cAMP-PKA phosphorylation of tau confers risk for degeneration in aging association cortex

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The pattern of neurodegeneration in Alzheimer's disease (AD) is very distinctive: neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) composed of hyperphosphorylated tau selectively affect pyramidal neurons of the aging association cortex that interconnect extensively through glutamate synapses on dendritic spines. In contrast, primary sensory cortices have few NFTs, even in late-stage disease. Understanding this selective vulnerability, and why advancing age is such a high risk factor for the degenerative process, may help to reveal disease etiology and provide targets for intervention. Our study has revealed age-related increase in cAMP-dependent protein kinase (PKA) phosphorylation of tau at serine 214 (pS214-tau) in monkey dorsolateral prefrontal association cortex (dlPFC), which specifically targets spine synapses and the Ca\textsuperscript{2+}-storing spine apparatus. This increase is mirrored by loss of phosphodiesterase 4A from the spine apparatus, consistent with increase in cAMP-Ca\textsuperscript{2+} signaling in aging spines. Phosphorylated tau was not detected in primary visual cortex, similar to the pattern observed in AD. We also report electron microscopic evidence of previously unidentified vesicular trafficking of phosphorylated tau in normal association cortex—in axons in young dlPFC vs. in spines in aged dlPFC—consistent with the transneuronal lesion spread reported in genetic rodent models. pS214-Tau was not observed in normal aged mice, suggesting that it arises with the evolutionary expansion of corticocortical connections in primates, crossing the threshold into NFTs and degeneration in humans. Thus, the cAMP-Ca\textsuperscript{2+} signaling mechanisms, needed for flexibly modulating network strength in young association cortex, confer vulnerability to degeneration when dysregulated with advancing age.

Aging is the highest risk factor for Alzheimer's disease (AD), a neurodegenerative disorder that severely affects the association cortex. Neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) are a hallmark of AD pathology, and their numbers correlate with cognitive decline. NFTs arise from phosphorylation of tau protein by a variety of kinases, including phosphorylation by cAMP-dependent protein kinase (PKA) at serine 214 (pS214-tau) and at threonine 231 (pT231-tau) by a number of kinases, e.g., CaM kinase II, GSK-3, and cdk5. Phosphorylation at S214 has synergistic actions when combined with other kinases, accelerating tau hyperphosphorylation at multiple sites. Hyperphosphorylation induces aggregation and then fibrillation, which in humans can progress to NFT formation. In AD, NFTs are selective to the association cortex, where they specifically target pyramidal cells with the most extensive corticocortical connections. For example, layer III pyramidal cells of the dorsolateral prefrontal association cortex (dlPFC) have extensive corticocortical connections and are afflicted early and severely in AD. In contrast, primary sensory cortices (e.g., visual area V1) have very few NFTs even in late-stage disease. Although this pattern of degeneration has been recognized for decades, it has not been known why extensively interconnected pyramidal cells in association cortex are selectively afflicted and why advancing age is such a high risk factor for their degeneration. These questions are key to revealing disease etiology and thus developing strategies for intervention. Although rodent AD models have provided a wealth of information regarding β-amyloid (Aβ) and tau signaling, they have not addressed this important issue, as rodents lack highly developed association cortices, and genetic alterations are introduced throughout the cortex and do not mimic the pattern of pathology seen in humans.

Contrary to rodents, nonhuman primates have well-developed association cortices with many similarities to those of humans. Studies in the monkey have shown that layer III dlPFC pyramidal cell circuits generate the mental representations needed for abstract thought (11). Within and across these cognitive circuits, pyramidal cells excite each other through NMDA receptor (NMDAR) glutamate synapses on long thin spines. dlPFC synapses are modulated differently from those in V1, with permissive nicotinic-α7 receptor activation of NMDAR (13) and feedforward cAMP-Ca\textsuperscript{2+}-K\textsuperscript{+} channel signaling to gate network inputs (14). In dendritic spines, internal Ca\textsuperscript{2+} is buffered by the spine apparatus (SA), the extension and elaboration of the smooth endoplasmic reticulum (SER) into the spine head. Stimulation of inositol trisphosphate receptors (IP3Rs) (15) and ryanodine receptors (RyRs) on the SA releases Ca\textsuperscript{2+} in a process amplified by cAMP-PKA signaling. For example, cAMP-PKA signaling increases internal Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release by increasing the efficacy and expression of IP3Rs (16) and by increasing Ca\textsuperscript{2+} leak through RyRs (17). Increased Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release can in turn promote NFT formation.

