

Identifying the cellular targets of drug action in the central nervous system following corticosteroid therapy

Stuart I. Jenkins,¹ Mark R. Pickard,¹ Melinda Khong,² Heather L. Smith,² Carl L.A. Mann,³ Richard D. Emes,^{2,4} Divya M. Chari^{1*}

¹Institute for Science and Technology in Medicine, School of Medicine, David Weatherall building, Keele University, Staffordshire, ST5 5BG, UK

²School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham, Sutton Bonington Campus, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE12 5RD, UK

³Neurology Department, University Hospital of North Staffordshire NHS Trust, City General, Newcastle Road, Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 6QG, UK

⁴Advanced Data Analysis Centre, University of Nottingham, Sutton Bonington Campus, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE12 5RD, UK

Abstract

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3 Corticosteroid (CS) therapy is used widely in the treatment of a range of pathologies, but can delay
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5 production of myelin, the insulating sheath around central nervous system nerve fibers. The cellular targets
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7 of CS action are not fully understood, *i.e.* 'direct' action on cells involved in myelin genesis
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9 [oligodendrocytes and their progenitors the oligodendrocyte precursor cells (OPCs)] versus 'indirect' action
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11 on other neural cells. We evaluated the effects of the widely used CS dexamethasone (DEX) on purified
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13 OPCs and oligodendrocytes, employing complementary histological and transcriptional analyses.
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15 Histological assessments showed no DEX effects on OPC proliferation or oligodendrocyte
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17 genesis/maturation (key processes underpinning myelin genesis). Immunostaining and RT-PCR analyses
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19 show that both cell types express GR (the target for DEX action), ruling out receptor expression as a causal
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21 factor in the lack of DEX-responsiveness. GRs function as ligand-activated transcription factors, so we
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23 simultaneously analyzed DEX-induced transcriptional responses using microarray analyses; these
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25 substantiated the histological findings, with limited gene expression changes in DEX-treated OPCs and
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27 oligodendrocytes. With identical treatment, microglial cells showed profound and global changes *post*-DEX
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29 addition; an unexpected finding was the identification of the transcription factor *Olig1*, a master regulator of
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31 myelination, as a DEX responsive gene in microglia. Our data indicate that CS-induced myelination delays
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33 are unlikely to be due to direct drug action on OPCs or oligodendrocytes, and may occur secondary to
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35 alterations in other neural cells, such as the immune component. To the best of our knowledge, this is the
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37 first comparative molecular and cellular analysis of CS effects in glial cells, to investigate the targets of this
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39 major class of anti-inflammatory drugs as a basis for myelination deficits.
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50 **Key words:** oligodendrocyte; Olig1; corticosteroid; glucocorticoid receptor; microglia; microarray
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Introduction

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3 Corticosteroid (CS) therapy is currently used widely for the treatment of a range of pathologies, but can
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5 delay myelin genesis during development and repair (remyelination) in major white matter tracts of the
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7 central nervous system (CNS) including the optic nerve and corpus callosum.¹⁻⁷ Notably, high and multiple
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9 CS doses are frequently used during periods of developmental myelination,^{8,9} and to treat conditions
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11 involving myelin injury/repair such as Multiple Sclerosis and spinal cord injury.^{10,11} The cellular
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13 mechanisms underpinning the reported CS induced defects in myelin genesis are largely unknown, but
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15 observations that myelination delays occur without accompanying axon loss^{2,5} indicate that such effects may
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17 be primarily underpinned by glial responses to CS.
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22 Myelination involves a sequential process: initially, proliferative and migratory precursors called
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24 oligodendrocyte precursor cells (OPCs) populate the CNS¹² and receive signals to generate
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26 oligodendrocytes. Astrocytes are important mediators of myelin genesis, by influencing OPC migration,
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28 proliferation and differentiation into oligodendrocytes;¹³ the latter engage in complex, intercellular cross-talk
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30 with axons to generate functional myelin.¹⁴ Oligodendrocytes continue to generate myelin sheaths well into
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32 adulthood (about the fifth decade) in the temporal and parietal lobes, with perturbations to this process being
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34 linked to cognitive decline in Alzheimer's disease.¹⁵ Following myelin injury, remyelination broadly
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36 recapitulates developmental myelination, and critically depends on a timed orchestration of cellular and
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38 molecular events in lesions.¹⁶ Myelin genesis in the normal and diseased CNS is therefore a complex
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40 multifactorial process, and studies aiming to establish the cellular targets of CS action during
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42 myelinogenesis yield contradictory information.¹⁷ Evidence for direct effects on OPCs includes CS
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44 treatment of CG4 cells (an OPC line)¹⁸ and adrenalectomized rats,¹⁹ where OPC proliferation was inhibited.
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46 Further, CS have pro-differentiation effects on myelinogenic cells,^{20,21} but in demyelination models CS can
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48 delay²² *or* enhance²³ remyelination. These confounding responses may relate to the immunomodulatory
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50 effects of CS on microglia; the latter remove myelin debris (inhibitory to myelin genesis) and secrete
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52 stimulatory/inhibitory cytokines that can impact oligodendrocyte development.²⁴ However, CS treatment of
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54 astrocytes can also down-regulate oligodendroglial differentiation factors.²⁵ While neurons engage in cross-
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1 talk with oligodendroglial cells during myelination, one study has reported limited CS effects in striatal
2 neurons, suggesting that at least some neurons are not direct targets of CS action.²⁶
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5 Such observations suggest that CS may impact myelination through *indirect* effects mediated by non-
6 myelinogenic glial cell intermediaries, but rigorous evaluation of *direct* effects of CS on oligodendroglia is
7 lacking. There is heavy reliance in the field on histological observations in cultures, but the constituent cell
8 types are often poorly characterized.^{27,28} In terms of drug action, CS are lipid-soluble, readily entering cells
9 where they bind to appropriate cytosolic ligand-activated receptors, with nuclear translocation of complexes
10 and action on hormone response elements to regulate the associated genes.²⁹ In this context, the critical
11 question of whether oligodendrocyte lineage cells express the glucocorticoid receptor (GR) is also not fully
12 resolved, with two studies yielding contradictory results.^{19,30}
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24 The widespread clinical use of CS in conjunction with the critical roles of myelin in neuroprotection and
25 regulation of electrical conductivity¹⁶ highlight the need to resolve such conflicting information by defining
26 the mechanisms underpinning aberrant myelinogenesis. To address this issue, and specifically, to evaluate if
27 CS exert direct effects on oligodendroglial cells, we have employed a two-pronged methodological approach
28 comprising histological analyses complemented with parallel transcriptional analyses (as CS effects are
29 mediated by transcriptional regulation). We have employed isolated purified cultures, and short time frames
30 for the studies, to evaluate direct cellular actions of CS and the potential primary/early targets of drug action
31 respectively. We consider this approach necessary to provide comprehensive insights into the mechanisms
32 by which CS therapy may impact myelination.
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Results and Discussion

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3 To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to employ a dual methodological approach (that provides
4 independent and corroborative readouts of CS effects at the morphological and molecular levels) in order to
5 investigate the mechanisms by which this major class of anti-inflammatory drugs may impact myelin
6 genesis. The inclusion of independent transcriptional analysis of DEX treated cultures, in conjunction with
7 histological assays, provides an unbiased approach unhindered by prior expectation of CS effects on neural
8 cells. Further, the use of isolated, purified glial cultures in these experiments allows for examination of
9 *direct* actions of CS which cannot be evaluated within the context of the multicellular lesion environment *in*
10 *vivo*.³ High purity OPC, astrocyte and microglial cultures were generated as judged by staining for cell
11 specific markers; values were: $96.4 \pm 0.5\%$ A2B5⁺ ($n = 6$) and $96.9 \pm 1.2\%$ NG2⁺ for OPCs ($n = 3$); $97.8 \pm$
12 0.8% OX42⁺ for microglia ($n = 6$); and $94.4 \pm 1.7\%$ glial fibrillary acidic protein positive (GFAP⁺) for
13 astrocytes ($n = 3$). Highly enriched oligodendrocyte cultures were obtained: $81.2 \pm 5.2\%$ myelin basic
14 protein positive (MBP⁺; $n = 6$), with the majority of the remaining cells showing morphological features of
15 earlier stages of the oligodendrocyte lineage under phase contrast microscopy; microglial cells (<5%) were
16 readily identifiable by their morphologies, and astrocytic morphologies were never observed in these
17 cultures.
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Histological analyses indicate that oligodendrocyte lineage cells are unaffected by CS treatment

