Rapid Effects of Deep Brain Stimulation for Treatment-Resistant Major Depression

Thomas E. Schlaepfer, Bettina H. Bewernick, Sarah Kayser, Burkhard Mädler, and Volker A. Coenen

Background: Treatment-resistant major depressive disorder is a prevalent and debilitating condition. Deep brain stimulation to different targets has been proposed as a putative treatment.

Methods: In this pilot study, we assessed safety and efficacy of deep brain stimulation to the supero-lateral branch of the medial forebrain bundle in seven patients with highly refractory depression. Primary outcome criterion was severity of treatment-resistant major depressive disorder as assessed with the Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale. General psychopathologic parameters, social functioning, and tolerance were assessed with standardized scales, the Global Assessment of Functioning, quality of life (Short-Form Health Survey Questionnaire), and neuropsychological tests.

Results: All patients showed strikingly similar intraoperative effects of increased appetitive motivation. Six patients attained the response criterion; response was rapid—mean Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale of the whole sample was reduced by >50% at day 7 after onset of stimulation. At last observation (12–33 weeks), six patients were responders; among them, four were classified as remitters. Social functioning (Global Assessment of Functioning) improved in the sample as a whole from serious to mild impairment. Mean stimulation current was 2.86 mA; all side effects (strabismus at higher stimulation current, one small intracranial bleeding during surgery, infection at the implanted pulse generator site) could be resolved at short term.

Conclusions: These preliminary findings suggest that bilateral stimulation of the supero-lateral branch of the medial forebrain bundle may significantly reduce symptoms in treatment-resistant major depressive disorder. Onset of antidepressant efficacy was rapid (days), and a higher proportion of the population responded at lower stimulation intensities than observed in previous studies.

Key Words: Affective disorders, deep brain stimulation, diffusion tensor imaging, medial forebrain bundle, rapid antidepressant effects, treatment-resistant major depression

Major depressive disorder (MDD) is a highly prevalent, seriously disabling condition of worldwide bearing (1). Most patients with MDD respond to combinations of psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, and electroconvulsive therapy; however, there are patients who profit little if anything even after many years of treatment. Between 10% and 30% of depressed patients taking an antidepressant are partially or totally resistant to treatments (2).

For about a decade, different modalities of targeted neuromodulation—among them most prominently deep brain stimulation (DBS)—are being actively researched as putative treatment options for these very treatment-resistant forms of depression (3). Recently, promising results on the use of DBS in small series of patients with treatment resistant depression have been reported for three different stimulation targets: the sub-genual cingulate gyrus (4), the anterior limb of the capsule interna (5), and the nucleus accumbens (NAcc) (6). Given the fact that patients included in DBS studies had hitherto been treated unsuccessfully for many years with conventional approaches renders these findings remarkable. Very recent studies show a stable long-term response (7). This gives hope to a substantial percentage of patients with treatment-resistant depression. However, only in 50% to 60% of the patients a significant response (decrease of depression severity of >50%) was achieved.

In recent years, research on major depression focused more on the role for the brain’s reward regions in motivated behavior, depression, and antidepressant treatment (8). Converging evidence has identified the NAcc and its dopaminergic inputs from the ventral tegmental area (VTA) of the midbrain as one of the important anatomical substrates for drug reward as well as for natural rewards (9). This reward pathway evolved to promote activities that are essential to the survival of the species and consists of core structures—the NAcc, the VTA, the ventromedial and lateral nuclei of the hypothalamus, and the amygdala—that are interconnected through the medial forebrain bundle (MFB) (10). The VTA is one of the regions of the brain that receives various inputs from other brain regions and is one of the crucial areas for information processing related to motivated behavior. It uses dopaminergic neurotransmission, and evolution has preserved the VTA to be remarkably intact, as there is general similarity between the VTA nuclei of mammals ranging from rodents to humans (11). It has been speculated that the reward system might be partly dysfunctional in major depression (12,13).

