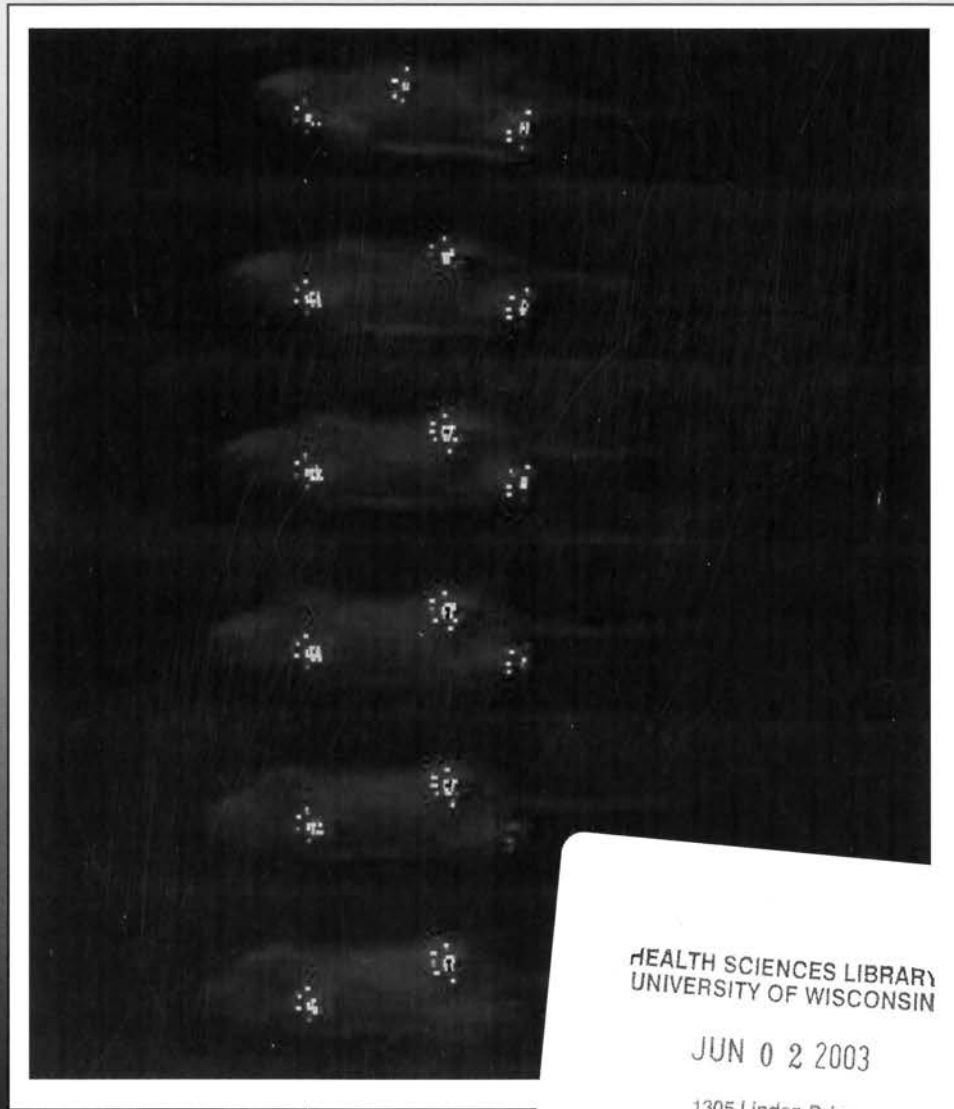


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## CONTENTS

## TOPICAL REVIEW

- Anger and persistent pain: current status and future directions  
K.A. Greenwood, R. Thurston, M. Rumble, S.J. Waters, F.J. Keefe (USA) 1

