

# Engineering therapeutic protein disaggregases

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**ABSTRACT** Therapeutic agents are urgently required to cure several common and fatal neurodegenerative disorders caused by protein misfolding and aggregation, including amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Parkinson's disease (PD), and Alzheimer's disease (AD). Protein disaggregases that reverse protein misfolding and restore proteins to native structure, function, and localization could mitigate neurodegeneration by simultaneously reversing 1) any toxic gain of function of the misfolded form and 2) any loss of function due to misfolding. Potentiated variants of Hsp104, a hexameric AAA+ ATPase and protein disaggregase from yeast, have been engineered to robustly disaggregate misfolded proteins connected with ALS (e.g., TDP-43 and FUS) and PD (e.g.,  $\alpha$ -synuclein). However, Hsp104 has no metazoan homologue. Metazoa possess protein disaggregase systems distinct from Hsp104, including Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40, as well as HtrA1, which might be harnessed to reverse deleterious protein misfolding. Nevertheless, vicissitudes of aging, environment, or genetics conspire to negate these disaggregase systems in neurodegenerative disease. Thus, engineering potentiated human protein disaggregases or isolating small-molecule enhancers of their activity could yield transformative therapeutics for ALS, PD, and AD.

**Monitoring Editor**

David G. Drubin  
University of California,  
Berkeley

Received: Feb 5, 2016

Revised: Mar 22, 2016

Accepted: Mar 23, 2016

We urgently need to pioneer game-changing solutions to remedy a number of increasingly prevalent and fatal neurodegenerative disorders, including amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), Parkinson's disease (PD), and Alzheimer's disease (AD; Cushman *et al.*, 2010; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). These disorders relentlessly erode our morale and economic resources. Aging is the major risk factor for all of these diseases, which threaten public health on a global scale and represent a severe impediment to living longer lives. A number of promising drugs have emerged to treat cancer and heart disease, but, distressingly, this is not the case for these and other neurodegenerative diseases, for which drug pipelines lie dormant and empty. This situation is unacceptable, and an impending healthcare crisis looms worldwide as population demographics inexorably shift toward older age groups.

ALS, PD, AD, and related neurodegenerative disorders are unified by a common underlying theme: the misfolding and aggrega-

tion of specific proteins (characteristic for each disease) in the CNS (Cushman *et al.*, 2010; Eisele *et al.*, 2015). Thus, in ALS, typically an RNA-binding protein with a prion-like domain, TDP-43, mislocalizes from the nucleus to cytoplasmic inclusions in degenerating motor neurons (Neumann *et al.*, 2006; Gitler and Shorter, 2011; King *et al.*, 2012; Robberecht and Philips, 2013; March *et al.*, 2016). In PD,  $\alpha$ -synuclein forms toxic soluble oligomers and cytoplasmic aggregates, termed Lewy bodies, in degenerating dopaminergic neurons (Dehay *et al.*, 2015). By contrast, in AD, amyloid- $\beta$  (A $\beta$ ) peptides form extracellular plaques and the microtubule-binding protein, tau, forms cytoplasmic neurofibrillary tangles in afflicted brain regions (Jucker and Walker, 2011). Typically, these disorders are categorized into ~80–90% sporadic cases and ~10–20% familial cases. Familial forms of disease often have clear genetic causes, which might one day be amenable to gene editing via clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR)-Cas9 therapeutics if critical safety and ethical concerns can be successfully addressed and respected (Doudna and Charpentier, 2014; Baltimore *et al.*, 2015; Rahdar *et al.*, 2015; Callaway, 2016). However, the more common sporadic forms of disease often have no clear underlying genetics, and wild-type proteins misfold (Cushman *et al.*, 2010; Jucker and Walker, 2011; Robberecht and Philips, 2013; Dehay *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, therapeutic agents that directly target and safely reverse deleterious protein misfolding are likely to have broad utility (Eisele *et al.*, 2015).

