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Poly(amidoamine) Conjugates Containing Doxorubicin Bound via an Acid-Sensitive Linker

Nathalie Lavignac,* Johanna L. Nicholls, Paolo Ferruti, Ruth Duncan

Poly(amidoamine)s with amino pendant groups were prepared by hydrogen-transfer polyaddition of primary and secondary amines to bis-acrylamines. Dansyl cadaverine (DC) doxorubicin (Dox) were bound to the polymers via a cis-aconityl spacer to give conjugates containing 3 μg of DC per mg of polymer and 28 to 35 μg of Dox per mg of polymer. Release of DC and Dox at physiological and acidic pH varied from 0 to 35% over 48 h and was pH dependent. Although the ISA1Dox conjugate (IC50 = 6 μg Dox·mL-1) presented similar toxicity as the parent polymer without Dox, ISA23Dox showed increased toxicity (IC50 = 10 μg Dox·mL-1). These results suggest that ISA23Dox is able to release biologically active Dox in vitro and that this conjugate might be suitable for further development.

Introduction

Following i.v. administration, low-molecular-weight drugs distribute into almost all tissues and intracellular compartments due to passive diffusion or active transport through cell membranes.[1] For anticancer agents such as anthracyclines this results in non-specific toxicity. When combined to polymeric carriers, the pharmacokinetics of the drug is modified at the body and cellular level and passive targeting to tumour site is obtained via the enhanced permeation and retention (EPR) effect.[2–4] Several macromolecular systems have been described to deliver doxorubicin (Dox)[5,6] including N-(2-hydroxypropyl)methacrylamide (HPMA) copolymers[7,8] and poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG) conjugates.[9,10] Here, we described new polymer-Dox conjugates based on poly(amidoamine)s (PAAs).[11–12] PAAs are water-soluble polymers and are >100-fold less toxic[13,14] than other polycationic vectors.[15–17] Poly(amidoamine)s also present the advantage to degrade to oligomeric products in aqueous media within days or weeks, depending on their structures.[18,19] Owing to their capacity to undergo a conformational change from a coiled structure at pH = 7.4 to a more extended one when exposed to acidic pH,[20–22] most recent effort have been directed to develop stimuli-responsive constructs for biomacromolecules intracellular delivery.[23–26] However,
these polymers have also the potential to be used as drug carrier. Poly(amidoamine)s with hydroxy pendant groups have been used to develop PAA/mitomycin (MMC) adducts[12,27] whereas PAAs containing β-cyclodextrin were used to deliver platinate (Pt) [28] and acyclovir[29] Poly(amidoamine)/MMC conjugates were found to be less toxic than free MMC. When given by i.p. route, they were equi-active compare to MMC resulting in long-term survival of DBA2 mice bearing L1210 tumour cells and treated with the conjugate.[12] Similarly PAA/Pt were equi-active compare to cisplatin in an i.p. L1210 leukaemia model[29] and in vitro, PAA/acyclovir complexes exhibited a higher antiviral activity against herpes simplex viruses compare to the free drug.[29]

As Dox is inactive in its conjugated form,[8] tumour cells-specific released of the drug and subsequent biological activity must be achieved by the choice of a suitable degradable linker between the polymer and the drug. By taking advantage of the pH-gradient between the extra-cellular matrix and the endosome it could be possible to use a pH-sensitive spacer that would be stable at physiological pH whereas it would degrade in the acidic cellular matrice and the endosome it could be possible to compare to the free drug.[29] Poly(amidoamine)-drug conjugates (Dox or dansyl cadaverin) were synthesised using a cis-acetonyl linker. Stability of the conjugates was evaluated in solution at pH = 7.4 and 5. An in vitro cytotoxicity of Dox-based polymers was assessed using mouse melanoma B16F10 cells.

