In vivo optogenetics reveals control of cochlear electromechanical responses by supporting cells

Victoria Lukashkina

University of Brighton

Snezana Levic

University of Brighton

Patricio Simões

University of Brighton

Zhenhang Xu

Creighton University School of Medicine

Joseph DiGuseppi

Creighton University School of Medicine

Jian Zuo

Creighton University

Andrei Lukashkin

University of Brighton <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4577-8716>

Ian Russell (✉ I.Russell@brighton.ac.uk)

University of Brighton <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4915-2772>

Research Article

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Title: In vivo optogenetics reveals control of cochlear electromechanical responses by supporting cells

Authors: Victoria A. Lukashkina¹, Snezana Levic^{1,3}, Patricio Simões^{1†}, Zhenhang Xu², Joseph A. DiGiuseppi², Jian Zuo^{2*}, Andrei N. Lukashin^{1*}, Ian J. Russell^{1*}

Affiliations:

¹Sensory Neuroscience Research Group, School of Applied Sciences, University of Brighton, Huxley Building, Brighton, BN2 4GJ, UK

²Department of Biomedical Sciences, Creighton University School of Medicine, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178, USA

³Brighton and Sussex Medical School, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9PX, UK.

[†]Current address: Sussex Neuroscience, School of Life Sciences, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9QG, UK

*Correspondence to: A.Lukashkin@brighton.ac.uk, I.Russell@brighton.ac.uk,

JianZuo@creighton.edu

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ABSTRACT:

Cochlear sensitivity, essential for communication and exploiting the acoustic environment, results from the function of sensory-motor outer hair cells (OHCs) operating in a structural scaffold of supporting cells and extracellular cortilymph (CL) within the organ of Corti (OoC). Control of cochlear sensitivity is hypothesized to involve interaction between the OHCs and OoC supporting cells (e.g., Deiters' cells (DCs) and outer pillar cells (OPCs)), but this has never been established *in vivo*. Here, we conditionally expressed channelrhodopsins (ChR2) specifically in mouse DCs and OPCs. illumination of the OoC activated the nonselective ChR2 cation conductance and depolarized DCs when measured *in vivo* and in isolated OoC. Measurements of sound-induced cochlear mechanical and electrical responses revealed OoC illumination suppressed the normal functions of OoC supporting cells transiently and reversibly. OoC illumination blocked normally occurring continuous minor adjustments of tone-evoked basilar membrane (BM) displacements over their entire dynamic range and OHC voltage responses to tones at levels and frequencies subject to cochlear amplification. OoC illumination altered the OHC MET conductance operating point, which reversed the asymmetry of OHC voltage responses to high level tones. OoC illumination accelerated recovery from temporary acoustic desensitization due to exposure to loud sounds. It was concluded that DCs and OPCs, are involved in control of cochlear responses, which are essential for normal hearing, and in recovery from temporary acoustic desensitization. This is the first direct *in vivo* evidence for the interdependency of the structural, mechanical, and electrochemical arrangement of OHCs and OoC supporting cells that, together, fine-control cochlear responses.

Significance statement

A striking feature of the mammalian cochlear sensory epithelium, the organ of Corti, is the cellular architecture and supporting cell arrangement that provides a structural scaffold for the sensory-motor outer hair cells. The role of the supporting cell scaffold, however, has never been elucidated *in vivo*, although *in vitro* and modelling studies indicate the scaffold is involved in the exchange of forces between the outer hair cells and the organ of Corti. We used *in vivo* techniques, including optogenetics, that do not disrupt the arrangements between the outer hair cells and supporting cells, but selectively, transiently, and reversibly interfere with the normal function of the supporting cells. We revealed the supporting cells provide continuous adjustment of cochlear sensitivity, which is instrumental in normal hearing. [124]

KEY WORDS: Cochlea; *in vivo* optogenetics; organ of Corti; supporting cells; outer hair cells; cochlear sensitivity; cochlea electrophysiology; cochlear mechanics; cochlear amplification; noise-induced hearing loss, cochlear control system.

INTRODUCTION

Cochlear OHCs (Dallos, 2008; Ashmore, 2008) interact with cellular and noncellular elements of the cochlear partition, including the BM, reticular laminar (RL), and tectorial membrane (TM), via an enveloping cage of specialized supporting cells (Fig. 1A, B) including OPCs and DCs (e.g. Nam, 2014; Motallebzadeh et al., 2018). Through this interaction, OHCs amplify responses to low-to-moderate-level sounds and compress responses to loud sounds over an enormous dynamic range. Simultaneously, OHC activity provides a basis for the precise frequency decomposition of complex sounds due to their tonotopic arrangement on the BM, which is graded in stiffness and frequency from the compliant low-frequency apex to the stiff, high-frequency base of the cochlea (Robles and Ruggero, 2001). Ultrastructural (Parsa et al., 2012), *in vitro* and *in vivo* electrophysiological,

micromechanical (Zhu et al., 2013), and modelling studies (Nam, 2014; Motallebzadeh et al., 2018) support the concept that the structural scaffold of OPCs and DCs are critically located to transmit passive and active forces from OHCs to the structures of the cochlear partition. However, the role of the supporting cell cage has never been elucidated *in vivo*. In addition to having a presumed role in the interactive transfer of forces between the major elements of the OoC and the OHCs, the DCs are also engaged in regulating the electrochemistry of the CL (Santos-Sacchi, 1985; Hibino & Kurachi, 2006; Mistrik & Ashmore, 2009; Eckhard et al., 2012), which has potential consequences for mechanoelectrical interaction between OHCs, DCs and OPCs. During acoustic stimulation, when the OHC mechanoelectrical transduction (MET) channels located near the tips of the OHC hair-bundle stereocilia are gated (Figs 1A, B) (Corey & Hudspeth, 1979; Beurg et al., 2009), K^+ accumulates in the CL. This accumulation is due to the flow of K^+ down its electrochemical gradient, from the positive K^+ rich endolymph through the OHC MET channels, via the negative OHC resting membrane potential and K^+ conductance of the OHC basolateral membranes, to the Na^+ dominated CL (Figs 1A, B) (Davis, 1965; Russell, 1983; Wangemann, 2006). K^+ accumulation occurs in the CL even during moderate level sounds (Cody & Russell, 1988; Johnston et al., 1989). Increased K^+ concentration in the CL, and simultaneous OHC depolarization, causes changes in OHC responses to acoustic stimulation (Cody & Russell, 1985;1995), possibly through mechanical stimulation of the DCs, which affects OHC electromotility (Yu & Zhao, 2009). Preservation of the electrochemical state of the CL is, therefore, important for the metabolic state of the OHCs (Zdebik et al., 2009), sensory transduction and cochlear amplification. To test the hypothesis that DCs and OPCs have roles in controlling cochlear responses *in vivo*, we used optogenetic techniques that do not disrupt the structural arrangement between the OHCs and supporting cells (Lagarde et al., 2014), but allow selective, transient, and

reversible interference with the normal function of DCs and OPCs. The DCs and OPCs of optogenetic mice conditionally expressed a channelrhodopsin, Chlamydomonas Opsin-tdTomato (ChR2) that, when light-activated, gates a large nonspecific cation conductance (Nagel et al., 2002; Nagel et al., 2003) (Methods and Fig. 1C-H). We measured BM mechanical responses, phasic extracellular receptor potentials (ERPs), and tonic extracellular receptor potentials (ERPDC) from the CL. We also measured cochlear desensitization following exposure to loud sounds in optogenetic mice with excellent high-frequency hearing. Activation of ChR2 expressed in DCs and OPCs, through OoC illumination, strongly and reversibly blocked the fine adjustments of cochlear mechanical and electrical responses and accelerated recovery of cochlear sensitivity from temporary noise-induced desensitization. The use of optogenetics to block an ongoing cochlear function, provided an opportunity to examine the involvement of DCs and OPCs in controlling cochlear responses *in vivo*.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Mouse models and immunofluorescence

The Animal Resource Facilities of Creighton University approved protocols on mouse breeding, husbandry and cochlear morphological analysis performed in this study. All *in vitro* and *in vivo* experiments performed at the University of Brighton complied with Home Office guidelines under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act of 1986 and were approved by the University of Brighton Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body.

