Anhedonia and reward-circuit connectivity distinguish nonresponders from responders to dorsomedial prefrontal rTMS in major depression

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To link to this article DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2013.10.026

Publisher: Elsevier

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Anhedonia and Reward-Circuit Connectivity Distinguish Nonresponders from Responders to Dorsomedial Prefrontal Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation in Major Depression


**Background:** Depression is a heterogeneous mental illness. Neurostimulation treatments, by targeting specific nodes within the brain’s emotion-regulation network, may be useful both as therapies and as probes for identifying clinically relevant depression subtypes.

**Methods:** Here, we applied 20 sessions of magnetic resonance imaging-guided repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS) to the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex in 47 unipolar or bipolar patients with a medication-resistant major depressive episode.

**Results:** Treatment response was strongly bimodal, with individual patients showing either minimal or marked improvement. Compared with responders, nonresponders showed markedly higher baseline anhedonia symptomatology (including pessimism, loss of pleasure, and loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities) on item-by-item examination of Beck Depression Inventory-II and Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology ratings. Congruently, on baseline functional magnetic resonance imaging, nonresponders showed significantly lower connectivity through a classical reward pathway comprising ventral tegmental area, striatum, and a region in ventromedial prefrontal cortex. Responders and nonresponders also showed opposite patterns of hemispheric lateralization in the connectivity of dorsomedial and dorsolateral regions to this same ventromedial region.

**Conclusions:** The results suggest distinct depression subtypes, one with preserved hedonic function and responsive to dorsomedial rTMS and another with disrupted hedonic function, abnormally lateralized connectivity through ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and unresponsive to dorsomedial rTMS. Future research directly comparing the effects of rTMS at different targets, guided by neuroimaging and clinical presentation, may clarify whether hedonia/reward circuit integrity is a reliable marker for optimizing rTMS target selection.

**Key Words:** Anhedonia, betweenness, depression, dorsomedial, fMRI, graph theory, prefrontal, rTMS, stimulation, subtype

Major depression is heterogeneous in its course, symptomatology, and responsiveness to treatment. A variety of clinical features or biomarkers have been proposed to reliably parse this heterogeneity into subtypes useful for prognosis or treatment selection. Examples include Leonhard’s (1) original distinction between unipolar and bipolar illness, as well as later proposed distinctions between melancholic and atypical depression (2), responsiveness to the dexamethasone suppression test (3), and the presence of agitation or mixed features (4). However, the utility of most such clinical features in guiding treatment selection remains controversial.

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Received Mar 5, 2013; revised Oct 9, 2013; accepted Oct 23, 2013.
In depression, the conventional rTMS target is the DLPFC (18,19). However, convergent evidence from lesion, stimulation, and neuroimaging studies (20) suggests that the DMPFC may also play a central role in depression. Dorosmedial prefrontal cortex lesions confer a strong risk of depressive symptoms (21,22). Inadvertent deactivation of DMPFC via DBS can precipitate immediate depressive symptomatology (23). The DMPFC also shows consistent gray matter reduction in volumetric studies of depression (24). Resting-state functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies have characterized the DMPFC as a dorsal nexus region where networks for cognitive control, default-mode rumination, and somatic marker generation converge in depressed patients but not healthy control subjects (16). The DMPFC may therefore present a promising target for excitatory rTMS in depression (20), as suggested by a recent case report (25).

Aside from the dorsal nexus, other regions could potentially contribute to the heterogeneity of depression. The mathematical tools of graph theory, which enables detailed analysis of complex network topology (26), are now being used to identify pathologic patterns of brain activity in Alzheimer dementia, schizophrenia, autism, and mood disorders (27–30). A particular network parameter, known as betweenness centrality (BC), measures the number of shortest paths between all other points A and B that pass through a given node. Nodes with high BC act as chokepoints that can be particularly damaging to network traffic if they are disrupted.

Betweenness centrality maps have been used to identify vulnerable points in energy transmission networks (31), critical proteins in biochemical pathways for therapeutic targeting in neurodegenerative disease (32,33), and abnormal patterns of whole-brain functional connectivity in Alzheimer dementia (34). Betweenness centrality has also recently been applied to resting-state fMRI series to distinguish patients with depression from healthy control subjects (35). However, to our knowledge, this approach has never previously been used to distinguish responders from nonresponders to a given treatment.

