage (Hampson et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2004). However, lesions of the PFC particularly impair performance of tasks that

include a delay-component, during which information must be held in working memory (Delatour and Gisquet-Verrier, 1999). Given the cooperation between hippocampal and prefrontal cortical areas necessary for effective performance of working memory tasks, it is possible that the deleterious effects of cannabinoids on working memory may additionally arise, at least in part, through disruption of prefrontal cortical transmission. In line with this hypothesis, Jentsch and colleagues have shown that Δ^9 -THC-induced working memory deficits in a delayed alternation T-maze task are associated with altered dopamine and noradrenaline turnover in the rat PFC (Jentsch et al., 1997). Moreover, deficits in memory task performance detected in marijuana users are associated with a relative inability to activate prefrontal regions in response to task demands (Block et al., 2002). Further research is required in order to fully characterize the relative contribution of prefrontal cortical disruptions to the working memory impairments that follow administration of cannabinoid agonists.

3.3. Attention

In humans, studies have repeatedly demonstrated deficits in attentional capacity following Δ^9 -THC intake (Block and Ghoneim, 1993; Bolla et al., 2002; Fletcher et al., 1996; Pope et al., 2001; Pope and Yurgelun-Todd, 1996; Solowij, 1995; Solowij et al., 1995, 2002). Early evidence for disruptive effects of cannabinoids on attentional processes in rats was detected in studies showing that the amplitudes of hippocampal synaptic potentials evoked by sensory stimuli in the DMTS task were reduced following cannabinoid administration, suggesting that cannabinoids may decrease the responsiveness of the hippocampus to sensory inputs (Campbell et al., 1986a,b; Heyser et al., 1993). Later, Presburger and Robinson (1999) investigated the effects of Δ^9 -THC on visual attention in an operant signal detection task in rats. In this task, administration of Δ^9 -THC decreased accuracy of stimulus detection and increased the number of response omissions (Presburger and Robinson, 1999). The authors concluded that Δ^9 -THC produced attentional deficits, and suggested that the problems in encoding during the DMTS task employed by Heyser and colleagues (Campbell et al., 1986a,b; Heyser et al., 1993) may have resulted from an impaired ability to effectively attend to task-relevant stimuli (Presburger and Robinson, 1999).

Cannabinoid-induced disruption of attention has been more recently confirmed using the rat lateralized reaction time task (LRT) of visuospatial attention (Arguello and Jentsch, 2004; Verrico et al., 2004). In this task, rats must attend to apertures for the location of a visual stimulus over a number of trials. In the LRT, acute systemic administration of the cannabinoid agonist WIN55212-2 significantly impaired attentional performance in a CB₁-dependent manner (Arguello and Jentsch, 2004). Attentional deficits were also present following subchronic administration of Δ^9 -THC in the rat, and persisted for at least 2 weeks following the final of 14 daily drug administrations (Verrico et al., 2004). Although SR141716A

reversed the WIN55212-2-induced impairments in attentional performance, this compound did not appear to produce any effects on attentional performance when administered alone (Arguello and Jentsch, 2004). As lesions of the medial PFC or striatum can produce attentional deficits similar to those observed following cannabinoid administration (Burk and Mair, 2001; Christakou et al., 2001) cannabinoid-induced attentional impairments might arise via CB₁ activation in the striatum or PFC (Arguello and Jentsch, 2004).

3.4. Behavioural flexibility

Impairments in cognitive flexibility have been reported in marijuana users after approximately 1 day (Pope and Yurgelun-Todd, 1996) and 28 days (Bolla et al., 2002) of abstinence from the drug. As this inflexibility in cognitive control may be deleterious to intellectual and social functioning (Pope and Yurgelun-Todd, 1996), we have recently investigated whether Δ^9 -THC administration produces similar impairments in behavioural flexibility in rats (Egerton et al., 2005).