This study of the monkey cerebral cortex revealed age-related changes that help to answer key questions about Alzheimer's disease (AD): (i) why advancing age is the highest risk factor for AD and (ii) why neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) in AD selectively target extensively interconnected pyramidal neurons in the highly evolved association cortex, but do not afflict the primary sensory cortex. NFTs arise from phosphorylation of tau protein. In aged prefrontal association cortex, we found increased cAMP-dependent protein kinase (PKA) phosphorylation of tau and corresponding loss of phosphodiesterase 4A, an enzyme that regulates cAMP-PKA signaling in dendritic spines where pyramidal neurons interconnect. In contrast, phosphorylated tau was not observed in aged primary visual cortex. These data provide new strategies for early intervention in AD.


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cAMP production (18), fueling feedforward signaling (14). Ca²⁺-cAMP-PKA signaling increases the open state of nearby K⁺ channels (SK, HCN, KCNQ) on the spine membrane, which temporarily weakens synaptic efficacy, thus providing dynamic gating of network inputs to enhance mental flexibility and coordinate cognitive and arousal states (14) (see Fig. 6A). Importantly, feedforward Ca²⁺-cAMP-PKA signaling receives negative feedback from phosphodiesterases (PDEs), e.g., PDE4s, which hydrolyze cAMP and terminate its actions (19). In particular, the isozyme PDE4A is prominent in dIPFC spines where corticocortical circuits interconnect (20).

It has been appreciated for many years that Ca²⁺ signaling is increased in the aging brain (21, 22) and that signs of increased cAMP-PKA signaling in aged PFC correlate with reduced neuronal firing and impaired cognition (23, 24). However, it has not been known why cAMP-PKA signaling becomes dysregulated with age and whether these changes contribute to vulnerability to degeneration. In recent years, “normal aging” and the “pathological aging” in AD have been studied as separate entities, even though advanced age is known to be the highest risk factor for degeneration. The study of the aging process in association cortex may reveal what renders its neurons particularly vulnerable and provide the much-needed bridge between normal and “pathological” aging. Here we used biochemistry, electron microscopy, and in vivo electrophysiology to examine the aging of nonhuman primate association cortex. We report (i) loss of the cAMP-phosphodiesterase, PDE4A, and (ii) a concomitant increase of cAMP-PKA phosphorylation of tau, in dendritic spines where corticocortical circuits interconnect. The data help to explain the selective vulnerability of these highly evolved circuits with advancing age.

**Results**

**Age-Related Increase in Tau Phosphorylation.** We compared the expression of pS214-tau in young vs. aged monkeys and in young vs. aged mouse dIPFC. Immunocytochemistry against pS214-tau revealed extensive reactivity of layer III pyramidal cells in aged monkey dIPFC (Fig. 1A) but not in V1 (Fig. 1B), similar to the pattern of NFTs in AD. Immunoblots of heat-stable preparations demonstrated a highly significant correlation of pS214-tau expression in monkey dIPFC with increasing age ($r^2 = 0.9974$, $P = 0.00006$) as well as age-related reductions in soluble tau, consistent with increasing fibrillation (Fig. 1C and Fig. S1). Age-related increases were also observed at pT231-tau ($r^2 = 0.9808$, $P = 0.001$; Fig. 1C). In contrast to the aging monkey, there were only background levels of pS214-tau and no significant change with age in pT231-tau in mouse medial PFC (Fig. S2).

Given the prominence of pS214-tau in aged monkey dIPFC, we used immunoelectron microscopy (immunoEM) to determine its exact subcellular localization at a resolution that is not possible in postmortem human tissue. In young monkey dIPFC (Fig. 1D, Left), pS214-tau prevailed in axons and certain proximal pyramidal dendrites, with fine labeling along the microtubules. This contrasted with the aged dIPFC, where pS214-tau was heavily aggregated in dendrites over microtubule bundles (Fig. 1D, Right, and Fig. S3) and was especially prominent in spines (Fig. 1D, Lower). In aged spines, pS214-tau selectively accumulated at the postsynaptic membrane (Fig. 2A and B) and the SA limiting membrane (Fig. 2C–E). Importantly, pS214-tau was found only on asymmetric, presumed glutamatergic, axosynaptic synapses; symmetric, inhibitory synapses on spines (Fig. 2B) or synapses on dendrites (Fig. S3A) were not labeled. Thus, pS214-tau aggregates directly over aging NMDAR spine synapses where pyramidal cell circuits interconnect.

The optimally preserved monkey brain allowed direct visualization of p-tau trafficking in situ, i.e., a distinct association with endoplasmic vesicles and exo/endocytotic membrane profiles. In young dIPFC, pS214-tau–reactive vesicular profiles of 60 nm appeared exclusively in axons (Fig. 3A and B) and particularly at axo-axonal appositions where they were observed to be fusing with the axolemma to form omega-shaped profiles (Fig. 3B). In aged dIPFC, pS214-tau–reactive vesicular profiles were no longer encountered in axons but found in spines instead, either fusing with the perisynaptic membrane flanking asymmetric, presumed glutamatergic synapses (Fig. 3C) or directly within the asymmetric synapse per se (Fig. 3D). Symmetric synapses on spines did not associate with p-tau–reactive vesicular profiles.

