Fluorescence Monitoring of Membrane Potentials: the Spatio-Temporal Resolution in Isolated Neurons of Helix pomatia

Thomas Knöpfel and Peter Fromherz

Abteilung Biophysik der Universität Ulm, D-7900 Ulm-Eselsberg, Bundesrepublik Deutschland
Z. Naturforsch. 42c, 986–990 (1987); received December 29, 1986/February 16, 1987

Potential Sensitive Dye, Fluorescent Probes, Styril Dyes, Helix pomatia

Using amino-styryl-pyridinium dyes as fluorescent probes we have studied the membrane potential in spheroidal neurons isolated from the circumaesophageal ganglia of the snail Helix pomatia. A spatial resolution of 10 μm is attained at a time resolution of 2.5 ms with a typical signal-to-noise ratio of 10/100 mV as referred to an average sensitivity of the probes of 3%/100 mV and to a quantum yield of the detector of 0.13. The linear response of fluorescence, the effect of staining, the variation of sampled area and of illumination are characterized.

Methods

Signal-to-Noise

The resolution of a potential map as probed by a fluorescent dye is limited by the shot noise caused by photons [8, 12] according to Eqn. (1) where $S_T$ is the total photoelectric signal at a power bandwidth of $(4 \tau_D)^{-1}$ (time constant $\tau_D$).

$$S_T = \sqrt{S_I/2 \tau_D} \tag{1}$$

The signal $S_I$ depends on the intensity of illumination $I_D$, on the absorbance of the probe per unit area $A_p$ and its quantum yield $q_p$, on any background $b$ of stray light and inactive fluorescing dye, on the membrane area $A_S$ sampled, on the fraction of light $f_c$ collected and on the quantum yield $q_D$ of the detector according to Eqn. (2). The response of a dye to a change of membrane potential $\Delta V_M$ is attributed to a relative change of its optical properties and is expressed by a sensitivity $S_p^*$ according to Eqn. (3) [12].

$$S_p \Delta V_M = \Delta (a_p \cdot q_p + b) \cdot f_c \cdot q_D \tag{2}$$

$$\Delta S_p / S_p = \Delta V_M \cdot S_p (1 - f_b) = \Delta V_M \cdot S_p^* \tag{3}$$

From Eqn. (2) and (3) a relation of the membrane potential $\Delta V_M$ and the change of the average total signal is obtained according to Eqn. (4), where $f_b = b / (a_p \cdot q_p + b)$ is the fraction of background. We define $S_p^*$ as an effective sensitivity. Combining Eqn. (1) to (4) we obtain the signal-to-noise ratio according to Eqn. (5).

$$\Delta S_p / S_T = \Delta V_M \cdot \sqrt{S_I/2 \tau_D} \cdot S_p \cdot \sqrt{(1 - f_b) \cdot a_p \cdot q_p}$$

$$\sqrt{I_D \cdot f_c \cdot q_D} \tag{5}$$
It depends on the microscopical technique ($I_0$, $f_c$, $q_D$, $q_p$, $q_B$), on the nature of the sample ($S_p$, $q_p$, $q_B$, $f_B$) and on the conditions of the actual experiment (primary signal $\Delta V_M$ and spatio-temporal resolution $A_s\tau_D$).

During an action potential we cannot evaluate directly the signal $S_T$ at constant $V_M$ with respect to its signal-to-noise ratio. Instead we fit Eqn. (4) to the actual voltage-dependent signal by a least-square-procedure. The RMS-noise $N_T = \sqrt{\overline{S_T^2} - \overline{S_T}^2}$ is evaluated then from the difference of the average linear response and the actual signal. The signal-to-noise ratio per unit voltage is defined as $S/N = -S_P/\bar{N}_T$.

**Cells**

To attain a well defined variable sample area $A_s$ and a low background $f_B$ we use freshly prepared neurons from the circumaesophageal ganglia of *Helix pomatia* [13]. They are dissociated and stripped from connecting tissue by repeated pipetting in saline and by trypsin treatment. Using polylysine they are fixed on a cover slide forming the bottom of a dish. Intact cells exhibit in phase contrast a fine granular cytoplasm surrounded by a smooth circular membrane of a diameter of 30–40 μm. Electrical contact is made by impaling the cells by micropipettes ($40–60\,\text{MΩ}$, KC1, Ag/AgCl) attached to a micromanipulator (Leitz). The resting potential is around $-50\,\text{mV}$. A bridge circuit is used to pass current through the electrode. Action potentials are induced by injecting current pulses up to $0.5\,\text{nA}$.

