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Podophyllotoxin Analogues Active versus *Trypanosoma brucei*

Md. Jashim Uddin^{‡,a}, David C. Smithson^{‡,b,c}, Kristin M. Brown^b, Brenda C. Crews^a, Michele Connelly^b, Fangyi Zhu^b, Lawrence J. Marnett^a, and R. Kiplin Guy^{*,b}

^a Department of Biochemistry, Chemistry and Pharmacology, Vanderbilt Institute of Chemical Biology, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, Tennessee 37232.

^b St Jude Children's Hospital, Department of Chemical Biology and Therapeutics, 262 Danny Thomas Place, Memphis TN, 38105-3678, USA

^c University of California San Francisco, Chemistry and Chemical Biology Graduate Program, San Francisco, California, 94158-2517.

Abstract

In an effort to discover novel anti-trypanosomal compounds, a series of podophyllotoxin analogues coupled to non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) has been synthesized and evaluated for activity versus *Trypanosoma brucei* and a panel of human cell lines, revealing compounds with low nano-molar potencies. It was discovered that coupling of NSAIDs to podophyllotoxin increased the potencies of both compounds over 1300-fold. The compounds were shown to be cytostatic in nature and seem to act via depolymerization of tubulin in a manner consistent with the known activities of podophyllotoxin. The potencies against *T. brucei* correlated directly with LogP values of the compounds, suggesting that the conjugates are acting as hydrophobic tags allowing podophyllotoxin to enter the cell.

The eukaryotic parasite *Trypanosoma brucei* is the causative agent of Human African Trypanosomiasis, a major health concern in much of sub-Saharan Africa.¹ Current treatments for this disease are highly toxic or suffer from poor pharmacokinetic properties which necessitate lengthy dosing regimens.² The need for novel therapeutics is further exacerbated by developing resistance to clinically used drugs.³

Previous work in developing anti-trypanosomal compounds targeted at the related parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi* showed that indomethacin amides were potent inhibitors of *T. cruzi* sterol 14 α -demethylase (TCCYP51), an important enzyme in the sterol biosynthetic pathway.⁴⁻⁶ These compounds were also active in *in vitro* whole cell assays. Since *T. brucei* shares this pathway and also possesses an active sterol 14 α -demethylase, it was decided to test this compound series for anti-trypanosomal activity in this parasite as well.⁷

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*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-901-595-5714; Fax: +1-901-595-5715; kip.guy@stjude.org.

[‡]These authors contributed equally to this report.

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Supplementary Material

Experimental details, cytotoxicity results, reversibility data, and analytical chemistry data is available online.

While most of the analogues were relatively inactive ($IC_{50} > 10 \mu M$) versus *T. brucei*, a small set of compounds (**1-3**) linked to podophyllotoxin showed very good potencies (IC_{50} values from 51 ± 6 nM to $5.3 \pm 0.8 \mu M$) as well as a preliminary structure activity relationship.

The observed activities are unlikely to be a result of CYP51 inhibition, since the *T. cruzi* and *T. brucei* enzymes are highly homologous, and the observed SAR for these compounds is significantly different from that observed for trypanosomal CYP51 inhibitors.⁴

Following this discovery, the effects of podophyllotoxin (**B**) and indomethacin (**C**) as both single agents and in various fixed ratio combinations (1:1, 1:10 and 1:100 in both directions) were tested. The compounds were inactive ($IC_{50} > 50 \mu M$) under all tested conditions, indicating that this was not a simple case of synergy. While podophyllotoxin was inactive in *T. brucei*, it was active in transformed mammalian cell lines, with similar potencies to compound **1**, but not in primary human cell lines. (Table 1) Indomethacin did not show toxicity in any of the cell lines tested. Following these observations, further experiments aimed at deconvoluting the mechanism of action of compound **1** were performed.

Compound **1** was shown to be reversibly cytostatic in *T. brucei* and mammalian cell lines with similar potencies in both. (Fig 2, Table 1) However, when tested against primary human mammary epithelial or foreskin fibroblast cell lines, **1** appeared completely non-toxic. Since podophyllotoxin, a tubulin destabilizing agent, is known to be a reversible cytostatic compound the effects of **1** on *T. brucei* tubulin was evaluated. Staining of *T. brucei* in the presence of $1 \mu M$ compound **1** with Tubulin Tracker (Molecular Probes, Eugene, OR), a fluorescently labeled taxol analogue which binds to polymerized tubulin, showed that the test compound caused a decrease in the amount of polymerized tubulin present in the cell. Rhizoxin (**D**), a microtubule toxin known to be active in *T. brucei* displayed similar potencies ($IC_{50} = 150 \pm 20$ nM) and phenotypes in these assays. After 24 hours of exposure to either **1** or **D**, the cells became rounded and began displaying aberrant nuclei counts. (Fig 3) This phenotype has been reported for 100 nM rhizoxin and has been interpreted as an indication of inhibition of microtubule dependent cellular processes.⁸ These results suggest that the compound is acting via the classical podophyllotoxin mechanism in which polymerization of the microtubules is inhibited.⁹

