

DOCTORAL THESIS

Arylnaphthalene lignans from justicia plants as potent broad-spectrum antiviral agents

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Date of Award:
2020

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ABSTRACT

Background:

The emergence of viral diseases has been the major threat to public health and social stability. A hundred years ago, 1918 Spanish flu (H1N1) pandemic spread worldwide, and about 3% ~ 5% of the world's population died from the flu-related illnesses. It is known as the deadliest catastrophic pandemics in human history. There have been five Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) declarations over the past decade, including the 2014 Ebola outbreak in west Africa, the 2016 Zika outbreak and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. There is always a new strain of virus emerging on the horizon. We have urgent need to develop more broad-spectrum antivirals, which work effective against multiple viruses, for thwarting outbreaks in the future.

Objective:

Based on our previous experience in search of anti-HIV compounds from topical plants, we aimed to discover novel antiviral lead compounds from *Justicia* plants collected in Hong Kong. Further, structure modification of the natural compounds can lead to optimization of their drug properties for further development as drug candidates. To determine the antiviral targets of the lead compounds will further provide insights to elucidate the mechanism of actions. The present studies are to discover the antiviral lead compounds from *Justicia* plants, to analyze the structure-activity relationship of the modified structures, to identify the molecular targets of the lead compounds as antiviral agents against the multiple viruses.

Methodology:

Four common *Justicia* plants were collected in Hong Kong. The plant extracts and compounds isolated from the plants were explored for their antiviral activities via our established "One-Stone-Two-Birds" antiviral assay. Time-of-addition experiments were performed to determine the target stages of the antiviral compounds on the viral replication. Computational techniques (3D-QSAR and *in silico* pharmacokinetics evaluation) were employed to elucidate the structure-activity relationship of the compounds and thereby optimize their structures to enhance the antiviral activity. Comprehensive activity-based protein profiling (ABPP) of biotin-linked compounds using SWATH-MS technique was performed to identify the protein target(s) of the lead compounds in an unbiased manner. The role of the molecular target in viral replication was further verified by mRNA knockdown using siRNA.

Result:

The extracts of *Justicia procumbens* and *Justicia championii* showed potent antiviral effects with low cytotoxicity among the collected *Justicia* plants. By correlating the antiviral activity with their HPLC-UV profiles, aryl-naphthalene lignans (ANLs) were determined as the principle active components. Among the isolated compounds from *J. procumbens*, diphyllin exhibited strong antiviral activities against VSV/HIV, H5N1/HIV and EBOV/HIV pseudoviruses with EC₅₀ values ranging from 30-100nM. In time-of-addition experiments, diphyllin mainly acts on the entry stage of the viral infection. Considering the broad-spectrum antiviral properties and antiviral mechanism together, diphyllin is probably a host-targeting antiviral agent. In a subsequent lead optimization, a reliable and predictive 3D-QSAR was established from 25 synthesized ANLs. Compound **31** was found as the most potent antiviral agent based on the 3D-QSAR model. It showed 70 times more potent antiviral activity than the parent diphyllin, with retained broad-spectrum antiviral properties and improved predicted ADMET properties. In addition, comprehensive ABPP analysis of the biotin-linked diphyllin was employed for the target identification of the ANL compounds. Total 2343 proteins were captured by the ABPP probes. By quantitative analysis, the protein TFAM showed significant affinity to the diphyllin-based ABPP probes. The viral susceptibility of TFAM-deficient cells was shown to be reduced in the subsequent validation. We thus determined TFAM as the potential antiviral drug target of the ANL compounds against a broad spectrum of viruses.

Keywords: broad-spectrum antiviral activity, *Justicia*, *Justicia procumbens*, aryl-naphthalene lignan, diphyllin, entry inhibitor, 3D-QSAR, *in silico* ADMET, ABPP, photoaffinity, SWATH-MS, TFAM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xi
CHAPTER 1	
Introduction.....	1
1 Background.....	2
2 The role of antivirals.....	2
3 Overview of broad-spectrum antiviral agents.....	3
3.1 Agents reduce viral infectivity.....	3
3.2 Agents act based on host defense	7
4 Current progress in antiviral strategies	9
5 Aim and Objectives	22
6 One-Stone-Two-Birds antiviral assay	22
7 Three-dimensional quantitative structure-activity relationship (3D-QSAR).....	24
8 Activity-based protein profiling (ABPP).....	24
CHAPTER 2	
Characterization and Mechanisms of Antiviral Metabolites Isolated from the Medicinal Plant <i>Justicia procumbens</i>	26
1 INTRODUCTION	27
2 RESULTS	30
2.1 Arylnaphthalene lignan (ANL) compounds account for the anti-H5N1/HIV activity of <i>J. championii</i> and <i>J. procumbens</i>	30
2.2 Diphyllin is one of the major active components found in <i>Justicia procumbens</i> against viral replication	32
2.3 HIV reverse transcriptase (RT) is not the main target of diphyllin for inhibiting viral replication	36
2.4 Diphyllin is a host-targeting agent for viral entry.....	38
3 DISCUSSION.....	40
4 MATERIALS AND METHODS	43
CHAPTER 3	
3D-QSAR and ADMET Properties <i>in silico</i> Studies of Arylnaphthalenes	

(ANLs) as Board-Spectrum Antiviral Agents against H5N1 Influenza.....	49
1 INTRODUCTION	50
2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	52
2.1 Data selection and process	52
2.2 Statistical analyses for CoMFA and CoMSIA models	53
2.3 Test-Set validation	59
2.4 3D-QSAR contour map analysis.....	60
2.5 Summary of the structure-activity relationships	63
2.6 Design, synthesis, and antiviral activities of novel ANLs based on 3D-QSAR	64
2.7 Virtual ADMET assessment.....	69
3 CONCLUSIONS	73
4 MATERIALS AND METHODS	74
CHAPTER 4	
The Broad Spectrum Antiviral Diphyllin Targets the Host Mitochondrial Transcription Factor A	
	79
1 INTRODUCTION	80
2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	82
2.1 Comprehensive ABPP.....	82
2.2 Probe design and synthesis	84
2.3 Target identification by ABPP	88
2.4 Viral infectivity of TFAM-knockdown A549 cell	93
3 CONCLUSIONS	96
4 EXPERIMENTAL SECTION	97
CHAPTER 5	
General Discussion, Conclusion, and Future Prospectus	112
1 General discussion and conclusion	113
2 Future prospects	116
SUPPLEMENTARY DATA.....	121
REFERENCE.....	159
PUBLICATIONS	188
CURRICULUM VITAE	190