Classification of Neurons in the Adult Mouse Cochlear Nucleus: Linear Discriminant Analysis

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Abstract

The cochlear nucleus (CN) transforms the spike trains of spiral ganglion cells into a new set of

sensory representations that are essential for auditory discriminations and perception. These

transformations require the coordinated activity of different classes of neurons that are

embryologically derived from distinct sets of precursors. Decades of investigation have shown

that the neurons of the CN are differentiated by their ion channel expression and intrinsic

excitability. In the present study we have used linear discriminant analysis (LDA) to perform an

unbiased analysis of measures of the responses of CN neurons to current injections to

mathematically separate cells on the basis of both morphology and physiology. Recordings

were made from cells in brain slices from CBA mice and a transgenic mouse line, NF107,

crossed against the Ai32 line. For each cell, responses to current injections were analyzed for

spike rate, spike shape (action potential height, afterhyperpolarization depth, first spike half-

width), input resistance, resting membrane potential, membrane time constant,

hyperpolarization-activated sag and time constant. Cells were filled with dye for morphological

classification, and visually classified according to published accounts. The different

morphological classes of cells were separated with the LDA. Ventral cochlear nucleus (VCN)

bushy cells, planar multipolar (T-stellate) cells, and radiate multipolar (D-stellate) cells were in

separate clusters, and were also separated from all of the neurons from the dorsal cochlear

nucleus (DCN). Within the DCN, the pyramidal cells and tuberculoventral cells were largely

separated from a distinct clusters of cartwheel cells. DCN cells fell largely within a plane in the

first 3 principal axes, whereas VCN cells were in 3 clouds approximately orthogonal to this

plane. VCN neurons from the two mouse strains were slightly separated, indicating either a

strain dependence or the differences in slice preparation methods. We conclude that cochlear

nucleus neurons can be objectively distinguished based on their intrinsic electrical properties,

but that such distinctions are still best aided by morphological identification.

Introduction

Neurons of the mammalian cochlear nucleus exhibit a variety of responses to intracellular current injection, reflecting the distinct expression of collections of ion channels amongst different classes. However, even within a class, such as bushy cells, individual cells may express specific conductances at different magnitudes (Rothman and Manis 2003b, a; Cao and Oertel 2011), leading to diversity in excitability features such as action potential threshold, action potential height, and rheobase. In spite of this variability, cells of a given morphological class appear to possess common properties that have been used to identify cells on the basis of their electrical signatures alone (Oertel 1983; Wu and Oertel 1984; Oertel et al. 1990; Zhang and Oertel 1993a, b, 1994; Manis et al. 1994; Kuo et al. 2012; Xie and Manis 2017).

Quantitative methods for identifying cell classes have been explored in the context of the myriad interneuronal populations in cortex (Druckmann et al. 2013), within the olfactory bulb (Tavakoli et al. 2018) and across neuronal populations throughout the brain (Tripathy et al. 2015). These methods rely on systematic measurement of distinct features of intrinsic excitability such as action potential shape, firing rates, passive membrane measures, and responses to hyperpolarization, and have used principal components analysis (PCA), support vector machine model, or stepwise linear regressions. Within the cochlear nucleus, application of an hierarchical clustering analysis to *in vivo* single unit data provided evidence for partial separation of unit response types in the gerbil AVCN (Typlt et al. 2012), although further analysis (using PCA) suggested that there was extensive overlap between cell classes.

Here we apply linear discriminant analysis (Rao 1948) to the problem of separating cell

classes in the cochlear nucleus based on intrinsic excitability. Whereas PCA separates

classes by finding the axes that maximize the variance within a data set, and does not

rely on labels, LDA maximizes the separation between classes, utilizing label (e.g.,

class) information. We find that LDA is an effective tool for segregating the cell classes

based on their excitability, while also suggesting that there is either overlap between the

properties of some of the classes, or that they may not be entirely morphologically

distinguishable. Such a classification tool should be useful in future studies of the

excitability of cochlear nucleus neurons following hearing loss as a way of objectively

assessing how the excitability of neurons changes.

