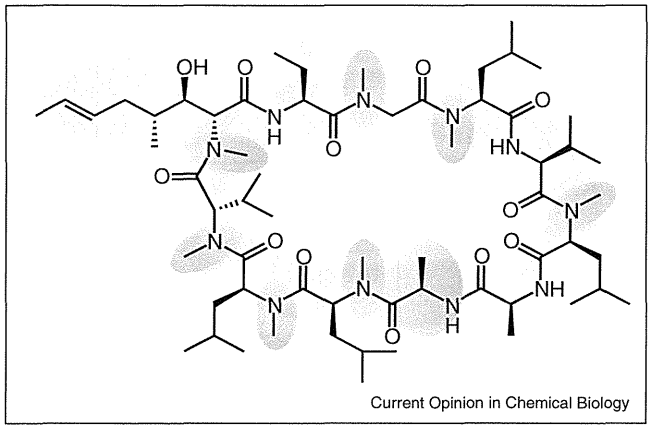
Figure 1



Structure of cyclosporin A, a nonribosomal peptide. Non-standard sidechains, *N*-methyl groups, a D-amino acid, and a macrocyclic peptide backbone are highlighted by yellow ovals, orange ovals, a blue oval, and a green doughnut, respectively.

factors IF1–3, elongation factors EF-Tu, G, and Ts) together with fMet-tRNA$^{fMet}_{CAU}$ and 70S ribosomes constituted a translation system with universally vacant elongator codon boxes. Subsequent refilling of three vacant boxes with three artificial amino acids by the addition of their aminoacyl-tRNAs resulted in successful expression of fMet-initiated tri-peptides or tetrapeptides [8]. Although this experiment was performed under single turnover conditions, it represented the first example of formatting codon boxes and reprogramming the genetic code by reconstituting the translation apparatus.

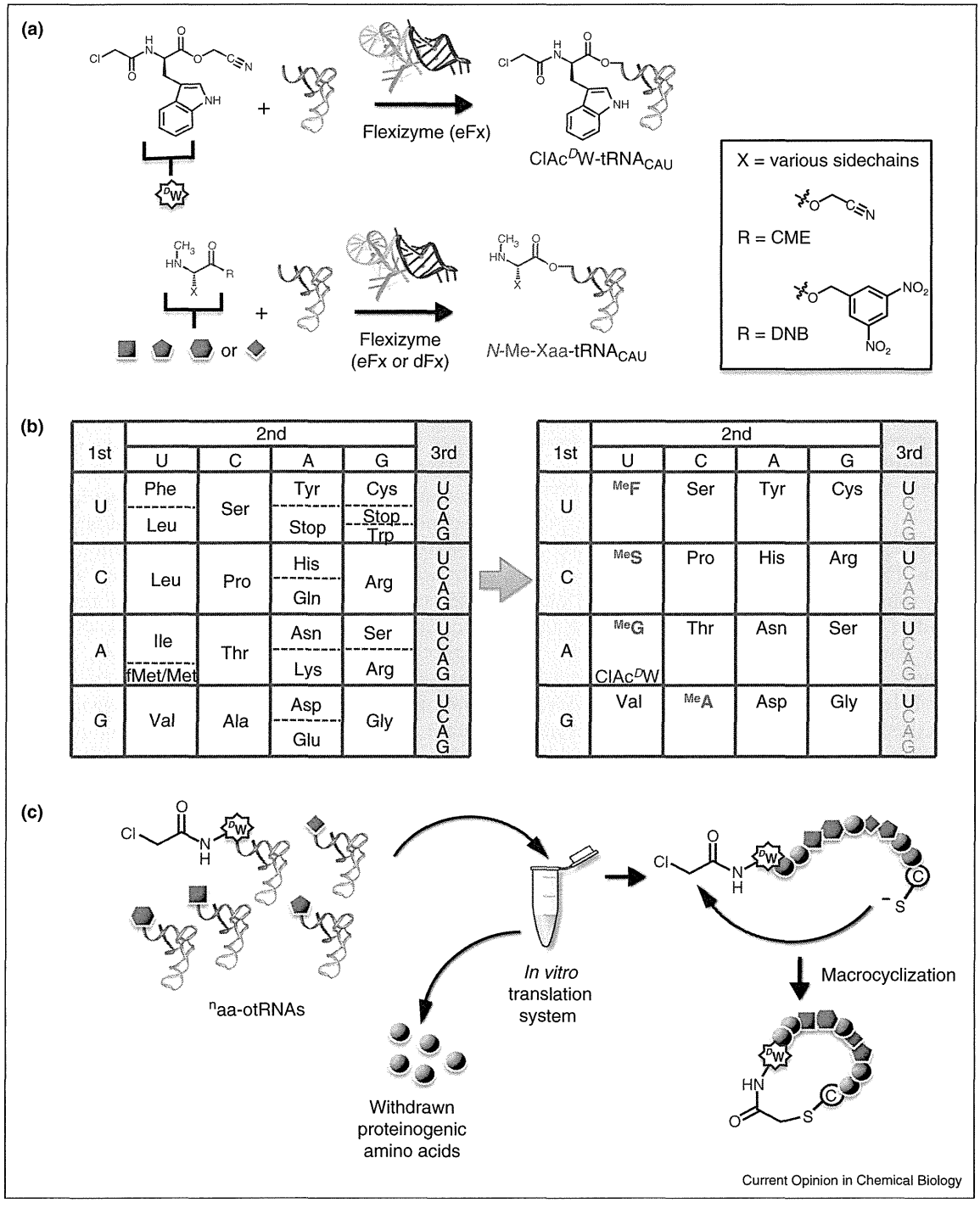
Since the Forster's demonstration, two methods, which are technically more advanced but both achieved through genetic code reprogramming, have been reported. Szostak *et al.* used a reconstituted *E. coli* translation system based on the protein synthesis using recombinant elements (PURE) system in which certain amino acids were depleted to make vacant codon boxes [10–12]. This method relied on the ability of some aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases (ARSs) to mischarge a wide array of non-standard amino acids onto cognate tRNAs under conditions lacking the cognate proteinogenic amino acids. The resulting mischarged non-standard amino acids were assigned to the vacant codon boxes by the tRNAs, thus allowing for expression of peptides containing multiple non-standard amino acids. The virtue of this method is the simplicity; the undesired amino acids were simply substituted with non-standard amino acids in the PURE system, and peptide translation could be performed. On the contrary, shortcomings also exist in this method. Since the choices of non-standard amino acids rely on the mischarging properties of ARSs, they often fall into the category of 'proteinogenic-like' non-standard amino acids. Moreover, even though a certain set of proteinogenic amino acids was not added to the PURE system, because ribosomes and ARSs are not completely proteinogenic amino acid-free (*i.e.* they carry over some amino acids into the PURE system), contaminating amino acids could compete with non-standard amino acids for incorporation. Particularly, since the proteinogenic amino acids are intrinsically much better substrates for ARSs, elongation factors, and ribosomes, their trace amount of competitive incorporation against non-standard amino acids is difficult to avoid. Therefore, the application of this method to *de novo* library synthesis of non-standard peptides must be carefully tuned in a balance of choice between non-standard amino acids and codons having the least contaminants of cognate proteinogenic amino acids.

The second method, developed by our group, also uses a reconstituted *E. coli* translation system, but the genetic code reprogramming relies on the preparation of desired non-standard aminoacyl-tRNAs by a *de novo* catalytic system based on flexizymes [13]. Flexizymes are flexible tRNA acylation ribozymes of which the prototype ribozyme was artificially selected from a random pool of RNA sequences. Reviews on the history and catalytic abilities of flexizyme can be found in recently written articles [14–17]. In brief, flexizymes are short ribonucleotides consisting of 45 or 46 nucleotides in length, and recognize specific leaving groups of amino acid esters. Since flexizymes strictly recognize neither sidechain nor amino group of given amino acids, they are able to charge a wide variety of non-proteinogenic (as well as proteinogenic) amino acids onto tRNAs. Moreover, the recognition of tRNA by flexizyme is dictated by the interaction of flexizyme's 3′-end motif with tRNA's 3′-end sequence via only 3 base pairs, that is, neither body nor anticodon sequences of tRNAs are involved. This feature grants flexizymes the ability to charge any kind of tRNA. Integration of the flexizymes with a reconstituted translation system, such as the PURE system, allowed us to devise a highly versatile peptide expression system with regards to the choice of amino acids and tRNAs. We refer to this system as the flexible *in vitro* translation (FIT) system [18].

The flexible *in vitro* translation (FIT) system

The FIT system is a translation apparatus comprised of two main groups of components. One group is made up of reconstituted *E. coli* translation components (IF1–3, EF-Tu, EF-G, EF-Ts, release factors RF2 and RF3, ribosome recycling factor RRF, methionine trans-formylase MTF and select ARSs), 70S ribosome, and desired proteinogenic amino acids [18]. By omitting the components (amino acids and ARSs) corresponding to specific codon boxes, vacant codon boxes are made available for non-proteinogenic amino acids. The other group of components is made up of the desired non-proteinogenic amino acids charged, by a flexizyme or flexizymes, onto orthogonal tRNAs (otRNAs) that correspond to the vacant codon boxes and are inert with the ARSs present in the FIT system. Their addition to the above custom-made translation apparatus complements

Figure 2



The FIT system [18,35••]. **(a)** Aminoacylation of tRNA using an activated *N*-acyl-D-Trp or an *N*-methyl amino acid along with the appropriate flexizyme. The flexizyme used depends on the activating group used [13,22••]. If the sidechain X is an aromatic group, the activating group shown in the rectangular box would be a cyanomethyl ester (CME), and the corresponding flexizyme would be enhanced-flexizyme (eFx). If the sidechain X is not an aromatic group, the activating group would be a dinitrobenzyl ester (DBE), and the corresponding flexizyme would be dinitro-flexizyme (dFx). **(b)** A reprogrammed genetic code that utilizes only NNU codons for elongation and the AUG codon for initiation by *N*-chloroacetyl (ClAc)-^{D}Trp. White boxes represent blank codon boxes for which the corresponding codon is not found in the random region of the mRNA sequence. **(c)** General scheme depicting genetically encoded macrocyclization of a non-standard peptide using the FIT system. Colored polygons represent non-standard amino acids (^{n}aa) depicted in **(a)**. Gray spheres represent proteinogenic amino acids. A 'C' within a black circle indicates the location of a cysteine.

the FIT system. A brief note that we previously referred to such a translation system as *withdrawn* PURE (*w*PURE); however, since we started developing more variations of the translation system differing from the original PURE system (*e.g.* the *c*PURE system that is specifically designed for macrocyclization between the peptide's N-terminus and C-terminus includes two N-terminal modifying enzymes), we renamed the *w*PURE system to the FIT system to reflect its versatility.