In the task employed, rats perform a series of discriminations during which they are required to shift behavioural strategies, by learning new stimulus-reward associations whilst inhibiting previously learned response tendencies (Birrell and Brown, 2000). Two types of behavioural flexibility are assessed during the task; for effective performance of extradimensional shifts, rats must shift attentional bias (or 'set') between different abstract features of stimuli, a process termed 'attentional set shifting'. In contrast, in order to perform reversal-learning discriminations, rats must update contingencies between stimuli and reward presentation when these are reversed. As shown in Fig. 2, acute administration of Δ^9 -THC impairs performance on reversal learning stages of the task, whilst attentional set shifting ability is unaffected (Egerton

et al., 2005). This profile of effects is similar to that observed following lesions of the orbitofrontal (McAlonan and Brown, 2003) but not the medial frontal (Birrell and Brown, 2000) division of the rat PFC, a dissociation that is also present in monkeys (Dias et al., 1996a,b, 1997; Jones and Mishkin, 1972) and humans (Fellows and Farah, 2003; Owen et al., 1991; Rolls et al., 1994). Indeed, the reversal learning deficits produced by Δ^9 -THC administration correlates with alterations in IEG mRNA expression in orbitofrontal and striatal areas (Egerton et al., 2005).

These results, therefore, suggest that, at least on acute administration, cannabinoids do not affect ability to shift attentional set, but do impair ability to reverse stimulus-reward associations. Reversal learning deficits have been associated with increases in risk-taking and impulsive responding, and thus impairments on some decision-making tasks (see Clark et al., 2004). Furthermore, an inability to alter behaviour according to changing reinforcement contingencies may contribute towards continued drug use and, therefore, be of significance to continued marijuana intake in humans (Bolla et al., 2002; Jentsch and Taylor, 1999; Volkow and Fowler, 2000). We have preliminary evidence that on repeated administration reversal learning deficits are maintained, but that there appears to be an emerging deficit in ability to shift attentional set (Allison et al., 2004); therefore, additional deficits in attentional/higher cognitive flexibility may arise on chronic marijuana exposure.

3.5. The endocannabinoid system and cognition

As detailed above, several studies have demonstrated that cognitive impairments arise following administration of exogenous cannabinoid compounds. This interaction raises interesting questions regarding the possible contribution of the endogenous cannabinoid system to aspects of cognitive control. Specifically, research is beginning to address the mnemonic role of the endocannabinoid system under normal physiological conditions and the possible disruption of this system in pathological states associated with cognitive abnormalities. Further, this research has raised the possibility that potential therapeutic benefits may be achieved through pharmacological manipulation of the endocannabinoid system.

Initial evidence that antagonism of CB₁ receptors may improve certain memory processes was obtained using an olfactory recognition task (Terranova et al., 1996). As mature rodents normally spend more time investigating unfamiliar than familiar conspecific animals, the olfactory recognition task measures social short-term working memory capacity. In this task, administration of SR141716A alone improves olfactory recognition memory in both aged rats and mice (Terranova et al., 1996). In addition, SR141716A improves working memory performance on the 8-arm radial maze when long delay periods are included (Lichtman, 2000). These studies have therefore, suggested that SR141716A may exert nootropic effects when administered alone, and, by extension, indicate that the endocannabinoid system may negatively influence some mnemonic processes. Other studies using

