Decreased Dendritic Spine Density on Prefrontal Cortical Pyramidal Neurons in Schizophrenia

Leisa A. Glantz, PhD; David A. Lewis, MD

**Background:** The pathophysiological characteristics of schizophrenia appear to involve altered synaptic connectivity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Given the central role that layer 3 pyramidal neurons play in corticocortical and thalamocortical connectivity, we hypothesized that the excitatory inputs to these neurons are altered in subjects with schizophrenia.

**Methods:** To test this hypothesis, we determined the density of dendritic spines, markers of excitatory inputs, on the basilar dendrites of Golgi-impregnated pyramidal neurons in the superficial and deep portions of layer 3 in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (area 46) and in layer 3 of the primary visual cortex (area 17) of 15 schizophrenic subjects, 15 normal control subjects, and 15 nonschizophrenic subjects with a psychiatric illness (referred to as psychiatric subjects).

**Results:** There was a significant effect of diagnosis on spine density only for deep layer 3 pyramidal neurons in area 46 ($P = .006$). In the schizophrenic subjects, spine density on these neurons was decreased by 23% and 16% compared with the normal control ($P = .004$) and psychiatric ($P = .08$) subjects, respectively. In contrast, spine density on neurons in superficial layer 3 in area 46 ($P = .09$) or in area 17 ($P = .08$) did not significantly differ across the 3 subject groups. Furthermore, spine density on deep layer 3 neurons in area 46 did not significantly ($P = .81$) differ between psychiatric subjects treated with antipsychotic agents and normal controls.

**Conclusion:** This region- and disease-specific decrease in dendritic spine density on dorsolateral prefrontal cortex layer 3 pyramidal cells is consistent with the hypothesis that the number of cortical and/or thalamic excitatory inputs to these neurons is altered in subjects with schizophrenia.

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the number of neurons in this nucleus appears to be decreased in subjects with schizophrenia.29,31 In addition, excitatory inputs to layer 3 pyramidal cells decline substantially in number during late adolescence,32-34 the typical age when the clinical features of schizophrenia become manifest.

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that schizophrenia is associated with a diminished complement of excitatory synapses onto DLPFC layer 3 pyramidal neurons. Because dendritic spines are the principal site of excitatory inputs to pyramidal neurons,35 and reflect the number of these synapses,35,36 we quantified dendritic spine density on the basilar dendrites of layer 3 pyramidal neurons in schizophrenic subjects and 2 groups of comparison subjects.

RESULTS

SPINE DENSITY ON LAYER 3 PYRAMIDAL NEURONS

The Golgi impregnation procedure clearly filled the basilar dendritic shafts and spines of layer 3 pyramidal neurons. As shown in Figure 2, differences in spine density among neurons and across brains were sometimes quite evident.

In DLPFC area 46 (Table 3), the mean spine density on the basilar dendrites of pyramidal neurons in superficial layer 3 of the schizophrenic subjects was 15% lower than that of the normal controls and 13% lower than that of the psychiatric subjects (Figure 3, A). However, these differences did not achieve statistical significance ($F_{2,37} = 2.52, P = .09$).

In contrast, the spine density on the basilar dendrites of pyramidal neurons in deep layer 3 of area 46 did significantly differ ($F_{2,37} = 6.01, P = .006$) among the 3 subject groups (Table 3). There was also a main effect for age ($F_{1,37} = 8.49, P = .006$) on spine density, but reanalysis failed to reveal a significant age-by-diagnosis interaction ($F_{2,36} = 1.87, P = .17$). In addition, there was no effect of race, sex, PMI, or tissue fixation time ($F_{1,37} < 0.86, P > .47$) on spine density.

As shown in Figure 3, B, the mean spine density on pyramidal neurons in deep layer 3 was 23% lower (95% confidence interval, -42.3% to -6.7%) in the schizophrenic subjects than in the normal controls, a differ-
and 55% of the distance from the pial surface to the white matter in area 46 were considered to be located in layer 3. In Golgi-processed sections containing area 17, a dark band demarcated layer 4. Therefore, sampled neurons were located superficially to this band or within 20% to 45% of the distance from the pial surface to the white matter.