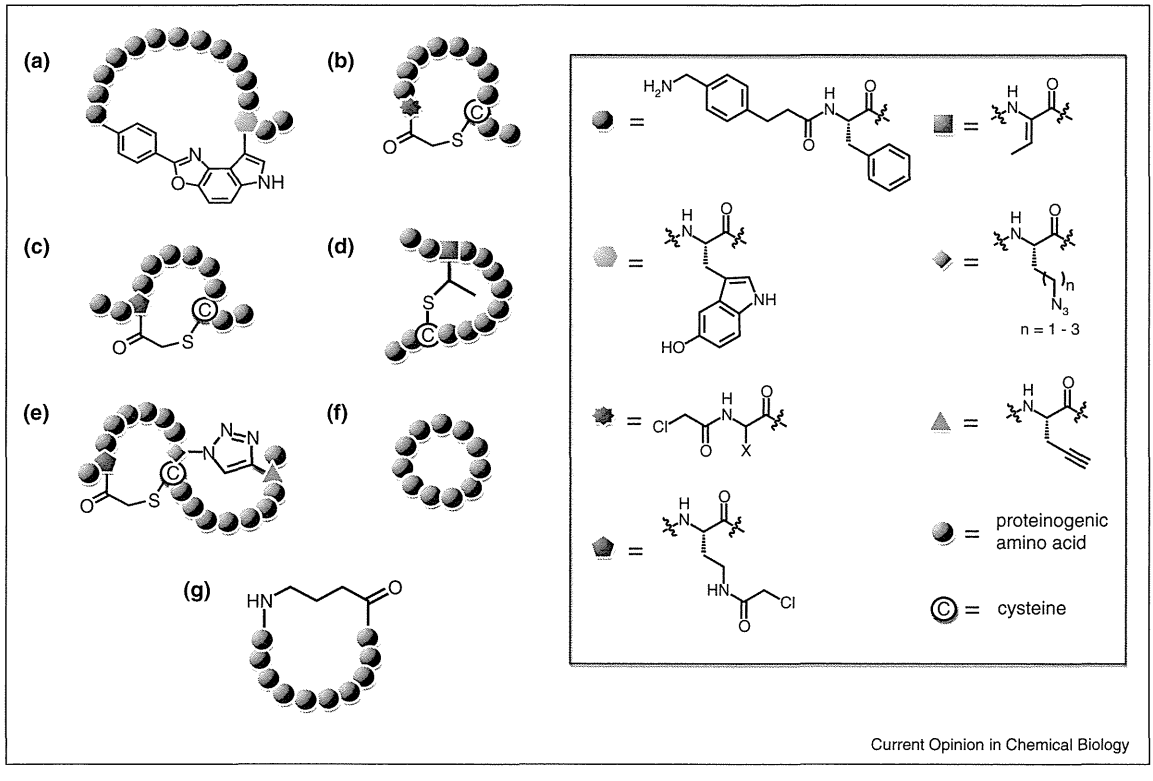
Despite the fact that otRNAs are supposedly inert with the ARSs present in the FIT system, to completely prevent the recycling of otRNAs that have been used by the translation machinery, omission of ARSs corresponding to any of the reprogrammed codons is crucial; this securely dismisses the possibility of reacylation of hydrolyzed otRNAs with contaminating proteogenic amino acids or any unexpected mischarging events. Using this technology, a variety of non-proteinogenic amino acids and α-hydroxy acids have been successfully incorporated into non-standard polypeptides and polyesters, respectively [13–20,21••,22••]. Recently, a new assortment of artificial amino acids that are chemically and biochemically valuable have been shown to be efficiently incorporated into non-standard peptides [23•,24,25••,26–28].

Reprogramming initiation and elongation

Needless to say, naturally occurring bioactive compounds have heavily influenced the inspiration for non-proteinogenic amino acid choice and design. One such non-proteinogenic amino is the D-amino acid. Unfortunately, elongation with D-amino acids has been known to occur with poor efficiency in the translation apparatus even when using the FIT system [13]. However, we have found that D-amino acid-tRNA$^{fMet}_{CAU}$ can be used for initiating translation, and while the translation efficiency is D-amino acid sidechain-dependent, *N*-acylation of the D-amino acid-tRNA$_{CAU}$ in general causes a significant increase in translation efficiency [21••] (Figure 2a). An alternative method of introducing D-amino acids is to initiate translation using an exotic peptide containing the D-amino acids [29]. It was demonstrated that a peptide bearing as many as four consecutive D-amino acids could be used to initiate translation.

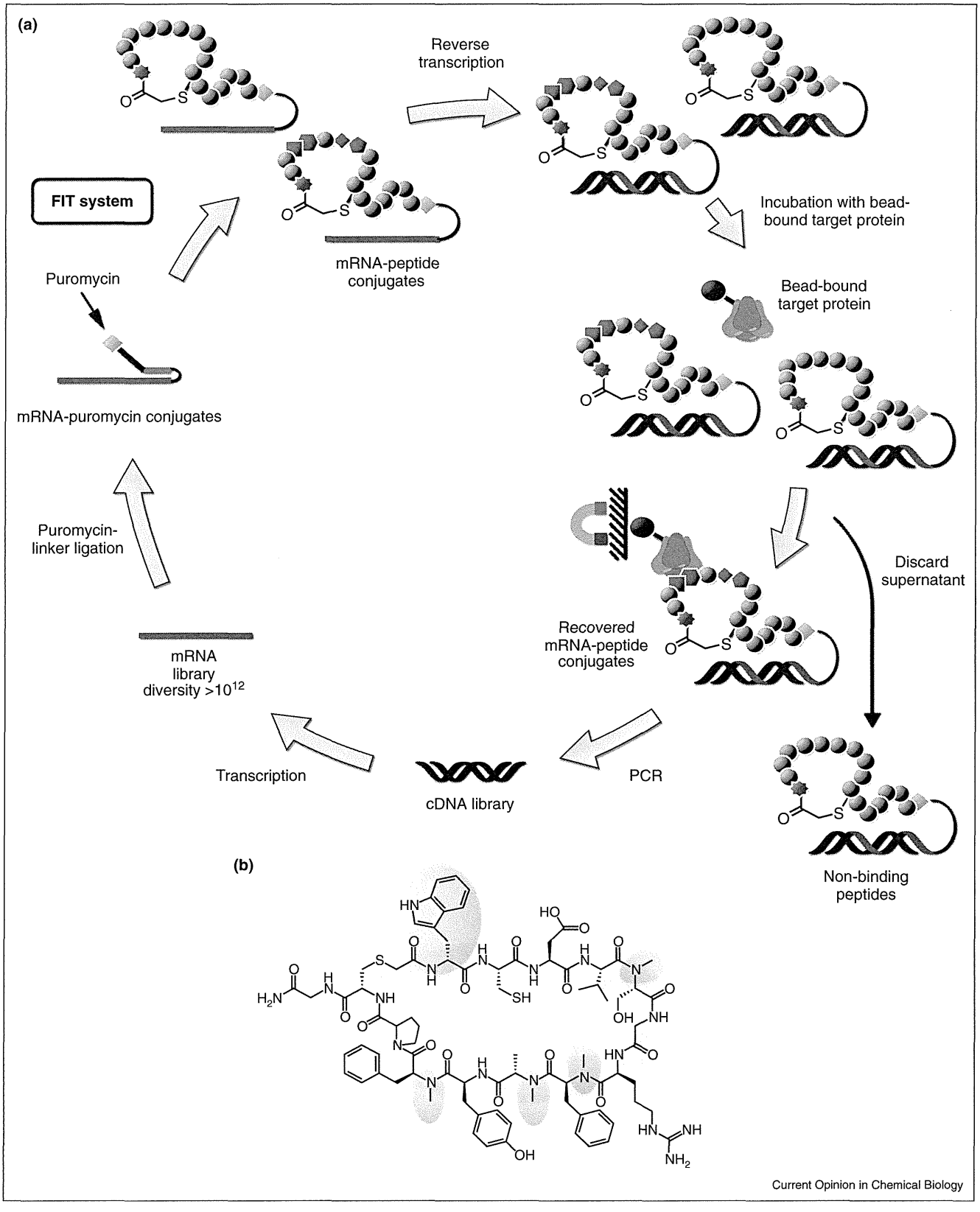
N-methylation, a deceptively small modification to amino acids, could have a tremendous impact on peptides'

Figure 3



Genetically encoded macrocyclized (exotic non-standard) peptides using the FIT system. Macrocyclization can occur via **(a)** oxidative coupling [24], **(b)** *N*-terminus-cysteine thioether bond formation [25••], inter-sidechain thioether bond formation using **(c)** S_N2 substitution [26] or **(d)** Michael addition [28], **(e)** Huisgen 1,3-dipolar cycloaddition in conjunction with thioether bond formation [27], **(f)** seamless head-to-tail polyamide backbone cyclization [37], or **(g)** backbone cyclization with an embedded γ-amino acid [38]. Colored polygons represent artificial amino acids. Gray spheres represent proteinogenic amino acids. The inset box on the right shows the chemical identities of the artificial amino acids, represented by the colored polygons, before macrocyclization. X can be any D-proteinogenic or L-proteinogenic sidechain. A 'C' within a black circle indicates the location a cysteine.

Figure 4


(a)
Reverse transcription
FIT system
Puromycin
mRNA-peptide conjugates
Incubation with bead-bound target protein
Bead-bound target protein
mRNA-puromycin conjugates
Puromycin-linker ligation
Discard supernatant
Recovered mRNA-peptide conjugates
mRNA library diversity >10^12
Transcription
cDNA library
PCR
Non-binding peptides
(b)
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pharmacological properties including oral availability, peptidase resistance and cell permeability [30]. It has been shown that the translation machinery is capable of utilizing *N*-methyl-amino acid-tRNAs (Figure 2a) and incorporating *N*-methyl-amino acids using genetic code reprogramming [22••,31–33,34•]. Careful reprogramming of the genetic code has resulted in a new genetic code that allows for the maximum diversity of *N*-methyl amino acids as well as proteinogenic amino acids [35••] (Figure 2b). Furthermore, these *N*-methylated peptides can be cyclized using the efficient and non-reducible thioether bond formation (*vide infra*, Figure 2c) [22••]. Expanding on the theme of incorporating *N*-substituted amino acids, the incorporation of *N*-substituted glycines (rGly) were also shown to proceed efficiently, and the resulting peptide–peptoid hybrids could, likewise, be cyclized [23•]. Nitrogen modification is not limited to the amide nitrogen (*e.g.* other recently incorporated non-standard amino acids include sidechain acylated or methylated lysines [20]).

Cyclization technologies adopted into the FIT system

In NRPSs, the thioesterase domain catalyzes linear peptide release via hydrolysis or aminolysis. Alternatively, the peptide can be released by macrocyclization. As with *N*-methylation, macrocyclization also enhances peptides' pharmacological properties. It is no surprise that many natural product peptides are macrocycles and that researchers are developing ways to introduce post-translational macrocyclization [36–43]. A unique way of genetically encoding backbone macrocyclization is by withdrawing an mRNA-encoded amino acid to promote elongation arrest and peptidyl-tRNA drop-off, which can then be utilized to promote a diketopiperazine-mediated macrocyclization [36]. This system requires the use of peptidyl deformylase (PDF) and, optionally, methionine aminopeptidase (MAP) if the initiation methionine is undesired in the final product.