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41 In control (untreated and vehicle) and DEX treated cultures, OPCs displayed typical bipolar phenotypes,
42 with similar morphologies of A2B5⁺ and NG2⁺ cells observed between treatment groups (Figure 1a-b). No
43 DEX effects on OPC proliferation/survival were observed in terms of total number of nuclei per microscopic
44 field or percentage of pyknotic nuclei (Figure 1c-d). No differences were found between the groups in terms
45 of numbers or percentages of A2B5⁺ or NG2⁺ cells per microscopic field (Figure 1e-h).
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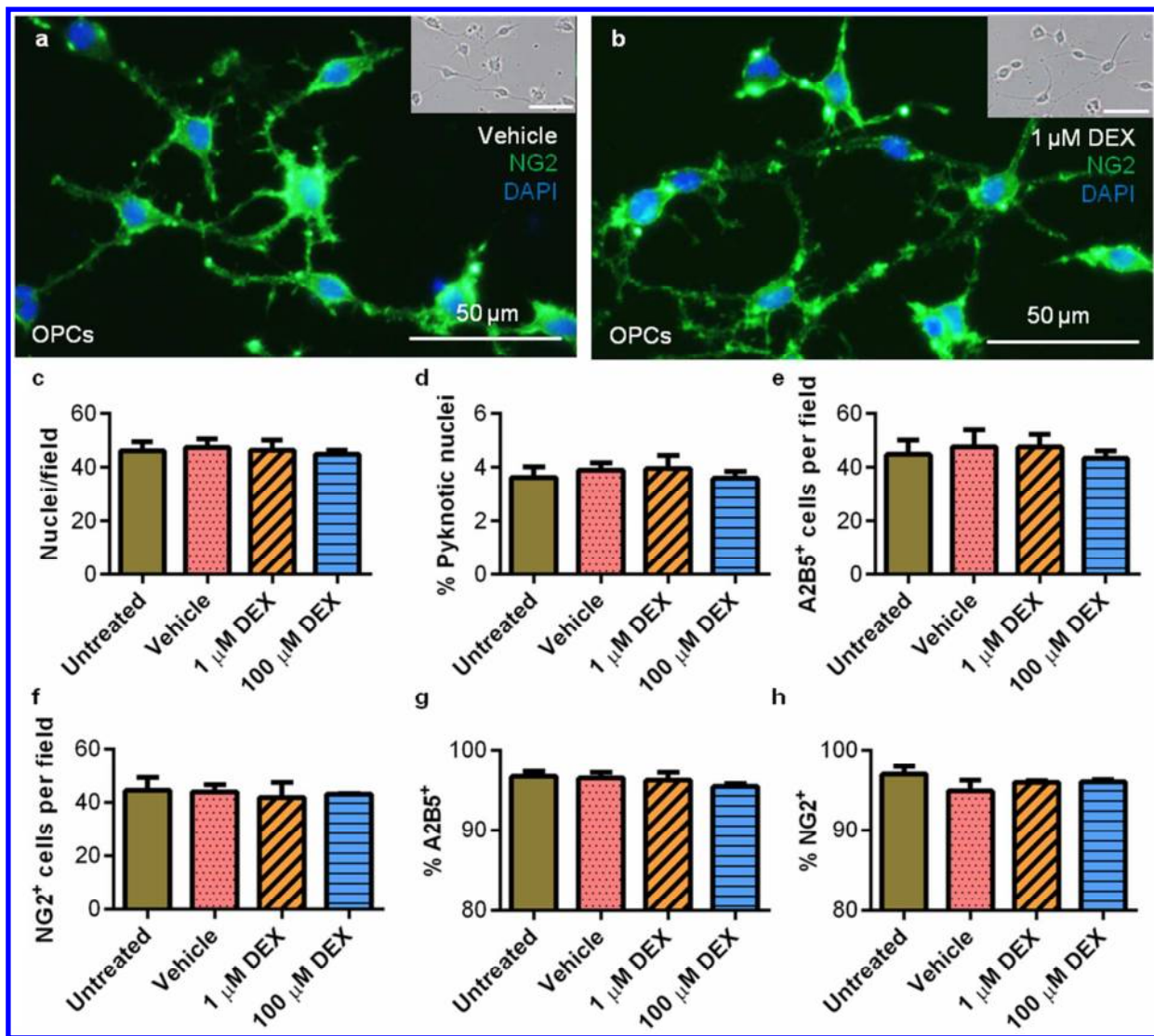


Figure 1 DEX does not affect the survival, proliferation or antigenic profiles of OPCs. Typical fluorescence micrographs (with phase contrast counterparts, inset) showing NG2⁺ OPCs with similar staining profiles and morphologies in vehicle control (a) and treated cultures (DEX; 72 h; 1 μM) (b). For all treatment conditions, bar graphs illustrate the number of healthy nuclei per microscopic field (c), percentage of pyknotic nuclei (d), number of A2B5⁺ (e) and NG2⁺ (f) cells per microscopic field, and the percentage of A2B5⁺ (g) and NG2⁺ (h) cells in OPC cultures [72 h DEX; for (c) and (d) n = 6; for (e-h) n = 3; (a-b) insets, scale bar = 50 μm].

To monitor the effects of DEX on oligodendrocyte differentiation, OPC cultures (propagated in OPC-MM for 24 h) were switched to Sato differentiation medium and allowed to differentiate +/- DEX for up to 7 days. Complex process-bearing oligodendrocytes were found in both control and DEX treated

oligodendrocyte cultures (Figure 2a-b). No differences were observed between groups in the total number of nuclei or the percentage of pyknotic nuclei per microscopic field (Figure 2c-d). Further, using our morphological scoring criteria, no CS effects were discernible on oligodendrocyte maturation in terms of the extent of process/membrane elaboration (Figure 2g). Therefore, DEX treatment did not affect the survival, proliferation, antigenic profiles or morphologies (including extent of differentiation) of oligodendrocyte lineage cells.

