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39. We acknowledge the many efforts of those at the University of Michigan who have contributed to the work described in this article. In particular, we thank J. Ji, S. Cho, E. Yoon, S. Crary, B. G. Orr, J. F. Hetke, L. C. Kong, N. Najafi, A. C. Hoogerwerf, Y. Gianchandani, and the staff of the Solid-State Fabrication Facility. The support and assistance of F. T. Hambrecht and W. Heetderks of the Neural Prosthesis Program, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, R. M. Burger and N. Foster of the Semiconductor Research Corporation, and G. Hazelrigg of the National Science Foundation have made our particular activities at the University of Michigan possible.

Research Article

Three-Dimensional Structures of the Ligand-Binding Domain of the Bacterial Aspartate Receptor With and Without a Ligand

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The three-dimensional structure of an active, disulfide cross-linked dimer of the ligand-binding domain of the *Salmonella typhimurium* aspartate receptor and that of an aspartate complex have been determined by x-ray crystallographic methods at 2.4 and 2.0 angstrom (Å) resolution, respectively. A single subunit is a four- α -helix bundle with two long amino-terminal and carboxyl-terminal helices and two shorter helices that form a cylinder 20 Å in diameter and more than 70 Å long. The two subunits in the disulfide-bonded dimer are related by a crystallographic twofold axis in the apo structure, but by a noncrystallographic twofold axis in the aspartate complex structure.

The latter structure reveals that the ligand binding site is located more than 60 Å from the presumed membrane surface and is at the interface of the two subunits. Aspartate binds between two α helices from one subunit and one α helix from the other in a highly charged pocket formed by three arginines. The comparison of the apo and aspartate complex structures shows only small structural changes in the individual subunits, except for one loop region that is disordered, but the subunits appear to change orientation relative to each other. The structures of the two forms of this protein provide a step toward understanding the mechanisms of transmembrane signaling.

TRANSMEMBRANE RECEPTORS ARE THE PROTEINS THROUGH which cells and organisms commonly receive information from the outside of a cell and transmit it for processing inside the cell. One type of receptor is connected to an ion channel and allows a burst of ions to enter or leave the cell, but in most cases the receptor information is probably transferred from exterior to interior through conformational changes in the protein. The mechanism of information transfer is obscure, in part because it has been

difficult to crystallize any transmembrane receptor. Although two membrane proteins, a photoreaction center (1) and a porin (2), have been crystallized and their crystal structures have been determined, they do not have the structure of a typical receptor of signal transduction. For one such class, of which the epidermal growth factor (3), platelet-derived growth factor (4), insulin (5), and low-density lipoprotein (6) receptors are typical, the proteins contain an extracellular ligand-binding domain, a cytoplasmic signaling domain, and a transmembrane domain composed of one or two transmembrane hydrophobic sequences. The aspartate receptor of chemotaxis falls in this last category (7) and is itself a member of a large family of bacterial protein receptors (8). The ligand-binding domain of the aspartate receptor has been crystallized in the presence and absence of aspartate. Structural properties have been revealed that represent an initial step toward unraveling the mechanism of transmembrane signaling in this and other related receptors.

The aspartate receptor of *Salmonella typhimurium* has been extensively studied, and the features of its primary structure are summa-

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rized below. The exterior periplasmic domain (residues 31 to 188) contains the aspartate binding site and is connected to the interior cytoplasmic domain (residues 1 to 6 and 213 to 552) by two transmembrane sequences (residues 7 to 30 and 189 to 212) (7, 8). Genetic and biochemical evidence has indicated that Arg⁶⁴, Arg⁶⁹, Arg⁷³ (9), and Thr¹⁵⁴ (10) are involved in aspartate binding or signal transmission and that Glu²⁹⁵, Glu³⁰², Glu³⁰⁹, and Glu⁴⁹¹ are sites of covalent modification during the signaling process (11). The biochemistry of transmembrane receptor-mediated chemotaxis and regulation through covalent modification has been thoroughly reviewed (12). A cloned fragment of the amino-terminal domain (residues 26 to 188) is water soluble and binds aspartate with wild-type affinity (13). We report the major features of the crystal structures of an active, disulfide-linked dimer of the ligand domain of the aspartate receptor in the presence and absence of aspartate and discuss the implications of the structural differences on signal transduction of this transmembrane receptor.

