

**Investigations of Ion Channels with
Computational Simulations and
Biochemical Experiments**

Thesis by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

California Institute of Technology

Pasadena, California

2006

(Defended February 13, 2006)

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Acknowledgements

My graduate studies at Caltech have been a wonderful experience. First of all, working for Dennis Dougherty has been fantastic. He is an excellent scientist and a model advisor, able to keep track of all the strange turns my research has taken. I have learned a lot from talking with him about my research, but beyond that, I also aspire to be as good a writer and speaker as he is, and I admire the way he is able to balance his professional and family life.

Thank you also to Doug Rees, my thesis committee chairman, with whom I enjoyed working during my projects with mechanosensitive channels. I also appreciate the contributions and encouraging words of my other committee members, Jack Beauchamp and Peter Dervan.

The real joy in working in the Dougherty lab has been the interactions I have had with my labmates, all of whom I consider friends. Three of them deserve special recognition. First of all, Don Elmore helped me get started in the simulations, teaching me the ins and outs of the software and the maintenance of our computer system. He is always happy to help in whatever way he can. Outside of lab, he was also a fun quiz bowl teammate. Sarah Monahan taught me everything that I know about tissue culture and most everything about molecular biology. She is also a brilliant scientist and an even better person. The scientific community took a hit when she decided to do photography instead. Josh Maurer taught me whatever molecular biology Sarah did not teach me. He was full of suggestions during the many times I got stuck early in my studies.

As for my other labmates, I found a fellow White Sox fan in Justin Gallivan. Lintong Li had a desk next to me and was fun to chat with. I admire Gabe Brandt's

voracious appetite for scientific knowledge and the way he can retain so much information about everything. Although I hardly did any organic chemistry, Vince Liptak helped me in my reactions when I most needed it. Niki Zacharias often kept me company during the graveyard shift. David Dahan was a formidable opponent in fantasy hockey, as a person who actually played the sport. James Petersson's goofiness kept things light, and his work ethic and the breadth of his research, not to mention his rock-climbing skills, were inspirational. I was amazed by the variety of experiences that Darren Beene has had in his life and am glad that he decided to settle down in Pasadena for a few years, so I could get to know him. Tingwei Mu was a pleasure to play soccer with. Amanda Cashin's outgoing nature made her a great teammate of sorts as we went through interviewing for jobs and finishing up our graduate work. Lori Lee is friendly and fun, even when we talk about serious issues. Erik Rodriguez is quick to help when things really need to get done in lab. Mike Torrice is always there to catch the Simpsons and Seinfeld references I constantly throw around. Amy Eastwood's sparkling personality will take her far in life—even farther than the 26.2 miles she ran in Boston last year. Joanne Xiu is a pleasure to be around. Katie McMenimen never complained when I played my cheesy music but actually gave me more. I have truly enjoyed the conversations that I have had with Kiowa Bower, and I thank him for sharing his perspectives with me. Ariele Hanek is a caring person. Jinti Wang is a hard worker and always has a smile on her face. I admire Kristin Rule's willingness to speak her mind. Jai Shanata has been extremely patient with me when my stuff kept spilling across his desk. Kay Limapichat, I am sure, will continue in the Dougherty tradition of being the coolest lab on campus.

Friends outside of lab, both at Caltech and elsewhere, have greatly enriched my experience in Pasadena. Jeremy Heidel, my roommate for five years, and I have shared so many fun times talking, playing games, watching and playing sports, and hanging out. Endy Min has a real servant's heart and an unparalleled zest for life. Swaroop Mishra, Julie Casperson, and Tim Best often helped me over the midweek hump. Also thank you to my wonderful friends from church, my "family away from family" for the last six-and-a-half years, especially Nick Lawrence, Tim Chinniah, Paul Sutherlin, and Robert Schwenk, who have been with me since the beginning.