Methods

Whole cell tight-seal recordings were made in brain slices from adult CBA (P28-69) and

NF107::Ai32 (P31-166) mice. The NF107::Ai32 mice are the F1 cross of the NF107

mouse line, originally from the GENSAT Consosrtium (Gong et al. 2003), and the

channel rhodopsin (ChR2) expressing line Ai32 (Madisen et al. 2012), and so are on a

mixed C57Bl/6J and FVB background. The ChR2 was not activated during these

experiments. CBA mice were of either sex, whereas the NF107::AI32 mice were only

males, as the Cre driver is carried on the Y chromosome.The data from the CBA mice

were taken from a previous series of studies (Xie and Manis 2013, 2017). Data from the

NF107::Ai32 mice were taken from unpublished work (Kasten, Ropp and Manis, in

preparation). The CBA slices were prepared following anesthesia (100 mg/kg ketamine

and 10 mg/kg xylazine), and decapitation, with slicing in warm ACSF. The NF107::Ai32

slices were prepared using the same anesthesia followed by transcardial perfusion with

an NMDG-based solution (Ting et al. 2014). Electrodes contained 126 K-gluconate, 6

KCl, 2 NaCl, 10 HEPES, 0.2 EGTA, 4 Mg-ATP, 0.3 Tris-GTP, and 10 Tris-

phosphocreatine, with pH adjusted to 7.2 with KOH and recordings were made with a

MultiClamp 700B (Molecular Devices) amplifier, low-pass filtered at 6kHz, and digitized

at 10-20 kHz with 16-bit A-D converters (National Instruments). Stimulus presentation

and acquisition were controlled by either a custom Matlab® program or by acq4

(Campagnola et al. 2014). All animal procedures were approved by the University of

North Carolina Institutuional and Animal Care Committee (protocols 12-253, 15-253 and

18-160).

For each cell, responses to current injections (100-500 msec duration, ranging from -1

to 4 nA) were analyzed. Data from either acquisition program were converted to a

common format for analysis by Python (V3.6) scripts. Passive measures included input

resistance (from the slope of the current-voltage relationship just below rest), resting

membrane potential, membrane time constant (measured from responses to small

hyperpolarizing current steps that produced 2-10 mV voltage deflections), the

magnitude of the hyperpolarization sag (Fujino and Oertel 2001) and the time constant

for the sag measured near -80 mV. Active measures included action potential height

(measured from rest to action potential peak), first spike half-width (measured at half the

action potential height from rest), afterhyperpolarization depth (measured from rest to

the first afterhyperpolarization), an adaptation index measured near firing threshold (see

below), the number of rebound spikes after hyperpolarizing steps, the coefficient of

variation of interspike intervals, and the slope of the firing rate versus current curve for

the first 3 current levels above threshold. Cells were filled with dyes (AlexaFluor 488 for

CBA mice; tetramethylrhodamine biocytin for the NF107:Ai32 mice) for morphological

classification, and visually classified according to published accounts, based on digital

images and image stacks collected at low (4X) and high (40-63X) power either during or

immediately after each cell was recorded.

Adaptation was measured for the lowest two levels of current that elicited spikes as:

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$$\frac{-2}{N} \sum_{i=0}^{i=N} \left(\frac{t_i}{t_d} - 0.5 \right)$$

Where t_i is the time of the ith spike in the trace, t_d is the trace duration, and N is the

number of spikes. This measure ranges from -1 to 1. Neurons that fire regularly without

adaptation throughout the trace will have an index of 0. Neurons that fire preferentially

only at the onset of the trace will have an index of 1, whereas those that fire near the

end of the trace will have an index of -1. Thus, bushy cells will have an index of 1,

stellate cells and tuberculoventral cells will usually have an index near 0, and pyramidal

cells may have a negative index, depending on the delay to the first spike. Note that this

measure depends on the current level that is used relative to the spike threshold, as

well as the current duration. The adaptation measured at the threshold current was

found to be uninformative in preliminary analyses, and so the only adaptation computed

from the next higher current that evoked spikes was used.

All absolute voltage measurements are corrected for a -11 mV junction potential for the

K-gluconate electrodes. All other voltage measurements are differential (action potential

height from peak to the minimum of the following AHP) and are independent of the

junction potential.

Computed measures were then analyzed using LDA and PCA using standard libraries

in Python (scikit-learn v0.20, Python 3.6), and in R (3.5, using the packages DisplayR

and flipMultivariates).