**Age-Related Decrease in PDE4A.** Why are dendritic spines in dIPFC a focus of pS214-tau accumulation with advancing age? Comparisons of young vs. aged monkey dIPFC indicate that increasing PKA phosphorylation of tau may involve age-related loss of PDE4A from spines, thus decreasing a key regulatory factor. In young dIPFC, PDE4A is prevalent in layer III spines, localized near the SA (Fig. 4A and B) and along with the PKA...
response to PDE4 inhibition (Fig. 5) PDE4A5 in aged monkey dlPFC (Fig. 5) decreases in the 105-kDa PDE4A subtype (equivalent to mouse PDE4A5). The protein data was consistent with physiological recordings from young vs. aged monkeys, where aged dlPFC neurons showed a blunted response to PDE4 inhibition (Fig. 5A and Fig. S5). Indeed, the firing patterns of aged neurons under control conditions resembled those of young neurons under conditions of reduced PDE4 activity. In summary, advancing age causes loss of PDE4A from spines, mirroring the location where ps214-tau accumulates in the aged dlPFC.

Similar but much subtler effects were observed in mouse medial PFC, with an age-related reduction of PDE4A5 protein in synapses (Fig. 5C and Fig. S6), which, however, was not evident in whole-tissue lysates (Fig. S7). Analysis of the rodent medial PFC also showed reduced PDE4A mRNA in aged mice (Fig. S8) and increased cAMP levels in aged rats: young (6 mo), 0.43 ± 0.045 (SEM) pmol/mg vs. aged (24 mo), 0.59 ± 0.02 (SEM) pmol/mg. Similar disinhibition of cAMP signaling in a large number of spines may increase PKA tau phosphorylation with advancing age. Finally, rolipram-mediated inhibition of PDE4 in mouse primary cortical neurons leads to increased PKA phosphorylation of tau on treatment with forskolin (Fig. 5D and Fig. S9), suggesting that loss of PDE4A in aged dlPFC spines could lead to ps214-tau accumulation in vivo.

Discussion

The current study revealed age-related increase in tau phosphorylation (ps214-tau and pT231-tau) and age-related reduction in PDE4A in pyramidal cell network synapses in primate association cortex (summarized in Fig. 6). As predicted with reduced PDE4A expression, cAMP levels were increased in the aged PFC. These data are consistent with previous reports of increased pS133-cAMP response element-binding protein (pS133-CREB) in aged rodent PFC (23) and age-related increases in CREB-related genes in human association cortex (25). PDE4A loss from the SA suggests that loss of PDE4A regulation of cAMP may also contribute to increased Ca\(^{2+}\) signaling in aged dlPFC (21, 22), e.g., by increasing Ca\(^{2+}\) leak through RYRs (17). There were age-related increases in tau phosphorylation at T231, a site phosphorylated by multiple kinases, including several Ca\(^{2+}\)-activated kinases. More importantly, advancing age increased PKA phosphorylation of tau at S214, suggesting that dysinhibited cAMP contributes to vulnerability to degeneration in aged primate dlPFC.

Species Differences. The great expansion in the number of corticocortical synapses on spines in primate dlPFC (27) likely makes it possible to detect the age-related loss of PDE4A from spines, as demonstrated with ImmunoEM, in whole tissue samples. In contrast, age-related changes in PDE4A in mouse PFC were detected only in the synaptosomal fraction, possibly due to the smaller number and volume proportion of spines in whole tissue. Ps214-Tau was also not detected in whole mouse PFC, consistent with literature showing that normal mice are not appropriate for modeling AD (10). It is possible that a very small amount of ps214-tau could have been detected in isolated synapses; however, the methods required for isolating synapses are incompatible with those needed to accurately quantify p-tau. In contrast, the abundance of ps214-tau–containing spines as
Relevance to Degeneration of Higher Cortical Circuits in AD. The discovery of p-tau aggregation at the spine postsynaptic membrane in aged primate dPFC suggests that p-tau may interfere with synaptic transmission and receptor trafficking in pyramidal cell networks as part of normal aging, as has been seen in genetic rodent models (28, 29). This process may be exacerbated in individuals with tau mutations that promote phosphorylation (28, 29). Importantly, p-tau vesicles and aggregates were found only in asymmetric, presumed glutamatergic, axospinous synapses in aged dPFC. These findings are consistent with the enrichment of p-tau in cortical synaptosome preparations from patients with AD (30) and illuminate how degeneration could specifically target those highly evolved glutamatergic pyramidal cell circuits that interconnect extensively on dendritic spines.