The flexibility of the FIT system was demonstrated by the incorporation of an artificial amino acid at the initiation position, an internal elongation position(s), or both internal and elongation positions for the purpose of genetically encoding macrocyclization. Genetically encoded macrocyclization can take place via chemically assisted oxidative coupling or spontaneous thioether formation [24–27] (Figure 3a–c and e). Thermal isomerization of a vinylglycine residue to a dehydrobutrine residue also affords access to thioether formation through an inter-sidechain Michael addition by a nearby cysteine [28] (Figure 3d). Bicyclic structures are also accessible and can be precisely formed using thioether formation coupled with the orthogonal Huisgen 1,3-dipolar cycloaddition [27] (Figure 3e). Seamless head-to-tail polyamide backbone macrocyclization can be genetically encoded [37] (Figure 3f) with the option of inserting a novel γ-amino acid in the middle of standard α-amino acids [38] (Figure 3g). Among this abundance of FIT system-based macrocyclization methods, the *N*-terminus-to-sidechain thioether formation [25••] was the preferred method in a recently performed *in vitro* selection of non-standard peptides (*vide infra*).

The random non-standard peptide integrated discovery (RaPID) system

Several years ago, it was anticipated that the introduction of non-standard amino acids into a translation system would inevitably lead to the discovery of bioactive non-standard peptides with enhanced pharmacological properties using *in vitro* selection [44]. With the ability to translate natural product-like peptidomimetics with high efficiency and fidelity, we have the means to identify bioactive compounds using *in vitro* selection by an appropriate display method, like mRNA display [45,46]. Toward this goal, the FIT system was integrated with the mRNA display format, and referred to as the random non-standard peptide integrated discovery system [35••] (Figure 4a). To date, more than a dozen of bioactive non-standard cyclic peptides have been discovered using the RaPID system in our laboratory and some have recently been reported in literature [35••,47•]. Among them, Yamagishi *et al.* [35••] recently reported an *in vitro* selection for *N*-methylated cyclic peptide inhibitors of a formerly non-druggable enzyme, E6AP. E6AP is known to ubiquitinate p53, a protein known to promote apoptosis, and other potentially tumor-related proteins.

The reprogrammed genetic code designed by Yamagishi *et al.* was thoroughly optimized for the RaPID system. For example, to create an mRNA library free from random stop codons, only NNU codons (where N is any of the four nucleobases and U is uracil) were used in the random region of the mRNA. The threat of misincorporation of proteinogenic amino acids forced the generation of multiple variations and optimization of reprogrammed genetic codes. In addition to the incorporation rate of *N*-alkyl amino acids being lower than the incorporation rate of proteinogenic acids [48], the choice of codons and the corresponding tRNAs [49,50] can affect the efficiency and sometimes the fidelity of *N*-methyl amino acid incorporation. While the incorporation of multiple non-standard amino acid adds yet another layer of complexity [51], library construction using a reprogrammed genetic

(Figure 4 Legend) The RaPID system [35••]. **(a)** A schematic representation of single cycle of a generalized RaPID system. **(b)** CM_{11}-11, an NRP-like inhibitor of E6AP discovered using the RaPID system. Non-standard *N*-methyl groups, D-amino acid and macrocyclic peptide backbone are shown within orange ovals, a blue oval and a green doughnut, respectively.

code containing low non-standard amino acid content could result in the selection of peptides possessing high affinity, but lacking the desired non-standard amino acid [43]. The final reprogrammed genetic code designed by Yamagishi *et al.* [35••] shown in Figure 2b resulted in the highest fidelity and still retained a high *N*-methyl amino acid content. Since UGG, the codon for tryptophan, was also eliminated; peptide library synthesis was initiated using a D-tryptophan to ensure that tryptophan is represented. As previously mentioned, the reprogrammed genetic code was optimized to accommodate elongation using any of 4 different *N*-methyl amino acids and 11 different proteogenic amino acids. Four out of 16 codon boxes represent an *N*-methyl amino acid, which gives a 25% chance of incorporating an *N*-methyl amino acid at any position in the random region. The peptides isolated at the end of the selection possessed an average of four *N*-methyl residues out of eleven residues in the random region. The cyclic peptide with the highest affinity, CM_{11}-1 (K_d = 0.60 nM), bears the three notable non-canonical features found in nonribosomal peptide cyclosporin A – a D-amino acid, *N*-methylation, and a macrocyclic backbone (Figure 4b). Most importantly, *in vitro* assays show that CM_{11}-1 inhibits E6AP poly-ubiquitination of target proteins, p53 and Prx1.

Conclusions and perspectives

Standard ribosomal synthesis is limited to twenty canonical amino acids. The FIT system has addressed and diminished these limitations allowing us to produce custom natural product-like peptidomimetics. The RaPID system has firmly placed itself amidst the growing repertoire of novel techniques for the *in vitro* selection of non-standard peptides. The promiscuity of flexizyme allows us to quickly conjugate tRNAs with amino acids from an incredibly diverse repertoire of non-standard amino acids. Initiation using a non-standard amino acid has proven to be extremely robust and has allowed us to produce stable D-amino acid-containing macrocyclic peptides that have been found to be bioactive. The above example of macrocyclic *N*-methyl-peptides against E6AP has opened a new door for the discovery of non-druggable enzyme inhibitors. However, the RaPID system has no limitation for targets of choice. The RaPID system could be used not only for the discovery of enzyme inhibitors, but also disruptors of protein–protein interaction based on various different natural product-like peptidomimetic scaffolds. More examples of such *in vitro* selections are forthcoming in the near future.

Acknowledgements

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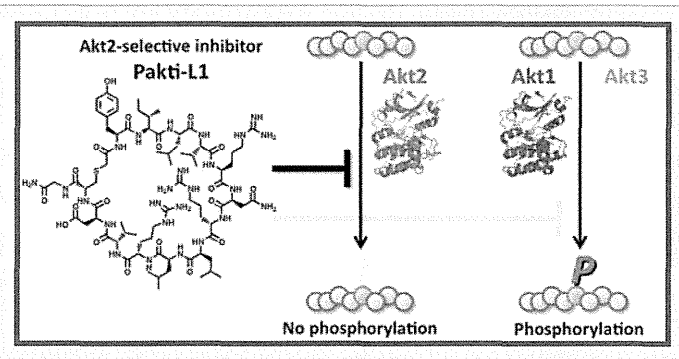
In Vitro Selection of Anti-Akt2 Thioether-Macrocyclic Peptides Leading to Isoform-Selective Inhibitors

Yuuki Hayashi,[†] Jumpei Morimoto,[‡] and Hiroaki Suga*[,†]

[†]Department of Chemistry, Graduate School of Science and [‡]Department of Chemistry and Biotechnology, Graduate School of Engineering, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: The Akt kinase family, consisting of three isoforms in humans, is a well-validated class of drug target. Through various screening campaigns in academics and pharmaceutical industries, several promising inhibitors have been developed to date. However, due to the mechanistic and structural similarities of Akt kinases, it is yet a challenging task to discover selective inhibitors against a specific Akt isoform. We here report Akt-selective and also Akt2 isoform-selective inhibitors based on a thioether-macrocyclic peptide scaffold. Several anti-Akt2 peptides have been selected from a library by means of an *in vitro* display system, referred to as the RaPID (Random nonstandard Peptide Integrated Discovery) system. Remarkably, the majority of these "binding-active" anti-Akt2 peptides turned out to be "inhibitory active", exhibiting IC_{50} values of approximately 100 nM. Moreover, these peptides are not only selective to the Akt kinase family but also isoform-selective to Akt2. Particularly, one referred to as Pakti-L1 is able to discriminate Akt2 250- and 40-fold over Akt1 and Akt3, respectively. This proof-of-concept case study suggests that the RaPID system has a tremendous potential for the discovery of unique inhibitors with high family- and isoform-selectivity.



In human cells, the Akt family, belonging to the serine/threonine (S/T) kinase family, plays critical roles in regulating various signal transduction pathways.[1] Because misregulation of Akt causes alterations of apoptosis, cell proliferation, and metabolisms depending upon the Akt isoforms, it is of great interest for academics, as well as pharmaceutical industries, to develop inhibitors against this kinase family. Three isoforms, Akt1, Akt2, and Akt3, are known in the human Akt family. Akt1 activates the translocation of nuclear factors, such as NF-κB (nuclear factor of kappa light polypeptide gene enhancer in B-cells),[2] which suppress apoptosis in a transcription-independent manner; thereby it promotes cell survival. In fact, elevated expression and activation of Akt1 have been observed in human gastric, breast, prostate, and ovarian cancers, implying that it is a major factor in the cancer development, *i.e.*, Akt1 is an oncogene.[3,4] Similar events involving Akt2 have been also observed in various carcinomas,[5−7] consistent with a view that Akt2 plays a similar role as Akt1 in developing malignant phenotype of these cancers. However, data generated by experiments involving Akt1 or Akt2-deficient transgenic mice have suggested that Akt2 likely plays a specific role in the insulin receptor signal transduction, implying that Akt2 is an important drug target for controlling diabetes mellitus.[8] The function of Akt3 is least understood among the Akt family, but it is expressed predominantly in the brain.[9] Presumably, it contributes to the development of the brain through the activation of growth factor mediated signal transductions.[10]

Because of the therapeutic significance of Akt in cancers and other diseases, a number of screening campaigns of molecules have been conducted to yield potent Akt inhibitors (representative Akt inhibitors along with their potency and selectivity against a specific Akt isoform over other isoforms and kinase family are summarized in Supplementary Table 1). There are four classes of inhibitors: (I) those that compete for binding to the ATP-binding site, (II) those that bind to the pleckstrin homology domain (PH domain), (III) those that bind to an allosteric site(s), and (IV) those derived from substrate peptide sequences and others.