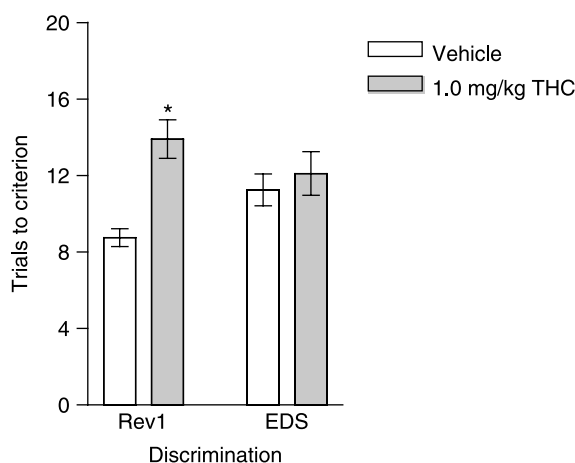


Fig. 2. Δ^9 -THC significantly impairs reversal learning but does not affect attentional set-shifting ability. Following i.p. administration of Δ^9 -THC (THC) rats were tested on a series of discriminations. THC-treated rats were particularly impaired on reversal learning discriminations (Rev1) but did not show impairments in ability to shift attentional set, as measured in the extradimensional shift (EDS) task stage compared to vehicle (saline)-treated control animals (* $p < 0.05$) (This data is taken from Egerton et al., 2005).

different paradigms have not, however, demonstrated any effect of SR141716A on working memory performance (Brodtkin and Moerschbaecher, 1997; Hampson and Deadwyler, 2000; Mallet and Beninger, 1998; Mansbach et al., 1996). Analysis of these results has led to the suggestion that the effects of SR141716A administration on working memory are dependent on temporal components of the task, and that CB₁ blockade may prolong the duration of memory rather than facilitating learning per se (Lichtman, 2000). Whilst these apparently nootropic effects of SR141716A may be interpreted in terms of a role for the endocannabinoid system in mnemonic function (Lichtman, 2000; Terranova et al., 1996), it has also been suggested that the observed effects may arise due to inverse agonist effects of SR141716A (Lichtman, 2000; Pan et al., 1998; Terranova et al., 1996), or an action of SR141716A at non-CB₁ receptors (Bukoski et al., 2002; Lichtman, 2000; Terranova et al., 1996). These possible confounds inherent to using a pharmacological antagonist to investigate endocannabinoid function are circumvented in the alternative approach of investigating cognitive function in mice lacking the CB₁ receptor. It should be noted, however, that the use of gene ablation strategies is also potentially subject to confounding effects, arising, for example, through developmental alterations and neuronal compensations (see Nelson and Young, 1998).

The availability of CB₁ receptor deficient mice has led to an elegant series of studies that further define the role of the endocannabinoid system in modulation of mnemonic processes. The first of these investigations showed that CB₁ receptor deficient mice exhibit better performance in an object-recognition memory task than wild-type control mice (Reibaud et al., 1999), in accordance with the improvement in memory produced by SR141716A on a similar task (Terranova et al., 1996). Subsequent studies showed that CB₁ receptor knock-out mice exhibit increased perseveration during reversal learning on a water maze task (Varvel and Lichtman, 2002). This observation led the authors to propose that the endocannabinoid system may aid 'forgetting' or memory extinction (Varvel and Lichtman, 2002); a theory further clarified by studies demonstrating that CB₁ deficient mice exhibit less extinction of contextual fear memory using foot-shock paradigms (Marsicano et al., 2002).

Further investigations, conducted in the water maze, have demonstrated that although both CB₁ receptor deficient mice and mice treated with SR141716A show deficits in extinction, these impairments crucially depend on the extinction procedure employed (Varvel et al., 2005). As inhibition of CB₁ receptor function appears to impair extinction when the extinction trials are spaced over long but not short periods, endocannabinoids may be involved in long- but not short-term extinction of learned behaviours (Varvel et al., 2005). As extinction learning, as assessed, for example, through fear conditioning paradigms in rodents, is also mediated by the medial frontal cortex, along with other areas (Morgan et al., 1993; Morrow et al., 1999), these mnemonic effects of cannabinoids may also arise, at least in part, through modulation of prefrontal cortical neurotransmission, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

In the above sections, we have shown that administration of CB₁ agonists may impair working memory, attentional function and behavioural flexibility in preclinical models. While the cognitive impairments that arise following acute cannabinoid administration are fairly well described, the effects of longer-term cannabinoid exposure warrant further investigation. Most of the effects of cannabinoid agonists on cognitive abilities appear to be dependent on CB₁ receptor activation, as they are absent in the presence of the CB₁ receptor antagonist SR141716A. In addition, studies that have investigated behaviours following administration of SR141716A alone or in CB₁ receptor-deficient mice have indicated that the endocannabinoid system may be tonically involved in extinction of learned behaviours. It is likely that neuromodulatory effects of cannabinoids in the PFC may contribute to alterations in cognitive performance.