Mice were housed in a facility with a 12-h light/dark cycle and free access to food and water.

All mice used here were purchased from The Jackson Lab: Fgfr3iCreER^{T2} (stock # 025809)

and Rosa-CAG-LSL-hChR2(H134R)-tdTomato-WPRE or ChR2-tdTomato (stock #012567)

were crossed to create the Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2}; ChR2-tdTomato mouse. Tamoxifen was injected

intraperitoneally (i.p.) at 250mg/kg on postnatal day 12 (P12) and P13 mice to visualize the expression of ChR2-tdTomato in cochleae at P28. Mice were genotyped as described in protocols by The Jackson Lab.

To induce ChR2-tdTomato expression specifically in mature DCs and PCs in the OoC, we used a previously characterized Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2} mouse line that displays ~100% inducible Cre activity in cochlear DCs and PCs when tamoxifen was injected at juvenile and adult ages (Cox et al., 2012, Walters et al., 2017). No ChR2-tdTomato was detected in DCs/PCs in Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2}; ChR2-tdTomato⁺ control mice at P28, whereas Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2}; ChR2-tdTomato⁺ experimental mice showed robust expression of ChR2-tdTomato fusion protein specifically in both DCs and PCs within the OoC at P28 (Figure 1, B-F).

The cochlear samples were fixed in 4% Paraformaldehyde for overnight at 4 °C (P28 cochleae). Tissues were washed in PBS and decalcified in 120mM EDTA (pH = 7.4) for 48 hrs before microdissection of the OoC. The samples were blocked and permeabilized in the blocking buffer (10% Fetal Bovine Serum serum and 0.2 % Triton X-100 in PBS) for 2hrs at room temperature. They were then incubated at 4 °C overnight with primary antibody Rabbit anti-Myosin VI (1:400 Proteus Bioscience). The tissues were incubated with 1:800 diluted secondary antibodies for 2 hours at room temperature, washed with PBS, and incubated with Dapi (1:1000 Thermo Scientific) for 2 mins at room temperature, washed with PBS, and then mounted for imaging using Fluoromount-G (SouthernBiotech). All samples were imaged with an LSM700 confocal laser scanning image system (Carl Zeiss, Jena, Germany).

In Vitro Methods

Mice aged at least P17 were sacrificed using cervical dislocation. The mouse cochlea was freshly isolated and dissected in an ice-cold solution containing (in mM) NaCl 5.8, KCl 135, CaCl₂ 1.3, MgCl₂ 0.9, NaH₂PO₄ 0.7, d-glucose 5.6, HEPES 10, Sodium pyruvate 2, pH 7.5 (adjusted with NaOH) and osmolarity ~308 mOsm.

Our primary aim was to record DC electrical behavior under illumination within the syncytium. Accordingly, the dissected apical coil of the OoC was transferred to a microscope chamber, immobilized using a nylon mesh fixed to a stainless-steel ring and viewed using an upright microscope (Axioskope, Zeiss, Germany). Cells were observed with Nomarski differential interface contrast optics (40× water immersion objectives). The DCs are electrically coupled through connexin channels, and this coupling allows for the passage of molecules between the cells, as well as acting as an electrical syncytium (Santos-Sacchi, 1986). In fact, Santos-Sacchi (1991) reported the increased potassium current amplitude when cells were coupled, attributing this to the junctional coupling between cells. The contribution of gap junctional coupling to the observed phenomena is beyond the scope of the present investigation, which is focused on the effects of ChR2 activation on the functioning of DCs. To mimic the *in situ* conditions, we recorded from a single DCs in the intact isolated tissue, to assess the cellular effects of light activation of ChR2, which encodes a nonspecific cation conductance, on DCs electrical responses within the syncytium. Currents and membrane potentials were recorded using the same solution as for dissection. All recordings were made at room temperature (22°C). Patch pipettes were filled with an intracellular solution containing (in mM) KCl 131, MgCl₂ 3, Na₂ATP 5, Na₂-phosphocreatine 10, EGTA 1, HEPES 10, Na₂GTP, pH 7.3 (adjusted with KOH) and osmolarity ~293 mOsm. All chemicals were obtained from Sigma Aldrich UK. The patch pipettes were fabricated with a dual-stage glass micropipette puller (Narishige PC-100) using borosilicate glass with outer diameter 1.5mm (Sutter Instruments) and heat polished with a microforge (Narishige MF-900). Currents were amplified with an Axopatch 700B amplifier

(Molecular Devices, Union City, CA) and filtered at a frequency of The response amplitude of
interferometer is largest when its operating point is situated in quadrature (Lukashkin et al., 2005). During
recordings, the operating point was fluctuating due to physiological noises in the preparation, and we constantly
tracked for a response in quadrature. After 10–15 presentations of the same tone burst, the largest response
amplitude was recorded as the one closest to the quadrature response. 2–5 kHz through a low-pass Bessel
filter. The data was digitized at 5–500 kHz using an analogue-to-digital converter (Digidata
1500; Molecular Devices). The whole-cell current recordings were carried out using pCLAMP
software (version 10, Axon Instruments, Foster City, CA, USA). No online leak-current
subtraction was made, and only recordings with holding currents smaller than 50 pA at holding
potentials of -90 mV were accepted for analyses.

This study included 18 cells with a series resistance (R_s) within a 5–15 M Ω range. After 60–
90% compensation of the mean residual, uncompensated R_s was 5.1 ± 0.5 M Ω . The seal
resistance was typically 2–5 G Ω . The number of cells (n) is given for each data set. Data were
analyzed using pClamp10 (Molecular Devices), Origin9.1 (OriginLab Corp. Northampton,
MA) and Excel (Microsoft).

In voltage-clamp mode, cells were held at a membrane potential of -80 mV, and 10 mV step
potentials were applied from -120 mV to +50 mV. For *in vitro* illumination of the preparation,
we used a 470 nm, 50 mW laser source (Dragon Lasers, Changchun Jilin, China) coupled to a
fiber-optic cable (Thorlabs, Newton, New Jersey, M63L01, 105 μ m, 0.22NA) which was placed
approximately 1.5 cm from the preparation. The fiber-tip location was adjusted with a micro
positioner to illuminate the entire preparation. In both voltage and current clamp, cells were
manually stimulated by shining the laser light for about 1 or 2 seconds. Laser power was
adjusted between 0.2 and 1.7 mW mm⁻² based on in-situ calibration with a photodiode sensor
power meter (Thorlabs, Newton, New Jersey, PM16-130). Since the light-induced currents
showed a time-sensitive reduction in amplitude, we first determined the full functional
recovery from this reduction. Using standard recovery protocol and testing different laser light

density (0.25, 0.38 and 0.50 mW mm⁻²), we observed that full recovery was almost achieved within 15 seconds (Fig. 2D), and fully achieved in 30s (not shown). The design of the stimulation protocol took this value into consideration, and thus was set to have 60 seconds between each voltage step. In current-clamp mode, cells were injected currents from -70 pA to +60 pA, in 10pA increments.