Results

The discharge patterns of cochlear nucleus neurons have been reported in a series of

studies over the years from multiple laboratories using similar, but not identical

recording conditions. Figure 1 shows the intrinsic physiology of example cells from six

major morphological classes as recorded in our dataset. Briefly, bushy cells (Figure 1A)

fire 1-3 action potentials at the onset of depolarizing current injections, and are silent

thereafter (Oertel 1983; Wu and Oertel 1984). At higher current levels, oscillatory

membrane responses, which may represent axonally initiated action potentials, are

sometimes visible. In response to hyperpolarizing pulses, bushy cells can show a slow

sag in membrane potential, and following the hyperpolarizing step can generate an

anodal break spike. The planar multipolar cells (Figure 1B) fire regularly in response to

depolarizing current injections, and also show a slow sag in response to hyperpolarizing

current steps; they can also show anodal break spikes (Fujino and Oertel 2001; Xie and

Manis 2017). Radiate multipolar cells also fire regularly in response to depolarization,

sometimes exhibiting an adapting spike train. They show a rapid sag in response to

hyperpolarization, and frequently have anodal break spikes. As noted previously (Xie

and Manis 2017), radiate multipolar cells also may fire only at the onset of a weak

depolarizing current pulse. Pyramidal (fusiform) cells of the dorsal cochlear nucleus fire

regularly (Hirsch and Oertel 1988; Manis 1990; Zhang and Oertel 1994), and may have

a long delay to the first spike or a long first interspike interval (Manis 1990; Kanold and

Manis 1999; Street and Manis 2007). In the adult mice studies here, these cells do not

show a prominent sag, but do show a rapidly activating rectification in response to

hyperpolarizing steps, which is likely generated by Kir channels (Leao et al. 2012).

Cartwheel cells show mixed single-spiking regular firing and burst firing (Zhang and

Oertel 1993a; Manis et al. 1994). The tuberculoventral neurons show regular firing, and

often have trains of rebound spikes after hyperpolarization (Zhang and Oertel 1993c;

Kuo et al. 2012). The principal cell database included 18 bushy cells, 32 planar

multipolar cells, 32 radiate multipolar cells, 38 pyramidal cells, 12 cartwheel cells, and

31 tuberculoventral cells. Additional cell classes (all from the DCN) had too few cells for

effective classification. These included 1 "Type-B" cell (Lorente de No 1981), 1 chestnut

cell (Weedman et al. 1996), 7 giant cells, 2 "horizontal bipolar" cells (small neurons in

the pyramidal cell layer of the DCN with a bipolar morphology where the moderately

spiny dendrites reside mainly within the pyramidal cell layer), 2 molecular layer stellate

cells (Apostolides and Trussell 2014), 3 unipolar brush cells (Weedman et al. 1996;

Mugnaini et al. 2011), and 3 cells that could not clearly be identified on comparison with

the literature. These were not included in the analyses.

In order to classify the principal cell types, we extracted a set of measurements from the

current-voltage and spiking responses (N = 163 cells). These are illustrated in Figures 2

and 3. Figure 2 summarize the passive properties of the cells (columns) against the cell

types (rows). From this, differences in the resting membrane potential, input resistances

and time constants can be appreciated between the groups. In addition, measurements

of the time constant of the hyperpolarizing sag, and a previously-used measure (Fujino

and Oertel 2001), the B/A sag ratio, also show clear differences between the cells, with

neurons from the DCN generally showing weaker I_h.

Figure 3 shows measures of action potential shape and firing properties. Again,

population-based distinctions are evident, such as the relatively small and wide action

potentials of bushy cells, and the tendency of tuberculoventral and some cartwheel cells

to show rebound responses, and the wide coefficient of variation of firing of the

cartwheel cells. The firing rate slope measured near threshold also was lowest for

bushy, pyramidal and cartwheel cells, and highest for the planar and radiate multipolar

cells, and tuberculoventral cells.