NEURON RECONSTRUCTIONS

Golgi-impregnated pyramidal neurons were readily identified by their characteristic triangular somal shape, apical dendrite extending toward the pial surface, and numerous dendritic spines. The following criteria were used to select pyramidal neurons for reconstruction: (1) location of the cell soma in layer 3 and within the middle of the thickness (z-axis) of the section; (2) full impregnation of the neuron; (3) soma or dendrites not obscured by overlying opaque artifacts larger than 5 µm; (4) no morphologic changes attributable to PMI; and (5) presence of at least 3 primary basilar dendritic shafts, each of which branched at least once. For each subject, 15 neurons were randomly sampled in each of 3 locations: (1) the superficial half of layer 3 (20%-37% of the total cortical depth) in area 46, (2) the deep half of layer 3 (38%-55% of the total cortical depth) in area 46, and (3) layer 3 of area 17. The adequacy of these sampling procedures for detecting differences in spine density has been previously demonstrated.

For each neuron, the longest basilar dendrite, including all branches, was reconstructed in 3 dimensions with a tracing system (Neuron Tracing System; Eutectics Electronics Inc, Raleigh, NC) and a ×100 oil immersion objective (Figure 1). Only those portions of the dendritic tree within the same section as the cell soma were reconstructed. Because apical dendrites are frequently truncated during sectioning, these dendrites were not examined. Each dendritic branch was recorded as having either a natural end (gradual tapering of dendritic thickness with an end swelling, spine, or spine cluster) or an artificial end (cut dendrite). For each basilar dendrite and its branches, the mean diameter and total length, the location and number of spines, the total number of dendritic segments (the portion of a dendrite located between either the soma or a dendritic bifurcation and either another bifurcation or the dendrite end), and the maximum branch order (highest numbered dendritic segment) of the dendrites were determined. The cross-sectional area of each cell body was determined by tracing its outline. All neurons were reconstructed by the same investigator (L.A.G.) without knowledge of the subject number or diagnostic group.

STATISTICAL ANALYSES

For each parameter measured, the results were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of covariance model with the independent variables of diagnostic group, sex, age, race, PMI, and tissue fixation time. The multiple observations per subject (15 neurons) for a particular parameter were treated as a multivariate observation. Because the measured parameters within a given subject were possibly correlated and were also exchangeable, they were modeled as repeated measures with a compound, symmetric covariance structure. To preserve degrees of freedom, the interactions with diagnostic group were only examined if the effect of a particular independent variable was significant (P < .05). For any neuron parameter in which the multivariate analysis of covariance test yielded a significant diagnostic group effect at the .05 level, post hoc simultaneous pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni procedure at the .05 level were conducted to determine which of the groups’ means differed significantly. Simultaneous 95% confidence intervals were also obtained for each pairwise comparison of diagnostic groups. Finally, paired t tests were used to compare spine density across layers within subject groups.

ence significant at P = .004 by post hoc comparisons. Furthermore, although spine density did not differ (t = 0.52, P = .61) between superficial and deep layer 3 pyramidal neurons in the normal controls (Table 3), spine density was significantly (t = 3.65, P = .003) decreased by 11% in deep layer 3 relative to superficial layer 3 in the subjects with schizophrenia. These comparisons confirm a laminar specificity to the spine density differences between schizophrenic and normal control subjects.

Compared with the psychiatric subjects, the mean spine density on deep layer 3 pyramidal neurons in the schizophrenic subjects was decreased by 16%. Although this difference did not achieve statistical significance (P = .08), the 95% confidence interval (−35.8% to 4.4%) was suggestive of a reduction in spine density in the schizophrenic subjects compared with the psychiatric subjects. In contrast, the mean spine density clearly did not differ (P = .81) between the psychiatric and control subjects.

In contrast to area 46, the spine density on layer 3 pyramidal neurons in area 17 (Figure 3, C), primary visual cortex, was decreased in the schizophrenic (13%) and psychiatric (11%) subjects relative to the normal controls (Table 4). However, these differences did not achieve statistical significance (F2,34 = 2.70, P = .08).

OTHER PARAMETERS OF LAYER 3 PYRAMIDAL NEURONS

In superficial layer 3 of area 46, only somal size significantly (F2,37 = 3.84, P = .03) differed among the 3 groups, and post hoc comparisons revealed that this difference was due to a smaller somal size in the psychiatric subjects compared with the normal controls (Table 3). In deep layer 3 of area 46, only total dendritic length (TDL) differed significantly (F2,37 = 4.17, P = .02) among the 3 groups. Post hoc comparisons revealed that the normal control group had a significantly (P < .05) greater TDL than the schizophrenic and psychiatric groups, which did not differ from each other. Interestingly, an analysis of covariance for spine density, controlling for TDL, in the schizophrenic and control groups revealed that the group difference in spine density on deep layer 3 pyramidal neurons was more highly significant (F1,27 = 15.2, P < .001) than that indicated by the initial analysis. In layer 3 of the primary visual cortex, TDL (F2,34 = 4.11, P = .03),
number of branch segments ($F_{2,34} = 4.41, P = .02$), and maximum branch order ($F_{2,34} = 4.27, P = .02$) differed significantly among the diagnostic groups (Table 4). For each measure, the main effect was due to significantly lower values in the psychiatric subjects compared with the control and schizophrenic subjects.

