

A Simulation Study of Atrial Fibrillation Initiation: Differences in Resting Membrane Potential Can Produce Spontaneous Activations at the Pulmonary Vein-Left Atrial Junction

F.H. Fenton^{1,2}, E.M. Cherry², J.R. Ehrlich³, S. Nattel⁴, S.J. Evans^{1,2}

¹The Heart Institute, Beth Israel Medical Center, NY; ²Center for Arrhythmia Research at Hofstra University, NY; ³J.W. Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main, Germany; ⁴Montreal Heart Institute, Montreal, PQ, Canada

Abstract

Introduction. Much attention has been given to the role of pulmonary vein (PV) focal activity during atrial fibrillation (AF). However, it still is not clear if PV preparations are auto-oscillatory and can produce ectopic beats when paced at physiological rates. An alternative hypothesis proposes that the resting membrane potentials (RMPs) of left atrial (LA) and PV cardiomyocytes may differ sufficiently to produce, by electrotonic effects, repeated spontaneous activations that propagate through the atria and potentially generate AF. **Methods and Results.** Using action potential (AP) recordings obtained experimentally, we developed ionic models of canine PV and LA cardiomyocyte APs that reproduce rate of rise, morphology, RMP (-74 mV in LA versus -65mV in PV), and rate adaptation. To study how different RMPs affected propagation, we created adjoining regions of PV and LA tissue of varying sizes. Electrotonic currents between adjacent regions originated when cells were at rest, due to differences in RMP, with coupling strength governing the spatial voltage profile between the two RMPs. We found that spontaneous activations arose in highly specific circumstances that can be understood by analyzing the interactions among spatial voltage profile, recovery from Na⁺ channel inactivation, and excitation threshold (ET). In particular, not only differences in RMP, but also differences in ET (such as those caused by stretch, memory, aging, and other mechanisms), were necessary for spontaneous activity to arise and propagate into the LA. **Conclusions.** PV focal activity leading to AF in some cases may arise not from auto-oscillatory behavior, but rather from experimentally observed RMP differences that result in continuous re-excitation via electrotonic current passage between adjacent regions.

Methods

The model consists of the following equations:

Currents:

$$I_{Na}(V,v) = -v^3 p(V-v)(V_{Na}-V)/\tau_{Na}$$

$$I_{Ca}(V) = (V-V_{Ca})(1-r)I_{Ca} + rI_{Ca,slow}$$

$$+rb(1+\tanh(k_r(V-V_{Ca})))^2$$

Gate Variables:

$$\dot{v}_1(x,t) = (1-p)(1-v)/\tau_v(V) - pv/\tau_v$$

$$\dot{w}(x,t) = (1-p)(1-w)/\tau_w - pw/\tau_w$$

$$\dot{c}_1(x,t) = (1-p)d/dx(V,d)/\tau_c + p^2 d^2(V,d)/dx^2$$

$$dxd = (0.5^x(1+\tanh(k_r(V-V_{Ca}))))$$

Voltage:

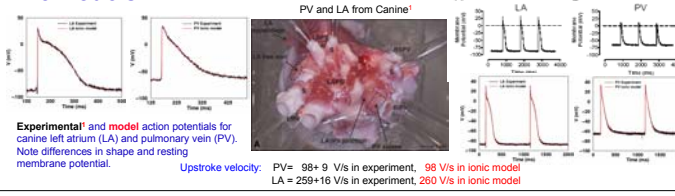
$$\dot{V}(x,t) = -V \cdot (D^2V) - (I_{Na} + I_{Ca} + I_{K})/C_m$$

where $\tau_v(V) = (1-a) \tau_{v1} + a \tau_{v2}$; For L.A. $\tau_v(V) = \tau_{v1}$ and for P.V. $\tau_v(V) = \tau_{v2}$ $\{s1 = (1+\tanh((V-17.14)^2/2.2^2))\}$
 $p=0$ if $V < V_{Ca}$, 1 if $V > V_{Ca}$; $s1=1$ if $V > 0.35$, 0 if $V < 0.35$;
 $q=0$ if $V < V_{Ca}$, 1 if $V > V_{Ca}$; $r=0$ if $V < V_{Ca}$, 1 if $V > V_{Ca}$;
 $s2=1$ if $V > 0.28$, 0 if $V < 0.28$; $C_m=1$, $D=0.001$ cm²/s

The model parameters are varied (see table) to produce the action potentials for pulmonary vein (PV) and left atrium (LA).