In the present study, we first sought to employ DMPFC-rTMS as a probe, as well as a treatment, to test the hypothesis that this intervention would reveal discrete subtypes of patients (as opposed to a unimodal continuum of response) within a heterogeneous sample of patients with treatment-refractory depression. Since virtually no studies of DMPFC-rTMS have been performed to date, we then adopted a more descriptive approach, examining pretreatment clinical and fMRI data to characterize the subtypes in greater detail, both in terms of symptomatology and BC maps of brain activity. Finally, we assessed the congruency of the clinical-symptom outcome predictors with the neural activity outcome predictors.

Methods and Materials

Design Overview

This study investigated the effects of 20 sessions of open-label, add-on bilateral magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)-guided rTMS of the DMPFC in a series of patients meeting DSM-IV criteria for unipolar or bipolar disorder and a current major depressive episode resistant to medication. Following initial clinical assessment, patients underwent MRI and a baseline symptom assessment before motor threshold testing, then began treatment 3 days later. During treatment, patients completed daily self-assessment questionnaires and weekly clinician-rated assessments as described below. Patients achieving response but not remission criteria were offered an additional 10 sessions (2 weeks) of treatment. Patients then underwent clinical assessments at 2, 4, 6, 12, and 26 weeks posttreatment to assess clinical response. Supplement 1 provides a more detailed description of all methods used.

Subjects

Subjects were a series of 47 consecutive patients (20 male patients, 27 female patients, age 42.2 ± 12.7 years), with either unipolar (n = 38) or bipolar (n = 9) illness referred to the University Health Network’s MRI-Guided rTMS Clinic for the treatment of a major depressive episode. All patients had a clinical history of resistance to at least two adequate medication trials (discontinuation of a medication trial due to adverse effects also being included in this count), including at least one trial in the current episode. Baseline symptom severity was a mean 22.7 ± SD 6.8 on the 17-item Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HAMD-17) and 32.6 ± SD 10.6 on the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). Major depressive episode duration was a mean 40.6 months ± SD 55.7. The total number of previous medication trials (including antidepressants and add-on mood stabilizers, antipsychotics, or psychostimulants, discontinued due to either intolerance or inefficacy) ranged from 2 to 25 (mean 6.7 ± SD 4.3). Seven patients had also previously failed to respond to electroconvulsive therapy.

Regarding exclusion criteria, no patients with active substance use or psychotic disorders participated in the study. Patients with potential contraindications to rTMS or MRI, including a history of seizures, implanted devices, foreign metal bodies, cardiac arrhythmia, unstable medical conditions, or pregnancy, were excluded from treatment. All patients had maintained a stable regimen of medications for ≥4 weeks before treatment, with no changes throughout the course of treatment. All patients provided informed consent to treatment, and the study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University Health Network.

rTMS Treatment Parameters

Repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation was delivered using a MagPro R30 rTMS device (MagVenture, Farum, Denmark) via a Cool-DB80 stimulation coil. The coil vertex was placed over the DMPFC under MRI guidance using the Visor 2.0 system (Advanced Neuro Technologies, Enschede, The Netherlands). The details of MRI acquisition, neuronavigation, and motor threshold procedures are described in Supplement 1. Stimulation was delivered at 120% of resting motor threshold, at 10 Hz, with a duty cycle of 5 seconds on and 10 seconds off, for a total of 3000 pulses in 60 trains per hemisphere per session. Preferential stimulation of each hemisphere was accomplished by lateral coil orientation (36,37) (Figure 1A).

Clinical Assessments

In the week before treatment, before motor threshold testing, patients underwent a baseline clinical assessment incorporating the HAMD-17 as the primary outcome measure (38). Patients also completed a battery of self-report BDI-II (39), Beck Anxiety Inventory (40), 16-item self-rated Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology (QIDS) (41), Sheehan Disability Scale (42), Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire (43), and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (44). This set of clinician-rated and self-report assessments was repeated after each five sessions of treatment, with follow-up assessments scheduled 2, 4, 6, 12, and 26 weeks posttreatment. The Clinical Global Impression of severity was also obtained before and after treatment and the Clinical Global Impression-Improvement measure was collected posttreatment.
Results

Clinical Outcomes

Clinical outcomes are summarized in Table 1. On the primary outcome measure, HAMD-17, 24 of 47 patients (51.1%) achieved a ≥50% reduction in symptoms and 20 of 47 patients (42.6%) achieved the remission criterion of HAMD-17 ≤7 posttreatment. On the secondary measure (BDI-II), outcomes were similar, with 23 of 47 patients (48.9%) reporting a ≥50% reduction in symptoms and 21 of 47 patients (44.7%) achieving the remission criterion of BDI-II ≤12 posttreatment. On continuous measures, the group as a whole improved from 22.9 ± SD 7.0 before treatment to 11.8 ± SD 9.3 posttreatment on the HAMD-17 ($p < .001$) and 32.8 ± SD 10.7 to 19.9 ± SD 15.2 on the BDI-II ($p < .001$) (Table 1). Symptomatic improvement proceeded approximately linearly, week by week during treatment (Figure S1 in Supplement 1).