Protein preparation and crystallization. Although the detailed procedures for preparation and crystallization of the ligand-binding domain of the aspartate receptor have been reported (14), the essentials are briefly summarized as follows. The ligand-binding domain (beginning with Met²⁵ and ending with Arg¹⁸⁸) was produced from a multicopy plasmid and exported to the periplasm, extracted by mild osmotic lysis, precipitated by ammonium sulfate, and purified to homogeneity by anion exchange and other chromatographic methods. The purified protein exists primarily as a dimer and binds aspartate with essentially wild-type affinity. Because crystals of the wild-type protein diffracted poorly, a functionally active disulfide-linked dimer of the ligand-binding domain containing Cys at position 36 was crystallized and used for high-resolution studies. The corresponding intact receptor dimer containing a Cys³⁶ cross-link has been shown to signal in the same way as the wild-type receptor, although this cross-linked receptor appears to be some-

what activated when compared to the wild-type receptor (15).

Crystal structure determination. The native crystals of the apo and aspartate complex proteins diffract to beyond 2.2 and 2.0 Å resolution, respectively (16). Complete data sets of the native crystals, as well as data for a KAu(CN)₂ and K₂Hg(SCN)₄ isomorphous derivative of the apo protein crystals, were collected and processed (17–20). Difference Patterson maps revealed two heavy-atom sites for each derivative, and the Au sites were independently confirmed in an anomalous Patterson map (21). Multiple isomorphous replacement (MIR) with anomalous scattering phase refinement was carried out in the space group P6₅22 with the program package PROTEIN (20) with data between 10.0 and 3.0 Å resolution. The phasing power of the Au data was 1.93 and that of the Hg data was 0.95. The average figure of merit for the phase determination was 0.60. The MIR phase set was then solvent-flattened (22), and phases were extended to 2.7 Å resolution with the calculated molecular envelope of the protein at 3.0 Å resolution.

The resulting electron density map revealed (Fig. 1A) a cluster of four roughly parallel α helices (Fig. 2), and the handedness of these helices confirmed the space group to be P6₅22 rather than P6₁22. Two of the helices were parallel to one another and antiparallel to the two others, thus restricting the possible connectivities within the protein. The chain tracing was verified by several marker features, including: (i) the location of the Cys³⁶ disulfide cross-link joining the two crystallographic symmetry-related subunits; (ii) the location of Trp⁵⁷ as well as many other aromatic side chains including Phe⁴⁰, Phe¹⁰⁷, Phe¹⁴⁰, Phe¹⁸⁰, Tyr¹⁰⁴, Tyr¹²⁷, and Tyr¹³⁰; and (iii) most amino acid residues at the binding sites of the heavy atoms (glutamines and glutamates) having the functional groups compatible for metal coordination—three of the four heavy atoms bind at the interface of the crystallographic dimer.

A total of 154 amino acids were assigned to the electron density, starting with Met²⁵ and ending at Phe¹⁸⁰. The eight carboxyl-terminal amino acids could not be assigned to the electron density; presumably they are disordered. This initial structure was refined with a slow-cooling simulated annealing method with the program XPLOR 2.1 (23). Data from 8.0 to 2.4 Å resolution were used with a temperature decrease from 4000 to 300 K with 50 cycles of refinement at 0.5-fs steps for each 25 K decrease in temperature. An

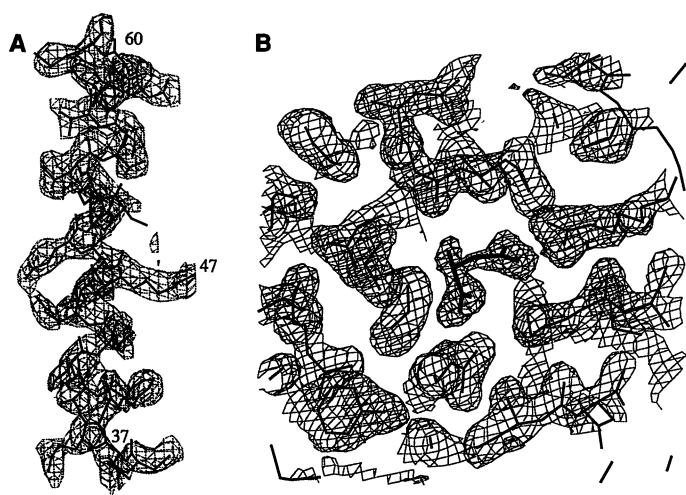
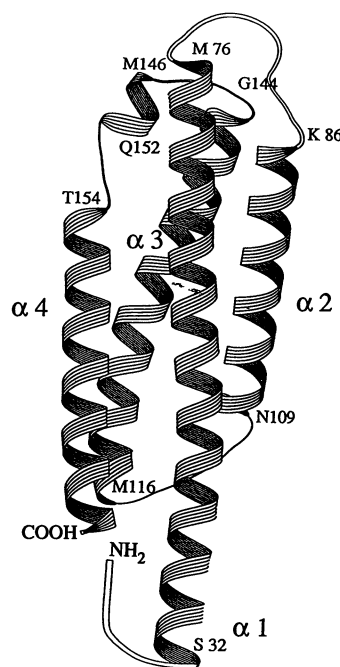


