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A diarylethene as the SO₂ gas generator upon UV irradiation

Ryuhei Kodama, Kimio Sumaru, Kana Morishita, Toshiyuki Kanamori, Kengo Hyodo, Takashi Kamitanka, Masakazu Morimoto, Satoshi Yokojima, Shinichiro Nakamura, and Kingo Uchida

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A closed-ring isomer of a diarylethene having sulfone group works as the reagent for SO₂ gas generator with thermal stability even at 70 °C, and it rapidly reverts to the open-ring isomer and generates the SO₂ gas to induce the cell death upon UV irradiation.

Since the development of the photochromic compounds in the late 1980s, diarylethenes have been attracted widespread attention as photocontrollable element in molecular devices and switches. This is due to the high fatigue resistance of the cyclization and cycloreversion reactions, which reversibly generate the open and closed-ring isomers. However, the reports to the biochemical and biological applications were still very rare. Branda et al. demonstrated that the photoresponsive diithienylethene could be reversibly triggered in a living organism and that the photoswitch induced paralysis in Caenorhabditis elegans only when the closed-ring isomer was generated by exposure with UV light (365 nm). Until today, the mechanism of the photoswitchable paralysis is not clear.

Some diarylethenes with sulfone groups are known as fatigue resistant photochromic compounds with dramatic fluorescence intensity changes upon alternate irradiation with UV and visible light. We found that one of the diarylethene derivatives having sulfone group 1o (Scheme 1), which was initially synthesized by S. I. Yang et al. works as SO₂ gas generator to induce the cell death upon UV irradiation. Sulfur dioxide (SO₂) is an environmental pollutant and toxic at elevated concentrations. Although the mechanism of its cytotoxicity is yet unclear, SO₂ at elevated concentrations is known to induce oxidative damage to biomacromolecules such as proteins, lipids, and DNA.

Oxidation of SO₂ to sulphate is known to occur through radical intermediates (such as SO₃) in neutral pH conditions, which in turn can damage biomacromolecules. In such background, reagents to generate SO₂ gas in situ have been developed.

Diarylethene 1o shows the reversible coloration and decoloration by alternate irradiation with UV and visible light. Open-ring isomer 1o has the λ_max at 229 nm (ε: 1.67 × 10⁴ M⁻¹ cm⁻¹) and the band extends to 400 nm, while the closed-ring isomer 1c has the λ_max at 477 nm (ε: 1.05 × 10⁵ M⁻¹ cm⁻¹) and the color is orange in hexane (Fig. 1), and quantum yields of the cyclization and cycloreversion reactions of 1 are 0.35 (366 nm) and 4.2 × 10⁻³ (533 nm), respectively. The isomer 1c is thermally stable and never generates the SO₂ gas by heating nor by visible light irradiation. By contrast, 1o generate SO₂ gas not only by light irradiation but also heating. Therefore the fatigue resistance of the photochromism of 1 in hexane was poor (ESI†). The quantum yield of SO₂ gas generation of 1o was estimated as 0.1 (ESI†). Herein we propose 1c as the thermally stable unique reagent for SO₂ gas storage and generator.

Although diarylethenes are generally known as thermally irreversible photochromic compounds, we confirmed the thermal stability of both isomers 1o and 1c. The hexane solution of the 1c was heated at 70 °C for 7 days in the dark, SO₂ gas formation and thermal cycloreversion reaction from 1c to 1o were not observed. Upon visible light (λ > 480 nm) irradiation, only cycloreversion reaction to 1o was observed without gas formation. In contrast, UV (300 nm < λ < 365 nm) irradiation to the hexane solution of 1o, gas was detected accompanied with the cyclization reaction to 1c. We identified the generated gas by the GC-Mass spectroscopy for the chloroform solution of 1o in a closed-vessels upon irradiation with UV (300 nm < λ < 365 nm). The gas consisted of SO, SO₂,
(CH$_3$)$_3$Si-OH, and the solvent (Fig. S1, ESI†). Then we used SO$_2$ gas test tube for the quantitative measurement (Fig. S2, S3 ESI†). By increasing the duration of UV irradiation, the amount of the generated SO$_2$ gas was increased (Fig. S4, ESI†). The SO$_2$ gas was also detected by heating the hexane solution of 1o in a sealed tube at 70 °C for 1 day. These results indicate that the SO$_2$ generation ability was locked in the closed-ring isomer 1c and unlocked by visible light irradiation (one way photoisomerization).