4. Alterations in frontal neurochemical systems

4.1. Dopamine, GABA and glutamate

Several groups have investigated the effects of cannabinoids on neurotransmitter content in the PFC, as these alterations may underlie some of the cognitive deficits associated with marijuana use. Unsurprisingly, the focus of this attention has been directed towards dopamine (DA), as this neurotransmitter is critically implicated in neuromodulation of PFC transmission. The PFC receives major dopaminergic innervation from the mesocortical DA projection, which arises from cell bodies in the ventral tegmental area (VTA) (Morgan et al., 1993; Morrow et al., 1999, also see Seamans and Yang, 2004; Tzschentke, 2001 for review). In the PFC, DA exerts inhibitory control over the activity of glutamatergic pyramidal projection neurons (Gellman and Aghajanian, 1993; Gioanni et al., 1998; Law-Tho et al., 1994; Pirot et al., 1992). This interaction may occur by several mechanisms (for review see Goldman-Rakic, 1996; Seamans and Yang, 2004): Dopaminergic axons may modulate pyramidal neuron activity directly through synaptic contacts to the pyramidal neuron spines (Goldman-Rakic et al., 1989; van Eden et al., 1987), via the D₁ dopamine receptors that are localized to this area (Bergson et al., 1995), or, alternatively, inhibition may occur indirectly via activation of GABAergic (γ -amino butyric acid) inhibitory interneurons, (Gellman and Aghajanian, 1993; Retaux et al., 1991), possibly via a D₄ DA receptor-mediated mechanism (Goldman-Rakic, 1996; Mrzljak et al., 1996).

The involvement of DA in working memory performance is commonly accepted, but complex. Impairments in working memory function arise in situations where dopaminergic activity is either particularly high or low, (Murphy et al., 1996a,b; Stam et al., 1989; Zahrt et al., 1997), leading to an inverted 'U' (bell shaped) relationship between dopamine levels and working memory efficiency (see Goldman-Rakic, 1996; Robbins, 2000; Seamans and Yang, 2004). Prefrontal cortical dopamine levels contribute to other aspects of cognition, as manipulation of this system also affects

attentional performance (Granon et al., 2000), and attentional set shifting ability (Ragozzino, 2002; Roberts et al., 1994).

Several groups have reported increases in prefrontal cortical DA release or turnover following systemic cannabinoid administration (Chen et al., 1990; Diana et al., 1998; Jentsch et al., 1997, 1998a, b; Pistis et al., 2002; Tanda et al., 1997; Verrico et al., 2003). As the ability of cannabinoids to increase extracellular DA concentrations in the PFC is blocked by SR141716A (Pistis et al., 2002), this effect appears to be mediated by CB₁ receptor activation. In 1997, an important study performed by Jentsch and colleagues showed that increases in prefrontal cortical DA following cannabinoid administration were associated with impairments in working memory performance on a T-maze task, suggesting that working memory impairments produced by cannabinoid agonist administration may result from hyperstimulation of mesocortical dopaminergic transmission (Jentsch et al., 1997). This hypothesis was further clarified by studies showing that the cannabinoid-induced increase in prefrontal cortical DA turnover is sensitive to blockade by two compounds which modulate mesocortical dopaminergic neuron activity (Goldstein et al., 1994; Murphy et al., 1996a,b): the strychnine-insensitive glycine site partial agonist/NMDA receptor antagonist HA966 (Jentsch et al., 1997) and the α -2-noradrenergic receptor agonist clonidine (Jentsch et al., 1998b). Therefore, cannabinoid-induced working memory deficits may result from increased mesocortical dopaminergic neuronal activity. Indeed, both Δ^9 -THC and WIN55212-2 increase firing rate and burst firing of mesocortical dopaminergic neurons (Diana et al., 1998).