The presence of p-tau in endoplasmic vesicles fusing with the plasma membrane provides a possible mechanism for transneuronal lesion spread within pyramidal cell circuits in primate association cortex. Transneuronal spread of p-tau has recently been documented in genetically modified mouse AD models (31, 32), where it has been viewed as a route for “infection” of interconnected cortical circuits. However, evidence of p-tau trafficking has never before been documented in the normal aging brain and has never been captured with immunoEM. This study found striking differences between young and aged dPFC, with p-tau vesicles exclusively in axons in young cortex vs. dendritic spines in the aged. The observation of p-tau trafficking in young axons is consistent with recent in vitro studies showing p-tau release during neuronal activity (33) and may also help to explain why repeated head injury in young athletes leads to extensive axonal pathology in chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) (34). The switch to spines in aged dPFC suggests that axonal spread is concluded by the time p-tau aggregates in dendrites. p-Tau vesicular profiles in spines may indicate translocation within the spine, e.g., from and toward the postsynaptic membrane, as captured in Fig. 3 C and D, or possibly transneuronal transport.

It is possible that tau phosphorylation in both the spine and the dendrite are related events. For example, loss of PDE4A and p-tau accumulation on the SA may aggravate internal Ca\(^{2+}\) release sufficiently to spread through to the SER of the parent dendrite (35), where it may increase kinase phosphorylation of tau on microtubules. Aggregation of p-tau along the microtubules well as the extensive aggregation of pS214-tau in dendrites magnifies age-related increases in tau phosphorylation in monkey dPFC. The vast expansion of corticocortical connections on dendritic spines through primate evolution may magnify this process further in human cortex and lead to sufficient phosphorylation to cause fibrillation, NFT formation, and neuronal degeneration. Thus, as association cortex evolves from rodents to monkeys to humans, there may be a parallel expansion in vulnerability to degeneration when dynamic modulation by cAMP-Ca\(^{2+}\) signaling becomes dysregulated with advancing age.

![Fig. 4. PDE4A is lost from dendritic spines in aged monkey dPFC. (A and B)](https://example.com/fig4.png)

In young dPFC, PDE4A (green arrowheads) is localized next to the SA (asterisk); shown are immunogold and immunoperoxidase, respectively. (Scale bars: 200 nm.) (C) PDE4A is widely expressed in layer III spines in young, but not in aged monkey dPFC (green circles, PDE4A spines; white circles, unlabeled spines; green rectangle, PDE4A dendrite). (Scale bar: 0.5 μm.) The graphs illustrate percentage of PDE4A spines in 10-y vs. 25-y monkey dPFC (upper), averaged from 46-μm\(^2\) electron microscopic fields (20 fields from five tissue blocks per animal; SI Materials and Methods) of layer III. Young (Left): PDE4A spines/46 μm\(^2\) = 5.95 (± 2.13 SD). Aged (Right): PDE4A spines/46 μm\(^2\) = 2.05 (± 1.24 SD).

![Fig. 5. PDE4A expression and physiological effect decrease with age in PFC.](https://example.com/fig5.png)

(A) Immunoblot and quantification of decreased PDE4A protein expression with age in monkey dPFC, normalized to GAPDH, 7–11 y vs. 20–28 y, *P < 0.05. Individual data points in arbitrary units: 7 y = 0.93; 11 y = 1.06; 20 y = 0.61 and 0.38; and 28 y = 0.42. (B) Low doses of the PDE4 inhibitor etazolate (5–10 nA) decreased task-related firing of dPFC neurons in young but not aged monkeys, whereas a high dose (25 nA) reduced firing in all neurons (n = 39). Shown are significant effects of dose (F = 6.95, P = 0.002) and age (F = 12.27, P = 0.001); significant changes from 0 nA, *P < 0.05, ***P < 0.009; and firing rates percentage of young control. (C) Quantification of postsynaptic density (PSD) preparations from mouse frontal cortex shows significant decrease of PDE4A5 in the PSD fraction with age, *P < 0.05, which remains significant (P < 0.05) when normalized by PSD95 levels to account for presumed spine loss. (D) PDE4 inhibitor, rolipram, increased pS214-tau in mouse primary cortical neurons. Activation of PKA by forskolin (Fsk) produced a dose-related increase in pS214-tau (F(4,60) = 8.920, P < 0.0001) that was significantly increased by rolipram [10 μM; F(1,60) = 8.882, P = 0.0042].
of thin, highly branched dendrites may in turn cause steric hindrance, interfering with intracellular transport and thus injuring the neuron before NFTs are formed.