In this study, we assessed the hypothesis that DBS to the human reward system in closer proximity to the VTA is efficacious in decreasing ratings of depression by bilaterally stimulating the supero-lateral branch of the medial forebrain bundle (sIMFB), a structure with proven convergence onto the prefrontal cortex...
and measures with eight subscales the patient’s subjective change in quality of life. The subscales can be summarized into a score in “physical health dimension” and “mental health dimension.”

At baseline, the score of the Modified Antidepressant Treatment History Form according to Sackeim (17) was calculated for each patient, indicating treatment resistance at the current episode and lifetime. A score of 3 is the threshold for considering a trial adequate and the patient resistant to that treatment.

Additionally, information about safety of the treatment method (see Table 2 for adverse events) was recorded in a standardized document with a priori definitions of adverse events and serious adverse events by the responsible psychologist (according to Food and Drug Administration definitions).

Cognitive effects were assessed with a standardized neuropsychological test battery clustered according to the Compendium of Neuropsychological Tests and described in detail elsewhere (24). See Grubert et al. (25) for a detailed description of neuropsychological tests applied. Patients were required not to change medication 6 weeks before and after surgery.

**Imaging and Planning Procedure**

**Individual Diffusion Tensor Imaging–Guided Intervention.** Because the MFB is a structure that cannot be identified with conventional MRI, we individually mapped the structure by means of deterministic diffusion tensor imaging with the use of an area lateral of the ventral tegmental area as seed region, which allowed displaying the projections of the sMFB through the NAcc to the prefrontal cortex (26,27) (Supplemental 1 and Figure 1).

Tracking results were transferred into the stereotactic planning software (FrameLink, Medtronic, Minneapolis, Minnesota). The target point was defined on the basis of the patient individual diffusion tensor imaging studies of the MFB in the center of its supero-lateral branch at its origin lateral and superior to the VTA (15). A trajectory with a precoronal entry point was planned bilaterally avoiding sulci, vessels, and cerebrospinal fluid spaces (Figure 1).

**Surgical Procedure and Electrode Positions**

Stereotactic implantations of bilateral quadripolar DBS electrodes (model 3389, Medtronic) were performed by means of a burr hole–mounted navigated frame (NexFrame, Medtronic), with the patient awake and predominantly under local anesthesia by use of mild analgesedation with Remifentanil (Ultiva, B. Braun Melsungen AG, Germany) during burr hole placement.

Intraoperative test stimulation was performed at the target point (continuous 5 minutes of macrostimulation, 130 Hz, 60 μsec, 2–3 mA, monopolar stimulation via the macro-tip of the MME electrode) to test for acute psychotropic effects and to qualify the side effects spectrum (oculomotor effects). During the testing phase, with the patient awake and responsive, the spatial center of the later verified DBS electrode implantation site was tested on its trajectory (between tentative contacts 1 and 2). Stimulation was performed with the macro-tip of the FHC electrode in a monopolar setting at 2.0 mA. This electrode was later exchanged for the DBS electrode that was not further tested intraoperatively. The most important effects were the onset of “appetitive motivation,” change of the head position in space to make visual and social contact with the testing psychologist, and increased vigilance. Side effects of unilateral stimulation were predominantly an increase of the heart rate (typical increase of
10 beats/min) and induced double vision caused by oculomotor nerve fiber co-activation. The latter—if double vision occurred at currents lower than 2 mA—was used to guide a change of the electrode position, accordingly.

After definite electrode placement, DBS electrodes were externalized for electrophysiological evaluation. After 2 days, internal pulse generators (ACTIVA PC, Medtronic) were implanted subclavicularly or abdominally under general anesthesia (Figures 1 and 2).

Postoperative electrode positions were analyzed with respect to the sMFB as described before, with the use of postoperative helical computed tomography and fusion to the MRI planning data (27). With respect to the MCP (midcommissural point) system, the coordinates for the center position of the effectively stimulated contacts were laterality $x = 5.1 \pm 0.9$ mm (lateral left or right, respectively), anterior-posterior $y = -2.8 \pm 1.6$ mm (posterior to MCP), and vertical $z = -6.2 \pm 1.1$ mm (inferior to MCP) (Figure 2) (28).