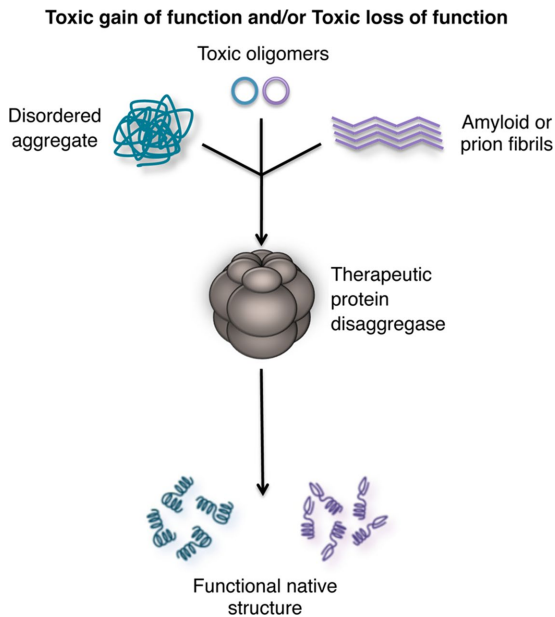
DOI:10.1091/mbc.E15-10-0693

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Abbreviations used: A $\beta$ , amyloid- $\beta$ ; AD, Alzheimer's disease; ALS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis; CHIP, C-terminus of Hsp70-interacting protein; CRISPR, clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats; PD, Parkinson's disease.

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**FIGURE 1:** Therapeutic protein disaggregases. Two malicious problems are commonly associated with protein misfolding into disordered aggregates, toxic oligomers, and cross- $\beta$  amyloid or prion fibrils: 1) a toxic gain of function of the protein in various misfolded states; and 2) a loss of function of the protein in the various misfolded states. These problems can contribute to the etiology of diverse neurodegenerative diseases in a combinatorial or mutually exclusive manner. A therapeutic protein disaggregase would reverse protein misfolding and recover natively folded functional proteins from disordered aggregates, toxic oligomers, and cross- $\beta$  amyloid or prion fibrils. In this way, any toxic gain of function or toxic loss of function caused by protein misfolding would be simultaneously reversed. Ideally, all toxic misfolded conformers would be purged. Therapeutic protein disaggregases could thus have broad utility for various fatal neurodegenerative diseases.

There are no treatments that directly target the reversal of the protein-misfolding phenomena that underlie these disorders (Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Strategies that directly reverse protein misfolding and restore proteins to native form and function could, in principle, eradicate any severely damaging loss-of-function or toxic gain-of-function phenotypes caused by misfolded conformers (Figure 1; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Moreover, therapeutic disaggregases would dismantle self-templating amyloid or prion structures, which spread pathology and nucleate formation of neurotoxic, soluble oligomers (Figure 1; Cushman *et al.*, 2010; Cohen *et al.*, 2013; Guo and Lee, 2014; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). My group has endeavored to engineer and evolve Hsp104, a hexameric AAA+ ATPase and protein disaggregase from yeast (DeSantis and Shorter, 2012; Sweeny and Shorter, 2015), to more effectively disaggregate misfolded proteins connected with various neurodegenerative disorders, including ALS (e.g., TDP-43 and FUS) and PD (e.g.,  $\alpha$ -synuclein). Although wild-type Hsp104 can disaggregate diverse amyloid and prion conformers, as well as toxic soluble oligomers (Lo Bianco *et al.*, 2008; DeSantis *et al.*, 2012), its activity against human neurodegenerative disease proteins is suboptimal. Is it even possible to improve on existing Hsp104 disaggregase activity, which has been wrought over the course of millions of years of evolution?

Remarkably, the answer to this question is yes! We used nimble yeast models of neurodegenerative proteinopathies (Outeiro and Lindquist, 2003; Gitler, 2008; Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Sun *et al.*, 2011;

Khurana *et al.*, 2015) as a platform to isolate enhanced disaggregases from large libraries of Hsp104 variants generated by error-prone PCR (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014b). In this way, we reprogrammed Hsp104 to yield the first disaggregases that reverse TDP-43, FUS (another RNA-binding protein with a prion-like domain connected to ALS), and  $\alpha$ -synuclein (connected to PD) aggregation and proteotoxicity (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a, 2015; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015; Torrente *et al.*, 2016). Remarkably, a therapeutic gain of Hsp104 function could be elicited by a single missense mutation (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a, 2015; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Under conditions in which Hsp104 was ineffective, potentiated Hsp104 variants dissolved protein inclusions, restored protein localization (e.g., TDP-43 returned to the nucleus from cytoplasmic inclusions), suppressed proteotoxicity, and attenuated dopaminergic neurodegeneration in a *Caenorhabditis elegans* PD model (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Remarkably, these therapeutic modalities originated from degenerate loss of amino acid identity at select positions of Hsp104 rather than specific mutation (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Some of these changes were remarkably small (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a, 2015; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Thus, potentiated Hsp104 variants could be generated by removal of a methyl group from a single side chain or addition or removal of a single methylene bridge from a single side chain (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a, 2015; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Thus, small molecules that bind in accessible regions of Hsp104 rich in potentiating mutations might also be able to enhance activity. However, a small-scale screen for small-molecule modulators of Hsp104 revealed only inhibitors (Torrente *et al.*, 2014). Nonetheless, our work has established that disease-associated aggregates and amyloid are tractable targets and that enhanced artificial disaggregases can restore proteostasis and mitigate neurodegeneration (Jackrel and Shorter, 2015).