The protection was also unlocked by UV light irradiation (back and forth photoisomerization) and SO$_2$ gas was generated from 1o after photo-converted from 1c. The formation of SO$_2$ gas upon UV irradiation to the hexane solution of 1o as well as 1c are measured by a gas detector and summarized in Fig. 2 (Tables S1–S3, ESI†). Therefore, it is possible to use 1c as the thermally stable regent for SO$_2$ gas storage. One of the useful applications of this finding for cell biological researches is that, once UV light is irradiated, it works as photoinduced on-demand killing of adherent cells on culture substrates.

When we reduced the light intensity by using neutral density (ND) filters (Fig. S5, S6), the amount of SO$_2$ gas generation from 1c was much suppressed than that from 1o. This is attributed by the following reason. For the hexane solution of 1c, the first photon absorbed by 1c is used for the cycloreversion reaction to 1o. The produced 1o can generate SO$_2$ gas but the concentration of 1o is low because of the reduced intensity of UV light at the initial stage of the experiment. Consequently, the ratio between the generation of SO$_2$ from 1o initially and that from 1c is larger for the reduced intensity of UV light (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2 SO$_2$ gas formations by the UV irradiation to the hexane solution of 1o and 1c with changing the UV intensity using ND filters.](image)

The photoinduced SO$_2$ gas generation from 1o is much easier compared to other diarylethene derivatives. This is most likely due to the shorter conjugation length in the molecular backbone. The thiophene 1,1-dioxide in which no lone pair electrons exist on the sulfur atom is not aromatic. The SO$_2$ gas generated vigorously upon UV irradiation as well as on heating (ESI†).

Here, we further studied photoinduced cell damage on the substrates and found the cell death upon UV irradiation to the 1o coated substrates with NIH/3T3 and MDCK cells. The phenomena were also observed for the cells on the 1c coated substrates. At the photo-toxicity experiment, NIH/3T3 and MDCK cells were disseminated onto thin layers of 1o and 1c, respectively. The photoirradiation to the thin layers containing 1o or 1c can be controlled by selecting the wavelengths of irradiation light at 365 and 436 nm which are switchable on our PC-controlled microprojection system. To both cells, 365 nm light was irradiated to the patterned area (four band shaped area) through the filter from bottom side of the culture substrate. Fig. 3a shows the NIH/3T3 cells on the thin layer of 1o. The 365 nm light was irradiated on the patterned area (Fig. 3b, fluorescence from base polystyrene substrate was observed in the irradiated area), and the cells on the area were damaged and detached from the surface as shown in Fig. 3c. Also MDCK cells on the thin layer of 1o were damaged after 365 nm irradiation (Fig. 3d, e), while no damage was observed with 436 nm light irradiation. Fig. 3d shows that the adhesion of the cells decreased in the irradiated area. Some of these cells were stained with Trypan which can stain the dead cells only. These results suggested that the cells were damaged significantly by 365 nm irradiation on the thin layer of 1o. On the 1c film, NIH /3T3 cells were also damaged upon 365 nm irradiation (Fig. 3f). The more magnified images (Fig. 3g, h) show clearly that the shape of the cells in the irradiated area were totally deformed indicating their critical damage.