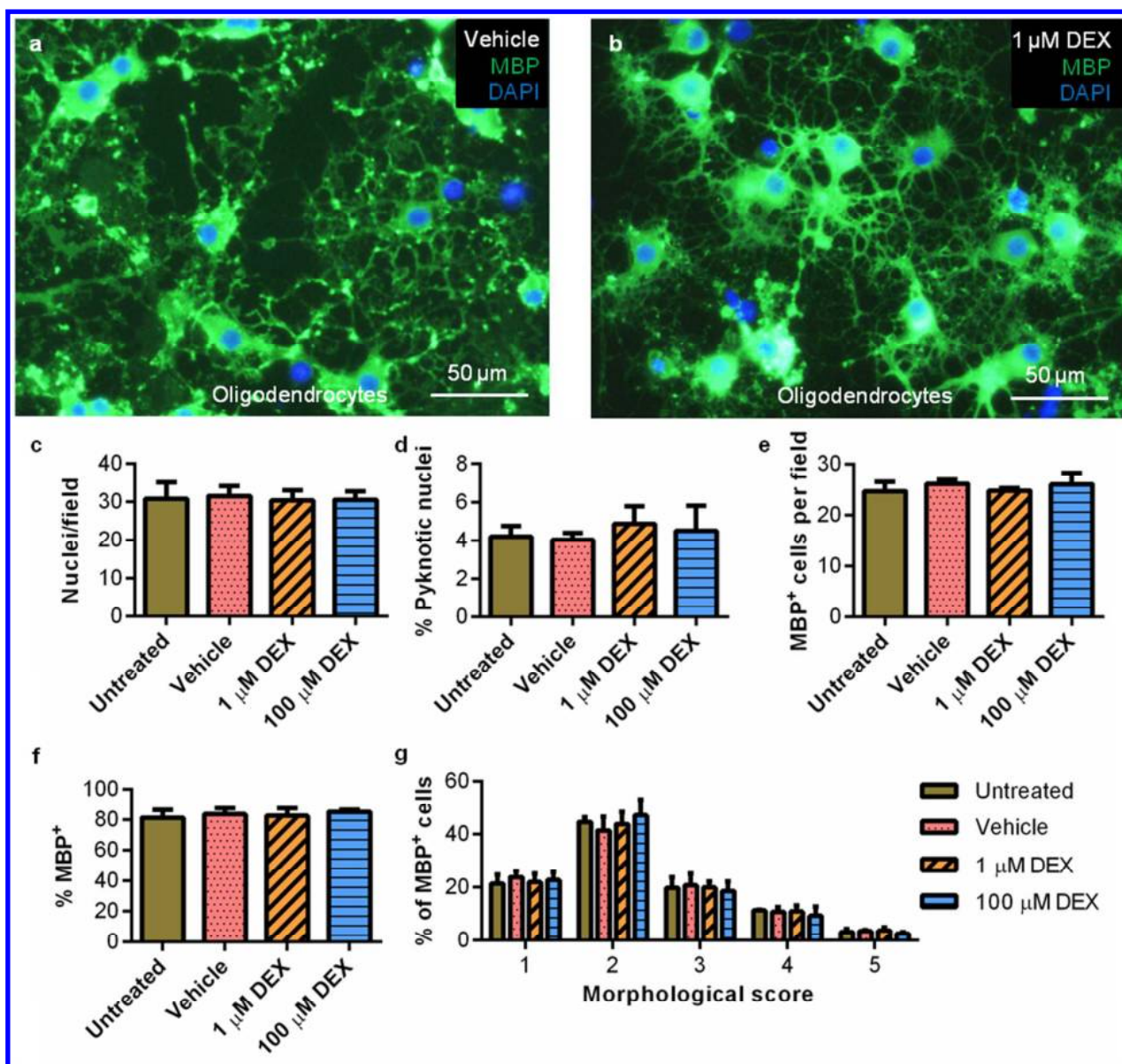


Figure 2 DEX does not affect the survival or maturation of oligodendrocytes. Typical fluorescence micrographs showing MBP⁺ oligodendrocytes with similar morphologies and staining profiles at different

1 stages of differentiation in vehicle control (a) and treated cultures (DEX; 7 d; 1 μ M) (b). Note the extensive
2 and complex branching of processes in both cultures. For all treatment conditions, bar graphs illustrate the
3 number of healthy nuclei per microscopic field (c), percentage of pyknotic nuclei (d), number of MBP⁺ cells
4 per microscopic field (e), the percentage of MBP⁺ cells (f) and morphological scoring of MBP⁺
5 oligodendrocytes indicating extent of differentiation/maturation (g) in oligodendrocyte cultures (7 d DEX; n
6 = 3 for all graphs).
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14 *Positive control cultures:* Untreated microglial cultures and those treated with vehicle showed cells with a
15 branching ramified morphology (Figure 3a). DEX treatment dramatically reduced cell densities with many
16 cells showing a rounded appearance (Figure 3b-c) confirming that the CS preparations used were
17 physiologically active, and the spectrophotometrically confirmed doses (see Methods) were appropriate for
18 eliciting cellular responses. No significant differences were noted in microglial response to 1 and 100 μ M
19 DEX, presumably due to saturating concentrations of DEX employed. In this context, the dissociation
20 constant (Kd) of GR with DEX is unknown for microglia, but is reported to be 3.5 – 6.0 nM in multicellular
21 cultures derived from rat brain.³¹⁻³² This is greatly exceeded by the lowest DEX dose tested (1 μ M), and as
22 DEX readily diffuses across the cell membrane,³³ this supports the concept of receptor saturation. Further, it
23 should be noted that biological responses to DEX in microglia³⁴ and other cell types³⁵⁻³⁷ have been shown to
24 display similar plateau effects.
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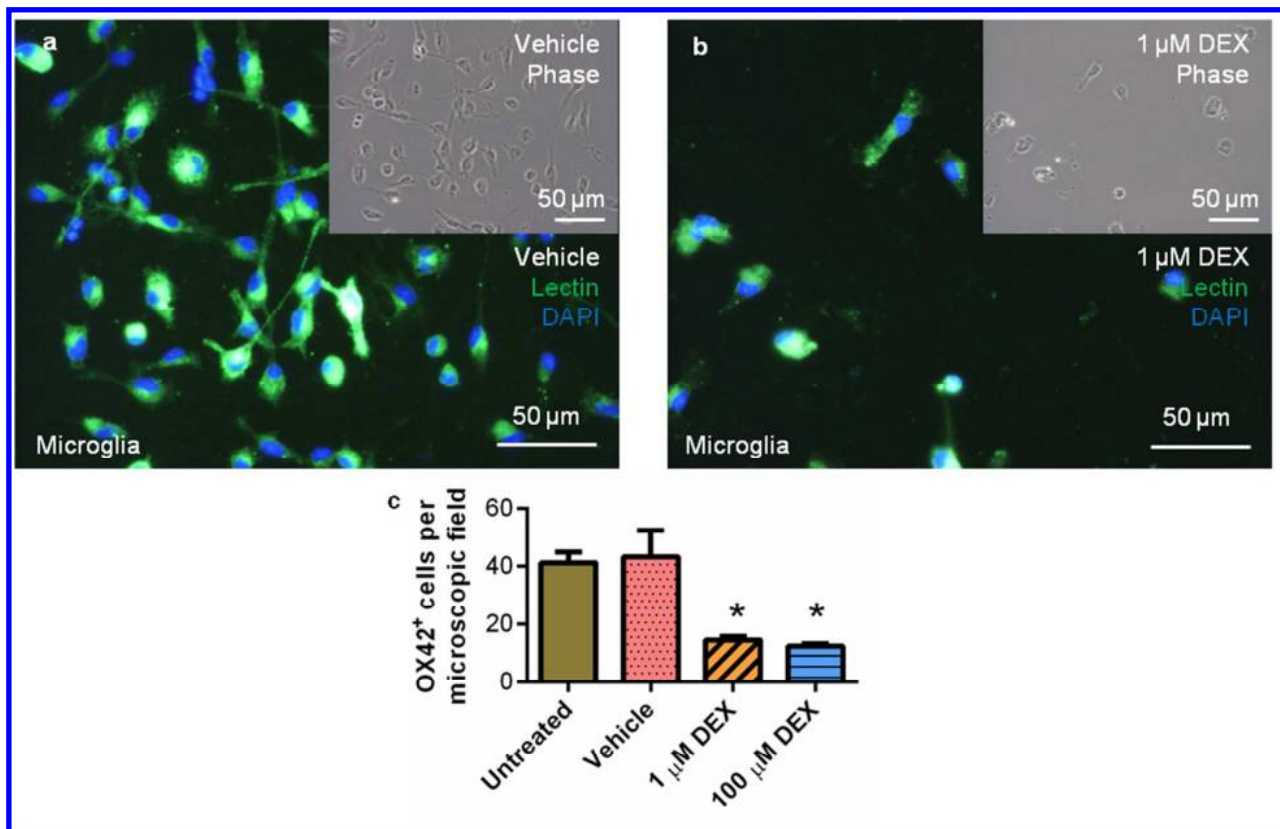


Figure 3 DEX dramatically alters numbers and morphologies of microglia. Typical fluorescence micrographs (with phase contrast counterparts, inset) showing many process bearing OX42⁺ microglia in a vehicle control culture (a) compared with a dramatic reduction in cell numbers and alterations to morphology following treatment (DEX; 72 h; 1 μM) (b). (c) Bar graph illustrating the number of OX42⁺ cells per microscopic field in microglial cultures for all treatment conditions (72 h DEX; *p < 0.05 versus untreated control; one-way ANOVA, Bonferroni's post-test; n = 3).