One surprising aspect of this work is just how many Hsp104 variants we could isolate with potentiated activity. We now have hundreds (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel *et al.*, 2015). Typically, potentiated Hsp104 variants displayed enhanced activity against several neurodegenerative disease proteins. For example, Hsp104<sup>A503S</sup> rescued the aggregation and toxicity of TDP-43, FUS, TAF15, and  $\alpha$ -synuclein (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel and Shorter, 2014). By contrast, some potentiated Hsp104 variants rescued only the aggregation and toxicity of a subset of disease proteins. For example, Hsp104<sup>D498V</sup> rescued only the aggregation and toxicity of FUS and  $\alpha$ -synuclein (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a). A challenge that lies ahead is to engineer potentiated Hsp104 variants that are highly substrate specific to mitigate any potential off-target effects, should they arise (Jackrel and Shorter, 2015).

Very small changes in primary sequence yield potentiated Hsp104 variants. However, Hsp104 has no metazoan homologue (Erives and Fassler, 2015). Now comes the important point. Neuroprotection could be broadly achieved by making very subtle modifications to existing human chaperones with newly appreciated disaggregase activity—for example, Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40 (Torrente and Shorter, 2013) and HtrA1 (Poepsel *et al.*, 2015).

Whether Metazoa even possess a powerful protein disaggregation and reactivation machinery had been a long-standing enigma (Torrente and Shorter, 2013). However, it has recently emerged that two metazoan chaperone systems—1) Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40 (Torrente and Shorter, 2013) and 2) HtrA1 (Poepsel *et al.*, 2015)—possess disaggregase activity that could be therapeutically harnessed or stimulated to reverse deleterious protein misfolding in neurodegenerative disease. I suspect that Metazoa harbor additional disaggregase systems that remain to be identified (Guo *et al.*, 2014). Whether due to vicissitudes of

aging, environment, or genetic background, these disaggregase systems fail in the context of ALS, PD, and AD. Based on the surprising precedent of our potentiated versions of Hsp104 (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015), I hypothesize that it is possible to engineer and evolve potentiated variants of these human protein disaggregases to more effectively counter deleterious misfolding events in ALS, PD, and AD (Torrente and Shorter, 2013; Mack and Shorter, 2016).

Using classical biochemical reconstitution, it was discovered that one mammalian protein-disaggregase system comprises three molecular chaperones—Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40—which synergize to dissolve and reactivate model proteins trapped in disordered aggregates and can even depolymerize amyloid fibrils formed by  $\alpha$ -synuclein from their ends (Shorter, 2011; Duenwald *et al.*, 2012; Torrente and Shorter, 2013). Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40 isoforms are found in the cytoplasm, nucleus, and endoplasmic reticulum, which suggest that protein disaggregation and reactivation can occur in several compartments (Finka *et al.*, 2015). Subsequent studies suggest that this system may be more powerful than initially anticipated (Rampelt *et al.*, 2012; Mattoo *et al.*, 2013; Gao *et al.*, 2015; Nilleghoda *et al.*, 2015). Nonetheless, this system must become overwhelmed in neurodegenerative disorders. Perhaps selectively vulnerable neurons display particular deficits in this machinery. Hence, potentiating the activity of this system via engineering could be extremely valuable. It is promising that directed evolution studies yielded DnaK (Hsp70 in *Escherichia coli*) variants with improved ability to refold specific substrates (Aponte *et al.*, 2010; Schweizer *et al.*, 2011; Mack and Shorter, 2016), but whether this can be extended to human Hsp70 and the disaggregation of neurodegenerative disease proteins is uncertain.