**Experimental Part**

**Materials**

Cis-acetonyl anhydride and dansyl cadaverine (DC) were purchased from Fluka (Buchs, Germany). N-hydroxy sulfo-succinimide (sulfo-NHS) and 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl) carbodiimide (EDC) were purchased from Pierce (Cramlington, UK). Triethylamine (TEA), sodium hydroxide (NaOH), Sephadex G25, gelonin, 5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) and Triton X-100 were all from Sigma (Dorset, UK). Dichloromethane, methanol and dialysing membrane were from Fisher (Loughborough, UK). The PD10 columns were from Pharmacia and PBS was supplied from Oxoid Ltd. (Basingstoke, UK). RPMI 1640 medium (25 x 10⁻³ M HEPES) supplemented with L-glutamine, foetal bovine serum (FBS) were purchased from Gibco-BRL (Paisley, UK). The B16F10 mouse melanoma cells were from ATCC (CL-6475).

Synthesis of PAAs Conjugates

Synthesis of PAAs with Amino-Pendant Group

The PAAs with amino-pendant group (ISA1NH₃ and ISA23NH₂) were synthesised as described elsewhere[30] The content of side chains terminated amino groups was determined using a ninhydrin assay[33] Samples and 3-amino-1-propanol standards were prepared in water and 200 µL aliquots were added to Eppendorfs. After addition of 200 µL of ninhydrin reagent, solutions were incubated at 100 °C for 10 min. 300 µL of 50 vol.-% ethanol was then added after cooling on ice for 2 min. Absorbance was measured at 570 nm within 10 min. Unmodified PAAs, used as control, did not give false positive results.

Synthesis of ISA1-Dansyl Cadaverine

ISA1-dansyl cadaverine conjugate was synthesised as described in Scheme 1. Briefly, ISA1NH₃ (50 mg) was dissolved in 5 mL of PBS (0.1 M, pH = 8). The pH was adjusted back to 8 using 1 M NaOH. 50 mg of cis-acetonyl anhydride (320 µmol) were added slowly whilst continually checking the pH and maintaining it between 8 and 8.5 using 1 M NaOH. The solution was left to react for 1 h at room temperature. The product was purified by gel permeation chromatography (GPC) on a Sephadex G25 column using PBS as eluent (0.1 M, pH = 7.4). Fractions containing the polymer were detected at 280 nm, pooled together and dialysed overnight against water (2 000 Da MW cut-off membrane). The final product was lyophilised. Conjugation of DC to the polymer derivative was carried out using a modified protocol adapted from Al-Shamkhani and Duncan.[34] ISA1-cis-acetonitrile (30 mg) was dissolved in 1.9 mL carbonate buffer (0.1 M, pH = 9). 1-Ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl) carbodiimide (0.78 mg, 4.1 µmol) was added. The solution was stirred for 2 min. at room temperature and sufo-NHS (0.82 mg, 3.8 µmol) was added. The pH was adjusted to pH = 9 using NaOH (1.0 M). The solution was stirred at room temperature for 1 h after which DC (1.2 mg, 3.6 µmol) was added and the mixture stirred in the dark for a further 1.5 h. The conjugate was purified by GPC. Fractions containing the conjugate were detected by fluorescence at 520 nm (excitation wavelength at 300 nm). The fractions were pooled and lyophilised. The recovered product was desalted using a PD10 column and lyophilised.