Later, Pistis and colleagues, (Pistis et al., 2001), further investigated the interaction of cannabinoid compounds with the mesocortical DA projection in the control of prefrontal neuronal responses, by characterizing the effects of cannabinoid administration on both the activity of pyramidal neurons projecting from the PFC to the VTA, and the inhibition of PFC neurons that occurs following VTA stimulation (Godbout et al., 1991; Pistis et al., 2001). As intravenous administration of Δ^9 -THC and WIN55212-2 increased the firing rate of the pyramidal neurons projecting to the VTA and reversed the inhibition of pyramidal neurons produced by VTA stimulation, the authors concluded that cannabinoid agonists increase the excitability of PFC pyramidal neurons (Pistis et al., 2001). This effect was CB₁ receptor-mediated, as subsequent administration of SR141716A decreased the effects of cannabinoid agonist administration and restored the inhibitory PFC response to VTA stimulation (Pistis et al., 2001).

On the basis of these findings, Pistis and colleagues proposed important hypotheses relating to the action of cannabinoids on the mesocortical DA projection (Pistis et al., 2001). First, activation of mesocortical DA transmission by cannabinoids may arise, at least in part, from increases in the firing rate of pyramidal neurons projecting to the VTA. Second, as cannabinoids reduce the level of inhibition in the PFC produced by VTA stimulation, the authors suggest that cannabinoids may functionally counter mesocortical dopaminergic transmission, possibly by inhibiting the function of GABAergic neurons in the PFC (Pistis et al., 2001). This latter hypothesis is further qualified by studies showing that cannabinoids can decrease extracellular GABA and increase