Fig. 1. (A) Residues 37 through 60 are plotted with the electron density from the solvent flattened map calculated with 2.7 Å resolution data of the apo crystal, contoured at 1σ of the map root-mean-square (rms). Based on this map, most of the residues could be easily identified to the protein sequence including those with branched side chains. Most notable among those that are plotted is: (i) Cys³⁶ at the bottom of the figure, which formed a continuous piece of density across the twofold axis to the other cross-linked subunit; (ii) Arg⁴⁷, Leu⁵³, and Thr⁵⁶ toward the top of the figure that, even at 2.7 Å resolution, clearly showed the branching of the side chains; and (iii) Trp⁵⁷ at the top of the figure, which was identified early on in the protein tracing. (B) Electron density of aspartate; 2F_o - F_c electron density of the aspartate complex crystal calculated before the aspartate ligand was included in the refinement model. The contour level is 1.0σ. The model shown is based on the current refinement with the aspartate shown in thick lines and the protein atoms in the ligand pocket in lighter lines.

Fig. 2. Ribbon drawing (41) of the ligand-binding domain of the aspartate receptor from *Salmonella typhimurium*. The beginning and ending residues of each α helix are labeled, as was determined by visual inspection of the MIR map and by using the secondary structure identification program DSSP (42, 43). The subunit has the prolate shape with a length of ~70 Å and a diameter of 20 Å. Residues 25 to 31, which are a part of the first transmembrane region, are nonhelical in our structure, but this is probably an artifact due to the absence of membrane in the crystals. The last ordered residue at the carboxyl (C) terminus in our electron density maps is residue 180, which is at the end of helix α4.



R factor of 0.27 was obtained with an overall temperature factor of 20.0 Å² for all atoms. Refinement was continued with several cycles of refinement and manual refitting of the protein to the density. Apart from the eight carboxyl-terminal residues, one loop region in the model from residue Asn⁸⁰ to Lys⁸⁶ corresponds to the weakest electron density in the map and consequently these residues have the highest temperature factors.

The structure of the complex between the protein and aspartate was solved by molecular replacement by Patterson correlation refinement (23) using a subunit from the unliganded structure as a probe model. (Residues 25 to 34 and 76 to 86, corresponding to the amino terminal and the first loop regions of the apo model, respectively, were not included in the search model.) Two independent and unambiguous solutions were found that correspond to a Cys³⁶ cross-linked dimer in the asymmetric unit. The initial crystallographic *R* factor for this solution before any refinement was 0.368 for the 5836 reflections between 8 to 3 Å resolution with a single overall temperature factor. Refinement with conjugate gradient minimization reduced the *R* factor to 0.246 for a 6 to 2.5 Å data set containing 8569 reflections with a single overall *B* factor. Data to 2.0 Å were then included, positions were refined with simulated annealing minimization (23), and atomic temperature factors were refined. A single aspartate ligand was identified and built into the resultant electron density map (Fig. 1B), as well as residues 25 to 34 and 76 to 86, which were absent in the search model. Solvent peaks are clear in the current electron density maps, but no water molecules have yet been included in the crystallographic refinement except those in the ligand-binding pocket.