Synthesis of PAA-Dox

Poly(amidoamine)-Dox was synthesised as described in Scheme 2. Doxorubicin-cis-acetonitrile was prepared using the method of Shen and Byser with some modifications[35] Doxorubicin hydrochloride (50 mg, 86.2 µmol) was dissolved in 15 mL of ice-cold carbonate buffer (0.1 M, pH = 9). cis-Acetonyl anhydride (50 mg, 0.32 mmol) was added slowly at 0 °C while maintaining a pH of 8.5 by addition of ice-cold NaOH (0.5 M). The reaction mixture was stirred at 0 °C for 20 min. and then at room temperature (20 min.). The reaction was cooled on ice and acidified with ice-cold HCl (1 M) till precipitation. The precipitate formed was isolated by centrifugation (10 min at 4000 g and 4 °C), dissolved in doubled distilled water and recovered by lyophilisation. Conjugation of Dox-cis-acetonitrile to PAA was carried out as previously described[36] Doxorubicin-cis-acetonitrile (7 mg, 10 µmol) was dissolved in 12 mL of
PBS (0.1 M, pH = 7.4). 1-Ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl) carbodiimide (20 mg, 0.1 mmol) was added. The solution was stirred for 2 min at room temperature and sulfo-NHS (25 mg, 0.12 mmol) was added. The pH was adjusted to pH = 9 using NaOH (1 M). The solution was stirred at room temperature for 30 min. after which ISA1-NH₃ or ISA23-NH₂ (100 mg) was added. pH was adjusted to neutral with NaOH (1 M) and the mixture stirred for 20 h in the dark. The conjugate was purified by GPC. Fractions containing the polymer were pooled and lyophilised. The recovered product was desalted using a PD10 column and lyophilised.

**Characterisation of PAAs Conjugates**

Determination of Doxorubicin or Dansyl Cadaverine Content

Dansyl cadaverine and Dox content in the conjugates were estimated by UV spectrophotometry at 485 (Dox) and 335 nm (DC) using free DC or free Dox as standards.  

Determination of Free Doxorubicin or Free Dansyl Cadaverine

The amount of free drug in the conjugates was determined by reverse-phase HPLC after extraction in organic solvent. Briefly, 100 μL of ammonium formate (1 M, pH = 8.5) was added to the conjugates (0–5 mg) dissolved in water (900 μL). For Dox containing samples, daunomycin (500 ng) was used as internal standard. After addition of 5 mL of chloroform, the samples were centrifuged for 10 min at 13 000 rpm. The aqueous phase was discarded, the solvent evaporated under nitrogen and mixed and centrifuged for 2 min at room temperature and sulfo-NHS (25 mg, 0.12 mmol) was added. The pH was adjusted to pH = 9 using NaOH (1 M). The solution was stirred at room temperature for 20 h in the dark. The conjugate was purified by GPC. Fractions containing the polymer were pooled and lyophilised. The recovered product was desalted using a PD10 column and lyophilised.

**Release Study of DC or Dox from Conjugates at Different pH**

Stability of the cis-aconityl linker was evaluated in buffer solutions at several pH. ISA1DC (7 mg·mL⁻¹, 21.77 μg of DC per mL), ISA1Dox (4 mg·mL⁻¹, 357.5 μg of Dox per mL) and ISA2Dox (4 mg·mL⁻¹, 281.7 μg of Dox per mL) were dissolved in citrate/phosphate buffers 0.1 M at pH = 5 and 7.4. The solutions were incubated in a water bath at 37°C. Aliquots (100 μL) were removed at different time points, immediately frozen with liquid nitrogen and stored into a freezer (−80°C) until further analysis. Free DC and Dox were extracted and quantified by HPLC as described before.

**Evaluation of in vitro Cytotoxicity of Doxorubicin Conjugates**

The cytotoxicity of the PAADox conjugates was assessed using a murine melanoma B16F10 model. Cells were cultured in RPMI-1640 supplemented with 5 x 10⁻³ M L-glutamine 10 vol.% heat-inactivated FBS and maintained at 37°C in a humid incubator with a 5% CO₂ atmosphere. No antibiotics were added. Polymer cytotoxicity was assessed during the log phase of cell growth using an MTT assay as described previously. Cells were added to 96-well microtitre plates at a density of 1 x 10⁴ cells·well⁻¹ 24 h prior to the assay. Polymer solutions (0.2 μM filtered) were made in complete RPMI-1640 medium to give a concentration range of 0 to 4 mg of polymer per mL. At the start of the experiment the culture medium was removed and the desired polymer solution was added (100 μL). After 67 h, MTT (20 μL; 5 mg·mL⁻¹ in PBS sterile filtered) was added to each well and the plates re-incubated for a further 5 h. The formazan crystals were dissolved in DMSO and concentration read at 550 nm using a microtitre plate reader. The results were expressed as per cent viability relative to a control containing no polymer (i.e. cells grown in media alone were used as a reference for 100% viability).