The class I inhibitors, represented by A674563 and GSK690693, have remarkable potencies against all Akt isoforms with low nanomolar IC_{50}'s.[11−15] However, since all kinase families have structurally similar ATP-binding sites, they generally show broad spectra of inhibitory activities against many S/T kinases with comparable potencies, thus interacting with various cellular kinases in a nonselective manner. On the other hand, since the PH domain of the Akt family is unique over other kinases, the class II inhibitors are inherently Akt-selective, but because all Akt members have nearly identical PH domains, they are so far unable to distinguish a specific isoform from other isoforms.[16−21] Representative class III inhibitors are

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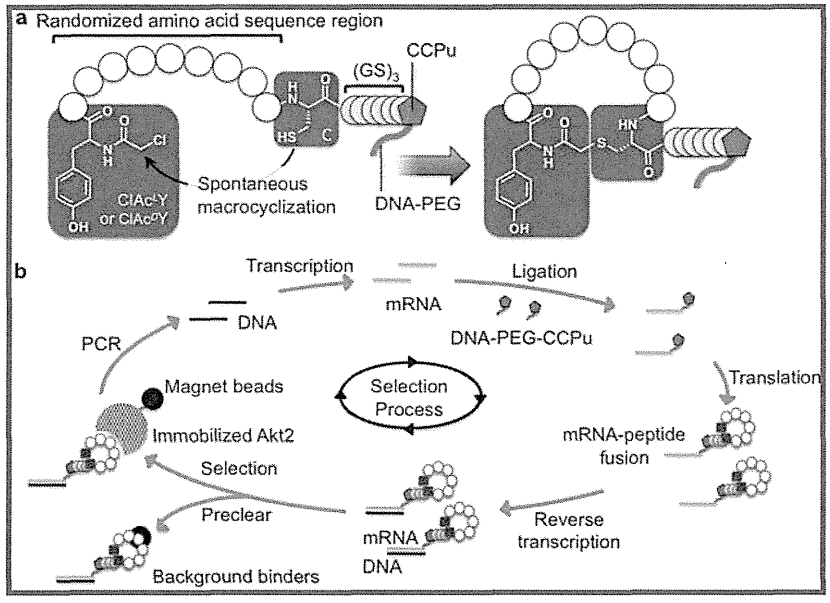

Figure 1. Schematic presentation of the macrocyclic peptide library and RaPID selection. (a) A macrocyclic peptide library closed by a thioether bond. The randomized amino acid sequence region (white circles) consists of 4–12 amino acid residues. Spontaneous cyclization takes place between $ClAc^{L}Y$ or $ClAc^{D}Y$ initiator and sulfhydryl group of a cysteine (C) residue, both shown in dark gray boxes. Although the C residue is designated right after the random region in each peptide, a C residue or residues can also be appeared from the random region to form a smaller ring sized head and a tail containing the unreacted cysteine residue(s). The $(GS)_3$-linker peptide is shown in gray circles. 5′-CCPu-3′ and DNA-PEG regions in DNA-PEG-CCPu are shown in a dark gray pentagon and a dark gray line, respectively. (b) Selection using RaPID system. DNA and RNA libraries are shown in black and gray lines, respectively. The full-length Akt2 protein and Ni^{2+}-NTA magnetic beads are shown in a black-dotted circle and black circles, respectively.

MK2206, Akti-1, Akti-2, and Akti-1/2 (Akt inhibitor VIII), all of which are categorized as allosteric inhibitors.[22−25] Among them, Akti-1/2 has been extensively studied by the X-ray structure complexed with Akt1.[26] This inhibitor binds to the interface between "N-lobe" and "C-lobe" in the kinase domain and further interacts with the PH domain, resulting in stabilization of the ternary interactions. This ternary complex, referred to as a "PH-in" form, prevents phosphorylation of T308 and S473, inhibiting activation of the kinase domain. The IC_{50} value of Akti-1/2 is 58 nM against Akt1 compared with 4- and 40-fold elevated IC_{50} values against Akt2 and Akt3, respectively. On the other hand, Akti-2, which is structurally similar to Akti-1/2, exhibits a greater isoform-selectivity (70-fold against Akt1 over Akt2), but its potency dropped to 325 nM IC_{50}. The class IV inhibitors competitively bind to the protein substrate-binding site of Akt.[27−30] Although the isoform selectivity of this class of inhibitors is unknown in literature, they display marginal inhibitory potencies even *in vitro*.

Even though simultaneous inhibition of all members of the Akt family by ATP-competitive inhibitors gave a maximal efficacy for caspase-3/7 activation,[31] these inhibitors may have a risk of side effects caused by undesired inhibitions of non-Akt kinases. An approach to devise inhibitors binding to the PH domain has yielded Akt-selective inhibitors, but it has been yet difficult to install an isoform-selectivity into the inhibitors. Allosteric inhibitors have given the Akt- and isoform-selective properties, but it remains difficult to achieve high selectivity and potency simultaneously against a specific isoform. Therefore, it is still a difficult challenge to devise Akt- and isoform-selective inhibitors.

We here report a potent Akt2 isoform-selective inhibitor with a 100 nM IC_{50} discovered from a library of thioether-macrocyclic peptides with a complexity of 10^{12}, by means of an *in vitro* display system, referred to as RaPID (Random nonstandard Peptide Integrated Discovery) system (Yamagishi *et al. Chem. Biol.*, in press).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thioether-Macrocyclic Peptide Libraries. In 2008, we reported a new strategy to ribosomally express thioether-macrocyclic peptides involving an initiation codon reprogramming. To facilitate such a codon reprogramming for this study, we have devised a FIT (Flexible In vitro Translation) system where a custom-made *in vitro* translation system lacking methionine (M) is supplied with *N*-(2-chloroacetyl)-aminoacyl-$tRNA^{fMet}_{CAU}$ (ClAc-aa-$tRNA^{fMet}_{CAU}$) prepared by a flexizyme (flexible tRNA acylation ribozyme),[32−35] resulting in a reassignment of AUG initiator codon from M to the ClAc-aa. In this setup, the peptide translation of mRNA is initiated by the ClAc-aa, and a cysteine (C) residue installed at a downstream position in the sequence reacts with the 2-chloroacetyl group, giving macrocyclic peptide closed by a thioether bond (Figure 1a).[36,37] The cyclization takes place spontaneously without an additional reagent, yielding a clean desired product almost regardless of the length and sequence composition. In fact, we were able to prepare a macrocyclic peptide library with various lengths from random sequences of mRNAs.

In the present work, we constructed two thioether-macrocyclic peptide libraries initiated by either L or D isomers of *N*-(2-chloroacetyl)-tyrosine ($ClAc^{L}Y$ or $ClAc^{D}Y$, respectively). To construct each peptide library, mRNA template libraries were designed to have AUG-$(NNK)_n$-UGC, where AUG and UGC assign $ClAc^{L}Y$ or $ClAc^{D}Y$ and C, respectively, which would undergo the thioether bond formation for cyclization; also where $(NNK)_n$ (N and K represent any of four bases and U or G, respectively) assign all possible 20 amino acids with a range of lengths between 4 and 12, *i.e.*, a mixture of peptides with a

Table 1. Selected Peptides with Frequency of Appearance and Their IC_{50} Values against Akt Isoforms[b]

Peptide	Sequence	Frequency	IC_{50} [nM]		
			Akt2	Akt1	Akt3
Pakti-L1	Ac-^{L}YILVRNRLLRVDCG-NH_2	28/37	110	>25,000	4,200
Pakti-L2	Ac-^{L}YWILITWPLVRRKCG-NH_2	2/37	120	~1,000[a]	~1,000[a]
Pakti-L3	Ac-^{L}YWIVLTWPIVTRRCG-NH_2	2/37	92	~1,000[a]	~1,000[a]
Pakti-L4	Ac-^{L}YTYWFVSMICG-NH_2	1/37	inactive	N.D.	N.D.
Pakti-L5	Ac-^{L}YIRRPWVPIMYLGCG-NH_2	3/37	active	N.D.	N.D.
Pakti-L6	Ac-^{L}YILVRNRPLRVDCG-NH_2	1/37	active	N.D.	N.D.
Pakti-D1	Ac-^{D}YAVRILGHYLQVGCG-NH_2	35/37	active	N.D.	N.D.
Pakti-D2	Ac-^{D}YLSRRHGLLFLIRCG-NH_2	1/37	inactive	N.D.	N.D.
Pakti-D3	Ac-^{D}YLSREFNLLFLVRCG-NH_2	1/37	active	N.D.	N.D.

[a]IC_{50} values were estimated by the graph shown in Figure.2b and c [b]Peptides shown in this table were synthesized by standard solid-phase synthesis and applied to the inhibition assay of kinase activities. IC_{50} values were determined by the plot shown in Figure 3. Pakti-L5, L6, D1, and D3 inhibited Akt2 kinase activity (the accurate IC_{50} value was undetermined), whereas Pakti-L4 and D2 were inactive by a preliminary assay. N.D. denotes "not determined" in this study.

random region of these lengths would be expressed. It should be noted that the thioether-macrocyclic peptide library initiated with ClAc^{D}Y would cover different conformational sequence space from that initiated with ClAc^{L}Y since a single D-isomer in the macrocyclic scaffold would potentially alter the tertiary structural conformers from those in all-L-macrocyclic peptides. We referred the respective libraries to as ^{L}Y- and ^{D}Y-libraries for our convenience in discussion below.

To perform the selection of active species, these libraries were integrated with an *in vitro* display method, so-called mRNA display,[38,39] where puromycin (Pu) was ligated to the 3′-end of a synthetic hybrid oligonucleotide (DNA-PEG-CCPu; the DNA sequence is complementary to the 3′-end sequence of mRNA, followed by a poly(ethylene glycol) linker, deoxyribonucleotides CC, and puromycin), which allows for fusion with the peptide C-terminus (Supplementary Table 2). To facilitate the integration, we designed the above mRNA libraries to have three repeats of (GGC)(AGC) encoding $(GS)_3$ (G, glycine; S, serine) after UGC (encoding a cysteine residue), UAG stop codon, followed by a short stretch of RNA that hybridizes the DNA-PEG-CCPu. It should be noted that our FIT system using this display experiment did not contain release factor-1 (RF1), which usually terminates the elongation at UAG stop codon; instead, ribosome would be stalled at UAG codon and the efficiency of puromycin-peptide fusion should be enhanced. By means of this system, the estimated complexity generated by the $(NNK)_n$ library transcribed from the corresponding DNA library was approximately 10^{14}, and the efficiency of the peptide-puromycin fusion was generally more than 30% in our hands for representative model peptides with the range of lengths and degenerated sequences used in the library (data not shown). Therefore, we confidently estimated the diversity of the initial display library to be 10^{12} or more. We referred to this system enabling display of nonstandard macrocyclic peptide libraries as the RaPID (Random nonstandard Peptide Integrated Discovery) system (Yamagishi *et al. Chem. Biol.*, in press). Significantly, the C-terminal end of each thioether-macrocyclic peptide in the library is covalently linked to its encoding mRNA *via* Pu, and thus active species of peptide based on their binding capability against a therapeutic target could be enriched by RT-PCR (reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction). Therefore, the RaPID selection process can be repeated until an active population emerges in the selected pool.

Selection of Anti-Akt2 Macrocyclic Peptides. We performed *in vitro* selection of the nonstandard macrocyclic peptides against Akt2 (Figure 1b). The ^{L}Y- and ^{D}Y-libraries were independently applied to the RaPID selection against a full-length Akt2 that was immobilized on Ni^{2+}-NTA magnetic beads *via* the interaction with hexa-His residues at the Akt2's N-terminus. Prior to the selection against Akt2-beads, the respective libraries were treated with the Ni^{2+}-NTA magnetic beads (up to 12 times) to remove undesired background-binding peptide species in the pool, and the peptide fraction unbound to the beads was then applied to the selection against Akt2-immobilized beads. At the sixth round, we observed an appreciable enrichment of active population in the both pools monitored by the recovery amount of selected cDNA by RT-PCR, while the background binding to the beads was significantly suppressed (Supplementary Figure 1).