This caused us to hypothesize that indomethacin was increasing the import of podophyllotoxin into the cell. Indomethacin is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) which works by inhibiting the cyclooxygenase enzymes (COX-1 and COX-2), which are not present in *T. brucei*.^{10,11} Therefore, it is unlikely that the NSAID was acting in COX dependent manner. A second possible mechanism for the increased uptake is the sterol pathway. *T. brucei* is known to possess high affinity transporters for low density lipoprotein (LDL) and it is possible that the linked NSAID could be acting as a cholesterol mimetic and entering the cells via this pathway.¹²

To determine if the observed increase in potencies was NSAID dependent, a set of podophyllotoxin analogues conjugated to various NSAIDs as well as non-NSAID groups were synthesized. The effects of varying the linker were also evaluated in this effort.

Synthesis of the test library of podophyllotoxin conjugates was performed using liquid phase parallel synthetic methodologies, where succinylpodophyllotoxin was reacted with tethered NSAIDs or other moieties containing terminal amino-groups. The succinylpodophyllotoxin (**A**) was synthesized from a reaction of succinic anhydride and podophyllotoxin. Tethered NSAIDs containing a terminal amino-group were synthesized from the reaction of carboxylic acid containing NSAIDs with BOC-protected alkyldimine or pyperziny, or aminomethylaniline in the presence of ethyl-1-{3-(dimethylamino)propyl}-3-ethylcarbodiimide (EDCI) followed by treatment with HCl gas. Compounds were purified via

LC/MS and Prep-HPLC. Structures were assigned by NMR and mass spec. analysis. All compounds were tested in cytotoxicity assays vs. *T. brucei*, HEPG2, HEK293, BJ, and Raji cell lines. In addition, compounds were tested for their ability to inhibit COX-I and COX-II enzymes as well as tubulin polymerization.

After testing, it was clear that compounds containing NSAID groups (**4** – **7**) were more potent against *T. brucei* than those without NSAIDs (**8** – **10**). However, with the exception of some indomethacin containing compounds (**1**, **2**, **11**, **12**), most of the compounds were unable to directly inhibit purified human COX enzymes. This suggests that if a NSAID binding target in *T. brucei* is responsible for the observed activities, the pharmacophore necessary for activity is substantially different than that for mammalian COX enzymes. All of the tested compounds displayed significant selectivity (>100-fold) for *T. brucei* and transformed human cell lines versus primary fibroblast and epithelial human cells.

The modest set of linker modifications explored (**1**, **2**, **11** and **12**) show that some modifications are tolerated. The lengthening by a single methylene group (**11**), only lowers potency 4-fold against *T. brucei* while the piperazine linker (**12**) lowers potency 20-fold. Shortening the linker and substituting an ester linkage for the amide (**2**), lowers potency by 60-fold. Compounds **4** and **8**, also follow this pattern.

Since the linkers used in this study contained ester and amide moieties, a subset of the compounds were tested for stability in simulated gastric fluid (SGF, pH 1) as well as stability in mouse plasma. All tested compounds displayed $T_{1/2} > 24$ hours in SGF. Half-lives in plasma ranged from 2.6 to 9.8 hours. Plasma $T_{1/2}$ was affected more by the NSAID moiety than linker type, indicating that stable compounds based on this scaffold may be achievable. (see compounds **1**, **5**, **10** – **12**)

The ability of the compounds to inhibit tubulin polymerization did not correlate with anti-trypansomal potencies, suggesting that cellular uptake was driving the observed differential activities. In support of this, it was observed that the potencies against *T. brucei* directly correlated with ALogP values. ($P < 0.001$) *T. brucei* possesses an extremely high rate of membrane turnover, recycling the cellular surface once every 12 minutes.¹³ If the hydrophobic conjugates are interacting directly with the cellular membrane, this could result in the rapid uptake and concentration of the compounds.