**Results and Discussion**

The concept of polymer drug carrier is not new; Ringsdorf proposed it 30 years ago. He described his model as a water-soluble macromolecular prodrugs consisting of an inert carrier to which the drug is attached directly or via a degradable spacer. A targeting moiety can be additionally added for cell-specific delivery via receptor-mediated endocytosis. Over the year, several systems using passive or enzymatic hydrolysis as well as pH controlled release
and reduction sensitive spacers were developed.\textsuperscript{[31]} Proteolytically degradable bonds are generally used for lysosomotropic drug delivery and peptidyl linkers, such as Gly-Phe-Leu-Gly which is degraded by lysosomal enzymes such as cathepsin B, are amongst the most widely used spacers.\textsuperscript{[30]} However, for cells with limited content of lysosomes, this might preclude the therapeutic effect of such macromolecular produgs.\textsuperscript{[40]} Furthermore, recent results suggest that the \textit{in vivo} enzymatic degradation of this type of linker relying on cathepsin B might be gender dependant.\textsuperscript{[41]} \textit{N}-(2-hydroxypropyl)methacrylamide-Dox conjugates prepared with pH sensitive spacers, hydrazone bond\textsuperscript{[42]} and \textit{cis}-aconityl\textsuperscript{[43]} were found to be more cytotoxic than PK1 (an HPMA-dox conjugate using a peptidyl linker) probably due to a higher release rate of the drug. Polymer conjugates using a pH sensitive linker could therefore present some advantages. In this paper, we report the synthesis and preliminary evaluation of PAAs-based conjugates containing either DC or Dox linked to the polymer backbone via a \textit{cis}-aconitil linker. DC was initially chosen as a model molecule. It was later replaced by Dox due to its potential therapeutic application in chemotherapy.

Poly(amidoamine)s containing amino groups in their side chains (Figure 1) were synthesised by hydrogen transfer polymeraddition of aliphatic amines to bisacrylamides.\textsuperscript{[32]} The molecular weight ($M_w$) of ISA23NH$_2$ and ISA1NH$_2$ were 22.7 and 16.7 kDa, respectively; their polydispersity indices were 1.9 and 1.7 (Table 1). The amine function was introduced using \textit{1-triphenylmethylamino-2-AMIDE} (TPHMAE) as comonomer (5 mol-% theoretically). The content of incorporated TPHMAE was estimated using a ninhydrin assay as described in the methods. ISA23NH$_2$ and ISA1NH$_2$ contained 4 and 4.5 mol-% of amino groups, respectively. Synthesis of the conjugates was carried out using sequential procedures as described in Scheme 1 and 2. DC-based polymer was synthesised via a polymer precursor obtained by the reaction of \textit{cis}-aconityl anhydride with the amine groups of ISA1NH$_2$ (Scheme 1). Dansyl cadaverine was conjugated to the precursor after activation of the carboxy groups with EDC and sulfo-NHS. Unreacted DC was removed by Sephadex G25 column chromatography and the resulting conjugate was desalted using a PD10 column (Figure 2). Dox-based polymers were prepared using a similar procedure (Scheme 2), respective polymers were reacted with \textit{N-cis}-aconityl Dox, prepared by acylation of the amino group of Dox-HCl.\textsuperscript{[38]} Drug loading determined spectrophotometrically was 3.11 µg of DC per mg of polymer for ISA1DC conjugate, 35.72 µg of Dox per mg of polymer for ISA1cis-Dox conjugate and 28.17 µg of Dox per mg of polymer for ISA23Dox conjugate. No detectable drug (less than 0.1 wt.-% free drug relative to total DC or Dox) was found in conjugates after purification.