The enriched pool was cloned and individual colonies were arbitrarily picked for sequencing, yielding a total of 37 DNA sequences from each of the ^{L}Y- and ^{D}Y-libraries (Table 1). The most abundant ^{L}Y-clone, referred to as Pakti-L1, was found 28 times in 37 clones, and shared the common sequence with Pakti-L6 found once. Pakti-L1 consists of 11 residues originating from the random sequence region, giving a total body length of a 13-mer macrocyclic peptide without the linker peptide region. Two clones, Pakti-L2 and 3, were each found twice, and shared a common sequence motif, consisting of 12 residues originating from the random region (a total of 14-mer body length). Pakti-L4 and L5 were independently found once and thrice, respectively. On the other hand, the ^{D}Y-library was dominated by a single kind of a peptide; Pakti-D1 was found 35 times. Pakti-D2 and D3 were found once, respectively, and shared the common sequence motif. Interestingly, no Pakti-D peptides had sequence similarity to any Pakti-L peptides. This implied that, even though the random region originated from

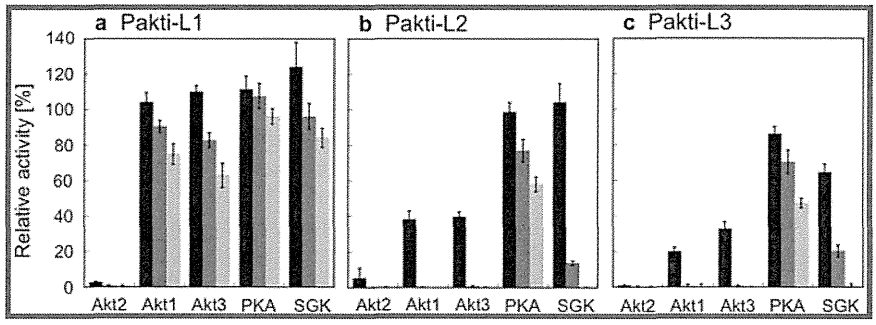

Figure 2. Inhibitory activities of Pakti-L1–L3 (a–c) against Akt isoforms and other kinases. (a) Akt- and isoform-selectivity of Pakti-L1. Black, gray, and light gray bars show observed activities of the kinase at the peptide concentrations of 1, 5, and 10 μM, respectively. The respective activity was defined as an average of activities of the kinase in triplicate in the presence of inhibitor relative to those in the absence of inhibitor. Error bars are shown as the standard deviations of the relative activities in triplicate. (b) Akt- and isoform-selectivity of Pakti-L2. (c) Akt- and isoform-selectivity of Pakti-L3.

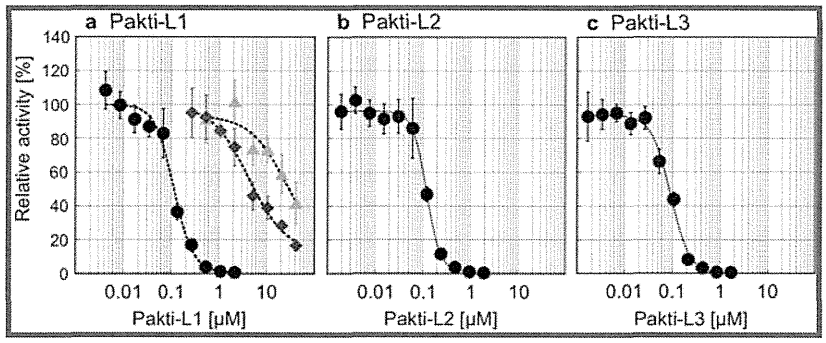

Figure 3. Titration of kinase activities as a function of Pakti-L inhibitor concentrations. (a) Inhibitory titration of Pakti-L1. Data plot in black circles are against Akt2. Those in light gray triangles and gray diamonds are against Akt1 and Akt3, respectively. IC_{50} values were determined by a curve fitting to a Hill equation generated by KaleidaGraph (Hulinks Inc.). (b) Inhibitory titration of Pakti-L2. (c) Inhibitory titration of Pakti-L3.

the same pool of mRNA sequences, the library composed of ^{L}Y-initiator covered different conformational sequence space from that of ^{D}Y-initiator.

Anti-Akt2 Macrocyclic Peptides Are Inhibitory Active. All peptides from the Pakti-L and -D families were chemically synthesized using a standard solid-phase method with an additional glycine-carboxamide at the C-terminus. The individual peptides were then subjected to kinase inhibitory screening using a universal S/T kinase assay system composed of biotin-labeled peptide substrates (HTRF KinEASE STK2 and STK3, the appropriate one of which was treated with the corresponding kinase). After the phosphorylation, the biotin in the substrate was captured with XL665-labeled streptavidin, and a phospho-specific monoclonal antibody labeled with Eu^{3+}-cryptate was used to detect the signal of time-resolved-fluorescence resonance energy transfer (TR-FRET). In this study, we used enzymatically active GST-Akt#-ΔPH (Carna Biosciences Inc.) in which GST, #, and ΔPH denoted glutathione *S*-transferase as a N-terminal tag, isoform number, and deletion of PH domain, respectively, and the respective Akt isoforms were phosphorylated at threonine/serine residues essential for the activation of kinase domain. Our preliminary activity screening for inhibition using Pakti-L1–L6 and Pakti-D1–D3 revealed that the Pakti peptides isolated in this study, except for Pakti-L4 and D2, were active inhibitors against Akt2 (Table 1). On the basis of this preliminary data, we chose three peptides from the Pakti-L family, Pakti-L1–L3, for further isoform-selectivity studies. In parallel, other representative S/T kinases, PKA (protein kinase A) and SGK (serum- and glucocorticoid-regulated protein kinase), were also tested for inhibition by these peptides (Figure 2a–c).

Akt- and Isoform-Selectivity of Pakti-L Peptides. The concentrations of each peptide were set at 1, 5, and 10 μM for the inhibitory test against Akt1–3, PKA, and SGK. Remarkably, under any of the above concentrations, Pakti-L1 completely shut down the kinase activity of Akt2, but all other kinases tested in this study retained activity over 50% even at 10 μM (Figure 2a). This result clearly shows a high isoform selectivity of Pakti-L1. Likewise, Pakti-L2 and L3 shut down the kinase activity of Akt2, but they also inhibited the kinase activity of both Akt1 and Akt3 to some extent (Figure 2b and c); at their 1 μM concentration, both Akt's gave an approximately 40% activity, and thus their IC_{50} values were estimated to be ~1 μM (Table 1). Similar to Pakti-L1, Pakti-L2 and L3 displayed very weak inhibitory activities against PKA and SGK (IC_{50} values could be <10 μM). Thus, Pakti-L2 and L3 are Akt2-selective but less isoform- and Akt-selective compared with Pakti-L1. Even though the *in vitro* selection of nonstandard macrocyclic peptides against Akt2 from the ^{L}Y- and ^{D}Y-libraries was based on their binding ability leading to enrichment, it has successfully yielded potent inhibitors from both libraries.

To assess more accurate IC_{50} values of the Akt2-inhibitors, we directly monitored the kinase activity of Akt2 by a classical filter-binding assay of ^{32}P-phosphorylated substrate peptide on a phosphocellulose paper.[40] For this experiment, we modified a known cross-reactive substrate, so-called crosstide, to generate a crosstide-KK in which two additional lysine residues were added to its C-terminus.[40,41] The phosphorylation activity was titrated in the presence of various concentrations of each peptide ranging from 2 to 2,100 nM against Akt2 (Figure 3a–c). All Pakti-L1–L3 displayed nearly the same inhibitory potencies against Akt2 with IC_{50} values of 100 nM (Table 1).

Because Pakti-L1 appears to exhibit a high selectivity to Akt2 according to the screening result (Figure 2a), we also attempted to determine the IC_{50} values against Akt1 and Akt3 (Figure 3a). The titration of Pakti-L1 in a range of 270−42,000 nM against Akt1 and Akt3 has revealed estimated IC_{50} values of 25 and 4.2 μM (Figure 3a and Table 1). It should be noted that the inhibitory activities of Pakti-L1 against Akt1 and Akt3 were intrinsically very weak, and therefore we were unable to completely titrate the inhibitory activity with 42 μM Pakti-L1, meaning that the above IC_{50} values were yet estimates. Nevertheless, the isoform selectivity of Pakti-L1 to Akt2 over Akt1 and Akt3 was 250- and 40-fold, respectively.

In summary, Pakti-L1, generated from ^{L}Y-library and studied in depth in the present work, displays an isoform-selective inhibitory activity against Akt2 over Akt1 and Akt3. It also exhibits nearly no activity against other families of S/T kinases. Thus, Pakti-L1 is a remarkable Akt-selective and Akt2 isoform-selective inhibitor. The other class of thioether-macrocyclic peptides, Pakti-L2 and L3, display potent inhibitory activity against Akt2, modest activities against Akt1/3, and very weak activity against other families of S/T kinases. Although they are weakly isoform-selective, they are highly Akt-selective inhibitors.

Discussion. The full-length of Akt2 used for the selection was an enzymatically inactive construct, *i.e.*, a nonphosphorylated form. Therefore, it is quite surprising that the majority of selected peptides found in ^{L}Y-library were able to show inhibitory potencies with a range of 100 nM IC_{50} against active Akt2. Moreover, all inhibitors found in this study inhibit the kinase activity of Akt2-ΔPH, suggesting that their binding site(s) should reside in the kinase domain of Akt2. The most intriguing question is how these macrocyclic peptides inhibit the kinase activity of Akt. Particularly, Pakti-L1 exhibits a high isoform-selective activity, so the questions where it binds in the Akt kinase domain and how it discriminates Akt2 over Akt1/3 are of greatest interest.

Since we have tertiary structural information of neither Pakti-L1 nor its complex with Akt2, we are only able to provide a speculative discussion for possible mechanisms of its isoform-selectivity, but it would be worthy to discuss such at this point. We propose two hypotheses as follows. The first hypothesis is that Pakti-L1 interacts with the substrate-binding domain and competitively inhibits Akt2 activity. It is known that a generic substrate sequence, such as crosstide, contains a RXRXX(S/T) motif (the phosphorylating S/T is assigned to position 0, and its N-terminal region is assigned to −1 to −5) where the arginine residues at positions −3 and −5, interact with the conserved glutamate residues (E236, E279, and E342) in Akt (Supplementary Figure 2a).[42] It turns out that Pakti-L1 has a RNR motif embedded in the middle of sequence (Table 1), and therefore this motif may be able to position Pakti-L1 into the active site. On the other hand, all Akt kinases share the same amino acid residues that interact with the substrate backbone amides or side chains, and unique residues in Akt2 differing from those in Akt1/3 are scattered outside of active site in the structure (see Supplementary Figure 2b). Therefore, if this hypothesis were correct, Pakti-L1 could use a unique mechanism, such as induced fit, to gain specific interactions, enabling the discrimination of Akt2 against Akt1/3.

The second hypothesis is that Pakti-L1 acts as an allosteric inhibitor. It may have a mechanism similar to Akti-1/2 where Pakti-L1 stabilizes the interaction between the kinase and PH domains, resulting in stabilization of the kinase-inactive "PH-in" form.[26] However, since Pakti-L1 is structurally bigger than Akti-1/2, the binding mode of Pakti-L1 should be largely different from that seen in Akti-1/2. Alternatively, Pakti-L1 interacts with a unique short sequence clustered in the region of 455−466 and allosterically inhibits the kinase activity (Supplementary Figure 2a and b). Unfortunately, this region is invisible in any of available X-ray structures of Akt, suggesting that this region may be largely unstructured. It is known that the downstream sequence, F470−Y475, docks on the "N-lobe" region when S474 is phosphorylated, resulting in activation of the kinase function.[42] Thus, if Pakti-L1 binds to this unique region and prevents the F470−Y475 region from docking, the kinase activity can be allosterically inhibited.