## RESEARCH PAPERS

- Chronic intrathecal cannulas inhibit some and potentiate other behaviors elicited by formalin injection  
J. Sawynok, A. Reid (Canada) 7
- Age differences in postoperative pain are scale dependent: a comparison of measures of pain intensity and quality in younger and older surgical patients  
L. Gagliese, J. Katz (Canada) 11
- Multiple phases of relief from experimental mechanical allodynia by systemic lidocaine: responses to early and late infusions  
M.C. Araujo, C.J. Sinnott, G.R. Strichartz (USA) 21
- Assessment of nociceptive trigeminal pathways by laser-evoked potentials and laser silent periods in patients with painful temporomandibular disorders  
A. Romaniello, G. Cruccu, G. Frisardi, L. Arendt-Nielsen, P. Svensson (Denmark, Italy) 31
- Chronic pain, work performance and litigation  
F.M. Blyth, L.M. March, M.K. Nicholas, M.J. Cousins (Australia) 41
- Tricyclic antidepressants as long-acting local anesthetics  
Y. Sudoh, E.E. Cahoon, P. Gerner, G.K. Wang (USA) 49
- Aftersensations in experimental and clinical hypersensitivity  
H. Gottrup, A.D. Kristensen, F.W. Bach, T.S. Jensen (Denmark) 57
- Development of motor system dysfunction following whiplash injury  
M. Sterling, G. Jull, B. Vicenzino, J. Kenardy, R. Darnell (Australia) 65
- Differential recruitment of endogenous pain inhibitory systems in neuropathic pain patients  
N. Witting, P. Svensson, T.S. Jensen (Denmark) 75
- Convergence of cutaneous, muscular and visceral noxious inputs onto ventromedial thalamic neurons in the rat  
L. Monconduit, L. Bourgeois, J.-F. Bernard, L. Villanueva (France) 83
- Susceptibility loci for complex regional pain syndrome  
W.-J.T. van de Beek, B.O. Roep, A.R. van der Slik, M.J. Giphart, B.J. van Hilten (The Netherlands) 93
- Central representation of visceral and cutaneous hypersensitivity in the irritable bowel syndrome  
G.N. Verne, N.C. Himes, M.E. Robinson, K.S. Gopinath, R.W. Briggs, B. Crosson, D.D. Price (USA) 99
- Intravenous adenosine alleviates neuropathic pain: a double blind placebo controlled crossover trial using an enriched enrolment design  
M.E. Lynch, A.J. Clark, J. Sawynok (Canada) 111
- Analgesia by electrostimulation of the trigeminal ganglion in patients with trigeminopathic pain: a PET activation study  
F. Willoch, U. Gamringer, R. Medele, U. Steude, T.R. Tölle (Germany, Norway) 119
- Changes in sensory processing in the spinal dorsal horn accompany vincristine-induced hyperalgesia and allodynia  
H.-R. Weng, J.V. Cordella, P.M. Dougherty (USA) 131
- The effects of high- and low-intensity percutaneous stimulation on nitric oxide levels and spike activity in the superficial laminae of the spinal cord  
D. Schulte, J. Millar (Germany, UK) 139
- The social context of gastrointestinal cancer pain: a preliminary study examining the relation of patient pain catastrophizing to patient perceptions of social support and caregiver stress and negative responses  
F.J. Keefe, I. Lipkus, J.C. Lefebvre, H. Hurwitz, E. Clipp, J. Smith, L. Porter (USA) 151
- The self-efficacy of family caregivers for helping cancer patients manage pain at end-of-life  
F.J. Keefe, T.A. Ahles, L.S. Porter, L.M. Sutton, C.M. McBride, M.S. Pope, E.T. McKinstry, C.P. Furstenberg, J. Dalton, D.H. Baucom (USA) 157
- Involvement of the anterior pretectal nucleus in the control of persistent pain: a behavioral and c-Fos expression study in the rat  
C.F. Villarreal, E.A. Del Bel, W.A. Prado (Brazil) 163
- A cannabinoid agonist differentially attenuates deep tissue hyperalgesia in animal models of cancer and inflammatory muscle pain  
L.J. Kehl, D.T. Hamamoto, P.W. Wacnik, D.L. Croft, B.D. Norsted, G.L. Wilcox, D.A. Simone (USA) 175
- Measuring pain in children with cognitive impairment: pain response to surgical procedures  
C. Terstegen, H.M. Koot, J.B. de Boer, D. Tibboel (The Netherlands) 187
- Complex regional pain syndrome type I: incidence and prevalence in Olmsted county, a population-based study  
P. Sandroni, L.M. Benrud-Larson, R.L. McClelland, P.A. Low (USA) 199

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*(contents continued)***CLINICAL NOTES**

Facet joint injection: a rare form cause of epidural abscess formation E. Alcock, A. Regaard, J. Browne (UK)	209
Cervical transforaminal injection of corticosteroids into a radicular artery: a possible mechanism for spinal cord injury R. Baker, P. Dreyfuss, S. Mercer, N. Bogduk (USA, New Zealand, Australia)	211
Encapsulation of an intrathecal catheter J. Gaertner, R. Sabatowski, F. Elsner, L. Radbruch (Germany)	217
Diabetic thoracic radiculopathy: an unusual cause of post-thoracotomy pain R. Brewer (USA)	221