In Vivo Physiological Recordings

Mice at 3-5 weeks of age were anaesthetized with ketamine (0.12 mg/g body weight i.p.) and xylazine (0.01 mg/g body weight i.p.) for nonsurgical procedures or with urethane (ethyl carbamate; 2 mg/g body weight i.p.) for surgical procedures at the University of Brighton. Mice were tracheotomized, and their core temperature was maintained at 38 °C. The auditory sensitivity of mice was assessed before surgery using distortion-product otoacoustic emissions (DPOAE, see below) to ensure each mouse was sensitive throughout the 1-70 kHz range of the sound system and especially sensitive to tones in the 50 kHz – 60 kHz range to levels $\leq$ 30 dB SPL.

To measure BM displacements and the OoC cochlear microphonics (CM), a caudal opening was made in the ventro-lateral aspect of the right bulla to reveal the round window (Legan et al., 2000). Sound was delivered via a probe with its tip within 1 mm of the tympanic membrane and coupled to a closed acoustic system comprising two MicroTechGefell GmbH 1-inch MK102 microphones for delivering tones and a Bruel and Kjaer (www.Bksv.co.uk) 3135 0.25-inch microphone for monitoring sound pressure at the tympanum and DPOAEs. The sound system was calibrated *in situ* for frequencies between 1 and 70 kHz and known sound-pressure levels were expressed in dB SPL with reference to 2×10^{-5} Pa. Tone pulses with rise/fall times of 1 ms were synthesized by a Data Translation 3010 (Data Translation, Marlboro, MA) data acquisition board, attenuated, and used for

sound-system calibration and the measurement of electrical and acoustical cochlear responses. To measure DPOAEs, primary tones were set to generate $2f_1$ – f_2 distortion products at frequencies between 1 and 50 kHz. DPOAEs were measured for f_1 levels from 10 to 80 dB SPL, with the levels of the f_2 tone set 10 dB below that of the f_1 tone. DPOAE threshold curves represented the level of the f_2 tone that produced a $2f_1$ – f_2 DPOAE with a level of 0 dB SPL when the f_2/f_1 frequency ratio was 1.23. System distortion during DPOAE measurements was 80 dB below the primary-tone levels.

The BM was illuminated by a blue 470 nm, 50 mW laser source (Dragon Lasers, Changchun Jilin, China) couple to a fiber-optic cable (Thorlabs, M63L01, 105 μ m, 0.22NA). The tip was positioned with a micromanipulator to be 0.2 mm from the surface of the RW membrane, where it cast a ~200 μ m diameter circle of illumination on the BM, centered on either the micropipette or the BM displacement measurement beam. The distance of 0.2 mm from the RW was determined during the calibration of the beam by casting a 200 μ m diameter circle of illumination on the surface of the photo diode sensor of a power meter (Thorlabs, PM16-130). The laser power at the level of the OHCs was computed according to Wu et al. (2016), who used analysis and estimates provided by Zhang et al. (2006) and Aravanis et al. (2007). Laser on-off was controlled through transistor-transistor logic (TTL). If the illumination periods were extended for more than three seconds, the prolonged excitation of ChR2 and the gating of the nonselective cation conductances caused large, but reversible, changes in the electrochemistry of the cochlea (Fig. 2G) that confounded the objective of using the technique for blocking ongoing DC and OPC function. For this reason, periods of BM light illumination were usually limited to ≤ 3 seconds.

Intracellular and extracellular voltage responses were recorded from presumed DCs and the fluid spaces of the OoC using glass pipettes (20 M Ω - 80 M Ω when filled with 3M KCl) pulled from 1 mm diameter thin-walled quartz glass tubing on a Sutter P-2000 micropipette

puller (Sutter Instrument Novato, CA 94949, USA). Signals were amplified with a recording bandwidth of DC - 100 kHz using a custom preamplifier (Brighton lab, James Hartley). The voltage signals were not capacitance compensated. Presumed DCs with very negative resting membrane potentials (-112.5 ± 8.3 mV, $n = 18$) were encountered by advancing microelectrodes through the BM in the close vicinity of OHCs in the 50 kHz - 60 kHz region of the basal turn of the cochlea. Further advance resulted in encountering the fluid spaces of Nuel that are adjacent to the OHCs, with zero potentials, and scala media with positive EP ($+114.3 \pm 3.7$ mV, $n=11$).

Tone-evoked BM displacements were measured by focusing the beam of a self-mixing, displacement sensitive, laser-diode interferometer (Lukashkin et al., 2005) through the round window membrane to form a 20- μ m spot on the center of the BM in the 50-60 kHz region of the cochlea. To take rapid snapshots of the BM responses without many averages, the following algorithm was employed: The response amplitude of interferometer is largest when its operating point is situated in quadrature (Lukashkin et al., 2005). During recordings, the operating point fluctuated due to physiological noises in the preparation, and we constantly tracked for a response in, or very close to, quadrature, i.e. for the largest response. We balanced the demand for rapid data acquisition with the need for sensitive measurement by spotting the maximum response in 10-15 presentations of the same tone burst. The largest response amplitude recorded was the one closest to the quadrature response. This allowed us to complete recording of the entire level functions (dependence of the BM movement on stimulation level) within 15-20 seconds. The interferometer was calibrated at each measurement location by vibrating the piezo stack on which it was mounted over a known range of displacements. BM measurements were checked continuously for changes in the sensitivity of the measurement (due to changes in alignment or to fluid on the RW) and for changes in the condition of the preparation. If thresholds of the latter changed by more than

5-10 dB SPL, the measurements were terminated. Tone pulses with rise/fall times of 1 ms were used for BM measurements. Stimulus delivery to the sound system and interferometer for calibration and processing of signals from the microphone amplifiers, microelectrode recording amplifiers, and interferometer were controlled by a DT3010/32 (Data Translation, Marlboro, MA) board by a PC running Matlab (The MathWorks, Natick, MA) at a sampling rate of 250 kHz. The output signal of the interferometer was processed using a digital phase-locking algorithm, and instantaneous amplitude and phase of the wave were recorded.

Measurements were made without knowledge of genotype. Less than 5% of all measurements were terminated because the physiological state of the preparation changed during measurements, in which case data from the sample was excluded.

Experimental design and statistical analyses

ChR2-tdTomato^{+/+} experimental mice were crossed to generate +/+, +/- and -/- genotypes. Male and female mice were studied in approximately equal proportions. No phenotypic differences were observed between males and females. Physiological tests were performed on +/+ and -/- littermates to minimize any influence of age, environment or genetic background. Tests were performed on 3 – 5-week-old mice to reduce the possibility of progressive loss of high frequency responses, which is common in many mouse strains. Tests were performed on all mice in a litter without knowledge of genotype. The genotypes were determined after the experiments. For statistical analysis of physiological experiments, data were compared for at least 5 +/+ and 5 ChR2-/- mice, obtained from recordings of 2 or 3 complete litters. For analysis of BM and electrophysiological measurements from presumed DCs and fluid spaces of the OC, 18 +/+ and 10 -/- ChR2 mice in total were tested. Data were analyzed as mean $\pm$ standard deviation (S.D.) and plotted using Fig P (www.figpsoft.com) or Origin (www.originlab.com) software. Statistical tests were performed with GraphPad Prism

(<https://www.graphpad.com/quickcalcs>) and comparisons made using unpaired *t* tests for unequal variances unless otherwise noted. P values are noted as absolute values with *t* values and degrees of freedom (df).