Since we do not have any data that enables us to rule out either hypothesis, we would like to leave open questions for the future investigations. Presumably, structural studies of the binary complex of the kinase domain with Pakti-L1 or the ternary complex with PH domain will be critical to reveal the exact inhibitory mechanism of Pakti-L1.

Conclusion. Here, we have reported thioether-macrocyclic peptide inhibitors with high Akt-selectivity generated by RaPID system. One of the inhibitors, Pakti-L1, was studied in depth and also showed a high isoform-selectivity against Akt2 over other isoforms. It is quite remarkable that even though the selection was performed against only Akt2, the selected peptides possessed isoform-selective properties. This suggests that the RaPID system could have a potential to yield isoform-selective inhibitors against various therapeutic targets of which isoform-selectivity is a strong requisite for the development of therapeutic agents. More extensive attempts by means of RaPID system against other therapeutic targets are currently underway in our laboratory.

METHODS

Preparation of ClAc^{L}Y and ^{D}Y Peptide Libraries. The mRNAs with the 4−12 repeated NNK sequences for the random region of amino acid sequence were prepared by *in vitro* transcription of their template cDNA amplified by PCR, respectively, using the primers P1, PNNK4−PNNK12, and P2 (Supplementary Table 2). The mRNA library was prepared by mixing the respective mRNAs with the 4−12 repeated NNK sequences with the following ratio, $(NNK)_4$:$(NNK)_5$:$(NNK)_6$:$(NNK)_7$:$(NNK)_8$:$(NNK)_9$:$(NNK)_{10}$:$(NNK)_{11}$:$(NNK)_{12}$ = 20^{-3}:20^{-2}:20^{-1}:1:10:10:10:10:10, adjusted to 10 μM total concentration of mRNA and denoted as a mRNA library. Two samples of 1 μM mRNA library were ligated with 1.5 μM of DNA-PEG-CCPu (Supplementary Table 2) by T4 RNA ligase at a scale of 200 μL total volume and incubated at RT for 30 min. The ligated libraries were purified by phenol-chloroform treatment and ethanol precipitation. The mRNA libraries fused with DNA-PEG-CCPu were translated in the Met-deficient FIT system at a scale of 150 μL total volume containing 50 μM ClAc^{L}Y-tRNA$^{fMet}_{CAU}$ or ClAc^{D}Y-tRNA$^{fMet}_{CAU}$,[36,37] prepared as described in Supporting Information, for 30 min at 37 °C and an additional 12 min at RT to enhance the mRNA-peptide conjugation efficiency. To quench the reaction, the samples were mixed with 15 μL of 200 mM EDTA (pH 7.5) and incubated at 37 °C for 30 min. For desalting, the samples were gel-filtered through 700 μL of fresh cross-linked dextran polymer beads, Sephadex G-25 Fine (GE Healthcare), equilibrated with PBST (10 mM Na_2HPO_4, 1.8 mM KH_2PO_4, 137 mM NaCl, 2.7 mM KCl, and 0.05% (v/v) Tween20 adjusted to pH 7.6 with HCl) twice. Preparation of the two libraries, ClAc^{L}Y (^{L}Y) library and ClAc^{D}Y (^{D}Y) library, was completed by adding an equivalent volume of 2× blocking buffer (1 M NaCl and 0.2% (w/v) acetyl-BSA in PBST) into the filtrates.

Selection Procedure by RaPID System. The following enrichment process was independently performed with the respective ^{L}Y and ^{D}Y libraries. At the first round, the ^{L}Y and ^{D}Y libraries were applied to

no protein-immobilized Ni^{2+}-NTA magnetic beads (Life Technologies, Cat. No. 10104D) twice to remove all the components tagged with the hexahistidine in the Met-deficient FIT system and undesired background beads binders from the libraries (this process is referred to as preclear below), then applied to $(His)_6$-Akt2-immobilized Ni^{2+}-NTA magnetic beads, and incubated at 4 °C for 30 min (this process is referred to as positive selection). After the incubation, the beads were washed with 500 μL of PBST four times. The washed beads were resuspended in 40 μL of reverse-transcription reaction mixture. The mRNAs remaining on the Akt2-immobilized beads were reverse-transcribed by MMLV reverse-transcriptase (Promega, Cat. No. M1705) at 42 °C for 1 h using the primer P2. The resultant cDNAs on the beads were eluted by being mixed with 200 μL of 1× PCR reaction buffer and heated at 95 °C for 5 min, with immediate separation of the supernatant from the beads. The amounts of the eluted cDNAs from the beads in the respective libraries were measured by qPCR, and the eluted cDNAs were amplified by PCR using the primer P1 and P2 for the preparation of the mRNA libraries for the next round. The aforementioned processes of (selected) library preparation, preclear, and positive selection constitute one cycle of the enrichment process.

From the second round, in the enrichment process, the reverse-transcription of mRNA to prepare the cDNAs was performed prior to the selection and the selection was performed by autodispenser machine (Nikkyo Technos Co., Ltd.). At the second round, the individual peptide libraries were prepared by *in vitro* transcription of the amplified cDNAs, ligation of the mRNA libraries with DNA-PEG-CCPu, *in vitro* translation, and reverse transcription. The libraries prepared in 5 μL of the translation scale and diluted to 100 μL with blocking buffer and PBST, the fresh magnetic beads, the wash buffer (PBST), inactive Akt2 protein, and H_2O were set in the appropriate wells of the 96-well plate. The machine was programmed to run the following processes, immobilization of Akt2 protein to Ni^{2+}-NTA magnetic beads, washing the extra Akt2 protein from the beads, and applying the respective library to the preclear and selection processes. After iterative preclear processes up to 6–12 times depending upon the rounds, the respective libraries were applied to the Akt2-immobilized beads for the selection and incubated at about 10 °C for 15–30 min. The beads were washed with 100 μL of PBST three times and resuspended with 40 μL of H_2O, and then the machine program was executed to completion. The beads were mixed with 50 μL of 2× PCR buffer and adjusted to 100 μL total volume with H_2O. The eluted cDNAs were recovered by heating the sample at 95 °C for 5 min and separating the supernatant from the beads. The recovered cDNAs were amplified by PCR and then transcribed to prepare mRNA libraries for the next round. The enrichment process was completed at the sixth round, where appreciable enrichment of the recovery rate was observed.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

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■ AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

*E-mail: hsuga@chem.s.u-tokyo.ac.jp.

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COMMUNICATION

Selective thioether macrocyclization of peptides having the N-terminal 2-chloroacetyl group and competing two or three cysteine residues in translation†‡

Kazuhiro Iwasaki,[a] Yuki Goto,[b] Takayuki Katoh[b] and Hiroaki Suga*[b]

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The mode of thioether macrocyclization of peptides containing an N-terminal 2-chloroacetyl group and two or three competing cysteine residues at downstream positions has been extensively studied, leading to a strategy for designated formation of overlapping-bicyclic peptides or dumbbell-type bicyclic peptides.

Naturally occurring peptides isolated from various organisms often have macrocyclic structures.[1] These structural features rigidify their tertiary structure, often granting them high affinities to the binding partners or targets. Unlike inter-sidechain disulfide bonds mostly found in ribosomally synthesized proteins, macrocyclization in such peptides takes place in various ways, *i.e.* head-to-tail, head-to-sidechain, sidechain-to-tail, inter-sidechain and their combinations,[2] giving not only their structural diversities but also greater physiological stability.[3] Since the formation of these unique bonds does not occur spontaneously, post-translational modification enzymes or enzymes in a part of non-ribosomal peptide synthetase are involved in the transformation.[4] On the other hand, as such enzymes generally have a preference toward certain sets of peptide sequences and/or particular recognition motifs upstream and/or downstream of the target sequences, their versatility for the synthesis of diverse and artificial macrocyclic peptides could be limited.

To circumvent this limitation, we recently devised a methodology[5] for spontaneous thioether macrocyclization of ribosomally expressed peptides using Flexible *In-vitro* Translation (FIT) system.[6] In this system, an artificial amino acid bearing a 2-chloroacetyl (ClAc) group on the α-amino group was incorporated by initiation codon reprogramming at the N-terminus, and reacts with sulfhydryl group in a cysteine (C) residue at a downstream position (Fig. 1a). Although this head-to-sidechain macrocyclization chemistry itself has been known for the chemical synthesis of peptides,[7] the above method using the FIT system represents the first example of thioether macrocyclization of ribosomally expressed peptides. Most importantly, this methodology allows us to readily construct various sequences and lengths of thioether macrocyclic peptides by simply designing their mRNA sequences which are transcribed from the corresponding synthetic DNAs *in vitro*.[5] Moreover, we have recently constructed such genetically encoded libraries of thioether macrocyclic peptides with a complexity of over 10^{12} and applied them to the discovery of inhibitors against various enzyme targets, *e.g.* E6AP,[8] Akt2,[9] SIRT2,[10] by integration with the mRNA display technique,[11] referred to as RaPID (Random non-standard Peptide Integrated Discovery) system as a whole.

A typical design of the above libraries is to have an *N*-ClAc-amino acid encoded by AUG as an initiator, random elongator amino acid sequences encoded by $(NNK)_n$ (K = U or G, n = 7–15), $(NNU)_n$, or $(NNC)_n$, followed by a cysteine (C) encoded

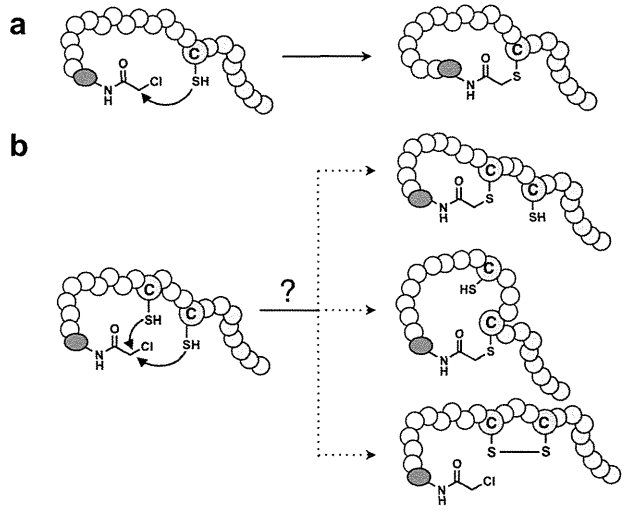

Fig. 1 Schematic representation of peptide macrocyclization closed by a thioether bond. (**a**) Peptide with N-terminal ClAc group that reacts with a cysteine (C) residue. (**b**) Three possible cyclization pathways in *N*-ClAc-peptides with two cysteine residues.