The absence of CS effects on oligodendrocyte lineage cells cannot be attributed to the absence of GR expression

The lack of an overt oligodendroglial response to CS treatment could be explained by an absence of the necessary receptor (GR) expression. Earlier studies report that oligodendroglial lineage cells express GR mRNA but evidence for GR expression in rat OPCs/oligodendrocytes has not been definitive. Although several studies report GR (mRNA or protein) expression in 'glial cells', often poorly characterized cultures

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are employed in the experiments, leaving doubt regarding cell specific receptor expression and related CS effects. For example, Vielkind *et al.*²⁸ show GR expression in “*tentatively identified*” OPCs in mixed glial cultures, without OPC-specific counterstaining (some of these cells were GFAP⁺, suggesting that they are astrocytes), while Jung-Testas and Baulieu²⁷ employed uncharacterized mixed glial cultures, identifying only GFAP⁺ astrocytes and CNP⁺ or MBP⁺ oligodendrocytes, with neither study immunostaining for microglia. The unresolved question of oligodendroglial expression of GR was addressed here using immunostaining for GR protein and RT-PCR for GR mRNA detection.

Microglia and astrocytes (the positive controls) expressed GR mRNA (Figure 4a) and immunostained for GR protein (Figure 4b-c). Both cytoplasmic and nuclear localization of GR were observed in both cell types. Similarly, both detection methods confirmed GR mRNA and protein expression in OPCs and oligodendrocytes (Figure 4a, d-e) with a comparable pattern of intracellular distribution of receptor. Therefore, we have shown here that all the major glial cell types studied (using well characterized glial culture systems) including the oligodendrocyte lineage cells, express both GR mRNA and protein, independently validated by PCR and immunocytochemical analyses, confirming their potential to respond to CS treatment.

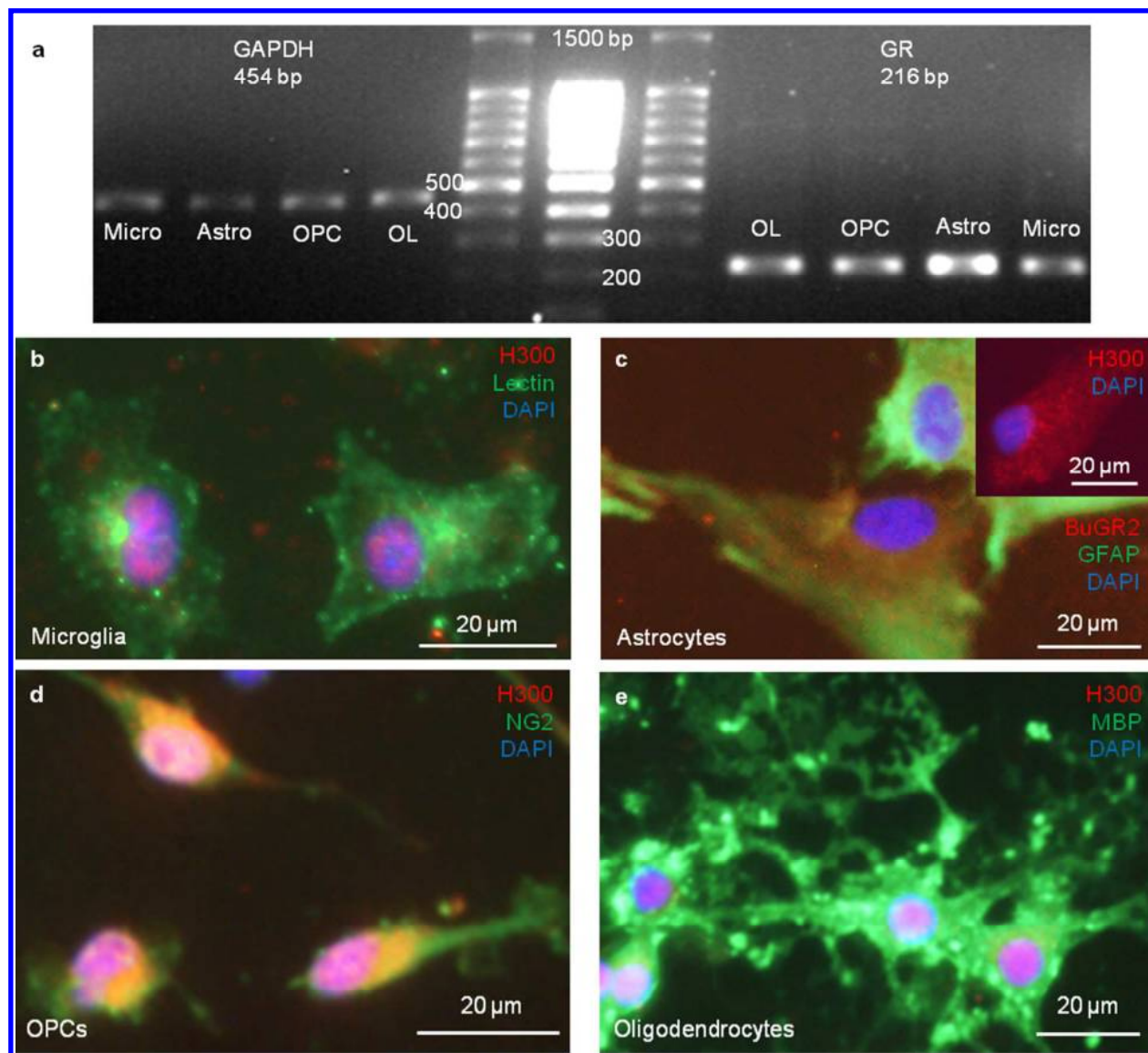
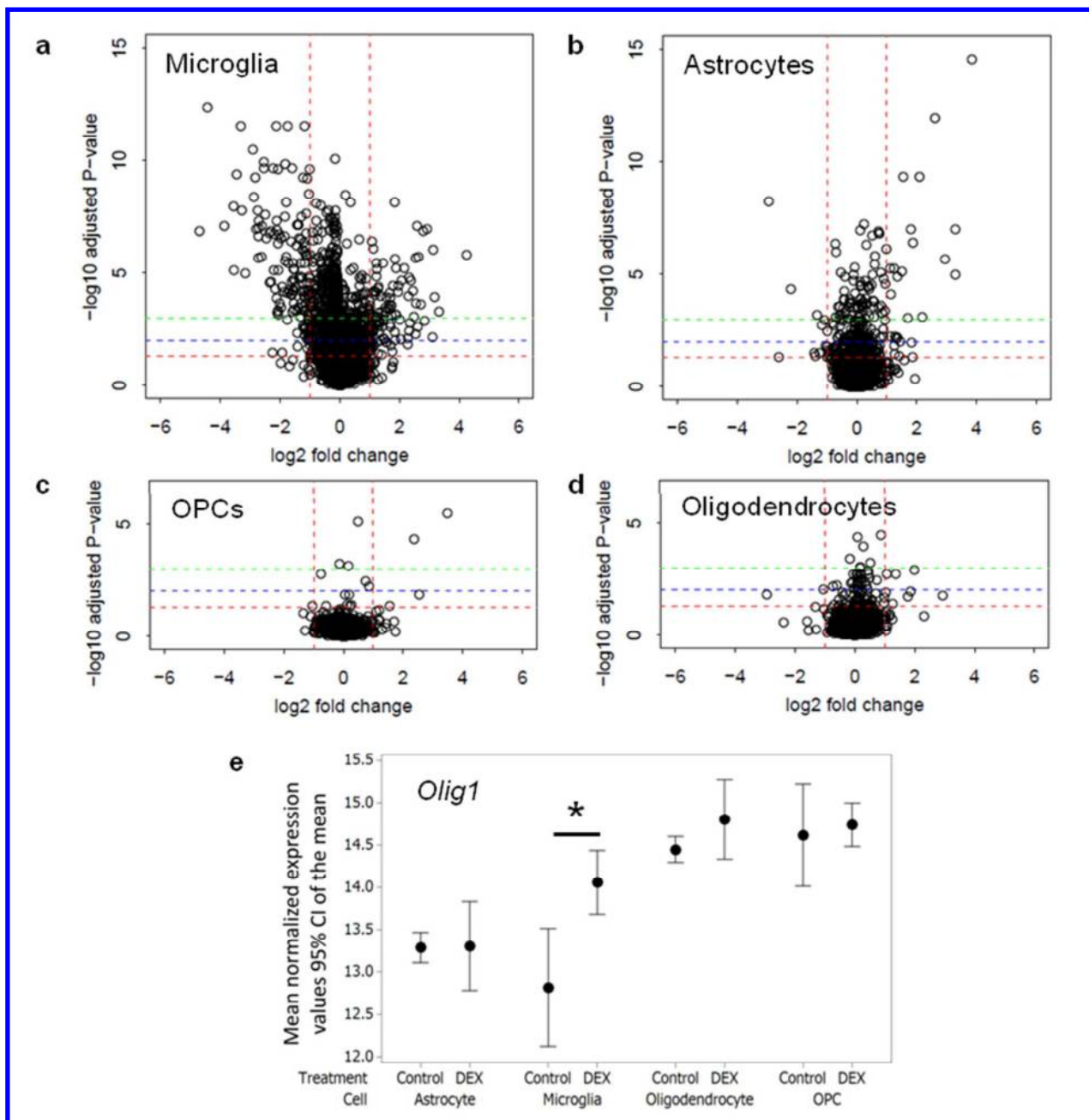