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Spinal cord stimulation for central pain S. Canavero, V. Bonicalzi (Italy)	225
Reply to Canavero and Bonicalzi's comments on Eisenberg and Brecker, Lumbar spinal cord stimulation for cervical-originated central pain: a case report (Pain 2002;100:299-301) E. Eisenberg, C. Brecker (Israel)	226
Comment on: Serpell et al., gabapentin in neuropathic pain syndromes: a randomised double-blind, placebo controlled trial (Pain 2002; 99: 557-66) G.J. McCleane (UK)	227
Neuropathic Pain Study Group M.G. Serpell (UK)	228



## Efficacy of the NMDA-receptor antagonist memantine in patients with chronic phantom limb pain – results of a randomized double-blinded, placebo-controlled trial

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### Abstract

Phantom limb pain (PLP) associated neuroplastic changes are partly mediated by excitatory amino acids at NMDA receptor sites. This study was undertaken to deduce if NMDA-receptor antagonists may be effective in patients with chronic PLP. Therefore a four week double-blinded, randomized placebo-controlled trial was performed to evaluate the efficacy of 30 mg memantine/day, an orally administrable NMDA receptor antagonist.

Thirty-six patients, 18 per group, with a history of at least 12 months PLP and an average pain of at least 4 on the 11-point numeric rating scale (NRS) were enrolled. The patients completed a standardized questionnaire before the trial. PLP intensity and the level of eight complaints were assessed during the trial. Number needed to treat (NNT) was calculated based on the average PLP during the 3rd week (steady state). In both groups, PLP declined significantly in comparison with the baseline (verum: 5.1 ( $\pm 2.1$ ) to 3.8 ( $\pm 2.3$ ), placebo from 5.1 ( $\pm 2.0$ ) to 3.2 ( $\pm 1.46$ ) NRS) without a re-rising of the PLP during the washout period. Mean pain relief was 47% in the memantine group (10 patients reported more than 50% relief), 40% in the placebo group (6 > 50%); NNT were 4.5 (KI: 2.1–10.6). Analysis of covariance demonstrated a significant impact only on the prior PLP intensity, but no treatment effect. Two patients have demonstrated long-term pain relief under memantine until now (16 months). The total number of slight adverse events were comparable in both groups, but the overall number of severe events was higher in the memantine group ( $P < 0.05$ ). This trial failed to demonstrate a significant clinical benefit of the NMDA-receptor antagonist memantine in chronic PLP. The administration of a higher dosage is probably not tolerable.

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**Keywords:** Phantom limb pain; *N*-Methyl-D-aspartate receptor antagonist; Memantine; Placebo-controlled randomized trial

### 1. Introduction

Phantom limb pain (PLP) is a common complaint following upper and lower limb amputation with an incidence of 60–70% (Jensen et al., 1985; Kooijman et al., 2000). Peripheral, spinal and cerebral neuronal mechanisms may generate and maintain PLP, including plastic changes occurring in the primary somatosensory cortex (Flor et al., 1995, 1998; Birbaumer et al., 1997). Rapid cortical neuroplasticity and the hyperexcitability in dorsal horn neurons after deafferentation are partly mediated by excitatory amino acids at *N*-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor sites (Garraghty and Muja, 1996; Woolf and Salter, 2000; Ji and Woolf, 2001).

NMDA-receptor antagonists reduce on-going pain, allodynia and pathologically decreased pain thresholds in experimental and clinical studies in humans (Nikolajsen et al., 1996; Warncke et al., 1996; Dickenson and Sullivan, 1987; Treede et al., 1992). Ketamine is the most powerful NMDA-receptor antagonist. Using a low-dose regimen, it seems to prevent tactile hyperalgesia after surgery (Warncke et al., 1996; Stubhaug et al., 1997). Using the same ketamine dosage 72 h postoperatively, we demonstrated recently in an open pilot study a reduced intensity of PLP 6–12 months after amputation in comparison to a historical control group (Dertwinkel et al., 2002). However, the feasibility of ketamine in the treatment of chronic neuropathic pain is limited due to its psychotomimetic effects (restlessness, hallucinations, anxiety disturbances). Further-

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