[a]*Department of Chemistry and Biotechnology, Graduate School of Engineering, the University of Tokyo, 7-3-1 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-8656, Japan*
[b]*Department of Chemistry, Graduate School of Science, the University of Tokyo, 7-3-1 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-8654, Japan. E-mail: hsuga@chem.s.u-tokyo.ac.jp*

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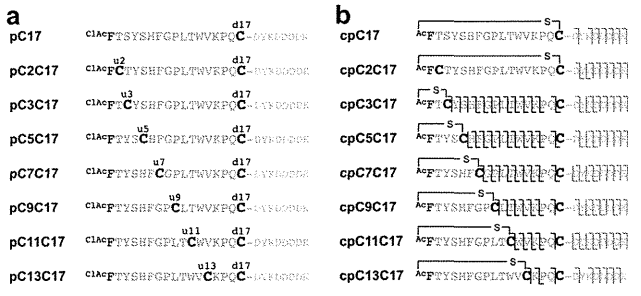

Fig. 2 Peptides and their fragmentation profiles observed in MALDI–TOF/TOF mass spectrometry. (**a**) Sequences of linear peptides expressed in this study. (**b**) Observed fragment peaks in each cyclized peptide and putative thioether bond formation based on the fragmentation profile. L shape and rotated L shape denote observations of y-ion and b-ion peaks, respectively.

by UGC. As a result, the major fraction of expressed peptides would cyclize between the N-terminus and the designated C residue at the C-terminus. However, during the course of such selection studies, we encountered active peptide sequences containing two (or possibly more) cysteine residues, one of which appeared in the random region encoded by UGU or UGC. In such peptides (Fig. 1b), both C residues could potentially react with the N-terminal ClAc group to form a thioether bond,[8] but it was unclear which bond would be preferentially or even selectively formed in such peptide sequences (Fig. 1b, top *vs.* middle). Alternatively, a disulfide bond between two C residues could possibly compete with the thioether bond formation (Fig. 1b, bottom). To understand a general rule of macrocyclization in such peptides, here we have designed experiments to express model peptides varying the position of an 'upstream Cys' (^{u}C) residue in addition to the designated 'downstream Cys' (^{d}C) residue.

We used a FIT system customized for the initiation codon reprogramming, where an initiator tRNA charged with *N*-ClAc-phenylalanine (^{ClAc}Phe) by means of flexizyme was supplemented to a Met-deficient cell-free translation system. We designed seven mRNA sequences encoding 25-mer model peptides (Fig. 2a), each of which was initiated with ^{ClAc}Phe, elongated with 15 residues containing ^{u}C and ^{d}C, and further elongated with a Flag tag (DYKDDDDK, where D, Y, K are aspartate, tyrosine, and lysine; it is used for not only an affinity purification tag but also for facilitating ionization of expressed peptides in mass spectrometry). In these peptides, ^{u}C was located in the 2nd position or an odd position from the 3rd to the 13th position along with a fixed ^{d}C at the 17th position (pC2C17–pC13C17, where the former and latter number denotes the position of ^{u}C and ^{d}C residue and p strands for peptide). Thus, each peptide would possibly produce three macrocyclic structures with a thioether bond between the N-terminus and ^{u}C or ^{d}C, or an ^{u}C–^{d}C disulfide bond. As a control, an mRNA sequence encoding a simple thioether macrocyclic peptide was also prepared (pC17).

All mRNA sequences expressed the encoded peptide with a loss of approximately 36 Da from the molecular mass of the full-length peptide, *i.e.* a loss of HCl, as a major product peak confirmed by MALDI-TOF (Fig. S1‡). This result indicated that the thioether bond formation preferentially occurred over the disulfide bond formation. The respective peptides were then subjected to the fragmentation by MALDI-TOF/TOF, of which the individual peaks were assigned to the expected fragments. Interestingly, two peptides, cpC17 and cpC2C17 (c stands for cyclic) were poorly fragmented at the region between F1 and ^{d}C17 (Fig. S2‡). On the other hand, cpC3C17–cpC13C17 afforded various peaks of fragments, supposedly originating from the linear region when macrocyclization took place between the N-terminus and ^{u}C; whereas, fragment of the thioether macrocyclic region was not found similar to that observed for cpC17 (Fig. S3‡). These results consistently suggested that macrocyclization of pC3C17–pC13C17 took place between the N-terminus and ^{u}C, giving the respective structures consisting of a macrocyclic head and a linear tail with a free sulfhydryl on ^{d}C17. In contrast, macrocyclization of pC2C17 predominantly took place between the N-terminus and ^{d}C17, giving the macrocyclic structure with a free sulfhydryl on ^{u}C2 (Fig. 2b). This selective macrocyclization could be attributed to the fact that the nucleophilic attack of the sulfhydryl group of ^{u}C2 on the α-carbon of the *N*-ClAc group required the formation of a constrained 9-membered ring, which might be unfavourable over macrocyclization between the N-terminus and ^{d}C17.

To solidify the above hypothesis, we expressed cpC3C17 peptide containing a single ester bond (cpC3e12C17; e denoting the ester bond) where tryptophan at the 12th position (W12) was replaced with phenyllactic acid (^{HO}F) by reprogramming of its codon (Fig. S4a‡).[12] As a control, we also expressed cpC17 with the same ester substitution at the 12th position (Fig. S4b‡). MALDI-TOF analysis of each peptide confirmed the production of macrocyclic peptide-ester hybrid as a single major product (Fig. S4c and d‡). Upon subjecting to alkaline hydrolysis, the ester bond was selectively cleaved to yield a product or products as follows: in cpC3e12C17, two fragment peaks were observed, each of which was assigned to the thioether macrocyclic peptide with the carboxylate tail (**1**) and the linear tail peptide (**2**) cleaved at ^{HO}F, respectively (Fig. S4c‡); in a control peptide cpe12C17, on the other hand, a single peak with the molecular weight corresponding to the hydrolysis product at the 12th position (**3**) was detected as a single piece of sequence (Fig. S4d‡). These results were consistent with our hypothesis that the macrocyclization of pC3C17–pC13C17 took place between the N-terminus and ^{u}C.

With all knowledge together, we designed bicyclic peptides consisting of a head-to-sidechain thioether bond and an inter-sidechain disulfide bond. We first demonstrated expression of a peptide, referred to as pC2C10C17, where leucine at the 10th position (L10) in pC2C17 was replaced with a 'middle Cys' (^{m}C10) residue. Because ^{u}C2 should not react with the N-terminal ClAc group, we expected that the sulfhydryl group of ^{m}C10 would spontaneously react with the N-terminus, leaving two thiol-free cysteine residues, ^{u}C2 and ^{d}C17; then these two residues would form a disulfide bond under mild oxidation conditions, yielding an overlapping-bicyclic backbone structure (Fig. 3a). In fact, the mass spectrum of the expressed pC2C10C17 after air-oxidization showed a peak corresponding to the expected bicyclic structure (Fig. 3b, pC2C10C17-oxi). Furthermore, the tandem mass analysis of cpC2C10C17-oxi by MALDI-TOF/TOF showed fragment peaks only corresponding

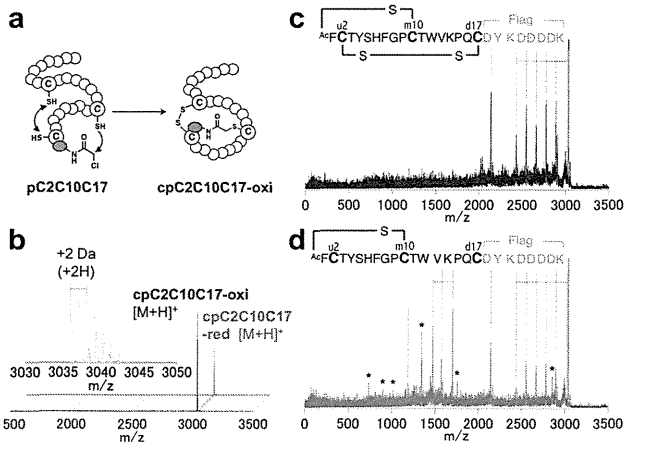

Fig. 3 Expression of an overlapping-bicyclic peptide consisting of a thioether bond and a disulfide bond. (a) Schematic representation of macrobicyclic peptides based on the pC2C10C17 scaffold. Because C2 is less susceptible to the reaction with the *N*-ClAc group, C10 predominantly forms a thioether bond and the remaining C2 and C17 form a disulfide bond. (b) MALDI-TOF spectra of cpC2C10C17 with two forms. Mild air-oxidation of the expressed peptide yielded the peptide, cpC2C10C17-oxi, that was consistent with the molecular mass containing a thioether bond and a disulfide bond (black spectrum). Its TCEP treatment yielded a mass with an additional 2 Da (cpC2C10C17-red), suggesting that the disulfide bond was reduced (red spectrum). The inset figure shows an expanded 3030–3050 *m/z* area of the superimposed spectra of cpC2C10C17-oxi (Cal. 3036.23, Obs. 3036.08) and cpC2C10C17-red (Cal. 3038.24, Obs. 3038.32). (c) MALDI-TOF/TOF spectrum of cpC2C10C17-oxi. (d) MALDI-TOF/TOF spectrum of cpC2C10C17-red. Assigned b-ion peaks are shown in the figure. Peaks labeled with asterisks are assigned as y-ion peaks.

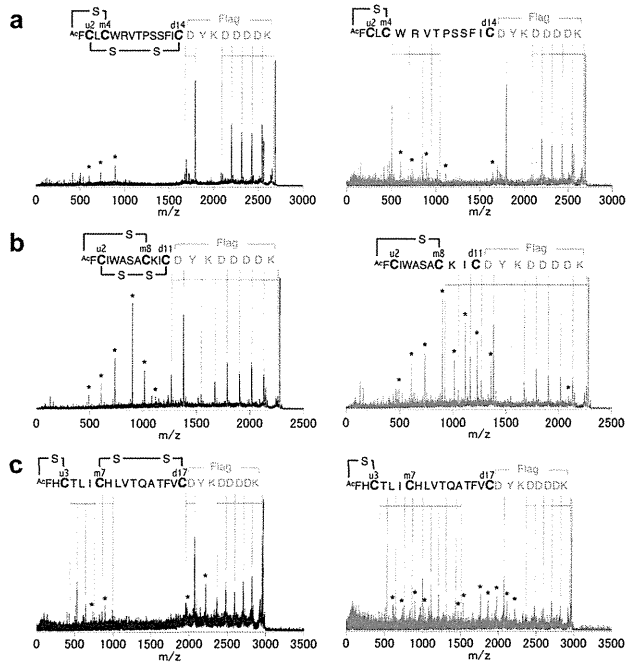

Fig. 4 MALDI-TOF/TOF spectra of overlapping- or dumbbell-type macrocyclic peptides. (a) cpC2C4C14, (b) cpC2C8C11, and (c) cpC3C7C17. Mild air-oxidation of the respective expressed peptide yielded the bicyclic structure that was consistent with the molecular mass containing a thioether bond and a disulfide bond (spectra of peptide-oxi shown in black). Upon treatment with TCEP, the molecular mass of each peptide-oxi increased by 2 Da, suggesting that the disulfide bond was reduced to yield monocyclic peptide (spectra of peptide-red shown in red). Assigned b-ion peaks are shown in the figure. Peaks labeled with asterisks are assigned as y-ion peaks.

to the linear Flag region (Fig. 3c), indicating that the desired overlapping-bicyclic structure was formed. Upon reduction treatment of pC2C10C17-oxi with tris(2-carboxyethyl)phosphine (TCEP), the molecular mass of pC2C10C17-oxi increased by approximately 2 Da, implying that the disulfide bond was reduced to form pC2C10C17-red (Fig. 3b, pC2C10C17-red). Tandem mass analysis of pC2C10C17-red yielded additional peaks corresponding to some fragmentations in the region between ^{m}C10 and ^{d}C17 (Fig. 3d). This result gave solid evidence that the designed overlapping-bicyclic peptide consisting of the head-to-sidechain and inter-sidechain bonds was produced.