Closer examination of the degree of improvement across individuals, via kernel density estimation, revealed a bimodal response distribution (Figure 2). Specifically, the probability distribution function contained two peaks or subpopulations: one with relatively little response to treatment (peak, 18% improvement) and another subpopulation with a much more robust response (peak, 84% improvement). The local minimum of the probability distribution function between these two groups lay at 48% improvement on HAMD-17, suggesting that the use of a 50% response criterion did indeed provide an appropriate segmentation between two distinct subpopulations and not an arbitrary threshold on a single unimodal distribution of response.

Given the presence of a bimodal distribution of outcomes, additional separate analyses were carried out for responders and nonresponders to quantify the degree and time course of response among each group (Table 1). Among responders, scores improved from 21.4 ± SD 6.7 pretreatment to 4.5 ± SD 3.8 posttreatment on the HAMD-17 and 27.8 ± SD 7.9 to 9.5 ± SD 7.2 on the BDI-II, representing a mean improvement from the moderate to the remitted range of symptom severity (Table 1, Figure 3).

Clinical Predictors of Outcome

To identify features of the clinical presentation that might be predictive of outcome, baseline demographic, patient history, and symptom scale measures were correlated to percentage improvement in HAMD-17 scores from pretreatment to posttreatment.

None of the seven electroconvulsive therapy refractory cases achieved either response or remission on either the HAMD-17 or the BDI-II. There was no significant correlation between percentage improvement in HAMD-17 score and duration of current episode ($r = -.18; p = .12)$, number of previous medication trials ($r = -.02; p = .44$), age ($r = .03; p = .41$), or gender ($r = .11; p = .23$). Nor was there any significant difference in percent HAMD-17 improvement between patients with unipolar or bipolar illness ($t_{45} = .05; p = .96$). Two of 2 patients with bipolar disorder, type I, and 1 of 7 patients with bipolar disorder, type II, met HAMD-17 response criteria.
Table 1. Treatment Outcomes Overall and in Subgroups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretreatment</th>
<th>Posttreatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall (n = 47)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAMD-17</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDI-II</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>10.7</td>
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<td>BAI</td>
<td>21.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>CGI</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Social</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Family</td>
<td>7.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Days Lost</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Days Unproductive</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEMWBS</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLESQ</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>6.4</td>
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Responders (n = 24)

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HAMD-17</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDI-II</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAI</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGI</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>9.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDS-Work</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Social</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Family</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Days Lost</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Days Unproductive</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEMWBS</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLESQ</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
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Nonresponders (n = 23)

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>HAMD-17</td>
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<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDI-II</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAI</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGI</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Work</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Social</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Family</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Days Lost</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDS-Days Unproductive</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEMWBS</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLESQ</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BAI, Beck Anxiety Inventory; BDI-II, Beck Depression Inventory-II; CGI, Clinical Global Impression; HAMD-17, Hamilton Depression Rating Scale, 17 item; QLESQ, Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire; SDS, Sheehan Disability Scale; WEMWBS, Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale.

To identify any specific symptoms that might predict outcome, we then correlated HAMD-17 improvement to each of 115 individual items from the entire set of baseline symptom scales (Table 2; Table S1 in Supplement 1). Following Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons (p < 4.35 × 10⁻⁴), there were three items that emerged as significantly, negatively predictive of HAMD-17 improvement: BDI-II item 2–pessimism (r = −.52; p = 6.47 × 10⁻⁴), BDI-II item 4–loss of pleasure (r = −.49, p = 1.98 × 10⁻⁴), and QIDS item 1–general interest (r = −.47; p = 3.82 × 10⁻⁴). The correlation between percent HAMD-17 improvement and the normalized composite product of these measures was r = −.61 (p = 1.29 × 10⁻⁴) (Figure 3B).

No individual items on HAMD-17, Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire, or Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale significantly predicted outcome. Likewise, at the Bonferroni-adjusted threshold, there was no significant predictive correlation to outcome for overall baseline score on the BDI-II (r = −.42; p = ns), HAMD-17 (r = −.20; p = ns), or QIDS (r = −.45; p = ns) (Table 2; Table S1 in Supplement 1).