**Probes**

High sensitivity $S_p$ with high photostability is attained with the amino-styryl-pyridinium dyes RH-160 and RH-237 (see Fig. 1) (gift of Dr. A. Grinvald). Sensitivities of $S_p = -3\%$ to $-12\%/100\,\text{mV}$ have been reported [8]. The cells are stained by bath application of the dyes dissolved in ethanol/saline (bath concentration of probe $c_p = 0.2–5\,\mu\text{M}$, ethanol $< 0.1\%$). The bath is not exchanged during the experiments. Values of $q_p$ and $q_B$ are not available. We have checked the pattern of fluorescence by densitometry of microphotographs. It corresponds to the projection of a homogeneously stained spheroid membrane indicating a low background $f_B$ due to staining of plasma and connecting tissue.

**Optics**

A high stable intensity $I_0$ is attained by imaging the central part of the arc of a Hg-lamp (Osram HBO 200) onto the cell, through an shutter (Compur), a heat filter (10 cm water), an interference filter (Schott-AL 541 nm, width 20 nm) and an oil immersion objective (Zeiss planapo 100 x, N.A. 1.3 Pol) in a Zeiss-Axiomat. The total cell is illuminated. Efficient light collection $f_c$ with low stray light is provided by the high aperture of the objective, a dichroic beam splitter (Zeiss FT-570) and a cut-off filter (Schott RG 610). The background is typically $f_B < .02$. $I_0$ and $f_c$ are not calibrated. The sample area $A_s$ is defined by circular diaphragms of diameter $d_s$ in the first image plane. The photocathode of a multiplier (RCA C31034) with a quantum yield of $q_D = .13$ at 700 nm is adjusted closely behind.

**Electronics**

The output of the photomultiplier $S_T$ is amplified with negligible electronic noise, bandpass filtered, digitized and sampled by a microcomputer (Apple II). Sufficient resolution of the small signal $\Delta S_T$ is obtained by digitizing directly the difference of $S_T$ and a reference $S_{TO}$ taken just before each measurement. In a standard cycle the computer controls the illumination time ($100–250\,\text{ms}$), the stimulation (de-polarization for about $20\,\text{ms}$) and the sampling of fluorescence $\Delta S_T$ and of potential $V_M$ (8 bit at $1–10\,\text{kHz}$). The bandwidth of the filter corresponds to $\tau_D = 2.5\,\text{ms}$. Dye bleaching is compensated by subtracting a fluorescence signal as obtained without stimulation. $V_M$ is folded with the filter function of the fluorescence detection system.

**Results**

We have studied the change of fluorescence $\Delta S_T/S_T$ as a function of the membrane potential $V_M$. Fig. 1 shows the result as obtained during an action potential. We have applied RH-160 and RH-237 at concentrations of 2 μm. The total cell membrane (50 μm diaphragm) was sampled at a relatively low illumination with repetitive detection. The linear dependence of $\Delta S_T/S_T$ and $V_M$ is apparent. The slight hysteresis referring to up- and downstroke of a spike is not significant. The effective sensitivity in these two experiments is $S_p = -2.8\%/100\,\text{mV}$ for RH-160 and $S_p = -3.2\%/100\,\text{mV}$ for RH-237. The signal-to-noise ratio for a single measurement is $S/N = 12/100\,\text{mV}$ for RH-160 and $S/N = 7.5/100\,\text{mV}$ for RH-237.
We have not observed a unique sensitivity in our experiments as shown in Fig. 2. The sensitivity of both probes scatters around $S_p = -3\%/100 \text{ mV}$. A correlation to concentration is not found. The insert in Fig. 2 shows a histogram of the signal-to-noise ratio for the same data. Apparently we have obtained quite frequently $S/N > 10/100 \text{ mV}$ (best value $S/N = 18/100 \text{ mV}$). A correlation of $S/N$ to $S_p$ is found for sets of data obtained at identical illumination.

We have studied the response of the dyes for decreasing area of the sampled membrane. Fig. 3 shows the fluorescence change of RH-237 (1.2 μm) at a relatively low intensity $I_0$ observed through diaphragms of decreasing diameter $d_s = 50 \text{ μm}, 20 \text{ μm}$ and $10 \text{ μm}$ with an adequately enhanced number of signal repetitions. The total signal intensity $S_T$ drops as $21:5.7:1$. Modelling the cell as a sphere of diameter $35 \text{ μm}$ with central location of the diaphragms, we estimate a reduction of the area $A_S$ sampled by the diaphragms as $24:4:1$, correlating to the intensity. The signal-to-noise ratio per 100 mV for a single measurement is found to be $7.5, 5$ and $2.5$ respectively. The drop at a ratio $3:2:1$ correlates with the square-root of the area sampled.