In summary, all measurements were performed blind. Measurements were made from each animal in a litter and data were analyzed at the end of each set of measurements. When all measurements had been made from a particular litter, the tissue was genotyped. Phenotypic differences between the wild-type (WT), heterozygous and homozygous mice were very strong. Thus, only sufficient numbers of measurements were made to obtain statistically significant differences. Experiments were terminated (<5% of all measurements) if the physiological state of the preparation changed during a measurement and data from the measurement was excluded.

Software / code

For physiological recordings, data acquisition and data analysis were performed using a PC with programs written in MATLAB (The MathWorks, Natick, MA). The programs are available upon request from authors ANL and IJR. Please note that the programs were written to communicate with specific hardware (Data Translation 3010 board and custom-made GPIB-controlled attenuators) and will need modification if used with different hardware.

RESULTS

Specific inducible expression of ChR2 in cochlear supporting cells

To induce ChR2 expression specifically in mature DCs and PCs in the OoC of the cochlea, we used a previously characterized Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2} mouse line that displays ~100% inducible Cre activity in cochlear DCs and PCs when tamoxifen is injected at juvenile and adult ages (Cox et al., 2012; Walters et al., 2017). When induced at postnatal days 12 and 13 (P12/13) or

P21, Fgfr3-iCreERT2+; ChR2-tdTomato+ experimental mice showed robust expression of ChR2-tdTomato fusion protein specifically in both DCs and PCs within the OoC at P28, whereas no ChR2-tdTomato was detected in DCs/PCs in Fgfr3-iCreERT2-; ChR2-tdTomato+ control mice at P28 (Fig. 1C-H; see Methods). No expression of ChR2-tdTomato was detected in stria vascularis or any other cochlear structures of Fgfr3-iCreERT2+; ChR2-tdTomato+ experimental mice when induced at P12/13 and analyzed at P21/22. These results on ChR2-specific expression in DCs and PCs in the cochlea are consistent with previous studies (Hayashi et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2012; Walters et al., 2017).

ChR2 activation depolarizes ChR2 mouse DC membrane potentials in *ex vivo* and *in vivo* preparations

ChR2 is a light-sensitive, cation-selective channel (Nagel et al., 2002, Nagel et al., 2003). When activated by light in whole-cell patch recordings from *ex vivo* flat-mounted preparations of the OoC, ChR2-expressing DCs are depolarized (Fig. 2A and B) by increased conductance (Fig. 2C). This was not observed in WT littermates (control, black traces, Figs. 2A, B).

In vivo measurements using sharp electrodes revealed that resting membrane potentials of mouse DCs (103.5 ± 7.3 mV, $n = 8$ DCs in 3 cochleae) were more negative than those recorded in the guinea-pig cochlea (Dallos et al., 1982). Depolarizations (Fig. 3A, B, 4.2 ± 0.3 mV, $n = 14$) were also recorded *in vivo* from presumed ChR2-expressing DCs when the ChR2 conductance was activated by OoC illumination.

Activation of ChR2-expressing DCs and OPCs suppresses continuous fine adjustments of BM responses.

357 To examine how supporting cells might influence cochlear mechanical responses, we
358 measured the magnitude of BM displacement as a function of sound pressure level (SPL). In
359 contrast to RL frequency tuning (Ren et al., 2016), BM displacement frequency tuning curves
360 closely mirror the voltages frequency tuning curves of OHCs (Russell & Kössl, 1992; Russell
361 et al., 1995). Thus, BM response to OoC illumination should reflect any changes in OHC
362 output due to light-activation of ChR2 expressed in the supporting cells. A self-mixing laser
363 vibrometer (Lukashkin et al., 2005) was used both in ChR2 mice that expressed ChR2 in their
364 OPCs and DCs, and in their WT littermates that lacked such expression. We measured tone-
365 evoked BM displacements both with and without activating the ChR2 conductance by OoC
366 illumination (Fig. 4). Significantly, we measured the BM displacement using an algorithm
367 that enables rapid BM measurements without involving extensive averaging: A single level
368 function (BM displacement as a function of stimulation level) could be measured within 15-
369 20 seconds. This technique resulted in enhanced temporal resolution, which was essential for
370 this study, but resulted in a high noise floor, preventing us from collecting data at the lowest
371 detection and stimulation levels (< 25 dB SPL and 0.03 nm).

372 Tone-evoked BM displacements were measured as a function of SPL to near-CF tones in the
373 basal turn of the cochlea before, during, and after illumination of the BM measurement site
374 through the RW membrane (Figs. 1A, 4). Changes in BM mechanical responses occurred in
375 ChR2 mice at OoC illumination onset but responses returned close to the original control
376 levels within 35 seconds of illumination offset. Measurements made from the cochleae of the
377 same and different ChR2 mice revealed that throughout the measured range ($20 - 90$ dB
378 SPL), OoC illumination could both increase and decrease (Fig.4A-G) BM mechanical
379 responses to near-CF tones in the same cochlea by similar amounts (11.7 ± 4.1 dB, $n = 7$
380 cochleae for the increases and 13.2 ± 2.9 dB, $n = 9$ cochleae for the decreases). BM laser
381 illumination in WT littermates had no visible effects on the BM mechanical responses, which

showed small variations in level functions regardless of the presence of the illumination (Figs. 5B). Any phase changes due to OoC illumination were $< \pm 10$ degrees and thus were within the noise floor of these measurements.

By measuring from the same cochlea successively over time at 5-minute intervals (Fig. 4A-G), which enabled full recovery of BM mechanical responses following OoC illumination, and after superimposing the traces (Fig. 4H), we discovered that OoC illumination did not alter the overall sensitivity of the BM mechanical responses. Instead, it suppressed a mechanism that exerted continuous fine control of BM mechanical responses over their entire measured range of sound levels. Without OoC illumination successive level functions differed slightly. When successive illuminated BM level functions were superimposed (Figs. 4H, 5A, C, red curves and symbols) level functions obtained during OoC illumination were very similar, but not in WT littermates (Fig. 5B, D). When the mean and standard deviations (SDs) of the superimposed level functions shown in Figs. 5 A, B were plotted (Figs. 5C, D), the mean curves lay almost over each other and the SDs overlapped. These findings indicate that there is no significant difference between the averaged BM responses to sound stimulation with and without OoC illumination for measurements made in Chr2 and WT mice. Importantly, however, the standard deviations (SDs) of the averaged BM level functions measured during OoC illumination in Chr2 mice (Fig. 4C), but not in the WT mice (Fig. 5D), were significantly reduced compared to those measured without OoC illumination (see below).