Backbone structure. The three-dimensional backbone structure of the ligand-binding domain subunit of the aspartate receptor is a four-helix bundle (24) as shown in Fig. 2, which also identifies the beginning and ending residues of each helix. Similar helix bundles have been observed in hemerythrin (25), apoferritin (26), and the

receptor-binding domain of apolipoprotein E (27). The first long helix spans the length of the periplasmic domain from residue 32 to 76, yielding a continuous 12-turn helix with 45 amino acids. Although we describe the structure as a four- α -helix bundle, the carboxyl-terminal helix is split into two: one helix has two turns and one helix has six turns (Fig. 2). The crystal structure has overall features similar to a model of this receptor that was based on optical rotary dispersion, biochemical data, and secondary structure predictions (28), although the detailed features are different. Perhaps the most striking feature of the overall protein structure is the extreme prolate shape of the molecule. The longest dimension of the molecule, the axis of the helix bundle, is more than 70 Å, whereas the diameter is ~20 Å. Although primarily composed of different secondary structures, the CD4 receptor ligand domain of T lymphocytes (29) and the influenza virus particle surface protein hemagglutinin (30) have a similar prolate shape, suggesting that this overall morphology may well be typical of the external domains of many other transmembrane proteins.

The functional form of the aspartate receptor ligand-binding domain is a dimer. Each subunit contains a four- α -helical bundle arranged in parallel to form a cluster of eight helices (Fig. 3). The monomer subunits, named A and B, are composed of helices $\alpha 1$ - $\alpha 4$ and $\alpha 1'$ - $\alpha 4'$, respectively. In the apo structure they are related by an exact crystallographic twofold axis that runs along the long dimension of the molecule near the two amino-terminal helices, which results in a close association between helices $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 1'$. With $\alpha 4$ and $\alpha 4'$ nearby, these four helices form a "quasi"-four-helix bundle in the core of the dimer, in that it is less compact than a regular four-helix bundle and is composed of two different peptides, that is, $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 4$ from one subunit and $\alpha 1'$ and $\alpha 4'$ from the other (Fig. 3). The dimer interface has two contacting regions, one on top and the other at the bottom of Fig. 3, with a 6 Å wide channel across the middle of the dimer that is wide enough to allow the passage of water and other small molecules between the subunits.

Ligand-binding pockets. The molecular symmetry generates two ligand-binding sites, each at the dimer interface within the quasi-four-helix bundle near the top of the molecule, distal from the membrane (Fig. 3). Of the two ligand-binding sites, one is fully occupied and shows clear electron density for an aspartate (Fig. 1B), whereas the second shows weaker density that may be due to a disordered aspartate or a sulfate ion, which is present in high concentration in the crystals. The binding stoichiometry is thought to be one aspartate per receptor subunit (31), but preliminary experiments indicate that aspartate binding to the receptor fragment is substantially weaker in solutions containing high Li₂SO₄ concentrations (32), and our crystallization solutions apparently did not contain enough aspartate to fully saturate both sites of the protein.

The detailed interactions between aspartate and the residues in the ligand pocket are shown in Fig. 4. Each binding pocket is formed by Arg⁶⁴ and residues 149 to 154 from one subunit and by Arg⁶⁹ and Arg⁷³ from the other subunit. The two aspartate carboxylate groups form hydrogen bonds with three positively charged arginines: Arg⁶⁴ (molecule A) forms two bonds to the α -carboxyl; Arg⁶⁹ (molecule B) interacts with both the α - and γ -carboxyls; and Arg⁷³ (molecule B) makes two bonds to the γ -carboxyl. The aspartate amino group is tightly bound in the pocket formed by the main-chain carbonyls of Tyr¹⁴⁹ and Gln¹⁵² and the side-chain hydroxyl group of Thr¹⁵⁴. The three electronegative oxygens all point toward the aspartate NH₃⁺ group, and the