We have improved the signal-to-noise ratio for the highest spatial resolution by application of a higher light intensity $I_0$. Fig. 4 shows the fluorescence change of RH-160 at 4 μm with a diaphragm of 10 μm at an arbitrarily enhanced $I_0$ without repetition. The signal-to-noise ratio is $S/N = 9/100 \text{ mV}$. However, in
Fig. 3. Fluorescence change $-\Delta S_f/S_T$ of RH-237 in a ganglial cell as a function of time during stimulation at a relatively low intensity $I_0$ of illumination at a concentration $c_p = 1.2 \text{ mM}$ (time constant $\tau_D = 2.5 \text{ ms}$). The diameter of the sampling diaphragm is varied as indicated. The number of superpositions $N$ is enhanced to balance the decreasing signal-to-noise ratio of a single measurement.

Fig. 4. Fluorescence change $-\Delta S_f/S_T$ of RH-160 in a ganglial cell as a function of time during a single action potential at a resolution of 10 $\mu$m at a high intensity $I_0$ of illumination at a concentration $c_p = 4 \text{ mM}$ and at a time constant $\tau_D = 2.5 \text{ ms}$. The time course of the membrane potential $V_M$ is indicated.
this case the number of repetitions of an experiment is limited to \( N < 5 \) due to photodynamical destruction of the action potential.

**Discussion**

We have observed a perfect linearity of the fluorescence signal of the amino-styryl-pyridinium probes RH-160 and RH-237 as a function of the membrane potential. We have found a sensitivity in the range of \( S_P = -3\% /100 \text{ mV} \) in the neurons of the circumaeophageal ganglia of *Helix pomatia*, scattering from \(-1\% \) to \(-5\% \). The weak reproducibility may be assigned to the sensitivity \( S_P \) as due to an inhomogeneous cell population or to the background \( B \) as due to a variable staining of inactive cell material. Apparently an absolute calibration of the probes is rather inaccurate even for neurons of the same species.

The average sensitivity of the probes is lower than in neuroblastoma cells of line NIE-115. There an optimal sensitivity of \( S_P = -12\% /100 \text{ mV} \) for RH-237 has been reported [8]. The difference may be due to species specific dye/membrane interaction affecting \( S_P \) or to the background \( B \).

We have found good agreement of the experimental control of the signal-to-noise ratio with the theory with respect to spatial resolution, intensity of illumination and repetition. At a resolution of 10 \( \mu \text{m} \) (sample area about \( A_S = 150 \mu \text{m}^2 \)) and a time constant \( \tau_D = 2.5 \text{ ms} \) we have attained typically a signal-to-noise ratio of \( S/N = 10/100 \text{ mV} \). A substitution of the photomultiplier with \( q_D = 0.13 \) by a photodiode with \( q_D = 0.7 \) would enhance the signal-to-noise ratio to \( S/N > 20/100 \text{ mV} \).

In neuroblasts the optimal value of \( S/N = 50/100 \text{ mV} \) has been reported with RH-237. This value refers to a membrane area of about \( A_S = 1000 \mu \text{m}^2 \) as selected by a 150 \( \mu \text{m} \) diaphragm from a cylindrical process of a diameter of 2 \( \mu \text{m} \) at a time constant \( \tau_D = 1.5 \text{ ms} \) [11]. Normalizing this result to our sample with \( A_S = 150 \mu \text{m}^2 \) and \( \tau_D = 2.5 \text{ ms} \), it corresponds to \( S/N = 25/100 \text{ mV} \). Normalizing it with respect to our sensitivity \( S_P = -3\% \) it corresponds to \( S/N = 6/100 \text{ mV} \).

With the present study we confirm, specify and extend the investigations of Grinvald *et al.* Although some of the parameters involved are not optimal we report for the first time a resolution of 10 \( \mu \text{m} \) at a time constant around 1 ms with fluorescent dyes [14]. For a sample with a sensitivity of \(-21\%/100 \text{ mV} \) (as neuroblasts stained by RH-421 [8, 11]) we may attain with our set-up a signal-to-noise ratio distinctly above 100/100 \text{ mV} at a spatial resolution of 10 \( \mu \text{m} \). For such a sample we may consider a drastic reduction of the light intensity such that series of measurements may be performed with a single sample without repetition. The result indicates the feasibility to obtain a fine-scaled mapping of the spatio-temporal pattern of the electrical potential in a dendritic tree of even moderate size.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank A. Kutruff for expert help in the electronic set-up and the State Baden-Württemberg (Schwerpunktprogramm 24) and the Fonds der Chemischen Industrie for their generous support.