To demonstrate the designer generality of this approach, we also expressed ^{u}C2-peptides varying in the position of ^{m}CX (X = 4, 5, 6, or 8) in the combination of ^{d}CY (Y = 7, 10, 11, or 14) with arbitrary sequence compositions and lengths. In all cases, production of the desired bicyclic peptide was confirmed by MALDI-TOF/TOF (Fig. 4a for X = 4 and Y = 14, and b for X = 8 and Y = 11; see also Fig. S5a, b, c, and d‡ for other combinations). Moreover, ^{u}C3-peptides having two different positions of ^{m}CX (X = 7, and 13) were also expressed, yielding dumbbell-type peptides (Fig. 4c for X = 7; see also Fig. S5e‡ for X = 13). Taken together, this designer bicyclization strategy enables us to construct various bicyclic peptides with desired sequence compositions.

Conclusions

Here we have shown selective macrocyclization of peptides having the N-terminal ClAc group with two competing C residues expressed in translation machinery under the reprogrammed genetic code. The nearest ^{u}C (upstream C) residue generally dictates the spontaneous thioether bond formation *via* thiol-nucleophilic attack on the α-carbon of the ClAc group, thus forming a macrocyclic structure and leaving a ^{d}C (downstream C) residue unreacted. However, there is one exception where ^{u}C embedded at position 2 (^{u}C2) does not react with the ClAc group and instead ^{d}C residue predominantly reacts with the ClAc group, leaving the ^{u}C residue thiol-free. Based on this knowledge, we have devised a strategy for the synthesis of bicyclic peptides in which an additional middle C (^{m}C) residue between the ^{u}C2 and ^{d}C residues is embedded in the sequence, cyclizing the peptide by a thioether bond between ClAc and ^{m}C followed by a disulfide bond formation of ^{u}C2 and ^{d}C. This bicyclization is selective and fairly general independent of sequence compositions. Thus, this strategy is applicable for constructing a library consisting of such constrained bicyclic peptide scaffolds. Particularly, the integration of this library with RaPID system will allow us to rapidly select bicyclic peptides against a chosen protein target. This opens a new avenue to search a unique peptide 3-dimensional sequence space for bioactive peptides.

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Original article

Selective estrogen receptor modulators inhibit hepatitis C virus infection at multiple steps of the virus life cycle

Yuko Murakami [a,*], Masayoshi Fukasawa [b], Yukihiro Kaneko [a], Tetsuro Suzuki [c,1], Takaji Wakita [c], Hidesuke Fukazawa [a]

[a] *Department of Bioactive Molecules, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Toyama 1-23-1, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 162-8640, Japan*
[b] *Department of Biochemistry and Cell Biology, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo, Japan*
[c] *Department of Virology II, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo, Japan*

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Abstract

We screened for hepatitis C virus (HCV) inhibitors using the JFH-1 viral culture system and found that selective estrogen receptor modulators (SERMs), such as tamoxifen, clomifene, raloxifene, and other estrogen receptor α (ERα) antagonists, inhibited HCV infection. Treatment with SERMs for the first 2 h and treatment 2–24 h after viral inoculation reduced the production of HCV RNA. Treating persistently JFH-1 infected cells with SERMs resulted in a preferential inhibition of extracellular HCV RNA compared to intracellular HCV RNA. When we treated two subgenomic replicon cells, which harbor HCV genome genotype 2a (JFH-1) or genotype 1b, SERMs reduced HCV genome copies and viral protein NS5A. SERMs inhibited the entry of HCV pseudo-particle (HCVpp) genotypes 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b and 4 but did not inhibit vesicular stomatitis virus (VSV) entry. Further experiment using HCVpp indicated that tamoxifen affected both viral binding to cell and post-binding events including endocytosis. Taken together, SERMs seemed to target multiple steps of HCV viral life cycle: attachment, entry, replication, and post replication events. SERMs may be potential candidates for the treatment of HCV infection.

Keywords: HCV; Tamoxifen; SERM (Selective estrogen receptor modulator)

1. Introduction

Over 170 million people in the world are infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Approximately 20% of infected patients develop cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma after chronic HCV infection. No HCV vaccine is available yet, and the current standard of care, which consists of a combination of interferon (IFN) and ribavirin, is only effective for approximately 50% of infected patients, and many patients have serious side effects. Because of the urgent need for novel HCV therapeutics, research is being conducted to develop new anti-HCV drugs. In addition to *in vitro* screening assays that target HCV-specific enzymes, other approaches that use replicon cells and the recently described Huh 7.5.1-JFH-1 (genotype 2a)-infection system have been developed [1]. The Huh 7.5.1-JFH-1-infection system is an excellent system to identify HCV inhibitors that interfere with individual steps of the HCV life cycle, such as viral attachment, entry, and release. This experimental system allows both viral and host components that are involved in HCV infection to be targeted. Although drugs that target the host components may be toxic, such drugs are unlikely to select for resistant viruses.

We screened chemicals using a cell-based screening system [2] and found that tamoxifen and other selective estrogen receptor modulators (SERMs) inhibited HCV infection. Tamoxifen has been successfully used for the treatment of breast cancer since it was found to be an ER antagonist over 30 years ago. Clomifene and raloxifene, which are compounds

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +81 3 5285 1111x2327; fax: +81 3 5285 1272.
E-mail address: murakami@nih.go.jp (Y. Murakami).
[1] Present address: Department of Infectious Diseases, Hamamatsu University School of Medicine, Hamamatsu, Japan.

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that are related to tamoxifen, have been developed and used for the treatment of breast cancer and for the treatment of anovulation and osteoporosis. Currently, these three SERMs and toremifene have been approved in Japan and the US, and next-generation SERMs are undergoing clinical evaluation.

Because tamoxifen exhibited the ability to inhibit HCV infection, we determined which SERMs could effectively inhibit HCV infection and be approved for clinical use. The first-generation SERMs—tamoxifen, clomifene, and raloxifene—were all effective against HCV as were other ERα antagonists. We examined whether SERMs could be utilized as new drugs for the treatment of HCV.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Cells and virus

Human hepatoma cell line, Huh 7.5.1 cells and human embryonic kidney 293T cells were cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) (Sigma–Aldrich Co. St. Louis, MO, USA) with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS). HCV-JFH-1 (HCVcc) (genotype 2a) was the culture supernatant of infected Huh 7.5.1 cells as described previously [2]. A subgenomic replicon cell line, clone #4-1, which harbors the genotype 2a (JFH-1) [3,4], and clone #5-15, that harbors the genotype 1b HCV genome [5], were also cultured in DMEM with FBS.

2.2. Chemicals

The SCADS inhibitor kit I was provided by the Screening Committee of Anticancer Drugs, supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research on the Priority Area "Cancer" from The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan. Tamoxifen, diethylstilbestrol, triphenylethylene, 17β-estradiol, and brefeldin A were purchased from Sigma–Aldrich Co. (St. Louis, MO, USA). Clomifene was purchased from LKT Laboratories, Inc. (St. Paul, MN, USA), and hydroxytamoxifen ((*z*)-4-hydroxytamoxifen) and raloxifene were purchased from Enzo Life Sciences, Inc. (Farmingdale, NY, USA). Chloroquine was purchased from WAKO (Osaka, Japan). Other chemicals were purchased from Tocris Bioscience (Bristol, UK).

2.3. Quantification of the viral titer in medium

Huh 7.5.1 cells were seeded in 96-well plates at a density of 2×10^4 cells per well in a volume of 120 μl. The next day, 15 μl of media that contained the test compound and 15 μl of the HCVcc virus stock solution at a moi of 0.01 were added to each well. After 5 days, 100 μl of the culture supernatant was taken from each well, and viral RNA was extracted. Total RNA was also extracted from the cells. Quantitative real-time RT-PCR was then performed with One step SYBR PrimeScript RT-PCR Kit (Takara-Bio Co., Otsu, Japan) as described previously [2]. In the case of #4-1 replicon cell, as an internal control, glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) were measured with primers 5′-CCACCCATGGCAAATTCC-3′ and 5′-TGGGATTTCCATTGAT-3′. Cell growth was monitored using the MTT assay as described previously [6].

2.4. Western blotting

Western blotting was performed as previously described [2]. Briefly, cell lysates that contained equal quantities of protein were separated by SDS-PAGE, transferred onto PVDF membranes, and probed with antibodies against the core antigen (2H9), NS5A (Austral Biologicals, San Raman, CA, USA), or GAPDH (Santa Cruz Biotech. Inc., Santa Cruz, USA). After incubation with horseradish peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibodies, the protein bands on the PVDF membranes were detected using an ECL system (GE Healthcare UK Ltd., Amersham Place, UK).

2.5. Production of and infection with pseudo-particles

HCV pseudo-particles (HCVpp) were generated using the following 3 plasmids: a Gag-Pol packaging construct (Gag-Pol 5349), a transfer vector construct (Luc 126), and a glycoprotein-expressing construct (HCV E1E2) (JFH-1, 2a). The generation of the pseudo-particles was performed according to the method described by Bartosch et al. [7]. To express the glycoproteins of other HCV genotypes, HCV E1E2 constructs of the genotypes 1a (H77), 1b (UKN1B 12.6), 2b (UKN2B 2.8), and 4 (UKN4 11.1) were generously provided by Dr. F. Cosset (INSERM, France) [8]. To produce VSVpp, a plasmid that coded the vesicular stomatitis virus (VSV) envelope, pCAG-VSV, was generously provided by Dr. Y. Matsuura (Osaka University, Japan). Gag-Pol 5349 (3.1 μg), Luc 126 (3.1 μg), and each of the individual glycoprotein-expression constructs (1.0 μg) were co-transfected into 293T cells that were seeded on a 10-cm dish (2.5×10^6 cells) using TransIT-LT1 Transfection Reagent (21.6 μl) (Mirus Bio LLC, Madison, WI, USA). The medium from the transfected cell cultures was harvested and used as the pseudo-particle stock. For the infection assay, Huh 7.5.1 cells were seeded onto a 48-well plate at a density of 4×10^4 cells per well one day prior to infection. The medium was then removed, and the cells were subsequently infected with the pseudo-particles in the presence or absence of drug. The cells were then incubated for 3 h. The VSVpp preparation was diluted (1:600) to infect with similar RLU activity compared to the HCVpp. The supernatant was then removed, fresh culture medium was added to the cells, and the cells were incubated for an additional 3 days. The luciferase assays were performed using a luciferase assay system (Promega Co. Madison WI, USA). Anti-CD81 antibody (sc-23962) was purchased from Santa Cruz Biotech.

3. Results

3.1. Tamoxifen and estrogen receptor α antagonists inhibited HCV infection

Using quantitative RT-PCR, we screened the compounds in the SCADS inhibitor kit I. Drugs and HCVcc at a moi of 0.01