Neuroimaging Predictors of Outcome

As a preliminary, first-pass assessment of the physiological relevance of the BC-mapping approach, we identified the set of regions in the upper fifth percentile (two-tailed) of BC difference between responders and nonresponders (Table S2 and Figures S2 and S3 in Supplement 1). This set of regions corresponded well to the network of regions previously implicated in depression and emotional reappraisal (12,14,50,51). Specifically, responders showed significantly higher BC than nonresponders in right amygdala, ventral striatum, temporal pole, and DMPFC, as well as a region in left DLPFC and anterior insula. Nonresponders showed significantly higher BC than responders in left VMPFC, as well as regions in left DLPFC, DMPFC, dorsal ACC, retrosplenial cingulate cortex, and right anterior insula. Thus, the BC approach did appear successful in localizing predictive differences to a set of regions with plausible involvement in emotion regulation (Figure 4B).

We next applied to this map a more stringent threshold, Bonferroni-corrected for multiple comparisons as with the clinical measures, across the 516 regions of interest. At this threshold, only the node in left VMPFC at Montreal Neurological Institute coordinate (x = −4, y 48, z = −15) showed markedly higher BC in nonresponders than in responders to treatment (p = .00001). This result was robust across a range of graph sparsities from .1 to .5, assessed in increments of .02, suggesting a relative lack of contingency on the choice of connectivity threshold (Figure 5 in Supplement 1). Of note, this specific VMPFC region corresponded very closely to the VMPFC region previously identified in neuroimaging meta-analyses as activated for a wide variety of rewarding stimuli in healthy control subjects (52,53) (Figure 4B).

Figure 2. Probability distribution function for percent 17-item Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HAMD-17) improvement from pretreatment to posttreatment across the 47 patients in the series. The degree of response was not unimodal but instead followed a sharply bimodal distribution, with a nonresponder group showing ∼15% to 25% improvement and a responder group showing ∼80% to 90% improvement in symptoms. The local minimum of the probability distribution lay almost exactly at 50% improvement, suggesting that the original patient sample was appropriately partitioned by the conventional 50% improvement criterion into distinct dorsomedial prefrontal cortex-repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation responder and nonresponder subpopulations.

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Finally, to better compare the network connectivity profile of this region in responders and nonresponders, we performed a statistical comparison of the whole-brain resting-state connectivity of this left VMPFC region with the other 515 regions across the two groups (whole-brain false discovery rate-corrected \( p < 0.05 \)) (Table 3, Figure 4C,D). Compared with responders, nonresponders showed significantly lower connectivity to left VMPFC in the ventral tegmental area and left caudate nucleus. They also showed lower significant connectivity to left VMPFC in a left-lateralized set of cortical regions that included the left DMPFC, DLPFC, inferior parietal lobule, and anterior insula. In addition, compared with responders, nonresponders showed higher connectivity to left VMPFC in a corresponding right-lateralized set of cortical regions that included right DMPFC and DLPFC, as well as right frontopolar cortex and posterior cingulate cortex (Table 3, Figure 4C,D).

**Discussion**

To our knowledge, this is the first report on either the effectiveness or predictors of outcome for DMPFC-rTMS in a series of patients with a medication-resistant major depressive episode. The results of the present study suggest that the patients did not respond uniformly to treatment but instead showed a strongly bimodal separation into a responder and a nonresponder group (Figure 2). The implication is that the original sample of patients, though all meeting criteria for a major depressive episode, may have comprised at least two distinct subgroups rather than a uniform and homogeneous population. Of note, a similar bimodal heterogeneity of response has recently been described in meta-analyses of clinical trials for duloxetine (54) and escitalopram (55).

Examination of the pretreatment clinical symptomatology confirmed a set of predictive differences between eventual responders and nonresponders at a high level of significance. The predictive items concurred across two independent scales (BDI-II and QIDS) and could potentially represent pathology of the appetitive and consummatory aspects of reward: pessimism (appetitive), general interest in formerly enjoyed activities (appetitive), and loss of pleasure (consummatory). The former two symptoms, in combination, have been observed elsewhere to be associated in major depression (56).