Figure 4 All glial cell types express GR mRNA and protein. (a) RT-PCR analyses showing expression by all glial cell types of GAPDH mRNA (452 bp product; housekeeping gene) and GR mRNA (216 bp product). Central numbers indicate bp values of ladders. Fluorescence micrographs showing GR expression (H300 and BuGR2 antibodies) in lectin⁺ microglia (b), GFAP⁺ (c) and morphologically-identified astrocytes (c, inset), NG2⁺ OPCs (d) and MBP⁺ oligodendrocytes (e). OL = oligodendrocyte.

Transcriptional analyses support the concept that oligodendrocyte lineage cells are not primary, direct targets of CS action

Supporting the histological observations, the transcriptional effects following DEX addition were most pronounced in microglia and astrocytes (positive controls for CS induced gene expression changes; Figure 5a-b), where 257 and 38 genes were differentially expressed, respectively. In contrast, the oligodendrocyte lineage cells showed modest responses with 5 and 10 differentially expressed genes in OPCs and oligodendrocytes, respectively (Figure 5c-d).



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Figure 5 DEX induced transcriptional changes are extensive in microglia and astrocytes, but limited in oligodendroglia. Volcano plots illustrate the transcriptional response to dexamethasone treatment (DEX; 48 h; 1 μ M) detected by microarray analysis of purified microglial (a), astrocyte (b), OPC (c) and oligodendrocyte cultures (d). Positive fold change represents upregulation, negative fold change represents downregulation (versus vehicle controls; x axis). Dashed horizontal lines represent $p < 0.05$ (red), $p < 0.01$ (blue) and $p < 0.001$ (green). Note extensive changes in microglia and astrocytes, but limited changes in OPCs and oligodendrocytes. (e) Mean normalized expression values (error bars represent 95% confidence intervals) for *Olig1* showing elevated expression in DEX treated microglia (unpaired t-test; $p < 0.05$; $n = 3$).

The majority of differentially expressed microglial genes are related to immune function but some individual genes of interest were identified. Two such key genes are *Olig1* (Figure 5e) a basic helix-loop-helix transcription factor involved in the maturation of oligodendrocytes³⁸ and oligodendrocyte-myelin glycoprotein (*Omg*; human homolog known as *OMG* and *OMGP*), both upregulated in microglia following DEX treatment. The former finding was confirmed using immunostaining to detect *Olig1* protein; both OPCs and oligodendrocytes (positive controls; Figure 6a-b) expressed *Olig1*, as did microglial cells (Figure 6c). In addition, a significant increase in *Olig1* expression was evident in DEX treated microglial cultures compared to controls (Figure 6d-e). Within each culture, DEX treated microglia consistently demonstrated significantly higher optical density values than controls (DEX minus vehicle for each culture; Figure 6f). Differentially expressed genes identified in astrocytes treated with DEX were significantly enriched in a number of gene ontologies including “response to corticosteroid stimulus” (see Supporting Information, Astrocyte.Enrichment_Analysis).

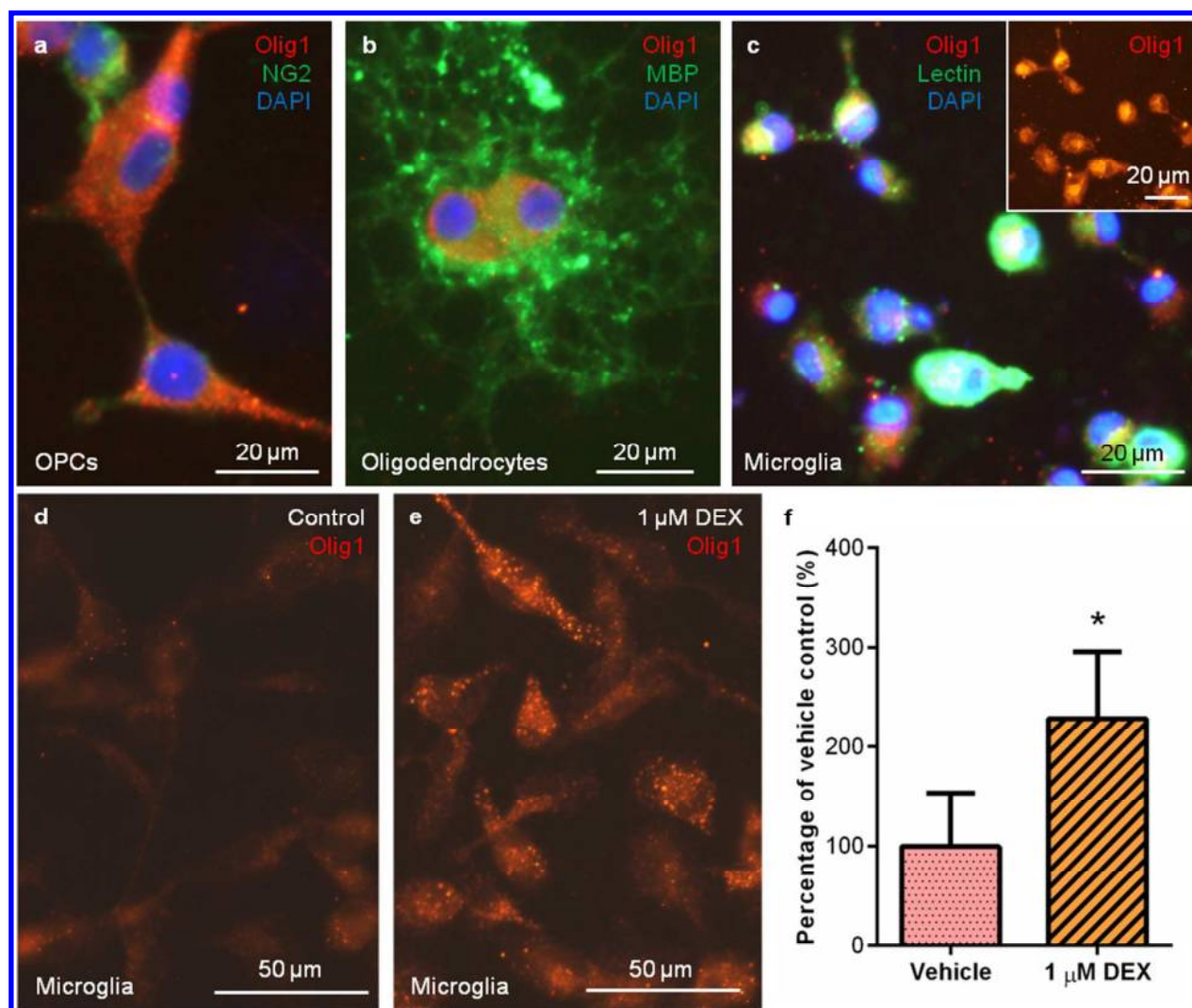


Figure 6 Microglia express Olig1 protein, and upregulate Olig1 expression following DEX treatment.

Fluorescence micrographs showing Olig1 expression in NG2⁺ OPCs (a), MBP⁺ oligodendrocytes (b) and lectin⁺ microglia (c; inset shows Olig1 counterpart image). (d) Olig1 expression in a vehicle control microglial culture. (e) Marked increase in microglial Olig1 expression following DEX addition (DEX; 48 h; 1 μM). (f) Bar graph showing normalized mean optical density measurements of Olig1 expression, with elevated values in DEX treated microglia over vehicle controls (48 h; 1 μM; paired t-test; $p < 0.05$; $n = 3$).