To quantify the effect of Chr2 activation on fluctuations in BM mechanical responses (Fig. 4H, Fig. 5A, B), the SDs of measurements made at all levels throughout the level functions were expressed as a percentage of the mean (Coefficient of Variation, CV). Based on five BM displacement-level functions measured during, five before, and five after OoC illumination, in each of five Chr2 mice (a total of 75 level functions), the CV calculated for

the entire range of level functions was $26.0 \pm 9.9\%$ ($n = 50$) without OoC illumination and $5.2 \pm 3.9\%$ ($n = 25$) with OoC illumination (Fig. 5E). The CV during OoC illumination (i.e. Chr2 activation) is significantly smaller than that without illumination (two-tailed t-test, $p > 0.0001$, $t = 9.4702$, $df = 73$). Similar analysis of 5 WT littermates revealed no significant difference in the CV in BM displacement measurements made without ($25.2 \pm 5.8\%$, $n = 50$) and with OoC illumination ($26.3 \pm 7.7\%$, $n = 25$) (two-tailed t-test, $p = 0.4909$, $t = 0.6923$, $df = 73$). Accordingly, light activation of Chr2 expressed in DCs and OPCs suppresses DC- and OPC-mediated fine adjustments in BM mechanical responses and stabilizes BM displacement-level functions.

Light activation of Chr2-expressing DCs and OPCs suppresses continuous adjustments to actively amplified OHC electrical responses

OHCs are mechanically caged by the DCs and OPCs and are suggested to exchange forces via this cage with the major noncellular structures of the cochlear partition (Soons et al., 2015; Motallebzadeh et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). For this reason, as a first step in understanding how DCs and OPCs might control OHC sensitivity *in vivo*, we measured the effects of activating the Chr2 receptors expressed in the DCs and OPCs, on OHC tone-evoked voltage responses. The measured voltage response corresponds to the extracellular receptor potential (ERP), which is produced across the resistive network of the CL (see Introduction). We measured the magnitude of ERPs recorded from the CL of Chr2 mice and their WT littermates using thin-walled quartz micropipettes (resistances: 30 – 60 M Ω , 3M KCl electrolyte). The ERP was expressed as a function of SPL (level functions) in response to tones with and without Chr2 activation in the 50 kHz – 60 kHz region of the cochleae. The largest tone-evoked voltage ERPs recorded from the OoC were from the CL immediately adjacent to the OHCs and DCs (Johnstone et al., 1989). Due to the spread of excitation, with

increasing level above ~40 dB SPL, OHCs from adjacent frequency regions contributed to the ERP (Cheatham et al., 2011). In 9 sensitive mice (thresholds at the CF of the measurement location = 16.5 ± 3.2 dB SPL), continuous light-activation of ChR2 expressed in the DCs and OPCs caused changes in the ERP responses to 50 – 60 kHz tones for stimulus levels within ~30 dB SPL of threshold (Fig. 6A). Similar to the stabilization effect of ChR2 light activation on the BM level functions in the ChR2 mice (Figs. 4H, 5), ChR2 light-activation stabilized OHC voltage responses to tones. They differed, however, by stabilizing ERPs only to tones at and close to the CF that are subject to amplification (Fig. 6A). OoC illumination had no apparent effect on ERPs outside this range or to ERPs recorded in response to tones at any frequency or level from WT littermates (Fig. 6B). The stabilization revealed that OPCs and DCs can adjust the threshold ERP response through decreasing it by a maximum of 14.1 ± 3.3 dB ($n = 7$ cochleae) or increasing it by a maximum of 12.4 ± 3.2 dB ($n = 8$ cochleae). Within 35 s of OoC illumination, ERP sensitivity returned to levels similar to those before OoC illumination demonstrating its reversibility.

To quantify the effect of ChR2 activation on ERP level-function fluctuation, we measured the mean $\pm$ SD at each measurement level of the successive groups of level functions (Figs. 6C, D). From inspection of Fig. 6C for levels within 30 dB of the detection threshold, the SDs of measurements made with ChR2 activation were considerably smaller than those made without. For ERP measurements to levels above this range, the SDs of ERP measurements made with and without ChR2 activation were similar. The relative SDs of measurements within 30 dB of the measurement threshold were expressed as CVs (Fig. 6E). Based on ERP level functions measured before, during, and after ChR2 activation, in each of five ChR2 mice (a total of 42 level functions), the CV was $36.9 \pm 15.0\%$ ($n = 28$) for ERP level functions in the 30-dB range of the ERP detection threshold without ChR2 activation, and $7.9 \pm 4.0\%$ ($n = 14$) for those with ChR2 activation. The CV during ChR2 activation was

significantly smaller than that without ChR2 activation (two-tailed t-test, $p > 0.0001$, $t = 6.9716$, $df = 40$). Similar analysis of 5 WT littermates that do not express ChR2, revealed no significant difference in the CV (Fig. 6E) in ERP level functions made without OoC illumination ($33.4 \pm 10.5\%$, $n = 32$) and with OoC illumination ($35.7 \pm 11.3\%$, $n = 16$) (two-tailed t-test, $p = 0.5053$, $t = 0.6714$, $df = 46$). It is concluded that light activation of ChR2 expressed in DCs and OPCs blocks fluctuations in the ERP displacement-level functions at levels that are subject to active amplification. Accordingly, DCs and OPCs fine-control cochlear amplification at near-threshold levels.

Light-activation of ChR2 reveals a role for DCs and OPCs in recovery from temporary noise-induced cochlear desensitization

It has been suggested that OoC supporting cells play a role in the recovery of cochlear sensitivity from temporary acoustic desensitization (Flock et al., 1999). Motivated by the findings reported above, we tested the idea that OPCs and DCs contribute to recovery from temporary acoustic desensitization through homeostatic control of the electrochemistry of the CL. To this end, we examined the consequences for recovery from temporary cochlear desensitization in ChR2 mice by activating the ChR2 conductance expressed in OPCs and DCs to effectively interfere with their normal function during the recovery period. Brief exposure to loud sounds (≥ 80 dB SPL) can temporarily desensitize the cochlea for seconds to minutes (Cody & Russell, 1988). Cochlear desensitization of about 15 dB (indicated by green arrows, Figs. 7A-C and associated timelines measured at 70 dB SPL (Figs. 7D-F) occurred when the required 5-minute recovery period between successive level function measurements (which included exposure to ≥ 80 dB SPL sounds) was omitted. In Fig. 7B, it is shown that the cochlear BM responses are desensitized if a second level function is measured (open circles) within 35 s of the initial measurement (open squares), as observed in Fig. 7A.

Measurement of a level function (open red squares, 105 s) immediately following ChR2 activation by a brief period (3 s) of OoC illumination revealed that ChR2 activation in the OoC supporting cells was associated with rapid recovery from the temporary desensitization (open black circles, 70 s). The OoC illumination period is shown as a vertical red bar in the associated timeline (Fig. 7E). All preparations, either through slow or rapid recovery, recovered to control levels by 5 minutes (solid black squares). Rapid recovery from loud-sound desensitization did not occur if OoC illumination of a ChR2 mouse was omitted (Fig. 7A, D). WT littermates that did not express ChR2 in OoC supporting cells also failed to recover rapidly if the OoC was illuminated (open red squares, Figs. 7C and vertical red bar in associated timeline, Fig. 7F). Bar charts shown in Fig. 7G represent the maximum decrease ($\pm$ SD) in BM displacement sensitivity to near-CF tones following presentation of three successive level function measurements at 35 s intervals in ChR2 mice (15.3 ± 3.4 dB, $n = 6$ cochleae) and WT littermates (14.9 ± 3.7 dB, $n = 5$) without OoC illumination, and in ChR2 (0.7 ± 2.4 dB, $n = 6$) and WT littermates (14.7 ± 4.1 dB, $n = 5$) with OoC illumination preceding the third level function measurement. There was no significant difference in the sensitivity decrease following loud-tone exposure between the WT with and ChR2 mice without OoC illumination (two-tailed t test, $P = 0.7964$, $t = 0.2658$, $df = 9$). The sensitivity decreases following loud-tone exposure with OoC illumination in ChR2 mice and in WT littermates was very significantly different (two-tailed t test, $P < 0.0001$, $t = 8.5932$, $df = 10$). DCs and OCs are thus involved in producing the period of desensitization in the prolonged recovery period that follows exposure of the cochlea to a loud sound.