More strikingly, the neuroimaging results were congruent with the clinical predictors in identifying a single, specific VMPFC

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**Table 2. Clinical Predictors of Outcome**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Correlation to % HAMD-17 Improvement</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BDI-II</td>
<td>Pessimism</td>
<td>—520</td>
<td>6.47 ( \times 10^{-5} )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loss of pleasure</td>
<td>—488</td>
<td>1.98 ( \times 10^{-4} )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QIDS</td>
<td>General interest</td>
<td>—468</td>
<td>3.82 ( \times 10^{-4} )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>QIDS - Total</td>
<td>—448</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HAMD-17 - Total</td>
<td>—204</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>—1.10</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Episode duration</td>
<td>—1.77</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failed medicine trials</td>
<td>—0.22</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unipolar/bipolar</td>
<td>—0.07</td>
<td>ns</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

All significantly predictive items were identified using a threshold \( p < 0.05 \), Bonferroni-corrected for multiple comparisons across the 115 items surveyed in the baseline mood and functional scales (i.e., threshold \( p = 4.35 \times 10^{-4} \)).

HAMD-17, Hamilton Depression Rating Scale, 17 item; BDI-II, Beck Depression Inventory-II; ns, nonsignificant; QIDS, Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology–Self-rated 16-item scale.

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region, previously shown to activate consistently for rewarding stimuli across a wide variety of studies, as predictive of treatment outcome. This region showed higher BC in nonresponders, and thus could potentially be considered as a bottleneck region in depressed patients with anhedonia and nonresponsiveness to dorsomedial stimulation. In nonresponders, this region showed significantly lower connectivity to a circuit of dopaminergic regions, including the ventral tegmental area and left caudate nucleus, suggesting a disruption of the reward pathway, which would be in keeping with the clinical features of this subpopulation.

There was also a striking hemispheric asymmetry in the set of brain regions showing connectivity to the left VMPFC seed in responders versus nonresponders. Nonresponders had significantly higher functional connectivity to left VMPFC from a set of right-lateralized regions, including right DMPFC, DLPFC, frontopolar cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, and middle temporal gyrus. In contrast, they showed significantly lower functional connectivity to left VMPFC from a similar but left-lateralized set of regions including left DMPFC, DLPFC, caudate nucleus, inferior parietal lobule, and occipital cortex. We also note a left-hemispheric lateralization of the VMPFC seed region itself, in contrast to the bilateral reward-related activity seen in studies in healthy control subjects (52,53).

The distinct and opposite lateralized pattern of left VMPFC connectivity in responders versus nonresponders was rather striking and bears further consideration. On one view, a deficit in left hemisphere connectivity to ventral prefrontal regions in nonresponders could be considered consistent with the original rationale for targeting left DLPFC in the first studies of excitatory rTMS for major depression (57,58) to address hypoactivity of left prefrontal regions. This perspective would suggest the possibility of achieving further gains in rTMS efficacy by tailoring the laterality and frequency of rTMS to the individual patient based
positive stimuli. In addition, previous observations of left-hemisphere specialization for control of the parasym pathetic and sympathetic nervous systems, respectively, may also be of relevance in interpreting the lateralized results observed in the present study (61).

The lack of response to treatment among a subgroup of patients in the present study could also potentially reflect the deep anatomical location of the VMPFC region, beyond the reach of the field applied during DMPFC-rTMS. This hypothesis generates three testable predictions: stimulation of the VMPFC region should also be effective in a subgroup of depressed patients; this subgroup should be characterized by prominent anhedonic symptoms before treatment; and these anhedonic symptoms should improve with stimulation.

While rTMS has not yet been applied to the VMPFC in this setting, two independent groups have targeted this pathway in depression using DBS, applied either to the subgenual ACC (62,63) or the nucleus accumbens (64). In both cases, neuroimaging investigations revealed DBS to deactivate precisely the VMPFC region identified in the present study (63,64). With DBS of the nucleus accumbens, hedonic response improved significantly overall, and responders showed long-term improvements in pursuit of positive activities (65). With DBS of the subgenual ACC, higher baseline symptoms of anhedonia predicted better, rather than poorer, treatment response—the opposite pattern from dorsomedial stimulation based on the results of the present study (66).

In the context of previous neuroimaging studies suggesting dorsomedial hypactivity and ventromedial hyperactivity in major depression (12,67), the results of this study and the results of the DBS studies suggest that there may exist at least two distinct patterns of lateralization.
depression subtypes: a dorsal-hypoactive type, responsive to DMPFC-rTMS and characterized by preserved hedonic response, and a ventral-hyperactive type, responsive to DBS of VMPFC reward pathways and characterized by disrupted hedonic response. This hypothesis would be consistent with the lesion and volumetric literature associating vulnerability to depression with injury/gray matter reduction in DMPFC and protective effects against depression with injury/gray matter reduction in VMPFC (22,24).