By contrast, for OPCs no enriched terms were identified which passed our inclusion criteria. For oligodendrocytes, a single pathway map “Role of ZNF202 in regulation of expression of genes involved in Atherosclerosis” was highlighted by pathway analysis (ZNF202 is a transcription factor; genes in this pathway are those encoding HDL proteins and APOE). Multiple gene ontology terms were identified, with

1 the most enriched being “regulation of growth” (genes encoding: HTRA1, HDL proteins, Alpha crystallin B,
2 Neuromodulin and APOE) and “response to reactive oxygen species” (genes encoding: Cystatin C, HDL
3 proteins, Alpha crystallin B and APOE). Additional terms were also identified for astrocytes and microglia,
4 with the full results provided as Supporting Information. Whilst the gene expression changes in
5 oligodendrocytes are limited, there were a few changes of note. Both *ApoE* and *Gap43* were downregulated
6 in oligodendrocytes on DEX addition. APOE has a major role in lipid metabolism,³⁹ but its role in the
7 genesis of lipid rich myelin sheaths in the CNS is currently unclear. *Gap43* is expressed in immature
8 oligodendrocytes but down regulated during maturation⁴⁰ – although we did not detect morphological
9 alterations in CS treated oligodendrocytes, we cannot currently rule out alterations in their engagement with
10 axons.
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23 In contrast to OPCs and oligodendrocytes, both astrocytes and microglia showed more global and
24 pronounced effects following identical CS treatment. For astrocytes, the affected genes included well known
25 glucocorticoid-responsive genes, including *Sgk*,⁴¹ *Fkbp5*⁴² and *Tsc22d3* (aka *Gilz*).⁴³ Further, five of the
26 affected genes (*Sult1a1*, *Sgk*, *Ddit4*, *Klf9* and *Tsc22d3*) were recently shown to be up-regulated by short-
27 term (4 h) glucocorticoid treatment of striatal astrocytes,²⁶ whereas the most down-regulated gene (*Ednrb*)
28 was also reported to be negatively regulated by glucocorticoids in neural progenitor cells.⁴⁴ Together, these
29 observations underscore the validity/robustness of the microarray procedures utilized here. With respect to
30 the microglial arrays, an unexpected finding was the identification of the transcription factor *Olig1* as a DEX
31 responsive gene, given its role as a master regulator of myelination, with expression reported in
32 oligodendroglia and radial glia.^{45,46} Nevertheless, immunocytochemical approaches unequivocally
33 demonstrated (i) *Olig1* expression in cultured microglia, and (ii) up-regulation of protein expression by DEX
34 treatment, further validating the sensitivity of the microarray system used here. The implications of this
35 finding remain to be established, but do question the prevailing view that *Olig1* expression in the CNS is
36 restricted to oligodendrocyte lineage cells.
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It is well established that different tissues/cell types exhibit markedly differing responses to glucocorticoids; indeed, glucocorticoid sensitivity can vary throughout the cell cycle within a single cell type.⁴⁷ Consequently, the finding that the various cell types exhibit differing transcriptional responses to DEX (as shown here for the first time with CNS glia) is not without precedent. However, elucidation of the factors accounting for the inter-cellular differences — and limited glucocorticoid sensitivity of oligodendroglia, in particular — will require extensive further study. For example, whilst all glial cell types express the GR, information is lacking regarding the complement of GR isoforms expressed in each cell type. This is important because (i) diverse GR subtypes can be generated from the Nr3c1 gene locus (by alternative splicing coupled with the usage of alternative translation initiation sites), each subtype being further subject to multiple post-translational modifications (including phosphorylation, sumoylation, acetylation and ubiquitination), and; (ii) different protein isoforms can exhibit distinct transactivation/transrepression patterns of gene regulation.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ Other factors influencing glucocorticoid action and which may differ between glial cell types include: GR chaperones/co-chaperones, transcriptional co-regulators and chromatin remodelling complexes;⁴⁷ transcription factors such as AP-1, NF-KB and STATs that participate in protein-protein interaction with – and are modulated by – the GR;⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ the lncRNA GAS5 which acts as a decoy GRE to riborepress the GR;⁵⁰ and chromatin architecture.⁵¹

CS are undoubtedly highly effective immunosuppressive agents that assist recovery in a range of pathologies. However, we consider that elucidation of the mechanisms of adverse effects of CS based immunotherapies is essential given the intimate relationship between myelination and axonal function/survival. For example, axons produce aberrant branches without the inhibitory effects of myelin.⁵² The ordered arrangement of ion channels at the nodes of Ranvier (and therefore conductive properties of axons) also critically depends on correct myelination.⁵³ Oligodendrocytes are considered to be essential to long-term axonal integrity, potentially through trophic support mechanisms and axon-glia metabolic coupling mechanisms^{54,55} leading to a widely held view that axon-myelin interactions have an important neuroprotective role (and by extension impact disease progression when perturbed).¹⁶ Consequently, CS-induced delays in myelination are of significant clinical importance when considering treatment of a range

1 of paediatric and adult pathologies. Our findings demonstrate that OL lineage cells show limited responses
2 to CS and are therefore not likely to constitute the direct cellular targets of CS action in the CNS. This is a
3 somewhat unexpected finding, given that both OPCs and oligodendrocytes are key players in the process of
4 myelin genesis.
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10 However, the exact mechanisms by which microglia impact myelin production *in vivo* are not fully resolved.
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12 Our pathway analyses do not indicate specific mechanisms by which microglial gene expression changes
13 may directly impact myelin genesis, however more complex secondary effects may account for CS-induced
14 myelin perturbations *in vivo*. During regeneration, impaired remyelination following microglial suppression
15 is likely due to impaired myelin debris clearance.⁵⁶ Microglial roles in *developmental* myelination are less
16 clear, however at least one study suggests that myelin synthesis can be stimulated by microglial cells,⁵⁷
17 through unknown secretory mechanisms. Further, it is established that microglia secrete several soluble
18 mediators including those with key roles in the development of the oligodendroglial lineage, such as IGF-
19 1.^{58,59} The release of such mediators is the critical first step towards successful myelin regeneration, and it is
20 feasible that similar mechanisms may be operational during developmental myelination,⁵⁶ and therefore
21 perturbed by immunosuppressive therapies. We also cannot exclude the possibility that CS effects on myelin
22 production may simply be related to a decrease in microglial numbers, as reported previously. *In vivo* DEX
23 treatment has been shown to elicit a decrease in microglial numbers, this effect being dependent on both the
24 dose employed⁶⁰ and the duration of treatment.⁶¹ However, systematic correlative analyses of CS-induced
25 microglial depletion and the progression of developmental myelination have not been conducted so far.
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28 Microglia remove supernumerary neurons during development, but it is not clear whether they perform the
29 same role for supernumerary oligodendroglial cells (which are known to be reduced by up to 50% during
30 development). Depleted numbers of microglia, and/or microglial dysfunction could also impair removal of
31 dead cells and regulation of glial population numbers, essential to establishing normal neuron:glia ratios and
32 interactions during development.⁶²
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55 In light of these points, the following transcriptional changes in our study may be of relevance. Analysis of
56 the combination of all transcriptional changes on cellular function using the Ingenuity Pathway analysis tool
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1 showed (i) DEX-treatment resulted in altered expression of genes relating to ‘cell movement’ (including
2 ‘migration of microglia’), therefore CS-treated microglia may demonstrate an impaired ability to migrate
3 towards and phagocytose cells/synapses and myelin debris. (ii) Microglial cytokine secretion can affect
4 neural/glial specification⁵⁹ and cytokines such as interleukin-2 (IL-2), whose gene expression was shown to
5 be altered in our analyses, can exert toxic effects on oligodendrocytes and myelin. The consequences of such
6 changes on global myelin genesis are as yet unknown. Future work will need to establish whether our *in*
7 *vitro* findings can be extrapolated to lesions *in vivo*, where the complex, intercellular crosstalk in sites of
8 pathology is maintained, and where the CS doses encountered by cells may be different to those employed in
9 our study. Nevertheless, our findings can provide a basis for future investigations into the precise
10 relationship between microglia, immune suppression and myelination.
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23 **Summary**