A special thanks is reserved for my family, even if sometimes they make fun of my nerdiness, although they are just telling it like it is. My siblings, Cindy, Karen, and Paul have helped shape me into who I am today. My parents are the best in the world and have supported me with unwavering love through all the good and bad times. In addition, my dad, who has a Ph.D. in biochemistry, has been really helpful during the many times I have struggled with experiments.

Without question, the highlight of my time in Pasadena has been finding my beautiful wife of noble character Tiffany. She has shown me more love and patience than I deserve, and I cannot imagine being with anyone else. I am a better man because of her, and I am so glad that she will be there with me wherever we end up next, and beyond.

Lastly, all the gifts that I have received—my intellect, my abilities, my love for science—come from God above and my Savior Jesus, whose strength has carried me through the difficult times. I could not have succeeded without it. I have no hope or joy except through His grace. Praise be to God!

Abstract

Chapter one describes studies of the voltage-dependent hydration and conduction properties of the hydrophobic pore of the mechanosensitive channel of small conductance, MscS. A detailed picture of water and ion properties in small pores is important for understanding the behavior of biological ion channels. Several recent modeling studies have shown that small, hydrophobic pores exclude water and ions even if they are physically large enough to accommodate them, a mechanism called hydrophobic gating. This mechanism has been implicated in the gating of several channels, including MscS. Although the pore in the crystal structure of MscS is wide and was initially hypothesized to be open, it is lined by hydrophobic residues and may represent a nonconducting state. Molecular dynamics simulations were performed on MscS to determine whether or not the structure can conduct ions. Unlike previous simulations of hydrophobic nanopores, electric fields were applied to this system to model the transmembrane potential, which proved to be important. Although simulations without a potential resulted in a dehydrated, occluded pore, the application of a potential increased the hydration of the pore and resulted in current flow through the channel. The calculated channel conductance was in good agreement with experiment. Therefore, it is likely that the MscS crystal structure is closer to a conducting than to a nonconducting state.

Chapter two describes work toward a method using protein transduction domains (PTDs) to deliver tRNA to cultured mammalian cells. *In vivo* incorporation of unnatural amino acids using nonsense suppression is a powerful technique to study proteins. However, one challenge to the method is that the amount of unnatural protein that can be

produced is directly limited by the amount of unnatural aminoacyl-tRNA presented to the cellular translation machinery. Therefore, the success of this technique depends heavily on the ability to deliver aminoacyl-tRNA, which is produced *in vitro*, into cells.

Currently, the most commonly used system involves injection of a *Xenopus* oocyte. It is desirable to transfer the technology to a mammalian expression system, but because mammalian cells are so much smaller than oocytes, injection is not a practical delivery method, so other techniques must be utilized. An intriguing possibility is the use of PTDs, small peptides that greatly enhance the internalization of extracellular material. Several PTD-based approaches for tRNA delivery were attempted: covalent ligation of tRNA to a PTD, noncovalent complexation of tRNA and PTDs, and production of a fusion protein containing a PTD and a tRNA-binding domain. However, none of these methods was useful in delivering tRNA into mammalian cells in culture.

Chapter three describes efforts to develop a high throughput assay for gating of the mechanosensitive channel of large conductance, MscL. The bacterial ion channel MscL is an ideal starting point for understanding the molecular basis of mechanosensation. However, current methods for the characterization of its mutants, patch clamp and bacterial growth analysis, are difficult and time consuming, so a higher throughput method for screening mutants is desired. We have attempted to develop a fluorescence assay for detecting MscL activity in synthetic vesicles. The assay involved the separation of two solutions—one inside and one outside the vesicles—that are separately nonfluorescent but fluorescent when mixed. It was hoped that MscL activity due to downshock of the vesicles would bring about mixing of the solutions, producing fluorescence. The development of the assay required the optimization of several

variables: the method for producing a uniform vesicle population containing MscL, the fluorescence system, and the lipid and protein composition of the vesicles. However, no MscL activity was ever detected even after optimization, so the assay was not fully developed. The probable cause of the failure was the inability of current techniques to produce a sufficiently uniform vesicle population.

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