Doxorubicin is inactive in its conjugated form and to exert its biological activity it has to be released from the polymer backbone.\textsuperscript{[9]} However, after \textit{i.v.} injection, the conjugate was desalted using a PD10 column (Figure 2). The amount of drug released from the PAAs conjugates was quantified by HPLC. As expected the release profiles depended on the pH. For all conjugates the amount of drug released was lower at pH = 7.4 with less than 3% of drug released within 42 h. At acidic pH, hydrolysis of the \textit{cis}-aconityl spacer occurred slowly in all cases, although the release rates were

### Table 1. Physicochemical characterisation of the PAAs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Polymers</th>
<th>(M_w)</th>
<th>PDI\textsuperscript{a)}</th>
<th>(NH_2) content\textsuperscript{b)}</th>
<th>Drug content\textsuperscript{c)}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mol-%</td>
<td>wt.-%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA1</td>
<td>39 200</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA23</td>
<td>38 800</td>
<td>1.75</td>
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<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA1NH$_2$</td>
<td>16, 700</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA23NH$_2$</td>
<td>22, 700</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA1DC</td>
<td>16, 100</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA1Dox</td>
<td>17, 800</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISA23Dox</td>
<td>23, 500</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a)}\(M_w\) and PDI (polydispersity index) were determined by GPC using poly(N-vinylpyrrolidone) standards; \textsuperscript{b)}Content of pendant amino groups; \textsuperscript{c)}DC or Dox.

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\[\text{Figure 1. Structure of the PAAs.}\]
different for each conjugate. For ISA1DC polymer (Figure 3) the release started after a time lag of 6 h whereas for Dox-based conjugates degradation of the cis-aconityl linker had already occurred after 2 h of incubation. For ISA23Dox (Figure 4b) the release increased regularly over the period of incubation with 30% of Dox released after 42 h. For ISA1, the release profile was different (Figure 4a). Nearly 10% of Dox was released within 2 h compared to less than 4% for ISA23. After 24 h of incubation, the release of Dox was quite steady and the concentration of Dox in solution reached a plateau at approximately 20%.

Shen and Ryser were the first to describe the synthesis of poly(l-lysine)-daunomycin (DNM) conjugates using a cis-aconityl spacer. Similarly, they found that the linker was more stable at pH = 6 than at pH = 4 with a half-life of more than 96 h in the first case and less than 3 h in the second. Further in vitro studies, demonstrated the release of DNM in the endosome compartment. To evaluate the release of Dox in vitro, the cytotoxicity of the PAA-cis-Dox conjugates synthesised was assessed.
using a murine melanoma B16F10 model and an MTT assay. Free Dox and parent polymers ISA1, ISA1NH$_2$, ISA23 and ISA23NH$_2$ were used as control. Cytotoxicity of both conjugates ($IC_{50}$ = 6 µg Dox mL$^{-1}$ for ISA1Dox and $IC_{50}$ = 10 µg Dox mL$^{-1}$ for ISA23Dox) was lower compare to free Dox ($IC_{50}$ = 0.3 µg Dox mL$^{-1}$) (Figure 5). This has been reported before for other polymer-Dox conjugates.$^{[10]}$ It is due to low rate of endocytic uptake and endosomotropic/lysosomotropic activation as the limiting rate for the conjugate compare to the free drug that can diffuse through cell’s membrane. For conjugate ISA1Dox the toxicity was similar to that of the parent polymers ($IC_{50}$ = 1.5 mg polymer mL$^{-1}$) (Figure 6a). Therefore the toxicity could not be correlated with the release of Dox. For conjugate ISA23Dox, cell death was dose dependent (Figure 6b) and cell death increased compare to the parent polymers that were not toxic (ISA23; ISA23NH$_2$) under the same conditions. These results confirmed the release of the drug from the polymer backbone (i.e. ISA23Dox) after degradation of the cis-aconityl linker in the endosomal/lysosomal compartments.