### Stimulation Parameters and Additional Treatments

Stimulation was initiated 1 week after surgery in a bipolar setting bilaterally with contacts 1 anodal and contacts 2 and 3 (being the two most superficial contacts) grouped cathodally. Constant voltage stimulation was initiated (2–3 V) with a typical

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Patient 1</th>
<th>Patient 2</th>
<th>Patient 3</th>
<th>Patient 4</th>
<th>Patient 5</th>
<th>Patient 6</th>
<th>Patient 7</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>41</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>48</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>3 Female/4male</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>12.9</td>
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<td>MDD</td>
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<td>MDD</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.9</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<td>Number of Medications in Current Episode</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
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<td>Number of Medications (Lifetime)</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>4.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total ATHF Score (Current Episode)</td>
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<td>82</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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</table>

Modified Antidepressant Treatment History Form (ATHF) according to Sackeim (17). A score of 3 is the threshold for considering a trial adequate and the patient resistant to that treatment (Sackeim). All medications including antipsychotics, anticonvulsants, and sleep medication if used for the treatment of depression are counted.

BD, bipolar disorder; ECT, electroconvulsive therapy; GAF, global assessment of functioning; HAMA, Hamilton Anxiety Scale; HDRS 24/28, Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression, 24 or 28 items; MADRS, Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale; MDD, major depressive disorder; MST, magnetic seizure therapy; SF-36, short for health survey (36 item version).
target current of 2–2.5 mA (as measured with therapeutic current readings), depending on oculomotor side effects. Stimulation was performed at constant voltage to observe changes in impedance over time. Although a target current was defined, stimulation was performed at constant voltage. Amplitude of stimulation was augmented to maximize clinical effects (antidepressant response as measured in MADRS) if necessary.

At the time of evaluation, mean current for responders was 2.4–3.5 mA (left), 2.3–3.1 mA (right) (mean: left, 2.85 ± .4 mA; right, 2.88 ± .38 mA). The nonresponder (patient 5, Figure 3C) is stimulated at left, 4.9 mA; right, 4.7 mA. Pulse width was 60 μsec; frequency was 130 Hz in all patients.

Pharmacological treatment was kept constant (medication and dose) for at least 6 weeks before and after surgery. During follow-up, changes in pharmacological regime were allowed. In two patients, medication change occurred after week 6 (one patient deliberately stopped all medications in week 8 and consequently had a worsening of symptoms that was successfully counteracted by re-initiation of medication. In the second case, the treating psychiatrist decided to change the medication from citalopram to escitalopram in week 12; this was inconsequential with regard to depression ratings. Patients undergoing psychotherapy entering the study continued the treatment.

Statistical Analysis

Clinical data (MADRS, HDRS, HAMA, GAF, SF-36) were analyzed with descriptive methods (mean, standard division, frequency). Because of small sample size of these pilot data, inferential statistics are not applicable. Neuropsychological data were analyzed with t test for dependent samples, comparing baseline and 3-month outcome. Data were analyzed by B.H.B. and T.E.S.

Baseline scores in primary and secondary measures of efficacy (MADRS, HDRS, HAMA, GAF, SF-36) are reported as changes after 1 week, 1 month, and 2 and 3 months of stimulation. As usually

### Table 2. Adverse Events and Serious Adverse Events in Seven Patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patients</th>
<th>Number of Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Serious Adverse Events</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intracranial bleeding&lt;sup&gt;bc&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adverse Events</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased sweating&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headache&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision/eye movement disorder&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aconuresis&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infection at IPG&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact malfunction&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial hemiparesis&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysarthria&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dizziness&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation problems</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Associated with stimulation/parameter change.<br> <sup>b</sup> Surgery-related.<br> <sup>c</sup> Device malfunction.<br> <sup>d</sup> Not related to the study.

<sup>IPG</sup>, implantable pulse generator.

