Response to letter to the editor: Safety of transcranial direct current stimulation: Evidence based update 2016

Dear Editor,

We respond to concerns raised by Godinho et al. about the Bikson et al. tDCS safety review [1]. As stated in the opening sentence, our report provided an update “based on published Serious Adverse Effects in human trials and irreversible brain damage in animal models”. Further, we carefully defined the scope of the review, “In this review, tDCS safety indicates the absence of a Serious Adverse Effect including brain tissue injury related to tDCS application.” We developed precise criteria for a Serious Adverse Effect. A systematic review of all adverse events, including minor side effects that may affect the acceptability and tolerability of tDCS (as suggested by Godinho et al.) was outside the scope of our review, and addressed elsewhere including recently by our coauthors [2].

Adverse event underreporting occurs in most medical fields. We dedicated our assessment to published reports specifically of Serious Adverse Events, assuming reporting a Serious Adverse Event (e.g. hospitalization) is more reliable than mild well-known tDCS side effects (e.g. itching). Speculation regarding unpublished adverse events was not incorporated into our evidence-based approach. Causality was explicit to our definition of Serious Adverse Effect namely: “based on scientific judgment is determined to be caused or aggravated by the application of direct current to the head.”

Exact methodology to estimate the volume of tDCS sessions was indicated in the relevant section, but safety considerations were based on the complete tDCS literature as assessed by authors with domain expertise. We underscore that our conclusions are derived from, and are explicitly limited to, stated definitions - such that the discourse by Godinho et al. does not affect the validity of our methodology. To the extent that Godinho et al. do not provide evidence for a Serious Adverse Effect by tDCS, the review conclusion is unchanged.


References


Marom Bikson*, Pnina Grossman, Adantchede Louis Zannou, Greg Kronberg, Dennis Truong
Department of Biomedical Engineering, The City College of New York,
New York, NY, USA

Paulo Boggio
Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory and Developmental Disorders Program, Center for Health and Biological Sciences, Mackenzie Presbyterian University, Sao Paulo, Brazil

Andre R. Brunoni
Service of Interdisciplinary Neuromodulation, Department and Institute of Psychiatry, Laboratory of Neurosciences (LIM-27), University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Leigh Charvet
NYU MS Comprehensive Care Center, Department of Neurology, New York University School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA

Felipe Fregni
Berenson-Allen Center for Noninvasive Brain Stimulation, Department of Neurology, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

Brita Fritsch
Department of Neurology, University Medical Center, Freiburg, Germany

Bernadette Gillick
BrainLinks-BrainTools Cluster of Excellence, University of Freiburg, Germany

Roy H. Hamilton
Laboratory for Cognition and Neural Stimulation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA
BrainLinks-BrainTools Cluster of Excellence, University of Freiburg, Germany

Jessica D. Richardson
Berenson-Allen Center for Noninvasive Brain Stimulation, Department of Neurology, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

Department of Communication Sciences & Disorders, The University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA

Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences, The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA

Alexander Rotenberg
Berenson-Allen Center for Noninvasive Brain Stimulation, Division of Cognitive Neurology, Department of Neurology, Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston, MA, USA

Pediatric Neuromodulation Program, Division of Epilepsy and Neurophysiology, Department of Neurology, Children’s Hospital Boston, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

Peter E. Turkeltaub
Department of Neurology, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

Research Division, MedStar National Rehabilitation Hospital, Washington, DC, USA

Adam J. Woods
Center for Cognitive Aging and Memory, Institute on Aging, Department of Aging and Geriatric Research, McKnight Brain Institute, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: bikson@ccny.cuny.edu (M. Bikson).

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