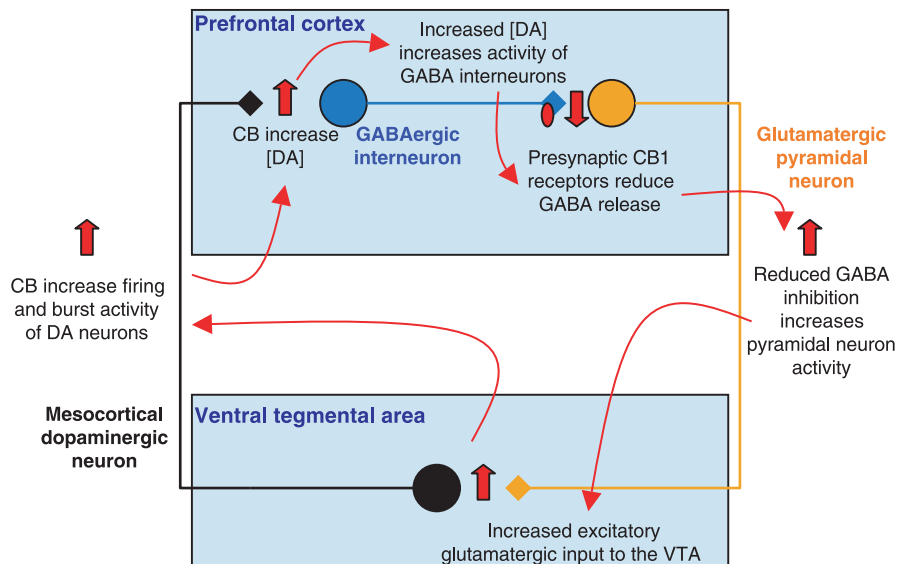


Fig. 3. Schematic diagram illustrating possible effects of cannabinoids on neurotransmission in the PFC. The diagram illustrates the mesocortical dopaminergic (DA) projection (black) from the ventral tegmental area (VTA) to the prefrontal cortex (PFC). Under normal conditions, dopamine release in the PFC increases activity of GABAergic interneurons (blue), which inhibits the activity of glutamatergic pyramidal projection neurons (orange) and, therefore, decreases excitatory input to dopamine neurons in the VTA providing a negative feedback loop. As shown by the red arrows, cannabinoid (CB) administration increases DA neuron activity (Diana et al., 1998) and augments dopaminergic transmission in the PFC (Jentsch et al., 1997; Tanda et al., 1997). This may increase dopamine-stimulated activity in GABAergic interneurons, however, GABA release is reduced (Pistis et al., 2002), possibly via presynaptic CB₁ receptors, which may underlie observed increases in pyramidal neuron activity (Pistis et al., 2001). It should be noted that this diagram is a simplification and in particular does not take into account CB₁-mediated effects in the VTA (e.g. Gessa et al., 1998a; Tanda et al., 1997) or other innervating structures, or the complex effects of DA on pyramidal neuron excitability in the PFC (Goldman-Rakic, 1996).

extracellular glutamate concentrations in the PFC (Ferraro et al., 2001; Pistis et al., 2001), effects which may occur via CB₁ receptors presynaptically located on GABAergic terminals (Marsicano and Lutz, 1999; Tsou et al., 1998). Indeed, in the auditory cortex, cannabinoids may suppress the inhibition of pyramidal neurons by depressing calcium-dependent GABA release from interneurons (Trettel and Levine, 2002). Together, these observations form the basis of the schematic diagram shown in Fig. 3, which illustrates possible mechanisms by which cannabinoids may alter activity in mesocortical dopaminergic and prefrontal pyramidal neurons.

Therefore, acute administration of cannabinoid agonists may modify PFC functionality by increasing the release of dopamine from mesocortical neurons and modifying the effects of dopamine on target neurons. This cannabinoid-induced hyperactivity in prefrontal dopaminergic transmission may contribute to working memory deficits (Diana et al., 1998; Jentsch et al., 1997); indeed, such deficits have been associated with increased PFC dopamine turnover (Jentsch et al., 1997).

In contrast to the increases in PFC DA release and turnover that follow acute cannabinoid administration (Jentsch et al., 1997; Tanda et al., 1997), repeated administration of Δ^9 -THC and WIN55212-2 decreases DA turnover in the rat PFC, an effect which may persist for up to 2 weeks following discontinuation of treatment (Jentsch et al., 1998a; Verrico et al., 2003). Therefore, some form of adaptive change in the mesocortical dopaminergic projection may occur in response to repeated cannabinoid exposure (Verrico et al., 2003). As cognitive impairments may arise in situations where dopaminergic activity is either particularly high or low (see Robbins, 2000), PFC DA hypoactivity may underlie some of the cognitive impairments observed after chronic THC exposure (Verrico et al., 2003). In accordance with this hypothesis, the attentional impairments observed following repeated cannabinoid administration in the rat are transiently reversed by administration of amphetamine, suggesting that dopaminergic hypoactivity may contribute to some of the cognitive impairments that arise on, and persist after, chronic cannabinoid exposure (Verrico et al., 2004).

4.2. Acetylcholine

The PFC also receives cholinergic innervation from neurons originating in the basal forebrain and the reticular core of the brainstem (see Everitt and Robbins, 1997). Lesions of cholinergic neurons, which project from the nucleus basalis magnocellularis to the cortex, impair attentional performance on the 5-choice serial reaction task (5-CSRT) in rats, particularly when the attentional demand of the task is high (Lehmann et al., 2001; McGaughy et al., 2002). Moreover, performance of 5-CSRT is associated with increased release of acetylcholine (ACh) in the PFC (Dalley et al., 2001; McGaughy et al., 2002; Passetti et al., 2000). Therefore, prefrontal cortical ACh appears to play an important role in modulating attentional performance. Prefrontal cortical ACh is also implicated in working memory, as antagonists acting at muscarinic cholinergic receptors affect spatial working

memory performance when infused to the prelimbic/infralimbic regions of the PFC (Kesner et al., 1996; Ragozzino and Kesner, 1998). Finally, prefrontal cholinergic depletion arising from lesions of the nucleus basalis also disrupts reversal learning but not attentional set shifting (Roberts et al., 1992). Decreased cholinergic function in the PFC, therefore, appears to result in deficits across several cognitive domains.