It is exciting that recent studies have revealed that HtrA1, a homo-oligomeric PDZ serine protease, can dissolve and degrade AD-linked tau and A $\beta$ 42 fibrils in an ATP-independent manner (Tennstaedt *et al.*, 2012; Poepsel *et al.*, 2015). HtrA1 first dissolves tau and A $\beta$ 42 fibrils and then degrades them, as protease-defective HtrA1 variants dissolve fibrils without degrading them (Poepsel *et al.*, 2015). HtrA1 is found in the cytoplasm (~30%) but is also secreted (~70%; Poepsel *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, HtrA1 is known to degrade substrates in both the extracellular space and the cytoplasm (Chien *et al.*, 2009; Campioni *et al.*, 2010; Taden and Richards, 2013). Thus HtrA1 could dissolve A $\beta$ 42 fibrils in the extracellular space and tau fibrils in the cytoplasm and simultaneously destroy the two cardinal features of AD (Poepsel *et al.*, 2015). I suspect that this system becomes overwhelmed or is insufficient in AD, and thus potentiating and tailoring HtrA1 disaggregase activity could be a valuable therapeutic strategy. For example, it might be advantageous to simply degrade A $\beta$ 42 after disaggregation if the peptide has no beneficial function. Thus HtrA1 variants with enhanced disaggregation and degradation activity against A $\beta$ 42 could be extremely useful. However, A $\beta$ 42 (and related A $\beta$  peptides) may have physiological functions that are presently underappreciated (Soscia *et al.*, 2010; Fedele *et al.*, 2015), in which case HtrA1 variants with enhanced disaggregase activity but reduced proteolytic activity could be vital. HtrA1 variants with enhanced disaggregase activity but reduced proteolytic activity may also be particularly important to recover functional tau from neurofibrillary tangles to reverse loss of tau function in AD and various tauopathies (Santacruz *et al.*, 2005; Trojanowski and Lee, 2005; Dixit *et al.*, 2008).

I suggest that relatively small changes in primary sequence will yield large increases in disaggregase activity for these systems as they do for Hsp104 (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). If true, this would further suggest that small molecules that bind in the appropriate regions of Hsp110, Hsp70, Hsp40, or HtrA1 might

also enhance disaggregase activity. Thus, isolating small-molecule enhancers of the Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40 or HtrA1 disaggregase systems could yield important therapeutics. Indeed, I hypothesize that enhancing the activity of the Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40 or HtrA1 disaggregase system with specific small molecules will enable dissolution of toxic oligomeric and amyloid forms of various disease proteins and confer therapeutic benefits in ALS, PD, AD, and potentially other neurodegenerative disorders.

It is intriguing that several small molecules are already known to enhance various aspects of Hsp70 chaperone activity (Pratt *et al.*, 2015; Shrestha *et al.*, 2016). These include MKT-077, JG-98, YM-1, YM-8, and 115-7c (Wisén *et al.*, 2010; Pratt *et al.*, 2015). It is not known whether any of these stimulates the disaggregase activity of the Hsp110, Hsp70, and Hsp40 system. MKT-077, JG-98, YM-1, and YM-8 are rhodocyanines that bind with low micromolar affinity to the nucleotide-binding domain of ADP- but not ATP-bound Hsp70, stabilizing the ADP-bound state (Pratt *et al.*, 2015). The ADP-bound state of Hsp70 engages clients with higher affinity, and consequently MKT-077, JG-98, and YM-1 activate binding of Hsp70 to misfolded proteins (Wang *et al.*, 2013; Pratt *et al.*, 2015). Thus, under some conditions, these small molecules can promote folding of certain Hsp70 clients (Morishima *et al.*, 2011; Pratt *et al.*, 2015). However, prolonged interaction of clients with Hsp70 promotes their CHIP-dependent ubiquitylation and degradation *in vivo* (Morishima *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2013; Pratt *et al.*, 2015). Intriguingly, YM-1 promotes clearance of polyglutamine oligomers and aggregates in cells (Wang *et al.*, 2013; Pratt *et al.*, 2015). MKT-077, YM-1, JG-98, and YM-8 also promote clearance of tau and confer therapeutic benefit in tauopathy models (Abisambra *et al.*, 2013; Miyata *et al.*, 2013; Fontaine *et al.*, 2015). Of importance, YM-8 is long lived *in vivo* and crosses the blood-brain barrier (Miyata *et al.*, 2013). The dihydropyrimidine 115-7c activates Hsp70 ATPase turnover rate, promotes Hsp70 substrate refolding, and reduces  $\alpha$ -synuclein aggregation in cell culture (Wisén *et al.*, 2010; Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2013). It binds to the IIA subdomain of Hsp70 and promotes the active Hsp70-Hsp40 complex (Wisén *et al.*, 2010). Small-molecule enhancers of HtrA1 protease activity have also emerged (Jo *et al.*, 2014). Thus it will be important to assess whether these small molecules enhance the activity of their respective disaggregases against various neurodegenerative substrates.