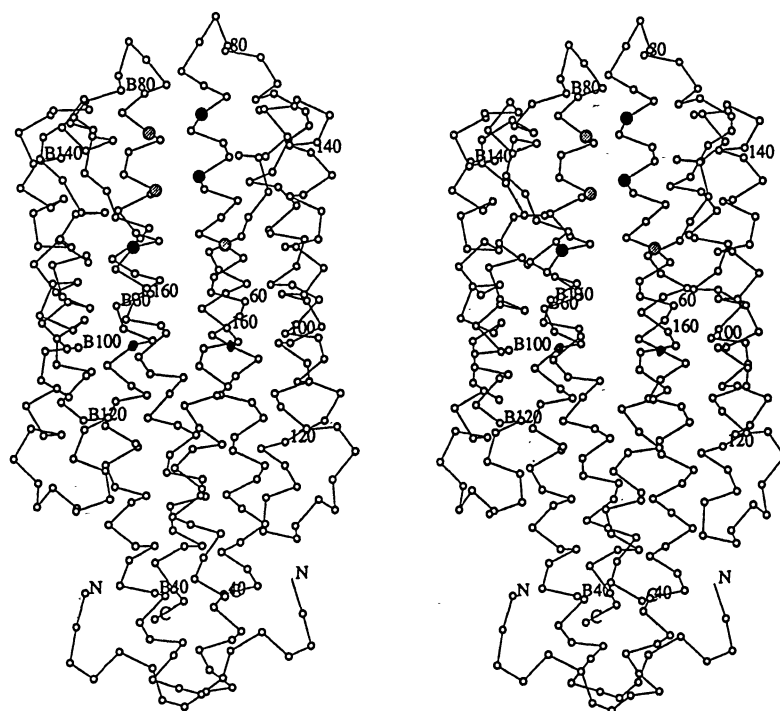


Fig. 3. Stereo view of the C α atoms in the apo form of the disulfide-linked ligand-binding dimer; Arg⁶⁴, Arg⁶⁹, and Arg⁷³, which are implicated genetically in ligand binding, are shown as shaded and enlarged circles. The twofold axis that relates the two subunits is vertical in the plane of the page, between the two central amino-terminal helices. Note that residues 64 and 154 of one subunit and residues 69 and 73 of the other (shown in black) form a pocket.

Table 1. Refinement results. Refinement statistics for the apo and aspartate complex of the ligand-binding domain of the aspartate receptor. After XPLOR (23) simulated annealing refinement, the structure was further refined with 100 rounds of TNT refinement (40). The results presented here are for the structure with no added water molecules (except for four waters in the ligand pocket of the complex structure) or phenanthroline.

Parameter	Apo	Complex
Maximum resolution (Å)	2.4	2.0
Unique reflections (no.)	12,236	19,191
Total number of observations ($I > \sigma$)	62,891	78,886
R_{merge}	0.0684	0.069
Completeness of data	0.972	0.821
R factor (no waters included)	0.204	0.216*
Total number of non-hydrogen atoms	2,462	2,471
Average temperature factor (all atoms) (Å ²)	23.5	25.1
Rms bond deviation from ideal (Å)	0.019	0.014
Rms angle deviation from ideal (degrees)	2.4	2.9
Rms dihedral deviation from ideal (degrees)	25.1	20.4

*Four waters at the aspartate binding site are included.

unfavorable (repulsive) electrostatic interactions among arginines. This effect explains the observation that addition of aspartate decreases the rate of dissociation and exchange of subunits in the intact receptor dimer (35).

A model for the transmembrane domain. The putative membrane-spanning regions of the protein sequence (residues 7 to 30 and 189 to 212) are substantially hydrophobic in character and are predicted to form two α helices (7), which we have modeled to continue uninterrupted from the amino- and carboxyl-terminal long helices ($\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 4$ in Fig. 2) of the ligand domain structure. The attached transmembrane helices were then energy-minimized in XPLOR 2.1 (23) to reduce sterically unfavorable side-chain contacts and to optimize protein dimer interactions. The resulting model of the aspartate-binding domain dimer with attached membrane-spanning helices is shown in Fig. 5. In the model, four α helices, two from each subunit, form a long quasi-four-helix bundle and connect the ligand binding region and the cytoplasmic domain, which are separated by a distance of more than 100 Å.

A continuous helical structure has been indicated by a cysteine cross-linking study (36) which has shown that residues 18 and 19 in the first transmembrane region (TM1) are close in space to positions 18' and 19' on the alternate subunit, whereas residues 198 to 201 in the second transmembrane domain (TM2) are distant from their 198' to 201' counterparts. In the quasi-four-helix model of the transmembrane domain described above, the residues 18 and 18' are closely juxtaposed, whereas residues 198 to 201 are distant, which supports the assumption that $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 1'$ continue through the membrane as relatively uninterrupted helices and suggests that the 36-36' cross-link does not adversely affect the structure.

Structural implications for signal transduction. The structural features described in this article may have important implications for the mechanism of transmembrane signal generation. The helices of the quasi-four-helix bundle in the central core of the dimer ($\alpha 1$, $\alpha 4$, $\alpha 1'$, and $\alpha 4'$) are the key to the signaling mechanism since they continue through the membrane (36), and the binding of aspartate must affect these helices over a distance exceeding 120 Å from the ligand-binding site at the top of the receptor down to the cytoplasmic domain. Three general, limiting-case models for transmembrane signaling in this receptor can be considered. Aspartate binding causes: (i) an internal change within a subunit, so that relative changes between $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 4$ are sensed in the cytoplasmic domain [recent studies with truncated receptors (37) give support for such an effect]; (ii) a change between the subunits with a possible

"scissor-type" motion in the intersubunit orientations as suggested by the crystallographic studies described in this article; or (iii) a combination of the above intra- and intersubunit motions.