Light-activation of ChR2-expressing DCs and OPCs changes the polarity of tonic electrical potentials, but not ERPs, recorded in the CL

When tone levels increase from moderate to intense, the almost symmetrical ERPs recorded adjacent to OHCs in the basal turn of the cochlea become positively asymmetrical and

generate an extracellular tonic receptor potential (ERPDC) that appears instantaneously positive at tone onset and declines with time (Russell et al., 1986; Kössl & Russell, 1992), as observed also in the mouse cochlea (Figs. 8A-E). Thus, immediately from tone onset, the net current outflow across the basolateral membranes into the CL exceeds net current inflow. The mechanism responsible for this change in symmetry has been attributed to a level-dependent change in the operating point of the OHC MET conductance, possibly caused by a tonic radial shear displacement between the RL and TM that causes tonic hair bundle displacement in the inhibitory direction (Cody & Russell, 1987; Russell & Kössl, 1992). Following the sudden positive potential at tone onset, the magnitude of the ERPDC declines over time. At tone offset the ERPDC became suddenly negative, presumably because the net radial shear between the RL and TM, and consequently the OHC MET conductance operating point, return to their resting states, and declines over a time scale similar to that observed during the tone burst (Figs. 8A-E). The time-dependent declines in net current outflow during the tone burst and net current inflow across the OHC basolateral membranes from the CL at tone offset has been attributed to the accumulation of K^+ in, and its removal from, the CL (Cody & Russell, 1988; Johnstone et al., 1989). When ChR2 expressed in the DCs and OPCs is activated, the sign of the ERPDC is reversed and becomes sharply negative on tone onset and positive at offset and declines in magnitude over time (Fig. 8 D, E), as observed for the ERPDC without ChR2 activation. It is possible that light activation of ChR2 expressed in DCs and OPCs alters the mechanical properties of the OoC, which causes a net radial shear between the RL and TM such that the OHC hair bundles, and hence the OHC MET operating point, are instantaneously biased in the excitatory direction. OoC illumination influences the magnitude of the phasic ERP to low-to-moderate level tones without altering the magnitude and sign of the ERP. However, OoC illumination and change in the polarity of the ERPDC

has little or no apparent influence on the magnitude and phase of ERPs to moderate to intense tones at frequencies at and close to the CF of the recording site (Figs. 8F, G).

Discussion

Optogenetics reveal DCs and OPCs finely and continuously control cochlear sensitivity.

To our knowledge, our report here is the first successful application of optogenetics to studying OoC function *in vivo*. By gating the large ChR2 cationic channels expressed in the DCs and OPCs of ChR2 mice, we revealed the normal function of DCs and OPCs concerns continuous, fine regulation of BM mechanical and OHC voltage responses (Figs 4-6). DC and OPCs are involved in finely regulating cochlear partition mechanical responses over their entire dynamic range but control OHC voltage responses only over the low-to-moderate sound levels that are subject to amplification. At moderate-to-high sound levels, DCs and OPCs control OHC voltage response symmetry by controlling the radial shear between the TM and RL. These findings indicate that at low sound levels, DCs and OPCs control cochlear amplification but, at higher sound levels, DCs and OPCs can induce mechanical changes in the cochlear partition that influence only the operating point of the OHC MET.

Fine regulation of the OHC voltage and BM mechanical responses. Studies on isolated cells and OoC preparations reveal both OHCs and DCs exhibit motility, however there is currently no evidence to show OPCs are motile. DCs exhibit Ca^{2+} -dependent motility (Dulon et al., 1994). Depolarization causes mechanical changes in isolated DCs that include increases in the curvature of the DC phalangeal processes (Bobbin, 2001; Dulon et al., 1994; Yu & Zhao, 2009). From *in vitro* studies of isolated DC/OHC pairs, mechanical stimulation and/or depolarization, causes mechanical changes in DCs that modulates OHC turgor pressure (Yu & Zhao, 2009), which controls OHC electromotility and, hence, cochlear

amplification (Takehata & Santos-Sacchi, 1995). It is proposed that such interaction between DCs and OHC could account for the fine adjustment in the sensitivity we have observed in OHC voltage responses and associated BM mechanical responses (Figures 4-6).

DCs regulate BM mechanical, OHC voltage responses and ERP symmetry. From the studies on isolated cells and preparations mentioned above, DC motility *in vivo* could be controlled by changes in the electrochemistry of the CL, notably the electrical polarization, and K^+ levels of the CL, which change in response to acoustic stimulation (Cody & Russell, 1988; Johnstone et al., 1989). OHCs generate a tonic component (ERPDC) of the ERP in response to acoustic stimulation by moderate to high level sounds. The ERPDC is associated with depolarization and increased K^+ levels in the CL (Cody & Russell, 1985; 1988; 1995; Johnstone et al., 1989). The sharp rise and fall of the ERPDC at tone onset and offset and its decline during and following the tone, as reported here (Fig. 8) and in earlier studies, can be explained as follows. Depolarization of the CL is due to K^+ accumulation (Johnstone et al., 1989), presumably when the inward flow of K^+ , due primarily to the gating of the OHC MET channels, exceeds outflow due to K^+ clearance by electro-neutral K^+/Cl^- co-transporters in the adjacent DCs (Boettger et al., 2002, Boettger et al., 2003). K^+ clearance is presumed to be facilitated by constant K^+ clearance from the DC cytoplasm via an intercellular gap-junctional pathway (Jagger & Forge, 2006). The ERPDC arises because the ERP changes from being almost symmetrical to positively asymmetrical. The mechanism responsible for this symmetry change was attributed to a level-dependent inhibitory shift of the OHC MET conductance operating point caused by tonic radial shear displacement between the RL and TM (Cody & Russell, 1988; Russell & Kössl, 1992b) due to voltage dependent OHC shortening (Brownell et al., 1985), which reduced the gap between the TM and RL. This conclusion was supported by the discovery that the ERPDC was mirrored exactly in the responses of the receptor potentials of adjacent inner hair cells (IHCs), which became more