Figure 1. Diffusion tensor imaging–based patient individual planning of bilateral supero-lateral medial forebrain bundle (slMFB) deep brain stimulation (DBS). Data from patient 3 shown. (A–C) Projection of the slMFB (dark green, left side) onto sagittal (A), axial (B), and coronal (C) sections. Note bilateral DBS electrode positions in B (white circles). (D) Three-dimensional rendering as seen from posterior and superior left includes final DBS electrode positions (white rods). VTA, ventral tegmental area.
up to 33 weeks. After 6 weeks, five of seven patients were classified as responders and remained as responders (except patient 4). At last observation (12–33 weeks), six of seven patients were responders; among them, four were classified as remitters. Individual responses of all patients are shown together with the group mean in Figure 1C.

Secondary Outcome Variables (HDRS, HAMA, SF-36, GAF, Cognition)

The HDRS (28-item version) was used to capture changes in additional depressive symptoms, and patients showed similar responses as in MADRS (Table 1). Improvement in depression was accompanied by a reduction in anxiety as measured by the HAMA from a clinically significant level of anxiety (HAMA score >10) to a subclinical level of anxiety (HAMA <10) after 1 week. The mean group score in the GAF changed from baseline 42.8 “serious impairment” (SD 11) to 61 × 4 (SD 8.9) “mild impairment” after 4 weeks of stimulation and further improved to 65.7 (SD 1.2) after 12 weeks of stimulation. Physical health (as one dimension of the quality of life scale SF-36) remained stable throughout the study, but mental health (the second quality of life dimension of the SF-36) improved about 1 SD from “much below average” (−3 SD) to “below average” (−2 SD). No significant change in cognitive functioning has been found in the different domains (Table 3) (29–38).

The most prominent adverse events were blurred vision and strabismus, which occurred in all patients at higher amplitudes when specific electrode contacts were activated. Oculomotor problems were a limiting factor for parameter changes. Other adverse events related to stimulation were dizziness and increased sweating. One patient had a small intracranial bleeding during implantation of the first electrode (left) with transient hemiparesis and dysarthria, which resolved after 7 hours. In a second surgery, bilateral electrodes were implanted without complications (Table 2).

Patients were required not to change medication 6 weeks before and after surgery. In two patients, medication change occurred after week 6 (one patient stopped all medications in week 8, one patient changed from Cipralex to Escitalopram in week 12).

Discussion

In this article, we report on effects of DBS to the sLMFB in an unblinded trial in seven patients with extreme forms of treatment-resistant major depression. This approach and the results obtained are noteworthy for several reasons; the target selection was hypothesis-based, individual deterministic diffusion tensor imaging was used to identify target sites in each patient, the onset of antidepressant response was unexpectedly rapid, and last, the short-term antidepressant effects were more robust than those reported in previous studies (4–6).

Hypothesis-Guided Target Site Selection

The symptom of anhedonia is a germane part of the depression syndrome. On the basis of three lines of reasoning, 1) the ventral striatum is heavily implicated in both normal and abnormal reward processes, 2) the NAcc acts as a “motivation gateway” between limbic systems involved in emotion and systems involved in motor control, and 3) the ventral striatum is uniquely located to modulate activity in other regions of the brain we previously demonstrated that DBS to the NAcc has

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**Figure 2.** Effective electrode contact positions as projected onto an idealized axial slice adapted from Schaltenbrand/Wahren, Atlas for Stereotaxy of the Human Brain (28). Fx, fornix; iii, third ventricle; MB, mammillary body; MCP, mid-commissural point; RN, red nucleus; SNr, substantia nigra; STN, subthalamic nucleus.
acute anti-anhedonic and longer-term antidepressant effects (6,39). We demonstrated the involvement of the sLMFB in DBS of the three current targets for the treatment of treatment-resistant major depressive disorder and therefore posited that a direct stimulation of the sLMFB (15) would result in stronger antidepressant effects (15). Indeed, our results appear to support this hypothesis because the effects were achieved with the use of a mean stimulation current of 2.86 mA, a current that is about one-third of the stimulation current used in previous studies.