Although small molecules that enhance disaggregase activity of endogenous human proteins might be the most immediately translatable, gene-, mRNA-, or protein-based therapies can also be envisioned. For example, adeno-associated viruses expressing enhanced disaggregases might be used to target degenerating neurons (Dong *et al.*, 2005; Lo Bianco *et al.*, 2008; Deverman *et al.*, 2016). Alternatively, if viral vectors are undesirable, modified mRNAs might serve as an alternative to DNA-based gene therapy (Kormann *et al.*, 2011). Protein-based therapeutics could also be explored. For example, intraperitoneal injection of human Hsp70 increased lifespan, delayed symptom onset, preserved motor function, and prolonged motor neuron viability in a mouse model of ALS (Gifondorwa *et al.*, 2007; Gifondorwa *et al.*, 2012). Several other studies suggest that exogenous delivery of Hsp70 can have beneficial, neuroprotective effects in mice (Nagel *et al.*, 2008; Bobkova *et al.*, 2014; Bobkova *et al.*, 2015).

Ultimately, if safety and ethical concerns can be overcome in a circumspect, risk-averse manner, CRISPR-Cas9-based therapeutics might even be used to genetically alter the underlying disaggregase to a potentiated form in selectively vulnerable neuronal populations. This approach might be particularly valuable if enhanced disaggregase activity is not detrimental in the long term. Moreover, stem cell-based therapies for replacing lost neurons

could also be fortified to express enhanced disaggregase systems. Thus they would be endowed with resistance to potential infection by prion-like conformers that might have accumulated during disease progression (Cushman *et al.*, 2010).

Enhanced disaggregase activity is likely to be highly advantageous to neurons under circumstances in which protein misfolding has overwhelmed the system (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). However, inappropriate hyperactivity of protein disaggregases might also have detrimental, off-target effects under regular conditions in which protein misfolding is not an overwhelming issue (Jackrel *et al.*, 2014a; Jackrel and Shorter, 2015). Thus it may be advantageous to engineer enhanced protein disaggregases to be highly substrate specific. In this way, off-target effects would be readily avoided. There is strong precedent for directed evolution or engineering of specialized chaperone or protein activity from a generalist antecedent (Wang *et al.*, 2002; Farrell *et al.*, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2015). Thus, engineering specialist disaggregases for each disease substrate could be achieved. Alternatively, transient or intermittent doses of enhanced disaggregases at specific times or places where they are most needed would also minimize potentially toxic side effects. For example, enhanced disaggregase activity might be applied ephemerally to clear existing misfolded conformers and then be withdrawn once the endogenous proteostasis network regains control. Similarly, it is straightforward to envision administration of small-molecule enhancers of disaggregase activity in intermittent protocols that enable facile recovery from potential side effects (Fontaine *et al.*, 2015). In this way, any adverse effects of enhanced protein-disaggregase activity under normal physiological conditions would be avoided. Many barriers will need to be safely overcome to implement a successful therapeutic disaggregase, including how to deliver enhanced disaggregase activity to exactly where it is needed. However, these obstacles are not a reason to be pessimistic. On the contrary, the isolation of engineered disaggregases that efficaciously reverse deleterious misfolding of neurodegenerative disease proteins directs our attention to considerably expand the environs in which they should be sought. My closing sentences, therefore, are intended to be provocative.

I suspect that neuroprotection could be broadly actualized via precise but subtle alterations to existing protein-disaggregase modalities. The engineering and evolution of protein disaggregases could yield important solutions to avert an imminent plague of neurodegenerative disorders that promises to devastate our society. I strongly suspect that cures for various neurodegenerative disorders will be realized by pioneering as-yet-uncharted regions of disaggregase sequence space or chemical space to elucidate small-molecule enhancers of disaggregase activity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Laura Castellano for the artwork. I am supported by National Institutes of Health Grant R01GM099836, a Muscular Dystrophy Association Research Award (MDA277268), an ALS Association Award, the Life Extension Foundation, a Linda Montague Pechinik Research Award, the Packard Center for ALS Research at Johns Hopkins University, and Target ALS.

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