**Potential Interactions with Aβ.** p-Tau aggregation on dendritic microtubules may also interfere with trafficking of amyloid precursor protein (APP) and thus contribute to the production of Aβ. APP traffics in vesicles in distal pyramidal dendrites (36). When trafficking is disrupted, e.g., by genetic mutations in the retromer complex, APP is cleaved by beta-secretase 1 (BACE1) in the vesicular membrane to produce Aβ (36). A similar exacerbation of Aβ production may occur if APP trafficking is hindered by aggregated p-tau along the microtubules in aging. As Aβ oligomers drive intracellular Ca\(^{2+}\) release through stimulation of mGlus receptors on spines (37, 38), a vicious cycle could propel the degenerative process. Pathological signaling could be initiated at many points within the vicious cycle (e.g., increased Aβ due to genetic insults in APP processing or increased p-tau due to head injury and/or aging) and lead to a similar, degenerative phenotype.

**Risk Factors for AD Increase cAMP-Ca\(^{2+}\) Signaling in PFC.** Our data help to explain why aging is the highest risk factor for degeneration of pyramidal cell circuits in association cortex in AD and related disorders (1). Loss of PDE4A from spines with advancing age leads to dysregulation of cAMP-Ca\(^{2+}\) signaling and increased kinase phosphorylation of tau in pyramidal cell circuits. However, it has long been appreciated that head injury is also a significant risk factor for AD (39) as well as CTE (34, 40). More recently, psychological trauma has been identified as a risk factor for AD as well (41). All three of these factors—aging (23, 24), head trauma (42), and psychological trauma (43)—increase cAMP-Ca\(^{2+}\) signaling in PFC, thus providing a coherent explanation for how they all exacerbate the degenerative process.

**Relevance to Prevention of AD.** It is now appreciated that tau phosphorylation in humans begins relatively early in the aging process (2), suggesting that interventions need to be initiated at younger ages. The current study demonstrates that the aging monkey can serve as an important animal model for understanding the molecular events that render the association cortices especially vulnerable to degeneration and an opportunity to test agents that may slow or prevent this process by compensating for PDE4A dysregulation of cAMP signaling in dendritic spines. This strategy would complement existing research focused on genetic mouse models and target the unique vulnerabilities of the highly evolved brain circuits most susceptible to degeneration.

**Materials and Methods**

All procedures were approved by the Yale Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

**Tissue Processing for ImmunoEM.** Three young adult (9–11 y) and five aged (24–26 y, 29 y, and 31 y) rhesus macaques were perfused transcardially with artificial cerebrospinal fluid, followed by 4% (wt/vol) paraformaldehyde/0.05% glutaraldehyde, plus 0.2% picric acid in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (PB). The brains were blocked coronally, vibrosliced at 60 μm, cryoprotected, and stored at −80 °C. Sections of the dPFC went through three freeze-thaw cycles in liquid nitrogen to facilitate penetration of immunoreagents and were processed free-floating for immunocytochemistry.

**Single and Dual Immunocytochemistry.** For single labeling, sections were incubated for 36 h in rabbit anti-PDE4A IgG (1:300; ab14467, Abcam) or mouse anti-pS214-tau (CP3) IgM (1:100) (4) or mouse anti-AKAP6 IgG2 (1:200; SA1401476; Sigma-Aldrich), followed by species-specific biotinylated secondary antibodies (Jackson Immunoresearch) and the avidin-biotinylated peroxidase reaction using DAB as a chromogen. Alternatively, secondaries were conjugated to 1.4 nm gold cluster (Nanoprobes) and visualized with silver intensification of gold (compare Fig. 4A to 4B). The procedures and immunoprobos are described in detail in ref. 20.

For dual immunolabeling, sections were incubated for 48 h in a mixture of anti-PDE4A and anti-AKAP6 (see above). Biotinylated and 1.4 nm gold-conjugated species-specific secondary antibodies were used to label PDE4A with DAB, as described for single labeling, and AKAP6 with silver-intensified gold; see ref. 20 for the detailed dual immunoprocudure and methodological controls.

**Electron Microscopy and Data Analysis.** Labeled tissue was processed for electron microscopy, using 40-nm-thick plastic sections and omitting counterstaining to facilitate weak signal detection. Quantitative analyses were performed on series of low-magnification images, each capturing a field of 46 μm\(^2\). A comprehensive account of tissue sampling and data collection is described in SI Materials and Methods. Micrographs were edited using Photoshop CS4 (Adobe Systems) for brightness and contrast (applied to the entire panel) and pseudocolored for clarity. No other manipulation was made to raw images.

**Single Neuron Recording and Iontophoresis.** Studies were performed on two young adult (9 y and 10 y) and one aged (21 y) rhesus macaque trained on the spatial oculomotor delayed response task (Fig. 55). MRI confirmed recording within a region ~1–2 mm medial and ~0–3 mm anterior to the caudal end of the principal sulcus. Iontophoretic electrodes were constructed with 20 μm iridium wire attached to a Teflon fiber inserted in the central barrel of a seven-barrel cannula. Signals were digitized and acquired using SpiKey2 software. The Neurephore BH2 iontophoretic system controlled delivery of the drugs. Etazolato hydrochloride (Tocris) was dissolved at 0.01 M in triple-distilled water (pH 3.5–4.0). Two-way ANOVA was used to examine the spatially tuned delay-related activity with regard to task periods (fixation vs. delay) and cue locations, and one-way ANOVA was used to assess the effect of drug on delay-related activity. The equipment and procedures have been described in detail previously (12, 13).