Next, we submitted the data to a LDA, using all of the parameters measured in Figures

2 and 3. Data were first standardized for each measure before being submitted to the

LDA. The standardization rescaled the individual measurements for each measurement

type so that it had a zero mean and a unit standard deviation. Figure 4 illustrates the

first 3 components of the LDA, with each cell colored by its classified type, in 3 views

(Figure 4A, B, C). The LDA effectively separated the different types of cells into distinct

spaces. The bushy and cartwheel cells were the most separated from the remainder of

the regular firing cells. Interestingly these two cell groups did not form tight clusters,

suggesting some diversity in their properties. The pyramidal and tuberculoventral cells

were clustered next to each other, although with minimal overlap. The radiate and

planar multipolar cells formed two slightly overlapping clusters that were largely

separate from all other cell classes. Note that although most of the bushy, planar and

radiate multipolar cells were recorded in CBA mice, those cells recorded from the

NF107::Ai32 mice (FVB and C57Bl/6 backgrounds; solid symbols) were close to the

measures of the CBA populations, although they were slightly separated in one of the

first 3 axes, as more clearly seen in Figure 4D, where only cells from the VCN are

shown. Cross-validation of the LDA yielded an estimated accuracy of 0.75 (+/- 0.24).

We also submitted the data set to a standard principal components analysis, following

the same standardization across cells for each measure (Figure 5). In this case, the

supervisory classifier (cell morphology) was not used in the initial classification. The

PCA resulted in clusters of cells from the same morphological class, but these had

greater overlap than with the LDA. Cross-validation of the PCA data yielded a low

accuracy of 0.17 (+/- 0.079).

In order to determine which measures provided the most information in the LDA

classification, we performed the LDA using combinations of measures, from individual

measures through all available measures, and estimated the accuracy of the

classification across all cells by dividing the data into training and testing sets. The

accuracy as a function of the number of combined measures is shown in Figure 6. As

expected, the accuracy improves as new measures are added, up until about 6

parameters, at which point the accuracy plateaus. However, the overall *worst* accuracy

continues to improve as more measures are added. The black line indicates the mean

of the best 5 combinations of measures. From this we conclude that some of the

measures are possibly redundant and that some measures may be non-informative.

With 7 or 8 combined measures (where the largest number of combinations was

tested), AP height, R_{in}, RMP, τ_h and I_{rate} occurred together in each of the 5 most

accurate runs. Similar, but not identical distributions were present for 8 combined

measures. Note that the accuracy of each point includes a standard deviation estimate

(not shown) as it is the result of multiple runs with different subsamples of training and

test cells, so the best measures can vary with an arbitrary threshold, and there is no

single "optimal" set. With the number of cells in the sample and the large number of

parameters, the SD can be 15-20% of the mean value.

To further investigate those factors that drove the prediction accuracy, we performed

the same analysis using the R package flipMultivariates. Table 1 summarizes the

prediction accuracy by cell type, and provides mean measures for each of the

parameters. Although all parameters provide a significant contribution (r^2) to the

separation, the five that accounted for the largest proportions of the variance ($r^2 > 0.50$)

were the AP height, AP half width, the adaptation measure, the coefficient of variation of

interspike intervals, and the firing rate slope (Irate). However, all of the measures

showed a significant contribution.

Figure 7 plots the overall prediction accuracy against the observed classifiers. Although

the overall accuracy was fairly high (87.1%), there were several confounds. The most

common of these was radiate vs. planar multipolar, which occurred in about 25% of the

cells in these groups. The next most common confound was misclassifying planar

multipolar and tuberculoventral cells as pyramidal cells, followed by pyramidal cells

being misclassified as tuberculoventral and planar multipolar cells. As these cells all fire

regularly, and have similar measures on other properties, this is not surprising.

Discussion

We find that cells thoughout the cochlear nucleus can be classified by firing patterns,

action potential shapes, and responses to hyperpolarizing steps, as well as their

morphology. Although not surprising given the long history of the identification of various

electrophysiological features as identifying characteristics of different morphological cell

classes, the extension of these comparisons across classes that fire regularly, and the

consistency of these measures in a population of cells taken from adult mice extends

the previous observations made in younger mice. In addition, these results suggest that

cells can be reasonably classified, at least coarsely, according to their

electrophysiological signatures.