581 symmetrical (Cody & Russell, 1995). Increased symmetry caused a decline in the DC
582 component of the IHC receptor potential, resulting in decreased sensitivity of the auditory
583 system to moderate to high level sounds. A role for interaction between DCs and OHCs is
584 strongly implicated in the control of the symmetry of OHC and IHC receptor potentials,
585 because activation of ChR2 expressed in DCs and OPCs controls the OHC MET operating
586 point, which reverses the polarity of the ERPDC from normally positive to negative. How
587 DCs contribute to the shear displacement between the TM and RL at high levels is unknown.
588 DCs could exert forces on OHCs to enhance turgor pressure and modify their electromotility.
589 In addition, through their phalangeal processes, they could exert shearing forces on the RL.
590 The reversal in polarity of the ERPDC can be accounted for by the gating of the large ChR2
591 cationic conductance expressed in the DCs, which would effectively shunt K^+ from the CL
592 and increase the driving voltage for K^+ across the OHC basolateral membrane and
593 hyperpolarize the OHCs. OHCs elongate when hyperpolarized (Brownell et al., 1995), which
594 could reverse radial shear between the TM and RL and shift the OHC MET conductance
595 operating point in the inhibitory direction. If, as we anticipate, fine control of cochlear
596 sensitivity depends on K^+ levels in the CL, this may explain why cation channels are not
597 expressed in DCs and OPCs in high densities (Santos-Sacchi, 1985), because these could
598 short-circuit the mechanism that fine-controls cochlear sensitivity. Another reason for the
599 limited K^+ buffering abilities of supporting cells might originate from an apparent lack of
600 selective evolutionary pressure to favor expression of a system that ensures rapid recovery
601 from temporary threshold shift (see below). This is because acoustic stimulation loud enough
602 to cause temporary threshold shift is normally absent in animal natural habitats. An intriguing
603 hypothesis requiring investigation is that OHCs and DCs together form a control system that
604 is mediated by CL K^+ levels. We propose increased levels of OHC excitation increases CL
605 K^+ levels, thereby stimulating K^+ clearance from the CL and corresponding adjustments in

OHC power output. Voltage and K^+ measurements from the CL (Cody & Russell., 1988; Johnstone et al., 1989) reveal the rate of K^+ influx due to OHC MET activation always exceeds that of K^+ clearance. We further conjecture, due to OHC MET activation, CL K^+ levels directly and/or indirectly control electromechanical feedback between the DCs and OHCs. This control appears as minor corrections to BM displacements throughout the dynamic range of BM responses to sound and as fine-tuning of OHC voltage responses to tones at levels subject to cochlear amplification.

DCs and OPCs and impedance matching between the OHCs and their supporting-cell scaffold. In parallel with changes in OHC electro-mechanical sensitivity (Yu & Zhao, 2009), changes in the mechanical properties of the DCs and OPCs have been proposed to alter impedance matching between the OHCs and their supporting-cell scaffold (Ramamoorthy and Nuttall, 2012). Similar effects *in vivo* could account for our findings that: 1) OHC voltage responses to CF and near-CF tones are sensitive to ChR2 light activation only over levels within 30 – 40 dB SPL of their thresholds, and 2) BM displacements are sensitive to light activation over their entire dynamic range and at levels and frequencies that have no observable influence on the magnitude and phase of OHC ERP. These findings indicate that DCs and OPCs can induce mechanical changes in the cochlear partition that influence only the operating point of the OHC MET.

Organ of Corti supporting cells mediate recovery from temporary desensitization.

The high-frequency region of the mouse cochlea is especially susceptible to temporary desensitization which was also observed in guinea pigs (Cody & Russell, 1985, 1988; 1995). For this reason, five minutes were interposed between each level-function measurement otherwise the cochlea became desensitized. OoC illumination in ChR2 mice, but not WT littermates, restored sensitivity almost immediately after a level-function measurement without a rest interval (Fig. 7). Perhaps ChR2 activation causes rapid K^+ removal from the

CL, as proposed above, and it is sound-induced K^+ elevation in the CL that initiates and controls OPCs and DCs in the recovery from cochlear temporary desensitization. This finding indicates roles for DCs and OPCs in the desensitization process that may be important for the long-term preservation of cochlear sensitivity and hearing, consistent with reported effects when DCs/OPCs are destroyed experimentally (Lagarde et al., 2014). Moreover, the interaction between supporting cells and OHCs has been studied at molecular levels. Breglio et al. (2020) demonstrated that exosomes are released from supporting cells that contain signaling molecules for protection against trauma or cisplatin insults. Further studies are clearly required to fully elucidate the mechanisms by which OoC supporting cells control the mechanical, electrical, and ionic environment of the OHCs, and the external factors that initiate this control. These studies are essential to better understand the normal function of OoC supporting cells in cochlear sensory processing. Their role should not be ignored in attempts to restore hearing function by repairing and regenerating sensory hair cells. Optogenetics, could offer new opportunities in both the investigation of normal and abnormal function in the cochlea and its eventual treatment. [1464]

Author contributions: IJR, ANL and JZ, conceived and designed the study. JZ designed mice with ChR expressing cochlear supporting cells. JAD designed ChR mouse cross experiments and contributed to genotyping. SL designed *ex vivo* measurements. ANL and IJR designed *in vivo* measurements. PS and SL measured and analyzed data from *ex vivo* experiments. VAL and IJR measured and analyzed data from *in vivo* experiments. SL prepared cochleae for immunohistochemistry and ZX performed cochlear immunohistochemistry. VAL organized mouse breeding at Brighton. ANL wrote computer programs. IJR and ANL wrote the paper with contributions from the other authors.

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657 **Data and materials availability:** All data is available in the main text or the supplementary
658 materials. Additional data related to this paper may be requested from the authors.

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Legends

Figure 1. Schematic of the organ of Corti, *in vivo* physiological techniques, and expression of ChR2-tdTomato in its supporting cells. A. Schematic cross-section of inner ear, including organ of Corti (OoC), with three fluid-filled chambers (scalae tympani, media, and vestibuli) separated by the basilar membrane (BM) and Reisner's membrane. The

positive endocochlear potential (EP) in series with the negative OHC membrane potential provide the battery driving the OoC, K^+ dominated, mechanoelectrical transducer (MET) current pathway (dashed lines (**A**, **B**)). OHC MET current is modulated when the OHC MET conductance (red lozenge, **B**) is modulated by OHC bundle displacement due to radial, shear displacements between the tectorial membrane (TM) and the reticular lamina (RL) caused by transverse BM vibrations (arrows, **B**). K^+ exits OHCs down its electrochemical gradient through voltage-dependent K^+ conductance (light blue lozenge, **B**) to the cortilymph (CL), where it is taken up by K^+ - Cl^- transporters in the DC lateral walls (blue lozenge) and through gap junctions (GJ; yellow lozenges) to the stria vascularis (**A**, **B**). (**A**) Micropipettes recording potentials from the CL or Scala media. A red self-mixing interferometer laser beam was used to measure BM displacements. The blue light beam activated ChR2 expressed in DCs and OPCs. (**C-H**) ChR2 expression in the Deiters' cells (DCs) and inner- and outer pillar cells (OPCs). Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2}; ChR2-tdTomato mice were induced with tamoxifen (TMX) at postnatal days 12/13 (P12/13) and analyzed at P28. (**C-E**) Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2}; ChR2-tdTomato⁺ control mice. (**F-H**) Fgfr3-iCreER^{T2}; ChR2-tdTomato⁺ experimental mice. (**C**, **D**, **F**, **G**) wholemounts of cochlear basal turns. (**C**, **F**) supporting-cell (SC) layers. (**D**, **G**) projections of SC and hair-cell (HC) layers. (**E**, **H**) optical cross-sections in (**D**, **G**), respectively. Arrows label ChR2-tdTomato-expressing DCs and PCs. IHCs: inner hair cells. Green: Myo6; blue: DAPI; red: tdTomato. Scale bar = 20 μ m.