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27 A detailed understanding of the cellular and molecular mechanisms underpinning adverse effects of
28 immunosuppressive drugs in the nervous system is critical to the development of better classes of
29 therapeutic agents. Our findings indicate that CS effects on myelin genesis are not primarily mediated by
30 oligodendrocyte lineage cells. Instead, the primary mediators of such effects could be the microglial or
31 astrocytic cells. The role of cellular cross-talk between astrocytes and other neural cells during development
32 and remyelination is well established.¹⁴ Further, while microglial interactions can impact regenerative
33 processes,²⁴ their role in neural development remains elusive. Evidence is gathering, however, that microglia
34 play critical roles in the regulation of precursor cell numbers⁶³ and development of cortical neurons;⁶⁴ the
35 impact that immunotherapies have in the context of repair and development is therefore an important issue
36 and will require elucidation. The current experiments were conducted within a short timeframe in purified
37 cultures to attempt to identify the primary/early targets of drug action in the response cascade. However, we
38 cannot rule out the possibility that cellular response profiles may be different following prolonged CS
39 exposure. Therefore, further investigations to identify downstream effectors/target cells will require
40 proteomic/secretomic analyses of CS treated glial populations, at later time points and with longer
41 exposures, all within experimental systems that allow for examination of neural cell cross-talk. Such work
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1 can potentially offer evidence for an indirect mechanism of CS effects on myelin genesis via a
2 microglial/astrocytic cell intermediary. This detailed understanding can provide information relevant to the
3 development of novel therapeutic agents/immunotherapies that limit adverse effects of CS, along with
4 refinements to the timing and dose of existing CS therapy.
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Materials and methods

The care and use of animals was in accordance with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act of 1986 (United Kingdom) with approval by the local ethics committee.

Reagents: Tissue culture materials were from Fisher Scientific (UK). Recombinant human platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF-AA) and basic fibroblast growth factor (FGF2) were from Peprotech (UK).

Dexamethasone (DEX) 21-phosphate disodium (D4902; $\geq 97\%$ pure), culture media and anti-biotin secondary antibodies [Cy3- or fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC)-conjugated] were from Sigma-Aldrich (UK). All other secondary antibodies were from Jackson ImmunoResearch Laboratories Inc. (USA).

Mounting medium [with 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI)] was from Vector Laboratories (UK). RQ1 RNase-free DNase and DNA ladders were from Promega (UK), Immolase DNA polymerase was from Bioline (UK), specific primers were from MWG Operon (Germany), random hexamer primers, Superscript II reverse transcriptase and RNase OUT were from Invitrogen (UK).

Cell cultures: Primary mixed glial cultures were prepared from dissociated cerebral cortices of Sprague-Dawley rats at postnatal day 1 – 3 and glial populations were isolated by sequential rotary shaking procedures using well-established protocols.^{65,66} Briefly, microglia were derived first (200 rpm, 1 h) and plated at 6×10^4 cells/cm² in D10 medium [Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 2 mM glutaMAX-I, 1 mM sodium pyruvate, 50 U/ml penicillin, and 50 μ g/ml streptomycin]. OPCs were derived next (200 rpm, 18 h) and plated at 4.5×10^4 cells/cm² in OPC maintenance medium (OPC-MM: DMEM supplemented with 2 mM glutaMAX-I, 1 mM sodium pyruvate, 10 nM biotin, 10 nM hydrocortisone, 30 nM sodium selenite, 50 μ g/ml transferrin, 5 μ g/ml insulin, 0.1% bovine serum albumin, 50 U/ml penicillin, 50 μ g/ml streptomycin, 10 ng/ml PDGF-AA, and 10 ng/ml FGF2). Finally, after an additional shake (200 rpm, 18 h) to deplete residual OPCs, adherent astrocytes were trypsinized and plated at 4×10^4 cells/cm² in D10. To deplete microglia from OPC and astrocyte fractions, cells were transferred to non-tissue-culture grade petri dishes (to which microglia readily attach) and after 30 min the unattached cells were collected. To establish oligodendrocyte cultures, OPC cultures were switched

1 to Sato differentiation medium [DMEM supplemented with 2 mM glutaMAX-I, 1 mM sodium pyruvate, 1x
2 N2 supplement (5 µg/ml insulin; 20 nM progesterone; 100 µM putrescine; 30 nM selenium; 100 µg/ml
3 transferrin), 30 nM thyroxine, 30 nM triiodothyronine, 50 U/ml penicillin, and 50 µg/ml streptomycin]. All
4 cultures were incubated at 37°C in 5% CO₂/95% humidified air. Cells were plated on poly-D-lysine (PDL)
5 coated 6-well plates for microarray/RNA studies, or PDL-coated chamber slides or coverslips in 24-well
6 plates for histological studies.
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14 **DEX treatment of cultures:** DEX is frequently employed in clinical practice,^{8,11} particularly for the
15 treatment of respiratory distress syndrome,⁹ reduction of cerebral oedema associated with intracranial
16 neoplasms,⁶⁷ and following acute spinal cord injury.¹⁰ This drug was therefore selected for use in the
17 experimental studies, and is reported to act almost exclusively on the GR.⁶⁸ DEX was prepared in ethanol
18 with the concentration verified spectrophotometrically (Genesys 10S UV-Vis spectrophotometer,
19 ThermoScientific, USA) then diluted in appropriate culture medium to the indicated concentration; the final
20 concentration of ethanol was 0.27% (v/v) at all doses and for vehicle controls. The drug doses used here
21 have been frequently used with neural cells including for microarray analysis,^{36,69} validating their use in the
22 current study. Further, CS treatment of microglia promotes apoptosis,⁷⁰ providing a simple and effective
23 measure of CS effects, making microglia suitable positive controls to validate the biological efficacy of the
24 DEX doses selected. Table 1 summarizes the protocols and timings of DEX treatment for individual assays.
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Table 1 Protocol timings for DEX treatment of glial cells

| Experiment | Cell type | Culture medium ¹ | [DEX] | DEX application post-plating | Period of DEX treatment | Total culture period | Processing at end of DEX treatment; immunostaining for cell markers ² |
|--|-----------|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Transcriptional effects of CS (microarray) | Astrocyte | D10 | 1 μ M | 24 h | 48 h | 3 d | RNA extraction |
| | Microglia | D10 | 1 μ M | 24 h | 48 h | 3 d | RNA extraction |
| | OPC | OPC-MM | 1 μ M | 24 h | 48 h | 3 d | RNA extraction |
| | OL | 24 h OPC-MM, then Sato | 1 μ M | 4 d | 48 h | 6 d | RNA extraction |
| CS effects on proliferation/differentiation/morphology | Microglia | D10 | 1 μ M, 100 μ M | 24 h | 3 d | 4 d | Histology; OX42 |
| | OPC | OPC-MM | 1 μ M, 100 μ M | 24 h | 3 d | 4 d | Histology; A2B5, NG2 |
| | OPC/OL | 24 h OPC-MM, then Sato | 1 μ M, 100 μ M | 24 h (applied in Sato) | 7 d; refreshed every 2-3 d | 8 d | Histology; MBP |
| GR detection | Astrocyte | D10 | 1 μ M | 3 d | 30 min | 3 d | Histology; H300, BuGR2/GFAP |
| | Microglia | D10 | 1 μ M | 3 d | 30 min | 3 d | Histology; H300/Lectin |
| | OPC | OPC-MM | 1 μ M | 3 d | 30 min | 3 d | Histology; H300/NG2 |
| | OL | 24 h OPC-MM, then Sato | 1 μ M | 9 d | 30 min | 9 d | Histology; H300/MBP |
| Olig1 detection | Microglia | D10 | 1 μ M | 24 h | 48 h | 3 d | Histology; Olig1/Lectin |
| | OPC | OPC-MM | 1 μ M | 24 h | 48 h | 3 d | Histology; Olig1/NG2 |
| | OL | 24 h OPC-MM, then Sato | 1 μ M | 7 d | 48 h | 9 d | Histology; Olig1/MBP |

DEX = dexamethasone; GR = glucocorticoid receptor; OL = oligodendrocyte; OPC = oligodendrocyte precursor cell; ¹see 'methods, cell cultures' for medium details; ²see Table 2 for antibody/marker details

Histological analyses

Immunocytochemistry: Cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde in phosphate buffered saline (PBS)

[room temperature (RT); 30 min] and washed in PBS. Table 2 summarizes the antibodies used to detect

specific cell types and the immunostaining protocols. Cells were blocked (RT; 30 min), incubated overnight

with primary antibody in blocking solution (4°C; simultaneous antibodies for double-staining), washed, blocked, incubated with the appropriate FITC- or Cy3-conjugated secondary antibody in blocking solution (1:200; RT; 2 h; simultaneous antibodies for double-staining), washed and mounted with the nuclear stain DAPI. As both H300 and GFAP require anti-rabbit secondary antibody, BuGR2 was used with GFAP to double-stain astrocytes.