In summary, we have reported the ability of NSAID motifs conjugated to podophyllotoxin to increase the potency of both compounds against *T. brucei* by over 1300-fold. This phenomenon is not a result of synergy of the two compounds and is hypothesized to be the result of increased cellular uptake, either via passive diffusion or via active uptake through the LDL import pathway. However, it remains a possibility that these compounds are acting through other mechanisms, such as inhibition of topoisomerase II, a known target of other podophyllotoxin analogues. Though the use of drug conjugates has been previously reported in other cases, it is extremely rare for the combination of two inactive compounds to result in such dramatic increases in potency. Efforts to further characterize this phenomenon are currently underway in our laboratory.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

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Succinylpodophyllotoxin (**A**, R = CO(CH₂)₂CO₂H) Indomethacin (**C**)

Podophyllotoxin (**B**, R = H)

Rhizoxin (**D**)

Figure 1.
Structures of compounds **A - D**.

Figure 2.

T. brucei growth curve of 1µM **1** (■) and DMSO control (▲). Cells were counted manually by haemocytometer. Values are a mean of three experiments.

Figure 3.

Phase contrast and fluorescence images of *T. brucei* showing the effect of **1** (1 μ M, 24 hour exposure) and **D** (100 nM, 24 hour exposure) on tubulin polymerization and DNA content. Green fluorescence indicates polymerized tubulin as determined by Tubulin Tracker™ while blue is Hoescht stained DNA.

Table 1
 ed analogues (**8 – 10**) and linker modifications (**11,12**) tested for anti-trypanosomal

	<i>T. brucei</i> IC ₅₀ , μM ^a	HEPG2 IC ₅₀ , μM ^a	BJ IC ₅₀ , μM ^a	% Tubulin Inhibition ^b	COX-1 IC ₅₀ , μM ^c	COX-2 IC ₅₀ , μM ^c	T _{1/2} plasma (hrs) ^d	ALogP
0.051 (0.006)	0.20 (0.06)	>50	60 (8)	>4	0.295	2.7 (0.1)	6.2
3.4 (0.2)	1.0 (0.2)	>50	NT	>4	0.254	NT	6.2

<i>T. brucei</i> IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	HEPG2 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	BJ IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	% Tubulin Inhibition ^b	COX-1 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^c	COX-2 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^c	T _{1/2} plasma (hrs) ^d	ALogP
5.3 (0.8)	0.32 (0.09)	>50	NT	>4	>4	NT	6.8
0.46 (0.08)	0.22 (0.07)	>50	64 (8)	>4	>4	4.1 (0.3)	5.6

	<i>T. brucei</i> IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	HEPG2 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	BJ IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	% Tubulin Inhibition ^b	COX-1 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^c	COX-2 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^c	T _{1/2} plasma (hrs) ^d	AlogP
0.17 (0.01)	0.27 (0.1)	>50	NT	>4	>4	9.7 (0.6)	5.6
4.5 (0.4)	0.54 (0.36)	>50	NT	>4	>4	NT	4.8
>50	>50	>50	89 (9)	>4	>4	6.2 (0.4)	5.3
32 (12.4)	0.44 (0.22)	>50	74 (6)	>4	>4	NT	4.3
	31 (12.7)	0.090 (0.061)	>50	NT	>4	>4	NT	3.8
	27 (15)	0.028 (0.015)	>50	58 (5)	>4	>4	2.6 (0.1)	5.1

Compounds	<i>T. brucei</i> IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	HEPG2 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	BJ IC ₅₀ , μ M ^a	% Tubulin Inhibition ^b	COX-1 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^c	COX-2 IC ₅₀ , μ M ^c	T _{1/2} plasma (hrs) ^d	ALogP
0.22 (0.02)	0.50 (0.23)	>50	NT	>4	0.147	2.9 (0.1)	6.6
0.99 (0.08)	0.71 (0.33)	>50	NT	>4	0.602	2.9 (0.2)	5.8
>50	0.17 (0.019)	>50	NT	>4	>4	NT	2.3
>50	0.024 (0.005)	>50	103 (0.8)	>4	>4	9.8 (0.4)	2.1
>50	>50	>50	NT	2.3	1.8	NT	4.2
0.15 (0.2)	0.40 (0.19)	>50	102 (2)	NT	NT	NT	5.5

ss. HEPG2 is a liver carcinoma cell line while BJ are normal human foreskin fibroblasts. The IC₅₀ values for $\pm$ 32 μ M respectively.

Compounds were tested at a single concentration of 10 μ M for their ability to inhibit tubulin polymerization.

purified murine COX-2 (6.6 nM) and ovine COX-1 (22.5 nM) for 20 min followed by treatment with 1-¹⁴C-
mean of both experiments. IC₅₀ values for control COX inhibitors are as follows: Celecoxib (COX-1 IC₅₀ =

d deviation given in parentheses. (NT = not tested)