**EFFECT OF ANTIPSYCHOTIC MEDICATIONS ON SPINE DENSITY**

To determine whether treatment with antipsychotic medications might account for the decreased spine density on DLPFC deep layer 3 pyramidal neurons in the schizophrenic subjects, we conducted a separate analysis of the 9 psychiatric subjects who had been treated with these medications (Table 1). The mean (±SD) spine density (measured as number of spines per micrometer) on deep layer 3 pyramidal neurons in these subjects ($0.30 ± 0.07$) did not significantly differ from that of either the entire group of normal controls ($0.33 ± 0.08, F_{1,18} = 0.47, P = .50$) or a subset of 9 normal controls ($0.31 ± 0.05, F_{1,12} = 0.06, P = .81$) who, as a group, did not differ from the antipsychotic-treated psychiatric subjects in sex, age, or PMI.

**COMMENT**

These findings demonstrate that the density of basilar dendritic spines on deep layer 3 pyramidal neurons is significantly decreased in DLPFC area 46 of subjects with schizophrenia. This decrease does not appear to be a general correlate of having a psychiatric illness or a consequence of treatment with antipsychotic medications, suggesting that the decrease in spine density may be specific to the pathophysiological characteristics of schizophrenic...
nia. Because dendritic spine density directly reflects the number of excitatory inputs to pyramidal neurons, 35,36 these findings, in concert with those of a pilot study 45 that also reported decreased spine density on prefrontal layer 3 pyramidal neurons, support the hypothesis that schizophr

In superficial layer 3 of area 46 and in layer 3 of area 17, pyramidal cells exhibited a trend toward decreased spine density in the schizophrenic subjects compared with the normal controls. Evidence suggestive of decreased cortical neuropil has been reported in both of these cortical regions. 10 However, in area 17, the psychiatric subjects also showed a trend toward decreased spine density on layer 3 pyramidal neurons. In addition, other measures of dendritic morphologic characteristics (TDL, number of branch segments, and maximum branch order) appeared to be altered in area 17 of the psychiatric sub-

The table below summarizes the psychiatric subjects included in the study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject No./Sex/Age, y</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>PMI, h</th>
<th>Duration of Illness, y</th>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>453/M/37</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Suicide by gunshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>475/M/17</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Suicide by gunshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>505/M/57</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Suicide by gunshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>513/M/24</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression with psychotic features&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Suicide by hanging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>532/M/76</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Mood disorder due to general medical condition with psychotic features&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>Suicide by jumping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>560/M/46</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Alcohol-induced psychotic disorder&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>GI bleeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>564/F/56</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression with psychotic features</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Suicide by hanging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>565/F/62</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Suicide by gunshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>580/F/58</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression with psychotic features&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>ASCVD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>613/M/59</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression with psychotic features&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Suicide by gunshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>631/M/45</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression with psychotic features&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Suicide by thioridazine overdose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>632/F/77</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Delusional disorder&lt;sup&gt;i&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>ASCVD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>637/M/34</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Alcohol-induced mood disorder with psychotic features&lt;sup&gt;j,k&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Suicide by chlorpromazine overdose</td>
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<td>642/F/40</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Bipolar disorder&lt;sup&gt;k&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Acute alcohol intoxication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>693/F/42</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Major depression with psychotic features&lt;sup&gt;j&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Suicide by propoxyphene hydrochloride overdose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the Golgi impregnation procedure is opaque, some spines are hidden behind the dendritic shaft and are not counted. Consequently, the spine densities reported in this study are relative and not absolute. However, previous studies have demonstrated that relative spine counts accurately reflect absolute numbers if comparisons are made between dendrites with similar shaft diameters, and, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, mean dendritic diameter did not differ across our subject groups. Third, the schizophrenic and psychiatric subjects available for this study were somewhat diagnostically heterogeneous. However, the mean (±SD) spine density in DLPFC deep layer 3 of the subjects with “pure” schizophrenia (0.25 ± 0.06; n = 10) was 23% lower than that of the normal controls (0.32 ± 0.07; n = 14) and of the psychiatric subjects with major depression (0.33 ± 0.04; n = 10).