**Heat-Stable Tau Preparations.** Heat-stable tau was prepared as described in ref. 44. Blocks of monkey dPFC were surgically removed and flash-frozen before aldehyde perfusion. Tissue was placed into ice-cold homogenization buffer (400 μL per 100 mg tissue) and homogenized by sonication; a fraction was reserved for protein quantification for gel loading. NaCl was added to 250 mM, followed by 14.3 M β-mercaptoethanol to 5% total volume. Samples were vortexed, heated to 100 °C for 15 min, vortexed, and cooled for 30 min on ice. Lysates were cleared, and the supernatant was used for immunoblotting. Tau band intensities were normalized by total heat-stable protein, quantified from whole-lane intensity on a Coomassie-stained gel.

**Immunoblots.** Primary antibodies were visualized using the appropriate Llicor IRDye 880 or 800 secondaries and a Liscor Odyssey Infra Red Scanner. Bands were quantified with Odyssey Software, and statistics were performed by Student’s t-test, unless stated otherwise. Antibody information is given in Figs. 52, 56, and 59.
Post synaptic Density Preparations. Mice were decapitated, and the frontal cortex was dissected into 1 mL of homogenization buffer (20 mM Hepes (pH 7.4), 0.32 M sucrose, 0.75% Triton X-100) for 15 min to extract Triton-insoluble postsynaptic densities, which were collected by ultracentrifugation and resuspended in PBS with 1% SDS.

cAMP Assays. cAMP levels were measured in the medial PFC of seven young adult (6 mo) and four aged (24 mo) Brown Norway rats. Rats were killed by focused microwave radiation and the brains rapidly removed and frozen. Tissue was dissected and sonicated in 0.1 M HC0.5% Triton X-100 on ice, and samples were cleared by centrifugation. Supernatants were used for cAMP assays, using the Correlate-EIA Enzyme Immunoassay Kit (Assay Designs). All samples and standards were run in duplicate, and results were averaged. Concentrations were determined by reference to a standard curve, and estimates (pmole cAMP) were divided by tissue mass. Data were analyzed by one-way ANOVA.

Primary Cortical Neuron Culture. Primary cortical neurons were prepared from P1 C57BL/6 mice. Brains were dissected in buffer (HBSS, l-glutamine, 7 mM Hepes; GibCO). Cortices were microdissected and the hippocampi discarded. Tissue was then transferred to 0.1% trypsin solution and incubated for 45 min before trituration and filtration (40 μm) to a single-cell suspension. Cells were plated at a density of 5 × 10⁴ live cells per well (six-well plates) in Neurobasal media plus B27 supplement, Glutamax, and Pen/Strep solution. Cells were incubated at 37 °C, 5% CO₂, with media replenished every 7 d.

p2314 Phosphorylation Assays in Cultured Neurons. Assays were performed on mouse primary cortical neurons (7–11 d in vitro). Cells were preincubated with vehicle or 10 μM rolipram in DMSO (Sigma) for 10 min and treated with increasing concentrations of forskolin (Abcam; 100 nM, 200 nM, 500 nM, and 1,000 nM in DMSO), in the presence or absence of 10 μM rolipram for further 10 min. Cells were lysed in PBS with 1% SDS, plus protease and phosphatase inhibitors, and heated to 70 °C for 10 min to inactivate phosphatases. Samples were quantified by bicinchoninic acid assay and analyzed by immunoblotting. Band intensity was quantified using ImageJ and significance assessed by two-way ANOVA, using Graph Pad Prism.

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Supporting Information

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SI Materials and Methods

For quantitative immunoelectron microscopy, layers II–III of the monkey dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) were sampled for resectioning and analysis under a JEM1010 (Jeol) transmission electron microscope at 80 kV. Immunoreactive structures were digitally captured at 25,000–160,000× magnification (Gatan). For profile identification, we adopted the criteria summarized in ref. 1.

Plastic blocks were examined using the 4th to the 20th surface-most sections (i.e., 160–800 nm; section thickness ≈40 nm), to exclude penetration artifacts. Intense immunolabeling was found to a depth of 2 μm, and was still detectable to a depth of at least 3 μm from the tissue/plastic interface. Data for quantitative assessments were collected from random 46-μm² fields of tau phosphorylated at serine 214 (pS214-tau) or phosphodiesterase 4A (PDE4A) immunoperoxidase-labeled material; counterstaining was omitted to facilitate detection.