These questions still need to be tested, but our study indicates that: (i) the ligand binding site for a transmembrane receptor can be far away from the membrane (more than 60 Å from the surface); (ii) continuous α helices more than 120 Å long appear to stretch from the ligand-binding site, which is the point of signal generation, down to the point of signal action in the cytoplasm; and (iii) the conformational changes caused by the ligand binding at the dimer interface suggest a realignment of the helices at the interface relative to each other, thus transmitting conformational information from the periplasm to the cytoplasm. The small changes that are observed suggest that the lack of transmembrane domain, the S-S cross-links, or the crystal lattice forces may tilt the protein partially to the aspartate-bound form, dampening an otherwise larger conformation change on aspartate binding.

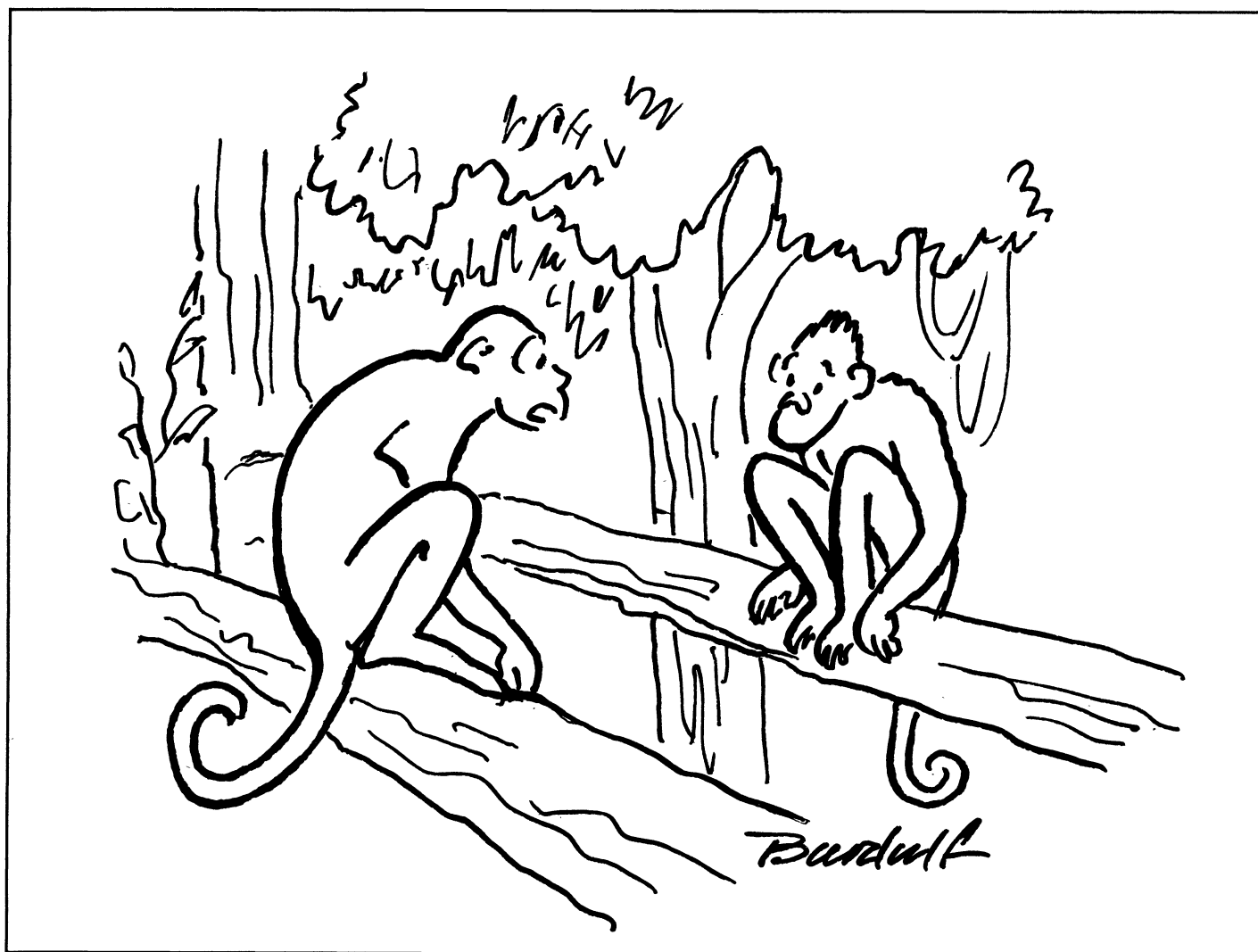
It is intriguing that many mammalian transmembrane receptors such as the epidermal growth factor receptor are postulated to be activated by an association mechanism (38). Although significant differences exist between this class of receptors and the aspartate receptor, the former having one transmembrane and the latter two per subunit, both do feature an association of subunits, and a realignment of helices relative to each other might be a common feature of both classes of receptor. The fact that a chimera of the ligand and transmembrane domain of the aspartate receptor and the cytoplasmic domain of the insulin receptor, which also contains two transmembrane helices, can transduce a signal (39), is further indication that there may be common mechanisms of signal transduction in many different types of receptors.