Figure 2. Light activation of ChR2 depolarizes ChR2 mouse DC membrane potentials

Ex Vivo. **A**, Current-voltage (I-V) plot: peak current amplitudes (I_{inst}) of a DC in response to blue-light illumination at different power densities, as functions of the membrane potential (V_m). Average currents measured from a holding potential of -90 mV, at a step potential of -130 mV, for 0.25, 0.38 and 0.50 mW/mm² light intensity, were -70 $\pm$ 10, -95 $\pm$ 16 and -125 $\pm$ 12 pA respectively, n=12. Inset: Inward current traces at different blue-light power

densities (-90 mV holding potential). **B**, Light-induced potential-current (ΔV_m -I) relationship of a DC: membrane-potential changes (ΔV_m) during blue-light illumination as functions of injected currents (I). Light-induced depolarizations were elicited during negative current injection. Average potential changes measured from resting membrane potential, at a current step of -80 pA 0.25 and 0.50 mW/mm² light intensity were 14.0 $\pm$ 1.6 and 13.0 $\pm$ 1.5 mV respectively, n=6. Inset: whole-cell current-clamp recording (resting membrane potential of -50 mV) of light-elicited depolarization with different blue-light power densities. **C**, Conductance G as a function of membrane potential V_m at 3 different blue-light power densities using data in **A** at -90 mV holding potential. Increasing blue-light power increased the maximum measured DC membrane conductance at a step potential of -130 mV (0.54 $\pm$ 0.09, 0.73 $\pm$ 0.09 and 0.96 $\pm$ 0.11 nS respectively, n=12). **D**, ChR2 recovery kinetics after 1s light stimulation in DCs at -90 mV holding potential using a standard recovery-time protocol. An initial 1s light stimulation (L1) was followed by a second light stimulation (L2) after a time ranging from 0.1 s to 17 s. The ratio of peak currents (I₂/I₁) elicited by L2 and L1 is plotted as a function of the inter-pulse interval to show the recovery from L1. Inset: examples of traces recorded in response to L2 after specified recovery times using 0.5 mW mm⁻² light intensity. The exponential fits to the data were T_s for 0.25 mW mm⁻²: 0.54 $\pm$ 0.2 s, 23.05 $\pm$ 4.21 s (n = 2); for 0.50 mW mm⁻²: 0.78 $\pm$ 0.23 s, 27.43 $\pm$ 4.84 (n = 2 cells).

Figure 3. Light activation of ChR2 depolarizes ChR2 mouse DC membrane potentials *in Vivo*. **A**, Examples of intracellular recordings from presumed DCs showing successive membrane depolarizations to OoC illumination. **B**, Mean $\pm$ standard deviation of eight successive membrane depolarizations to OoC illumination. Dashed line indicates the membrane potential of the DC. **C**, Prolonged OoC illumination and activation of ChR2 channels expressed in DCs and OPCs causes a large, slow, reduction in the EP recorded from scala media during OoC illumination. ChR2 trace arrow: onset step. WT littermate (blue

trace): nonresponsive to OoC illumination. Blue bars in **F** and **G**: periods of illumination with a laser beam (200 μm diameter, 0.25 mW mm^{-2} , 470 nm).

Figure 4. Light activation of ChR2 expressed in OPCs and DCs in ChR2 mice alters and stabilizes BM responses to tones. **A-G**, Successive BM displacement level functions to 56 kHz tones at 5 min intervals measured in a single preparation at the same 56 kHz BM location. Black symbols: without OoC illumination; red symbols: with OoC illumination for >3 s. **H**, Traces **A-G** superimposed. Dashed horizontal lines, **A-G**: averaged noise floors. OoC illumination (200 μm diameter spot, 0.25 mW mm^{-2} , 470 nm wavelength).

Fig. 5. OoC illumination reduces the variability of basal turn BM responses in mice that express ChR2 in OPCs and DCs, but not in WT littermates. **A, B**, Superimposed successive level functions (BM displacement as a function of tone SPL), measured from the basal BM turns (at 5 min. intervals) in a ChR2 mouse (**A**) and a WT littermate (**B**), without (black curves) and with (red curves) OoC illumination. **C, D**, Mean $\pm$ SD of curves presented in **A, B**. **E**, Coefficient of variation (CV, details see text). ChR2: Without OoC illumination (black solid); with OoC illumination (red solid). WT: Without OoC illumination (black hatched); with OoC illumination (red hatched). OoC illumination: 200 μm diameter spot, 0.25 mW mm^{-2} , 470 nm wavelength.

Figure 6. Light-activation of ChR2-expressing DCs and OPCs suppresses continuous adjustments to actively amplified OHC electrical responses. **A, B**, Superimposed succession of alternating measurements of ERP magnitude to tonal stimulation at 54 kHz from the 54 kHz BM location of a ChR2 mouse as a function of SPL, spaced at 5-minute intervals, without and with OoC illumination, (**A**), and for tonal stimulation at 56 kHz from the 56 kHz BM location of a WT littermate (**B**). **C, D**, Mean $\pm$ SD of data shown in **A, B**, with the addition in **A** of mean $\pm$ SD for responses to 44 kHz at the 54 kHz location. **E**, Coefficient of variation (CV, see text for details). ChR2: Without OoC illumination (black solid) with OoC

illumination (red solid) WT: Without OoC illumination (black hatched); with OoC illumination (red hatched). All measurements were uncompensated for and electrode characteristics. For **C** and **D**, $n = 6$ without OoC illumination and $n = 5$ with OoC illumination. OoC illumination: 200 μm beam diameter, wavelength: 473 nm, power density = 0.25 mW mm^{-2} .

Figure 7. Light-activation of Chr2-expressing supporting cells accelerates recovery of cochleae temporarily desensitized by loud sound. **A, B**, Succession of BM displacement level functions measured in the cochlea of a Chr2 mouse without OoC illumination (**A**) and with OoC illumination (**B**). **C**, WT littermate with OoC illumination. **A**, Black open squares: 1st (35 s) level function measurement. Black open circles: 2nd (70 s) measurement. Black open triangles: 3rd (105 s) measurement. Solid black squares: level function measured 5 mins later. See accompanying timelines (**D, E, F**, below **A, B, C**) of BM displacement (nm) measured at 70 dB SPL (vertical dashed lines in **A, B, C**) as a function of the time. **E, F**, Red vertical bars indicate 3 second period of OoC illumination. **A, B, C**, Green arrows indicate maximum change in sensitivity; dotted lines: recording noise floor; vertical axes optimized for scale. **G**, Bar graphs: maximum decrease in BM displacement sensitivity to near-CF tone level functions measured at 105 s, after three level function measurements, in Chr2 mice (solid black) and WT littermates (hatched black) without OoC illumination and in Chr2 (solid red) and WT (hatched red) mice with OoC illumination. OoC illumination: 200 mm beam diameter, wavelength: 473 nm, power density = 0.25 mW mm^{-2} .

Figure 8. Light-activation of Chr2-expressing DCs and OPCs changes the polarity of tonic electrical potentials recorded in the CL. **A-E**, ERP recorded from the CL in WT littermates (**A, C**) and Chr2 mice (**B, D, E**) to tones at frequencies and levels indicated. ERP before (black), during (red), after (grey) OoC illumination. Traces are superimposed with 1kHz, low-pass (LP) filtered ERPDC before (white), during (yellow), after (blue), OoC illumination. Black lozenges: tone bursts. **D, E** represent sequences of ERP to tones of

increasing levels, before, during and after OoC illumination. *F*, *G*, ERP magnitude and phase measured from *D* and *E*, respectively, as functions of sound pressure level. Phase is measured with respect to sound stimulus command voltage. BM blue light illumination: 200 μm beam diameter, wavelength: 473 nm, power density: 0.25 mW mm⁻². Measurements were not corrected for middle-ear and electrode characteristics.

FIGURES

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Figure 3

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Figure 8