Low serotonergic tone and elevated risk for substance misuse†

David Nutt

Summary
Cox et al’s paper addresses an issue that has long been assumed to be a central aspect of brain function – the interplay of different neurotransmitters – but for which we have very little evidence so far. It is currently unclear whether these findings will have implications for the treatment of those with cocaine or other substance dependence.

Declaration of interest
None.

Cox et al’s address an issue that has long been assumed to be a central aspect of brain function – the interplay of different neurotransmitters – but for which we have very little evidence so far. The 5-hydroxytryptamine (5-HT) system is perhaps the easiest to manipulate in that many studies have shown that simply by reducing the access of the 5-HT precursor L-tryptophan to the brain using a dietary manipulation (the tryptophan depletion technique) 5-HT function falls. This results in major alterations in brain function such as the loss of the antidepressant and anxiolytic effect of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and the shortening of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep latency. However, by and large, such changes in 5-HT function have not revealed much evidence of significant interactions with other neurotransmitters. In particular, when the tryptophan depletion approach was used to test a 5-HT link in the action of noradrenaline-acting antidepressants no measurable interaction was detected. 1

So is dopamine different? It seems that this might be the case as in Cox et al’s study lowering 5-HT function by tryptophan depletion led to a reduction in the actions of cocaine to release dopamine that was to some extent paralleled by a reduction in cocaine craving. This finding fits with some preclinical literature that suggests 5-HT restrains dopamine neuronal function, which is sometimes seen clinically when elevating 5-HT by SSRIs causes symptoms attributable to low dopamine function such as akathisia and dystonias.

Low brain 5-HT function has long been associated with impulsive and aggressive traits 2 that themselves may be predictors of stimulant misuse. The possibility that cocaine users might exacerbate their addiction by being in a state of relative L-tryptophan deficiency from poor diet and reduced appetite should also be considered.

References
The Last Vision of Angus McKay

Tom Pow

Angus McKay, Queen Victoria’s piper, went insane ‘over study of music’. He was admitted to the Crichton Royal from Bedlam in 1856 when he was 43 years old. ‘His most prominent delusion is that Her Majesty is his wife and that Prince Albert has defrauded him of his rights.’ (Crichton case notes)

Let it be noted (in copperplate), Angus McKay is a gentleman to watch. The stoutest furniture is firewood to him; a mattress, within a day, he’ll disembowel. He has been known to drink his own urine; to spit, shriek, howl and hoot like an owl:

though this last does not appear in his case notes from Bedlam – “hooting and howling” in southern parts being thought not abnormal for a Scot.

Nevertheless, there is enough on his native ground to amaze and perplex his keepers.

Fuck it! Angus McKay has done with them all.

He eases himself into the rivercold waters of the Nith across which lies Kirkconnell Wood and his freedom. At that moment (to which the record is blind, no body being found, never mind testament forthcoming)

something catches his eye – a sudden flurry and a bird with two necks intertwined; one black, the other – bodiless – a shimmering Islay malt brown.

Angus McKay watches, mesmerised as the cormorant lifts its white-cheeked head till its brassy twin – the eel – lifting with it, unwinds like a flailing clef and falls, bit by bit, into perfect darkness.

This, thinks Angus McKay, is how the bagpipe has devoured my life.

He lies on his back, drifting downstream, shadowing the black bag of a bird through flanges of light, past two gracefully disinterested swans. The eel rages still – the cormorant’s neck rising and falling in a helpless hiccup. Up ahead, the bird will calm, its neck settle again on its shoulders – but there, the quicksand waits to welcome Angus McKay, sipping him, limb by limb, into its dark and clammy hold.

That evening, owls will keen – in Gaelic – from Kirkconnell Wood, where Angus McKay perches, pale and dripping.

Will a soul never find peace? he asks. Oh, where has my plump little lover gone – and what’s become of that shit, Prince Albert?

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