A significant limitation of the present study involves the use of an open-label design without sham stimulation. Such a design cannot precisely quantify the specific versus the nonspecific effects of treatment suing DMPFC-rTMS. For context, it should be kept in mind that a recent meta-analysis quantified the response and remission rates for sham DLPFC-rTMS at only 10% and ~5%, respectively, with the response and remission rates for active DLPFC-rTMS at 29.3% and 18.6%, respectively (68). Thus, it would be difficult to account for the present study’s observed response and remission rates of 51% and 43%, respectively, as due entirely to sham effects. However, a randomized, sham-controlled trial of DMPFC-rTMS will be an essential follow-up to the present open-label case series in establishing the effectiveness of this stimulation target. A blinded comparison of the efficacy of DMPFC-rTMS and DLPFC-rTMS might also be worth pursuing in the future.

Other significant limitations include the use of a relatively small sample size and the availability of functional neuroimaging in only a subset of patients. This leaves open the possibility that additional significant predictors of outcome might reveal themselves in a larger or a more standardized sample. For example, the considerable heterogeneity of medication classes and doses in this sample precluded any determination of whether medication type or dose might be predictive of outcome, and this remains an open question for more systematic study in the future.

The present study also does not clarify whether hedonic response and reward-circuit integrity are also distinguishing features for responders versus nonresponders to rTMS of the conventional target, DLPFC. Symptoms of apathy have been reported to predict nonresponse to DLPFC-rTMS using a deep stimulation coil, suggesting the possibility of such a relationship (69). The generalizability of the present results to DLPFC-rTMS remains an important question for further study.

In conclusion, the search for clinically meaningful subtypes of major depression is now beginning to profit from recent advances in understanding major depression as a network-level pathology of connectivity among emotion-regulating regions of the brain. Anatomically targeted therapies, such as rTMS and DBS, may be particularly well-suited to individualized treatment based on clinical presentation. Stimulation studies now appear to be consistent with lesions studies in identifying DMPFC and VMPFC as playing central, yet complementary, roles in the pathophysiology of depression. Further studies comparing the effects of stimulation at these two sites, in individual patients, will clarify whether this distinction is robust and clinically meaningful. If so, the long-recognized core depression symptom of anhedonia, and its underlying neural correlates, may prove themselves to be reliable guides for maximizing the likelihood of successful treatment in patients with otherwise intractable illness.

We thank Vanathy Niranjan and Kianoush Donboli for their technical assistance in completing this work. We also thank Sakina Rizvi for valuable input regarding anhedonia symptomatology in responders to DBS and for comments on this manuscript.

Dr. Downar has received research support from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the National Institutes of Health, the Klarman Family Foundation, the Buchan Family Foundation, and the Toronto General and Western Hospital Foundation, as well as a travel stipend from Lundbeck and in-kind equipment support for an investigator-initiated study from Tonika/MagVenture. Dr. Geraci has received salary support from a fellowship from Eli Lilly Canada. Dr. Blumberger has received research support from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation (formerly National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression), the Temerty Family through the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health Research Foundation and the Campbell Research Institute, as well as research funding for an investigator-initiated study fromBrainsway Ltd., and in-kind equipment support for an investigator-initiated study from Tonika/Magventure. Dr. Daskalakis has received external funding through Brainsway Ltd. and a travel allowance through Pfizer and Merck, as well as speaker funding through Sepracor Inc. and AstraZeneca, and has served on the advisory board for Hoffman-La Roche Ltd. Dr. Kennedy has received honoraria from Servier, Eli Lilly, Spinmco, Bristol-Myers Squibb, AstraZeneca, and Lundbeck. He has received research support from AstraZeneca, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Brain Cells Inc., Clera Inc., Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, Lundbeck, and St. Jude Medical Inc. He is on advisory boards for AstraZeneca, Eli Lilly, Pfizer, Servier, and St. Jude Medical Inc. Dr. Flint has received grant support from the National Institute of Mental Health, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and Lundbeck and has received honoraria from Pfizer Canada. Dr. Giacobbe is a consultant for St. Jude Medical and has received personal fees from Eli Lilly Canada, Bristol-Myers Squibb, AstraZeneca, and Pfizer. He has also received research support from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research, the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation (formerly National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression), and the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Salomons, Ms. Dunlop, Dr. Wheeler, Dr. McAndrews, and Mr. Bakker report no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.

Supplementary material cited in this article is available online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2013.10.026.


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