We found that the linear discriminant analysis can be used to classify cells based on 12

measured electrophysiological parameters with ~80% success, although there was little

improvement when using more than 7 parameters. This requires that the LDA

coefficients be estimated from a standardized (training) set of cells before application to

an unidentified population. The selection of the training cell, and the quality of that data

set, is critical to the success of the technique. Cell morphology should be positively

identified, and ambiguous cases discarded, although it is essential to include a full

range of cell properties in each class. The measurements should be complete and

precise for each cell. Our data set has three limitations in part because it was collected

as part of a different experiments. The first is that due to different levels of

hyperpolarizing current injection, the voltages reached with hyperpolarizing pulses were

not consistent across cells, so that the estimates of the magnitude of the

hyperpolarizing sag are influenced by the variability of the voltages reached. The

second is that for depolarizing pulses, not all cells reached saturation of their firing

rates. For this reason, we did not include maximal firing rates as a measure, but rather

focused on the discharge patterns closer to spike threshold. A third limitation is that the

current steps near spike threshold were, in some cells, too coarse to precisely define a

threshold current. These limitations partly reflect the different input resistances of

neurons, as an example, hyperpolarizing pulses strong enough to damage

tuberculoventral cells often fail to hyperpolarize pyramidal cells to -80 mV.

Classification errors principally occurred between cell classes with similar firing patterns,

such as planar and radiate multipolar cells, and between pyramidal and tuberculoventral

cells. In addition, the TV and bushy cells show significant dispersion in the first 3

dimensions of the LDA. This may indicate variability in the intrinsic excitability of these

cell classes as noted before (Francis and Manis 2000; Cao et al. 2007; Kuo et al. 2012),

or possibly the existence of distinct subclasses. This dispersion was also evident in the

unsupervised PCA analysis. Substantially larger datasets of identified cells from

individual strains would be needed to clarify the existence of such subclasses in the

electrophysiology. An improvement in the classification would be expected to result from

the inclusion of additional parameters such as maximal firing rates and the time courses

of synaptic events. In addition, in our data set there was some overlap between the

planar and radiate multipolar cells. This may in part reflect the limitations of

classification for these two similarly firing cell types, but may also indicate the limitations

of our morphological classification method, which was qualitative and relied on

fluorescent images of the cells collected during the experiments. The qualitative

morphological classification of DCN neurons is much easier, so the overlap between the

pyramidal and tuberculoventral cells probably represents the limitations of the

measurement parameters used, although it could also reflect a true confluence of

intrinsic excitability.

Part of the dispersion in the VCN cell classes may reflect strain or preparation

differences, as the cells from CBA mice were slightly offset from those from the

NF107::Ai32 mice along the second LDA component. The strain difference is

reminiscent of the differences in HCN channels seen in bushy, planar multipolar and

octopus cells between ICR and a knockout on a hybrid 129S and C57Bl/6 background

(Cao and Oertel 2011). This raises a cautionary flag that the LDA should be trained on

data acquired from cells recorded from animals of the same genetic background (and

age and preparation techniques) if it is to be used to categorize cells from a novel data

set.

Figure Legends

Figure 1. Examples of discharge patterns for 6 classes of cochlear nucleus neurons (A. Bushy; B. planar multipolar; C. radiate multipolar; D. pyramidal; E. cartwheel; F. tuberculoventral), and passive responses, for different levels of current injection. Red dots indicate spikes evoked by current injection.

Figure 2. Summary of passive measurements from responses to hyperpolarizing current pulses across the population of CN neurons. RMP: resting membrane potential; R_{in}: input resistance; τ_m: membrane time constant; τ_h: time constant of repolarizing sag from traces near -80 mV; B/A: steady-state over peak voltage deflection for hyperpolarizing sag (from Fujino and Oertel, 2001). The ordinate indicates the population density based on the kernel density estimate (blue line). The histograms shows the distribution of values from the population cells for each type and measure.

Figure 3. Summary of action potential shape and firing patterns across the population of CN neurons. AP Peak: action potential peak potential; APHW: action potential half-width; AHP: action potential afterhyperpolarization; Adaptation: adaptation calculated from the response to a suprathreshold current injection; Rebound: count of rebound action potential after the end of the hyperpolarizing current injection; CV: coefficient of variation of interspike intervals; Irate: slope of the current-firing relationship for current levels just above spike threshold. The ordinate indicates the population density based

on the kernel density estimate (blue line). The histograms show the distribution of

values from the population cells for each type and measure.