**Individual Diffusion Tensor Imaging–Guided Intervention**

Because the sLMFB is a structure that cannot be identified with conventional MRI, we individually mapped the structure by means of deterministic diffusion tensor imaging (40) with the use of an area lateral of the VTA as seed region, which allowed displaying the projections of the sLMFB through the NAcc to the prefrontal cortex (26,27).

**Rapid Onset of Antidepressant Response**

Unexpectedly (given the experience of the development of the antidepressant effect seen in earlier DBS studies), response was rapid; mean MADRS was reduced by >50% at day 7 after onset of stimulation, and six of the patients had significant effects over only 2 days of stimulation (Figure 3A). Comparably instant effects in major depression have only been demonstrated in studies with the use of ketamine (41,42) or sleep deprivation. However, the clinical effect of ketamine lasts up to 2 weeks only (43) and effects of sleep deprivation only until the next sleeping phase. In contrast, the effects of sLMFB DBS reported here appear to be enduring.

**Antidepressant Efficacy**

Six of the seven patients attained the response criterion; mean MADRS of the whole sample decreased from group mean at baseline of 29.9 (SD 8) to a group mean of 14.6 (SD 10.1) after 12 weeks of stimulation. At last observation (12–33 weeks), six of seven patients were responders; four were classified as remitters (MADRS <10). Baseline elevated levels of anxiety (HAMA) were reduced to subclinical level. Social functioning (GAF) improved in the sample as a whole from serious to mild impairment; this was also reflected in subjective patient reports, which described an augmentation in quality of life to a meaningful degree. The majority of patients were treated with antidepressants and psychotherapy during the study, and only one patient stopped medications, which was associated with a relapse in depression. One responder was not taking any medication. Thus, it remains open whether sLMFB-DBS exerts its antidepressant effect in combination with other treatments or if it would be effective alone.

The putative mode of action of sLMFB DBS must be elucidated and at this moment remains hypothetical. The density of the fiber tract at the stimulation site suggests a connection of the VTA to a
whole network of the previously targeted structures of the reward system (NAcc, anterior limb of the capsula interna, cg25). The slMFB consists of short axons of unmyelinated dopaminergic neurons that are not prone to direct recruitment with DBS at short pulse widths (60 μsec) used here (44). It was suggested earlier that the modulation of a network of forebrain structures via the MFB is merely realized by an activation of thoroughly myelinated fibers descending from the frontal lobe into the VTA. Upstream dysfunctional cortical input into the network might therefore be ameliorated by modulating cortical regions, whereas downstream dopaminergic VTA neurons could be recruited and activated indirectly. As a result, the VTA might exert its activating effects on forebrain structures and the prefrontal cortex by way of the DBS to the slMFB (15,27,40).

It has been demonstrated that electrical stimulation of parts of the reward system can lead to acute reinforcing effects (45). In this study, however, slMFB stimulation was not associated with a direct reinforcing, hedonic, or liking (46) effect per se. The only acute effect seen in all patients (including the one who did not respond) was a strikingly similar onset of behavior with increased appetitive motivation, visual exploration of the surroundings, and increased verbal interaction without any symptoms of hypomania or anxiety. It might be that at the low stimulation intensity used in this study (mean of 2.5 mA), we could elicit “wanting” (incentive salience) effects only, whereas higher currents at this very site could elicit the clearly discernible “liking” (hedonic impact) effects (47). Because higher currents amplified oculomotor side effects—because the slMFB target site is in close proximity to the oculomotor nerve fibers in their passage...
through the brain stem—in all patients (Table 2), we are unable to test this assumption.

Obvious limitations of this study are the small sample size and the lack of a sham-controlled design. The first criticism is somewhat stifled by the rapid and strong effects, following a strikingly similar development in six of the seven patients; the second must be addressed in future study designs, mainly in light of findings that DBS for Parkinson’s disease is associated with an unexpectedly sizeable sham response. DBS is certainly a major invasive intervention, which at least in principle could be associated with sham effects even in treatment-resistant psychiatric disorders.

Taken together, we believe that the results from this study point to the possibility that simFB-DBS might be a safe, highly efficacious alternative method for treatment-resistant depression, associated with a rapid onset of action.

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