All of the schizophrenic subjects in this study had a history of treatment with antipsychotic agents. Studies addressing the effect of haloperidol on spine density in the rat prefrontal cortex have been inconclusive, with spine density reported to be decreased following high-dose, short-term treatment but unchanged following long-term treatment at levels more consistent with clinical practice. However, 3 lines of evidence suggest that antipsychotic medications do not account for the decreased dendritic spine density observed in the present study. First, the decrease in spine density exhibited regional and laminar specificity, an effect that is not readily explained by systemically administered agents. Second, the 4 schizophrenic subjects (subjects 410, 450, 537, and 622) who were not taking medications (for an average of 5.4 months) at the time of death actually had a lower spine density (0.24 ± 0.08) in deep layer 3 of area 46 than did the 11 subjects who were taking medications (0.26 ± 0.06). Finally, the 9 psychiatric subjects who had been treated with antipsychotic medications did not differ in spine density from normal controls. However, the lifetime exposure to antipsychotic medications is likely to have been lower in these psychiatric subjects than in the schizophrenic subjects.

Although decreased spine density represents a morphologic abnormality in the DLPFC of schizophrenic subjects, dendritic spines are relatively plastic structures. For example, spine number has been reported to change rapidly in certain brain regions of experimental animals under various conditions. Although we cannot completely exclude the influence of such factors, their impact may have been minimized by the study design. For ex-
Table 3. Dendritic Parameters From Layer 3 Pyramidal Neurons in the DLPFC (Area 46)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dendritic Parameter</th>
<th>Control Subjects (n = 15)</th>
<th>Schizophrenic Subjects (n = 14)</th>
<th>Psychiatric Subjects (n = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spine density, spines/µm</td>
<td>0.34 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.29 ± 0.10</td>
<td>0.33 ± 0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somal area, µm²</td>
<td>352.2 ± 143.5</td>
<td>312.1 ± 127.7</td>
<td>300.4 ± 111.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total dendritic length, µm</td>
<td>656.1 ± 308.9</td>
<td>566.8 ± 342.7</td>
<td>547.9 ± 308.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dendritic diameter, µm</td>
<td>0.44 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.44 ± 0.1</td>
<td>0.42 ± 0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of branch segments</td>
<td>10.8 ± 4.2</td>
<td>10.4 ± 4.8</td>
<td>10.6 ± 4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum branch order</td>
<td>4.4 ± 1.0</td>
<td>4.3 ± 1.1</td>
<td>4.3 ± 1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of natural ends</td>
<td>3.3 ± 1.9</td>
<td>3.3 ± 2.0</td>
<td>3.1 ± 1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of artificial ends</td>
<td>2.6 ± 1.9</td>
<td>2.4 ± 1.7</td>
<td>2.7 ± 2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data are given as the mean ± SD. n = 15 for all subjects. DLPFC indicates dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.

†Group differences are significant in deep layer 3 only (F2,37 = 4.17, P = .02). Within this row, values not sharing the same superscript letter are significantly different (P < .05) by pairwise post hoc analyses.

‡Group differences are significant in superficial layer 3 only (F2,37 = 3.84, P = .03). Within this row, values not sharing the same superscript letter are significantly different (P < .05) by pairwise post hoc analyses.

§Group differences are significant in deep layer 3 only (F2,34 = 6.01, P = .006). Within this row, values not sharing the same superscript letter are significantly different (P < .05) by pairwise post hoc analyses.

Table 4. Dendritic Parameters From Layer 3 Pyramidal Neurons in the Primary Visual Cortex (Area 17)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dendritic Parameter</th>
<th>Control Subjects (n = 15)</th>
<th>Schizophrenic Subjects (n = 14)</th>
<th>Psychiatric Subjects (n = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spine density, spines/µm</td>
<td>0.29 ± 0.08</td>
<td>0.25 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.26 ± 0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somal area, µm²</td>
<td>190.9 ± 76.9</td>
<td>181.5 ± 70.0</td>
<td>174.2 ± 65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total dendritic length, µm</td>
<td>449.3 ± 227.9</td>
<td>464.5 ± 325.0</td>
<td>351.6 ± 178.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dendritic diameter, µm</td>
<td>0.41 ± 0.11</td>
<td>0.43 ± 0.10</td>
<td>0.40 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of branch segments</td>
<td>9.3 ± 3.8</td>
<td>9.1 ± 4.0</td>
<td>8.2 ± 3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum branch order</td>
<td>4.1 ± 1.0</td>
<td>4.0 ± 1.1</td>
<td>3.8 ± 0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of natural ends</td>
<td>3.1 ± 1.7</td>
<td>3.0 ± 1.9</td>
<td>2.7 ± 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of artificial ends</td>
<td>2.0 ± 1.6</td>
<td>2.1 ± 1.9</td>
<td>1.9 ± 1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data are given as the mean ± SD. †Group differences are significant (F2,37 = 4.1, P = .03). Within this row, values not sharing the same superscript letter are significantly different (P < .05) by pairwise post hoc analyses.