Our results suggest that the mechanism of Dox release from the polymer backbone (ISA23 or ISA1) is different (Figure 4) and that the conjugates present different biological activity (Figure 6). It has been showed that when daunomycin is acylated with cis-aconitic anhydride two isomers are obtained (cis-DNM and trans-DNM).$^{[44]}$ Recently, Kakinoki et al.$^{[45]}$ reported similar results for Dox. They conjugated Dox to poly(vinyl alcohol) (PVA) via a cis-aconityl linker. They found that in solution, the configuration of the intermediate isomers (cis-Dox and trans-Dox) had an influence on the kinetics release profile of Dox from the polymer. At pH = 5 the half-life for the release of Dox was 3 h for PVA-cis-Dox whereas it was 14 h for PVA-trans-Dox. They concluded that the cis conformation catalysed the hydrolysis of the amide bond. They also demonstrated that the biological activity of the polymer conjugate (PVADox) depended on the configuration of the aconityl-Dox isomer. Under similar conditions the cis-Dox conjugate displayed higher toxicity. In the present study, we did not isolate the isomers (cis-Dox and trans-Dox).

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**Figure 5.** Cytotoxicity of PAADox relative to free Dox. Viability is expressed as per cent of the growth of control B16F10 mouse melanoma cells incubated in medium alone. $IC_{50}$: Dox concentration at which 50% of the cells are dead. ISA23Dox (▲), ISA1Dox (■) and Free Dox (●) (data represents mean ± SEM; n = 6).

**Figure 6.** Cytotoxicity of PAAss toward B16F10 mouse melanoma. Viability is expressed as per cent of the growth of control cells incubated in medium alone. Panel (a) ISA1 (■), ISA1NH$_2$ (●) and ISA1Dox (▲); Panel (b) ISA23 (■), ISA23NH$_2$ (●) and ISA23Dox (▲) (data represents mean ± SEM; n = 6).
The proportion of cis-Dox and trans-Dox might therefore be different between the two conjugates, which could potentially explain the difference between their profile and activity. ISA1 and ISA23 are poly(amideamine)s with different chemical structure. This could also alter the biological activity of the Dox conjugates. Several studies have shown that the structure of polymers can have an effect on their cellular uptake and that polymers with different architecture may have different intracellular trafficking. Our conjugates are stimuli responsive. The release of Dox is pH dependent and requires substantial access to the acidic compartment of the cells. It has already been suggested in a previous study that the intracellular fate of ISA1 and ISA23 polymers may be different. Such variation in trafficking may affect the kinetics of Dox release in vitro and could also explain the difference of activity between ISA1Dox and ISA23Dox. Two HPMA conjugates (PK1 and PK2) with similar chemical structure displayed different maximum-tolerated dose (MTD) in clinical trials. A recent study using small angle neutron scattering (SANS) suggested that this difference might be explained by different conjugates conformation. Such experiments have already shown the pH-dependent changes in conformation of poly(amideamine) experiments with the present conjugates could lead to further insight into the mechanism of Dox release.

Conclusion

Poly(amideamine)/Dox conjugates (ISA1Dox and ISA23Dox) were synthesised from PAAs with amino pendant groups and Dox acylated with cis-aconitic anhydride. Although both conjugates demonstrated pH-dependent stability in buffer solutions, only ISA23Dox showed the ability to release biologically active Dox in the endosomal compartment of B16F10 cells. Influence of the Dox isomer’s configuration (cis-Dox or trans-Dox) is currently under investigation. Macromolecular systems are quite often eliminated from the blood circulation by the reticulo-endothelial system. However, ISA23 is known to possess stability in buffer solutions, only ISA23Dox showed the pH-dependent changes in conformation of poly(amideamine) experiments with the present conjugates could lead to further insight into the mechanism of Dox release.

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