![Fig. 3 Influence of patterned UV irradiation (wavelength: 365 nm, intensity: 90 mW/cm$^2$) on NIH/3T3 (a–c, f–h) and MDCK (d, e) cells on 1o coated substrate (a–e), and 1c coated substrate (f–h). Phase contrast images of NIH/3T3 cells on 1o coated substrate (0.44 µg/cm$^2$) before the irradiation (a), during the 365 nm light irradiation for 8 min (b), and 3 hours after the irradiation (c). Phase contrast image of MDCK cells on 1o coated substrate (0.31 µg/cm$^2$) before the irradiation (d), during the 365 nm light irradiation for 8 min (e), and 3 hours after the irradiation (f).](image)
coated substrate (0.44 µg/cm²) 2 hours after 365 nm light irradiation for 12 min (d) and transmission image after subsequent Trypan blue dyeing (e). Phase contrast image of NIH/3T3 cells on 1c coated substrate (0.30 µg/cm²) 2 hours after 365 nm light irradiation for 12 min (f), phase contrast image after subsequent Trypan blue dyeing (g) and transmission image of the same view field (h). (Scale bars in all figures: 500 µm)

We then carried out the cell damage experiment on the PMMA films containing 1c. The cells were attached before UV irradiation. UV light (365 nm, 95 mW/cm²) was irradiated to the central part for 8 min (Figure 4).

Two hours later the irradiation, the cells in the irradiated area were damaged and departed from the surface. In the control experiment, such cell damage was not observed on the PMMA film without 1c under the same UV irradiation conditions.

The by-products formed during the SO₂ gas generation were similar to those reported by Kobatake et al, and the by-products were maintained in PMMA matrix.¹⁷

The diarylenethenes having longer conjugations showed high fatigue resistance even they possess the SO₂ groups.⁶ The effective photoinduced elimination of sulfur dioxide will be limited within simple structured derivatives. Diarylenethene 1o is the special compound in that the SO₂ gas generation is moderate and the absorption wavelength is longer compared to that of thiophene 1,1-dioxide, and the degradation process is prohibited by forming the closed ring structure. Therefore, diarylenethene 1c has desirable characteristics as the photoinduced cell killing culture substrate for cell control.

Conclusions

Photoinduced elimination reaction of sulfur dioxide was found as biologically useful SO₂ gas generator accompanied with the photochromism of diarylenethene 1o. For the closed-ring isomer 1c, the gas generation was prohibited without UV light irradiation even at 70 °C, however once UV light (365 nm) was irradiated, it reverts to 1o and sulfur dioxide gas was generated. Due to the generated gas, selective cell damage was observed. Such photoinduced on-demand killing of adherent cells on culture substrates will be applicable as one of the noncontact cell control technique.

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Notes and references

¹ Department of Materials Chemistry, Faculty of Science and Technology, Rikkyo University, 3-34-1 Nishi-Ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo 171-8501, Japan, Fax: +81-3-3972-1221; E-mail; uchida@rins.ryukoku.ac.jp
² Research Center for Stem Cell Engineering, National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST), Tsukuba Central 5th, 1-1-1 Higashi, Tsukuba, Ibaraki 305-8565, Japan
³ Industrial Research Center of Shiga Prefecture, Kamitoyama 232, Ritto, Shiga 520-3004, Japan
⁴ Department of Chemistry and Research Center for Smart Molecules, Rikkyo University, 3-34-1 Nishi-Ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo 171-8501, Japan
⁵ School of Pharmacy, Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Sciences, 1432-1 Horinouchi, Hachioji, Tokyo 192-0392, Japan
⁶ RIKEN Research Cluster for Innovation, Nakamura Laboratory, 2-1 Hiroswasa, Wako, Saitama 351-0198, Japan
⁷ † Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI) available: [Experimental Section, Absorption spectral changes of 1o in hexane solution, Generated amount of SO₂ gas by gas detector with ND filters, GC-Mass spectroscopy of UV generated substance in gas phase, Detection of sulfur dioxide by a gas detector, and Discussion about decomposition mechanism]. See DOI: 10.1039/b6000000x/