A total of 1,200 pS214-tau immunoreactive cellular profiles were counted in young dlPFC neuropil (six tissue blocks from brains 9 y, 10 y, and 11 y; two blocks per brain) and, likewise, 1,200 profiles in aged dlPFC (brains 25 y, 26 y, and 29 y). pS214-Tau profiles were categorized as (i) axons, (ii) dendritic shafts, (iii) dendritic spines, and (iv) nondetermined, when safe ultrastructural criteria could not be used for profile identification. The prevalence of PDE4A in dendritic spines was assessed by counting immunoreactive spines within twenty 46-μm² fields from five tissue blocks per brain, and counts were normalized to total number of spines in the same area. All eight brains (9–11 y, 24–26 y, 29 y, and 31 y) were used for mapping pS214-tau, PDE4A, and A-kinase anchor protein 6 (AKAP6) with immunoperoxidase or immunogold markers. Vesicular structures exhibiting pS214-tau immunoreactivity were traced in consecutive sections to identify the host cellular profile (i.e., axon, dendritic shaft, or spine) and to capture an association with the plasma membrane or a synaptic junction.

Fig. S1. p-Tau increases in aging monkey dlPFC. (A and B) Graphs show increasing tau phosphorylation with age at T231 (A) and S214 (B); fitting to an exponential model shows a highly significant correlation for both phosphorylation sites. Total heat-stable tau band intensity was normalized by total protein from the heat-stable preparation (C). Normalized total tau intensity was used to normalize p-tau intensity to produce the graphs. (C) To control for total soluble protein in the heat-stable extract, a separate gel was run in parallel and stained with Coomassie blue. The intensity of the whole lane was quantified using Image J, and that number used to normalize total tau band intensity. There was no overall reduction in soluble protein in aged dlPFC, and therefore the decreased levels of soluble tau were not due to a general loss of soluble protein.
Fig. S2. There is minimal PKA phosphorylation of tau at S214 in adult mouse frontal cortex. Immunoblots of heat-stable protein extracts from whole frontal cortex were labeled for pS214-tau (Millipore; AB9672), pT231-tau (Thermo; PA1-14418), and total tau (Millipore; 05-348, clone SE2). Quantification showed no significant differences with age for either phosphorylation site or total soluble tau obtained from the preparations. The final lane on the pS214-tau blot shows P7 total mouse brain as a positive control, given low signals in adult mouse brain. Error bars represent SEM.

Fig. S3. (A and B) Subcellular expression of pS214-tau in dendritic shafts of the aged monkey diPFC. p-Tau aggregates along the microtubules of small caliber, high-order dendrites. A, cross section; B, longitudinal section. Note that a single microtubule may present intermittent reactivity along its length (red and white arrowheads point to p-tau–reactive and nonreactive microtubules/microtubule sections, respectively). Unlike asymmetric synapses on spines (e.g., Fig. 2A), the asymmetric synapse onto the dendrite in A (black arrows) is not p-tau immunoreactive. Ax, axon; Den, dendrite. A and B are pseudocolored for clarity. (Scale bars: 100 nm.)
Fig. S4. AKAP6 localization and colocalization with PDE4A in young monkey dPFC. PKA is tethered by anchoring proteins, including AKAP6. These images document AKAP6 on the spine apparatus (SA) (pseudocolored), the specialized smooth endoplasmic reticulum (SER) that buffers Ca\textsuperscript{2+} in the spine. Internal Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release is mediated via channels on the SA-limiting membrane, namely inositol trisphosphate receptors (IP3Rs) and ryanodine receptors (RYRs); in monkey dPFC, IP3Rs are localized on SER cisterns, including the SA (1). cAMP-PKA signaling increases internal Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release by increasing the efficacy and expression of IP3Rs (2) and by increasing Ca\textsuperscript{2+} leak through RyRs (3). Increased Ca\textsuperscript{2+} can in turn promote cAMP production, fueling feedforward signaling (2). (A–D) AKAP6 is selectively localized (orange arrowheads) on the SA, the extension of the dendrite’s smooth reticulum into the spine; note in A the continuity with the SER of the parent dendrite (white arrowheads). Double immunoEM (C and D) demonstrates AKAP6 (immunogold, orange arrowheads) colocalization with PDE4A (immunoperoxidase, green arrowheads) on the SA. Thus, PDE4A is positioned to regulate feedforward cAMP-Ca\textsuperscript{2+} signaling in dPFC spines. Arrows point to asymmetric axospinous synapses. Ax, axon; Den, dendrite; Sp, spine. (Scale bars: 200 nm.)