Table 2 Antibodies and immunostaining protocols

| Antibody | Supplier | Blocking solution in PBS | Antibody concentration |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Mouse anti-A2B5, OPC marker | Sigma-Aldrich, UK | 5% serum | 1:200 |
| BuGR2, mouse anti-GR | Abcam, UK | 5% serum, 0.3% Triton | 1:100 |
| Rabbit anti-GFAP, astrocyte marker | DakoCytomation, UK | 5% serum, 0.3% Triton | 1:500 |
| H300, rabbit anti-GR | Santa Cruz Biotech, USA | 5% serum, 0.3% Triton | 1:100 |
| Lectin (<i>Lycopersicon esculentum</i> , biotin-conjugated), microglial marker | Sigma-Aldrich, UK | 5% serum | 1:150 |
| Rat anti-MBP, oligodendrocyte marker | Serotech Ltd., UK | 5% serum, 0.3% Triton | 1:200 |
| Rabbit anti-NG2, OPC marker | Millipore, UK | 5% serum | 1:150 |
| Mouse anti-Olig1 | Millipore, UK | 5% serum, 0.1% Triton | 1:200 |
| OX42 (mouse anti-Cd11b), microglial marker | Serotech Ltd., UK | 5% serum ¹ | 1:500 |

GR = glucocorticoid receptor; OPC = oligodendrocyte precursor cell; PBS = phosphate buffered saline; Triton = Triton X-100; ¹pre-permeabilised cells with 1% Triton in PBS, 20 min, room temperature

Image analysis: Immunostained samples were imaged using fixed exposure settings on an Axio Scope A1 fluorescence microscope (Carl Zeiss MicroImaging GmbH, Germany), and the images merged using Photoshop CS3 (version 10.0.1; Adobe, USA). Culture purity was assessed by scoring the coincidence of DAPI-stained nuclei with immunostaining for the appropriate cell marker, for a minimum of three micrographs and 100 nuclei per treatment condition. Simultaneously, nuclei were scored for pyknosis,

1 indicated by fragmented, intensely stained nuclei, as a measure of toxicity. For oligodendrocyte cultures,
2 MBP⁺ cells were assigned a morphological score to semi-quantitatively assess extent of
3 differentiation/maturation as follows: (1) few or no processes, (2) processed but displaying some bipolarity,
4 (3) multiple processes with loss of bipolarity (displaying radial symmetry), (4) highly-processed and (5)
5 dense and elaborate/flattened processes.
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10 To validate microarray findings regarding *Olig1* expression (see Microarray analysis section), fluorescence
11 micrographs of control and CS-treated microglia were converted to grayscale (Photoshop) and calibrated as
12 a batch (optical density step-tablet, Rodbard equation; ImageJ, National Institutes of Health, USA). The
13 relative expression of Olig1 protein was quantified using optical density measurements of individual cells
14 (minimum of 30 lectin⁺ microglia and 3 images per condition per culture), with background readings
15 subtracted.
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25 RNA analyses

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30 **Total RNA extraction:** For these experiments, microglia and astrocytes (from the same parent primary
31 cultures as OPCs/oligodendrocytes) were used as positive controls. Both express the GR^{71,72} (providing RT-
32 PCR validation) and are CS responsive,^{26,73,74} so can be predicted to show significant alterations in gene
33 expression, making both cell types suitable positive controls for microarray analysis. All cell types were
34 washed with nuclease-free PBS then RNA was extracted using an RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen, UK), as per
35 manufacturer's instructions. Concentrations were determined by Nanodrop spectrophotometry (Labtech,
36 UK) and samples stored at -80°C.
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47 **RT-PCR:** Residual genomic DNA from vehicle only samples was removed using RNase-free DNase then
48 RNA was reverse transcribed using random hexamer primers and reverse transcriptase, all according to the
49 manufacturer's protocols. cDNA was amplified by hot-start RT-PCR with specific primers for GR⁷⁵ (36
50 cycles) or glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH;⁷⁶ 34 cycles). Products were
51 electrophoresed on 2% agarose gels with 100 bp DNA ladders. Primer sequences were:
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GR: fwd: 5'GAG CAG AGA ATG TCT CTA CCC; rev: 5'GAC GAT GGC TTT TCC TAG CTC.

GAPDH: fwd: 5'ACC ACA GTC CAT GCC ATC AC; rev: 5'TCC ACC ACC CTG TTG CTG TA.

Microarray analysis: For each cell type, RNA samples from four cultures were dispatched to Source Bioscience UK Ltd. (Nottingham, UK) for processing and hybridisation. RNA integrity was determined using the Bioanalyzer (Agilent, USA) and the three pairs of RNA samples (DEX treated and vehicle only control samples from the same culture) with the highest quality per condition were selected for microarray analysis. 750 ng of processed cRNA was hybridized to Illumina RatRef-12 bead chips. Differentially expressed genes were identified using limma package of R.⁷⁷ Data was normalized using the neqc function of the limma package found to be robust for Beadarray analysis.⁷⁸ Beads with quality scores (detection probability) < 95% in any sample were removed, resulting in 15,498 genes analyzed. Significantly differentially-expressed genes were identified using a modified *t*-test with Benjamini-Hochberg test to control false discovery rate (FDR) for multiple testing. Genes were considered as differentially-expressed if corrected *p* values were < 0.05 and log₂ fold change values were ≥ |1|. Enrichment and Pathway analysis was conducted using the MetaCore™ platform, with all genes reported here having an enrichment FDR corrected *p* value < 0.01 and a minimum of two genes in an enriched category. One transcriptionally-altered gene (*Olig1*) was selected in order to validate the microarray findings by double-immunostaining microglia for both lectin and *Olig1*, using OPCs (NG2 staining) and oligodendrocytes (MBP staining) as positive controls as *Olig1* expression is considered to be restricted to oligodendrocyte lineage cells.³⁸

Statistical analysis: Other than for the array analysis described above, data were analyzed using Prism statistical analysis software (GraphPad, USA). All data are expressed as mean ± SEM. The number of experiments (*n*) refers to the number of mixed glial cultures from which isolated cultures were derived, with each primary culture being established from a different rat litter. For CS effects on oligodendroglia and microglia, data were analyzed by one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni's multiple comparison *post*-tests for *post*-hoc analysis. Optical density measurements of *Olig1* expression were averaged for each culture/condition, normalized then analyzed by a paired *t*-test.

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Supporting information available: Microarray analyses are provided as Excel files.

Gene.lists.with.annotations; Astrocyte.Enrichment_Analysis; Mglia.Enrichment_Analysis;
Oligo.Enrichment_Analysis; OPC.Enrichment_Analysis. The complete microarray dataset has been
deposited at ArrayExpress (Experiment name: Corticosteroid treatment of glial cell types; ArrayExpress
accession: E-MTAB-1695). This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

Abbreviations: CNS, central nervous system; CS, corticosteroid; DEX, dexamethasone; GFAP, glial
fibrillary acidic protein; GR, glucocorticoid receptor; MBP, myelin basic protein; OPC, oligodendrocyte
precursor cell.

Author information: Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Divya M. Chari, Institute for Science and
Technology in Medicine, School of Medicine, David Weatherall building, Keele University, Staffordshire,
ST5 5BG, UK. d.chari@keele.ac.uk. Tel: +44 1782 733314. Fax: +44 1782 734634.

Funding sources: This work was funded by grants from the British Neuropathological Society, North
Staffordshire Medical Institute and The University of Nottingham.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments: We thank Professor Robin Franklin (Cambridge University) for his critical comments
on a draft manuscript.

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