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16. High-quality single crystals of the ligand-binding domain in the absence of aspartate were obtained by the sitting drop technique from solutions containing 10 mg/ml protein, 0.05 M Hepes buffer at pH 7.4, 0.75 M Li₂SO₄, and 0.5 mM Cu(II)[1,10-phenanthroline]₃ (added to maintain the disulfide cross-link), and equilibrated against 0.1 M Hepes and 1.5 M Li₂SO₄ at the same pH at 21°C. The space group of the crystals is P6₃22 with cell dimensions $a = b = 80.03$ Å and $c = 155.6$ Å. One half of the Cys³⁶ cross-linked dimer of the periplasmic domain resides in an asymmetric unit. The sparse matrix method [J. Jancarik and S.-H. Kim, *J. Appl. Crystallogr.* **24**, 409 (1991)] was used for screening crystallization conditions. Crystals of the periplasmic domain complexed with aspartate were grown under the same conditions except that the crystallization solution contained 2 mM aspartate. The complex protein crystallized in space group P3₂21 with unit cell dimensions $a = b = 80.38$ Å and $c = 91.35$ Å.
17. Complete data sets of the native crystals as well as data for KAUCN)₂ isomorphous derivative of the apo protein were collected on phosphor imaging plates with a specially designed Weissenberg camera [N. Sakabe, *J. Appl. Crystallogr.* **16**, 542 (1983)] on synchrotron x-ray at Photon Factory, Tsukuba, Japan, or an R-Axis-II camera made by Rigaku, Japan. The digitized images were reduced to structure factor amplitudes with the program WEIS (18). Data for the K₂Hg(SCN)₄ isomorphous derivative of the apo protein were collected on x-ray film at a wavelength of 1.54 Å with an Enraf-Nonius rotation camera at the Stanford

- Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory. The films were digitized with a drum scanner (Optronix Corp.), and the data were processed with computer programs originally written by Rossmann (19). The native and the Hg data were merged and scaled with the crystallographic program package PROTEIN (20), and the Au data were merged and scaled for anomalous scattering data with programs from the CCP4 package. [S.E.R.K. (U.K.) Collaborative Computing Project No. 4 (Daresbury Laboratory, Warrington, U.K., 1979)].
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 43. Abbreviations for the amino acid residues are: G, Gly; K, Lys; M, Met; N, Asn; Q, Gln; S, Ser; and T, Thr.
 44. We thank N. Sakabe, A. Nakagawa, and N. Watanabe of the National Laboratory of High Energy Physics, Tsukuba, Japan, and J. Farrar of Molecular Structure Corp., the Woodlands, Texas, for use of their data collection facilities. G.G.P. thanks the American Cancer Society, California Division, for a postdoctoral fellowship (J-15-89). Supported in part by NIH grants AI 30725 to S.H.K. and DK09765 to D.E.K., DOE (Director, Office of Energy Research, Office of Biological and Environmental Research, General Life Sciences Division under contract DE-AC03-76SF0098 to S.H.K.), and the William M. Keck Foundation. Atomic coordinates will be deposited with the Brookhaven Protein Data Bank.

19 August 1991; accepted 21 October 1991



"Of course, I'd like to evolve into something better, but what could that possibly be?"