At low doses, cannabinoid administration increases extracellular ACh levels in the PFC (Acquas et al., 2001; Verrico et al., 2003). This effect is CB₁ receptor-dependent, (Acquas et al., 2001; Verrico et al., 2003), but does not appear to be mediated by CB₁ receptors on cholinergic terminals in the PFC as the increases in PFC ACh concentrations are observed after systemic but not intraprefrontal cannabinoid administration (Verrico et al., 2003). In contrast, administration of cannabinoids at higher doses decreases ACh concentrations in the PFC (Gessa et al., 1998b) and, accordingly, increases in ACh release have also been observed following CB₁ antagonist administration (Gessa et al., 1998b; Tzavara et al., 2003).

It is possible that some of the cognitive impairments associated with marijuana use may be associated with decreases in extracellular ACh concentrations in the PFC. As prefrontal ACh function correlates with performance on attentional, working memory and reversal learning tasks (Dalley et al., 2001; Kesner et al., 1996; Lehmann et al., 2001; McGaughy et al., 2002; Passetti et al., 2000; Ragozzino and Kesner, 1998; Roberts et al., 1992), by extension cannabinoid-induced decreases in PFC ACh (Gessa et al., 1998b) may contribute to the deficits across these cognitive domains that are observed following cannabinoid administration (Jentsch et al., 1997; Arguello and Jentsch, 2004; Egerton et al., 2005). However, these hypotheses have not been directly tested to date, and effects may be complex due to the mixed effects of cannabinoids on PFC ACh concentrations (Acquas et al., 2001; Verrico et al., 2003; Gessa et al., 1998b).

4.3. Serotonin

The effects of depleted serotonin (5-hydroxytryptamine, 5-HT) levels on cognitive function may be investigated by feeding humans or rats a diet deficient in tryptophan (see Robbins, 2000). Using this approach, Rogers et al. have demonstrated that low 5-HT levels may be associated with relatively selective impairments in reversal learning and decision-making in human volunteers (Rogers et al., 1999a,b). Similarly, 5,7-dihydroxytryptamine-induced prefrontal 5-HT lesions produce reversal-learning deficits in monkeys (Clarke et al., 2004, 2005), whilst attentional set shifting ability is preserved (Clarke et al., 2005).

As decreases in prefrontal 5-HT levels produce reversal learning deficits in monkeys (Clarke et al., 2004, 2005) similar to those observed following Δ^9 -THC administration in rats (Egerton et al., 2005), this raises the possibility that cannabinoid-induced impairments in reversal learning may be mediated, at least in part, through disruption of serotonergic transmission in the PFC. Few studies have specifically investigated the effects of cannabinoids on prefrontal cortical

5-HT levels, but, in line with this hypothesis, increases in PFC 5-HT efflux and concentrations of the 5-HT metabolite 5-hydroxyindoleacetic acid (5-HIAA) have been reported to occur following blockade of CB₁ receptors (Tzavara et al., 2003) and stimulation of CB₁ receptors inhibits 5-HT release in mouse cortical slices (Nakazi et al., 2000). In contrast, however, administration of Δ^9 -THC has been reported to have no effect on 5-HT turnover in the medial PFC in vivo (Jentsch et al., 1997). Given that reversal learning may more particularly involve 5-HT transmission in orbital than medial aspects of the PFC (see Clark et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2004, 2005), and that Δ^9 -THC-induced deficits in reversal learning were associated with altered activity in this area (Egerton et al., 2005), it is possible that investigation of the effects of cannabinoids on 5-HT content in more lateral PFC areas may reveal differential effects.