§Group differences are significant (F2,37 = 4.41, P = .02). Within this row, values not sharing the same superscript letter are significantly different (P < .05) by pairwise post hoc analyses.

Figure 3. Scatterplots illustrating mean spine densities for 15 pyramidal neurons per subject in the superficial (A) and deep (B) portions of layer 3 in dorsolateral prefrontal cortex area 46, and in area 17, primary visual cortex (C). Horizontal lines indicate group means; C, control subjects; S, schizophrenic subjects; and P, psychiatric subjects.

Because the presynaptic and postsynaptic elements of axospinous synapses change in parallel,35,54,58-60 the decreased spine density in schizophrenic subjects is likely to reflect a diminished number of excitatory synaptic inputs to DLPFC layer 3 pyramidal neurons. This interpretation is consistent with previous reports10,11,23-25 of decreased synaptophysin protein and neuropil measures in the DLPFC of schizophrenic subjects. Interestingly, dendritic spine density on layer 3 pyramidal neurons undergoes a substantial decline during adolescence in primates.12 In addition, the density of asymmetric (presumably excitatory) synapses changes in a similar manner in the monkey and human DLPFC.33,34 These late developmental refinements in the excitatory circuitry of the DLPFC coincide with the age when the clinical manifestations of schizophrenia frequently first appear, suggesting that they may contribute to the pathophysiological characteristics of this disorder.9 However, we cannot
determine from the present study whether the presynaptic terminals to DLPFC layer 3 pyramidal neurons never developed, were extensively pruned during adolescence, or were resorbed later in life.

The functional significance of a decrease in excitatory inputs depends on which population(s) of axon terminals is affected. Several lines of evidence suggest that the affected inputs may be from the mediodorsal thalamic nucleus. First, this nucleus has been reported to have fewer neurons in schizophrenic subjects. Second, spine density was preferentially decreased on pyramidal neurons in deep layer 3 of the DLPFC. The basilar dendrites of these neurons typically extend through deep layer 3 and layer 4, the termination zone of afferents from the mediodorsal thalamic nucleus, and dendritic spines appear to be the principal synaptic targets of thalamic projections. Finally, decreased expression of the messenger RNA for GAD67, the synthesizing enzyme for γ-aminobutyric acid, in the DLPFC of schizophrenic subjects has been suggested to represent a compensatory response to diminished excitatory thalamic drive, since decreased activity in thalamic inputs to sensory cortices produces a downregulation of GAD67 expression.

However, the observations of this study may not be fully explained by a reduction in thalamic inputs to the DLPFC. For example, thalamocortical afferents appear to compose a small proportion (<10%) of the total excitatory inputs to the targeted cortical neurons in the cat visual cortex. If these findings can be extrapolated to the human DLPFC, then even a complete loss of thalamocortical afferents would not be sufficient to account for the observed 16% to 23% decrease in basilar dendritic spine density on deep layer 3 pyramidal cells in the schizophrenic subjects. Two other major sources of excitatory inputs to deep and superficial layer 3 DLPFC pyramidal neurons are intrinsic axon collaterals from other pyramidal neurons, and associational or callosal projections from other cortical regions. Thus, given the trend for spine density to also be decreased on superficial layer 3 pyramidal cells, it may be that abnormalities in thalamocortical afferents to deep layer 3 have an additive effect to a disturbance in cortical axon terminals that are distributed across layer 3. However, our findings do not reveal the direction of the pathophysiological changes. For example, it is possible that the inputs to DLPFC layer 3 pyramidal cells are reduced not because of a primary disorder in the source of the inputs but because an abnormality intrinsic to these pyramidal cells renders them unable to support a normal complement of excitatory inputs.

In summary, our findings provide evidence for a decrease in excitatory inputs to DLPFC layer 3 pyramidal cells that may be most marked for pyramidal cells located in the thalamic recipient zone. Given the role of thalamic excitatory inputs in the mediation of working memory, these findings may contribute to the pathophysiological basis for the disturbance of these cognitive abilities in subjects with schizophrenia.

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Reprints: David A. Lewis, MD, University of Pittsburgh, 3811 O’Hara St, W1650 Biomedical Science Tower, Pittsburgh, PA 15231 (e-mail: lewiswa@umss.upmc.edu).

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