Figure 4. LDA with supervised clustering by cell morphology. A. The first 3 (largest)

LDA components are shown in a perspective view. The axes represent the projections

of each cell on to the 3 largest components from the standardized data (zero mean, unit

standard deviation; therefore there are no units). Note the clear separation of the bushy

cell and cartwheel cells populations from the rest of the CN neurons. Although the other

populations are close together, they are also separated as can be appreciated by

comparing the different views. Cells from CBA mice are shown with open symbols; cells

from the NF107 mice are shown with closed symbols. B, C. Two other perspective

views (rotated) of the same data as in A. D. A view of the data for the VCN cells only

(bushy, planar multipolar and radiate multipolar) for clarity. This is the same perspective

view as panel C.

Figure 5

Principal components analysis (PCA) on the same data set; the PCA method is not

supervised by cell type, and so the results depend only on factors that maximize the

variance. The PCA successfully separated the cell classes, but did not have good

accuracy. Four views are shown, in the same format as Figure 4.

Figure 6

Accuracy of separation for different number of combined measures, using the LDA

separation score for each set of measures. All 12 measures were considered in all

possible combinations in groups from 1 to 12 (the number of combinations are shown

above the data), and each combination is plotted as a point along the ordinate

representing the number of combinations. The mean score is indicated by the red line.

The average of the best 5 scores for each combination set are plotted as a black line. In

general, including more measures improves the accuracy of the separation of groups.

Figure 7

Prediction accuracy table (confusion matrix) by cell type. The most frequent mis-

classifications occurred amongst cells with similar general firing patterns, such as planar

and radiate multipolar cells, and pyramidal and tuberculoventral cells. This table was

generated in R using data from all 12 measures. The numbers in each box indicate the

proportion of correct classifications for each cell type.

Table 1

Measure	Bushy	Cartwheel	Radiate Multipolar	Pyramidal	Planar multipolar	Tuberculo-ventral	R^2	p
RMP (mV)	**-62.5**	**-75.2**	**-63.1**	**-68.5**	**-62.9**	**-67.9**	0.41	**<0.001**
τ_m (ms)	**1.29**	5.25	**2.83**	**8.0**	4.9	**12.7**	0.41	**<0.001**
R_{in} (MΩ)	**27.5**	79.6	**60.1**	68.8	87.9	**155.6**	0.39	**<0.001**
τ_h (ms)	**27.5**	56.9	**12.1**	51.0	39.4	**74.4**	0.32	**<0.001**
B/A	0.50	**0.95**	**0.39**	0.59	0.63	**0.71**	0.28	**<0.001**
AP Height (mV)	**-27.6**	2.9	**5.9**	**2.2**	**6.0**	**-6.9**	0.62	**<0.001**
AP Width (ms)	**1.32**	**0.83**	**0.28**	**0.40**	**0.27**	**0.35**	0.73	**<0.001**
AP AHP (mV)	**-57.6**	**-53.8**	**-68.3**	-64.6	**-68.9**	-62.1	0.31	**<0.001**
AP Adaptation	**0.96**	0.22	0.21	**0.10**	**0.05**	**0.13**	0.62	**<0.001**
AP Rebound (N)	0.33	1.37	1.17	1.37	1.63	**11.41**	0.25	**<0.001**
CV	N/A	**0.71**	**0.07**	0.10	**0.05**	0.14	0.65	**<0.001**
I_{rate} (spikes/nA)	**5.8**	768	1158	4.12	1248	1148	0.52	**<0.001**
Correct Predictions (%)	94.4	83.3	81.3	92.1	81.3	90.3		

416 Relations between the predictors and each cell class, indicating the number of correct predictions overall, and for each class. The top
417 predicting variabiles (largest R^2 values) are highlighted. N = 163 cases used in estimation. Null hypotheses: two-sided; multiple
418 comparisons correction: False Discovery Rate correction applied simultaneously to entire table.

Table Caption

Table 1

Relations between the predictors and each cell class, indicating the number of correct predictions overall, and for each class. The top predicting variabiles (largest R2 values) are highlighted. N = 163 cases used in estimation. Null hypotheses: two-sided; multiple comparisons correction: False Discovery Rate correction applied simultaneously to entire table.

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A bushy

B planar multipolar

C radiate multipolar

D pyramidal

E cartwheel

F tuberculoventral

25 mV
25 ms

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2018.01.26.s0c1

2018.06.11.s0c0

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