5. Summary and future directions

In conclusion, several lines of evidence suggest that cannabinoids may alter functionality of the PFC and thereby elicit impairments across several domains of complex cognitive function. Both cannabinoid receptors and endogenous cannabinoid compounds are present in the PFC (Bisogno et al., 1999; Di Marzo et al., 2000a,c; Tsou et al., 1998, 1999), from which position they may modulate neurotransmitter release and thereby the neural activity that underpins normal cognitive function. Several studies in both humans and rats have shown that cannabinoid exposure results in alterations in PFC activity (e.g. Block et al., 2002; Freedland et al., 2002; O'Leary et al., 2000; Whitlow et al., 2002), providing evidence that cannabinoid administration may affect the functionality of this brain area.

In accordance with the effects of marijuana intake in humans, several preclinical behavioural studies have demonstrated that acute administration of cannabinoid agonists produces impairments in working memory capacity (see Lichtman et al., 2002). Whilst working memory impairments have typically been assigned to disruption of hippocampal functioning (see Lichtman et al., 2002), some studies suggest that effects may arise from altered neurochemistry of the PFC (Jentsch et al., 1997). The relative contribution of hippocampal and prefrontal mechanisms to cannabinoid-induced working memory impairments warrants further investigation. Preclinical studies have additionally demonstrated cannabinoid-induced impairments in other cognitive domains, such as attentional function (Arguello and Jentsch, 2004) and reversal learning (Egerton et al., 2005). Together, these animal behavioural models of disordered cognition following cannabinoid exposure provide useful platforms for the future investigation of the neural mechanisms that underlie these effects. Indeed, administration of cannabinoid agonists such as Δ^9 -THC may alter release of several neurochemicals in the PFC, such as DA (Jentsch et al., 1997), ACh (Gessa et al., 1998b) and 5-HT (Nakazi et al., 2000), that are heavily implicated in control of cognitive function (see Dalley et al., 2004; Robbins, 2000).

To date, few studies have addressed the impact of chronic cannabinoid exposure on cognitive function in rodents, and whether these impairments persist after periods of drug abstinence. This question forms an important clinical concern, as several studies in humans indicate long-term or prolonged effects of marijuana exposure on cognitive functioning (Bolla et al., 2002; Eldreth et al., 2004; Lundqvist, 2005; Pope et al., 2001; Schwartz et al., 1989; Solowij et al., 2002). Future preclinical investigation may aid characterization and understanding of the long-term cognitive effects of cannabinoid exposure, and the neural mechanisms that contribute to these impairments.

Studies in CB₁ receptor knock-out mice (Marsicano et al., 2002; Reibaud et al., 1999; Varvel et al., 2005; Varvel and Lichtman, 2002) or using the CB₁ antagonist SR141716A (Terranova et al., 1996) have also highlighted a possible role for the endogenous cannabinoid system in the negative regulation of some forms of cognition under normal physiological conditions. Prefrontal cortical pathological alterations in the endogenous cannabinoid system have also been associated with disorders of cognition such as schizophrenia (Dean et al., 2001) and depression (Hugund et al., 2004). The link between disordered cannabinoid signalling and cognitive impairment is certainly an important and exciting area of current research, as negative modulation of the endocannabinoid system may confer therapeutic benefit in treating impairments in some cognitive domains (Hugund et al., 2004; Marsicano et al., 2002; Terranova et al., 1996), although we are not aware of any published clinical studies to date.

In summary, although preclinical research has uncovered several interesting findings regarding the interaction of cannabinoids with the prefrontal cortex and the cognitive processes associated with this region, our understanding of these interactions is still relatively immature. Key areas for future research include identification of the mechanisms of the association between cannabinoid-induced alterations in neurotransmitter release in the PFC and resultant cognitive alterations, characterization of the effects of long-term cannabinoid exposure on these processes and the role of the endocannabinoid system in the PFC. No doubt, future preclinical research will further clarify neuroscientific understanding of the impact of cannabinoids on cognitive function in health and disease.

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