Parameter	τ_v^1	τ_v^2	k_r	V_{Ca}	V_{Na}	V_{K}	$V_{Ca,slow}$	r	b
Left Atrium	3.33	50	160	75	0.065	59	0.106	31.83	
Pulmonary Vein	3.33	50	30	160	0.167	55	0.016	47.53	
Parameter	τ_v^1	τ_v^2	k_r	V_{Ca}	V_{Na}	V_{K}	$V_{Ca,slow}$	r	b
Left Atrium	50	0.833	3	50	0.8	0.08	0.3	0.155	0.84
Pulmonary Vein	50	0.833	3	14.28	0.8	0.25	0.6	0.21	0.9

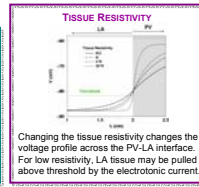
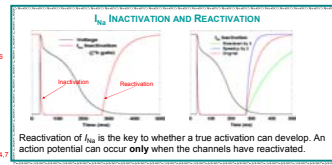
The Models



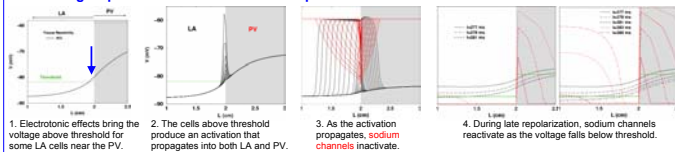
Dynamics in One Dimension

When the LA activation threshold is lower than the PV resting membrane potential, the difference in RMP can produce a current² that produces spontaneous activations depending on:

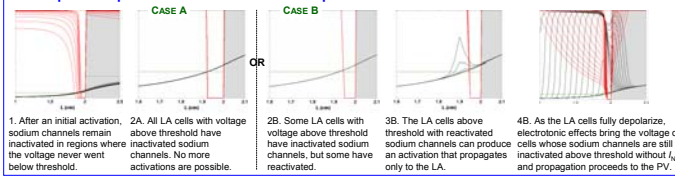
- Tissue resistivity
- Difference in RMPs
- I_{Na} reactivation.
- Difference in activation thresholds, which may decrease with age, etc.^{2,3,4}



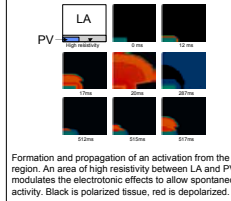
How a single spontaneous activation can be produced



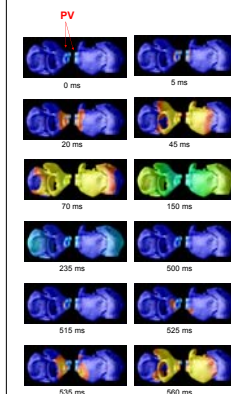
How repetitive spontaneous activations can be produced



Two Dimensions



Three Dimensions



Conclusions

Pulmonary vein focal activity leading to atrial fibrillation in some cases may arise not from auto-oscillatory behavior, but rather from experimentally observed differences in resting membrane potential that result in continuous re-excitation via electrotonic current passage between adjacent left atrium and pulmonary vein regions.

Spontaneous activations can occur when the different resting membrane potentials between LA and PV and cellular coupling produce a voltage profile that meets the following conditions:

- Activation threshold for LA tissue must be lower than the PV resting membrane potential.
- Voltage for part of the LA side of the LA-PV interface must recover enough for I_{Na} to reactivate.
- Electrotonic current from different resting membrane potentials then must be large enough to bring the LA side of the LA-PV interface above threshold.

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