Fig. S5. The PDE4 inhibitor, etazolate, has more potent effects on dlPFC neurons of young than aged monkeys performing a spatial working-memory task. (A) The oculomotor delayed response (ODR) task, a test of spatial working memory. The subject begins a trial by fixating at the central spot (fixation period), whereupon a cue is illuminated for 0.5 s (cue period) at one of eight peripheral targets. After the cue, a 2.5-s delay period follows. The subject is required to maintain central fixation throughout both the cue presentation and the delay period. At the end of the delay, the fixation spot is extinguished, instructing the monkey to respond with a memory-guided saccade to the location where the cue had been shown before the delay period. A trial is considered successful if the response is completed within 0.5 s of the offset of the fixation spot and within 2° around the correct cue location; every successful response is rewarded with fruit juice. The stimulus position is randomized over trials (2-s intertrial intervals) such that it has to be remembered on a trial-by-trial basis. (B) An example of a dlPFC “delay cell” with spatially tuned persistent firing across the delay period, the neuronal representation of visual space. The yellow highlight indicates the preferred direction of the neuron; gray shading shows the antipreferred direction. (C) The dlPFC recording site in the caudal portion of the principal sulcus (PS) near the arcuate sulcus (AS). This is the region that receives visual spatial information from the parietal association cortex and is most needed for performance of the ODR task. (D) Etazolate effect on a dlPFC delay cell from a young monkey (9 y). Etazolate (5 nA) significantly reduced delay-related firing compared with control conditions (P < 0.05, one-way ANOVA). Only firing for the neuron’s preferred direction is shown. (E) Etazolate effect on a dlPFC delay cell from an aged monkey (21 y). Etazolate (5 nA) did not significantly alter delay-related firing compared with control conditions, whereas the higher dose (25 nA) significantly reduced firing (P < 0.05, one-way ANOVA). Only firing for the neuron’s preferred direction is shown.
Fig. S6. Distribution of PDE4s through the mouse postsynaptic density (PSD) preparation. (A) Immunoblot showing the segregation of PDE4A isoforms throughout the stages of the PSD preparation process. Triton-insoluble PSD fraction. Only PDE4A5 is detectable in the Triton-insoluble PSD fraction. (B) Immunoblots showing the data quantified in Fig. 5C. Blots depict Triton-insoluble PSD fraction staining for PDE4A5 (Abcam; ab14607), PDE4B (1), β-tubulin (Sigma), and PSD95 (EMD Millipore). Each band represents tissue pooled from two animals of the same age: n = 4 pools per age group. (C) PDE4A, PDE4B, and PSD95 bands were quantified and normalized to β-tubulin to control for protein loading. PDE4A and PDE4B bands were further normalized with regard to PSD95 intensity to account for observed PSD loss. **P < 0.05, remained significant (P < 0.05) when also normalized by PSD95 levels. *P < 0.05, significance was lost after correction for PSD95 intensity. Error bars represent SEM.

Fig. S7. PDE4A5 in total lysate from mouse PFC. Immunoblot was labeled for PDE4A (Abcam; ab14607) in 6-mo-old vs. 24-mo-old total tissue lysate from a punch of flash-frozen PFC. Note that the signal-to-noise ratio is low, reflecting the difficulty to discern PDE4A5 in total lysate from mouse brain. PDE4A5 band intensity was normalized by Amido black total protein stain (Sigma), and the quantification is shown in the graph. No significant effect of age on PDE4A5 expression was detected.

Fig. S8. qPCR using a pan-PDE4A probe shows a significant decrease in PDE4A mRNA with age in flash-frozen mouse PFC. Monotonic decrease in expression was found to be significant by one-way ANOVA; \( P < 0.02 \) \( [F(2,18) = 5.185] \). Error bars represent SEM. Samples were normalized using probes for the reference genes TBP and RSP, which were found to be stable with increasing age. Forward pan-PDE4A probe, ACCACAACAGCCTGACGCA; reverse pan-PDE4A probe, TGCCAGCTCCGAAATGGTGGT.
Fig. S9. Effect of PDE4 inhibition on phosphorylation of tau at S214. Sample immunoblot (one representative experiment of seven) depicts data summarized in Fig. 5D. Mouse primary cortical neurons (7–11 d in vitro) were preincubated with 10 μM rolipram or vehicle for 10 min, before being subjected to varying concentrations of forskolin (100–1,000 nM). Following treatment, cells were lysed in 1% SDS with protease and phosphatase inhibitors (Complete Mini, Roche; and PhosStop, Roche) and heated to 70 °C to prevent further phosphatase activity. Samples were quantified by bicinchoninic acid assay and analyzed by immunoblotting. Blots were labeled for pS214-tau (Abcam; 4846), total tau (EMD Millipore; clone 5E2) and GAPDH (Advanced Immunochemical; mAb 6C5). Bands were quantified using Image J, and total tau signals were normalized by GAPDH. p-Tau signals were then normalized to total tau signals.