



## A matrix metalloproteinase activation probe for painting human tumours†

 Bethany Mills,<sup>a</sup> Dominic Norberg,<sup>a</sup> Kevin Dhaliwal,<sup>a</sup> Ahsan R Akram,<sup>a</sup>  
Mark Bradley,<sup>b</sup> and Alicia Megia-Fernandez<sup>\*b</sup>

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**A probe that allows specific ‘painting’ of human tumours is described. Probe activation was mediated by specific matrix metalloproteinases, resulting not only in disruption of a FRET pair, but in the generation of a fragment that “fluorescently paints” human tumours. This probe demonstrated rapid and effective human tumour labelling with the potential to allow margin detection during surgical resection.**

The concept of tissue-based fluorescent labelling has gained attention as a method for identification of diseased tissue margins during intra-operative cancer surgery,<sup>1–6</sup> made possible with key advances in imaging instrumentation.<sup>7,8</sup> Pivotal to this has been the development of fluorescent probes which provide disease-mediated contrast.<sup>9</sup> Approved fluorescent contrast agents in this area include compounds such as 5-aminolevulinic acid which is selectively up-taken and metabolized by cancerous tissues to generate protoporphyrin IX.<sup>10</sup> Other optical agents in clinical studies<sup>11</sup> include labelled nanobodies,<sup>12</sup> peptides, such as chlorotoxin (tozuleristide)<sup>13</sup> which is currently in phase II/III studies for pediatric CNS tumours, and the bis-cyclic peptide GE-137, which targets the human hepatocyte growth factor receptor (c-MET).<sup>14</sup> There are also a wide variety of protease based probes,<sup>15–21</sup> with cathepsins being a key target where signals are generated by either covalent modification of the enzyme<sup>22</sup> or by FRET dequenching.<sup>23,24</sup> Such probes have been able to detect margins in nonmelanoma skin cancer.<sup>25</sup> Other examples of probes explored for cancer imaging include those targeting DPP-IV for esophageal cancer,<sup>26,27</sup> folate receptor targeted probes,<sup>28</sup> PSMA for prostate cancer<sup>29</sup> or those developed by Tsien,<sup>30</sup> whereby MMP-2 activation liberated a cell penetrating peptide that locally tagged proximal tissue. Matrix metalloproteinase 13 (MMP-13 or

collagenase 3) is an endopeptidase overexpressed in the micro-environment around both lung tumours and fibrotic tissue, and has been shown to play a role in early invasive pulmonary adenocarcinoma.<sup>31</sup> MMP-2 and -9 (gelatinase A and B) are cancer-associated endopeptidases overexpressed in a variety of malignant tumors and often associated with aggressiveness and poor prognosis.<sup>32,33</sup> Here we report on the rational design, synthesis and evaluation on human cancerous tissue of a novel MMP-imaging agent (3) which allowed MMP-mediated ‘painting’ of resected human tumour tissue.

The designed probe (3) contained both a FRET pair between 5-carboxyfluorescein (FAM) and the quencher methyl red reporting on enzyme activity, as well as the incorporation of an ‘always-on’ far-red fluorophore (an in-house synthesized Cy5.5, ex/em 670/693 nm) with a spectral window distinct from FAM and away from tissue autofluorescence. The Cy5.5-fragment released enzymatically was responsible for the “tissue-painting” ability of the activated probe, which is attributable to the hydrophobicity of this fragment compared to the parent compound (Fig. 1a).

The peptide sequence (Pro-Phe-Gly-Nle-Lys-βAla, previously reported as MMP-2,9,13 substrate<sup>34,35</sup>) was synthesized by Fmoc solid-phase peptide synthesis on ChemMatrix resin using Oxyma/DIC as the coupling combination (Scheme 1). At the carboxy-terminus of the peptide, three replicates of bis-ethyleneglycol and D-lysine were added to ensure both solubility and stability against proteases.<sup>34</sup> As part of this strategy we developed a novel Cy5.5 red dye, that was readily prepared on large scale in 4 steps, and contained a (5-carboxypyridin-2-yl) group to allow ready incorporation *via* an amide bond to the peptide by solid phase methods (ESI† for details). The Cy5.5, 5-carboxyfluorescein and methyl red were sequentially incorporated at the amino terminus of the peptide, on the Lys side chain (after Dde deprotection) and conjugated to the Lys(N<sub>3</sub>) residue *via* azide/alkyne cycloaddition respectively (Scheme 1 and ESI†). Probe 3 was purified and characterized by RP-HPLC and MALDI TOF MS and was fully aqueous soluble (log *P* –1.5) (ESI† for details).

<sup>a</sup> Centre for Inflammation Research, Queen's Medical Research Institute, University of Edinburgh, 147 Little France Crescent, EH16 4TJ Edinburgh, UK

<sup>b</sup> EaStCHEM School of Chemistry, University of Edinburgh, David Brewster Road, EH9 3FJ Edinburgh, UK. E-mail: v1amegia@exseed.ed.ac.uk

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**Fig. 1** Cleavage of compound **3** by target MMPs and generation of the tissue painting fragment. (a) Mode of action of **3** showing the quenched and non-quenched fluorophores and resultant tissue staining with the Cy5.5 fragment released following MMP cleavage; (b) cleavage of **3** (5  $\mu$ M) measured as fluorescence increase (compared to enzyme-free control) at 15 min; ex/em 485/528 nm (FAM, green bars) and 680/710 nm (Cy5.5, red bars) (M: marimastat, MMP inhibitor). Data is the mean of three independent replicates performed in duplicate. Error bars represent s.e.m. Statistical analysis was performed with a one-way ANOVA test compared to an enzyme-free control. \* $P = 0.0147$ ; \*\*\*\* $P < 0.0001$ ; (c) RP-HPLC analysis revealed the decreased polarity of the Cy5.5-fragment after cleavage compared to the parent peak; (d) visual change in the octanol–water distribution before and after enzymatic cleavage of **3** showing the generation of the hydrophobic Cy5.5 fragment; (e) structure of **3** showing the fragments generated following cleavage at the Gly–Nle site by MMPs.

Target and off-target proteases were incubated with **3**. Within 15 min, as anticipated, an increase in green fluorescence (FAM signal) was measurable from the probe incubated with the active domains of MMP-2, -9 and -13 (Fig. 1b and Fig. S1, ESI<sup>†</sup>), which was blockable in the presence of pan-MMP inhibitor marimastat.

Probe **3** was stable against the off-target proteases (Fig. 1b), with cleavage by MMPs specifically at Gly  $\uparrow$  Nle, as confirmed by MALDI TOF MS (Fig. S2, ESI<sup>†</sup>). Importantly the Cy5.5 residue did not interfere with fluorescence in the green channel following MMP activation, with data similar to the control compound **4** that contained FAM & methyl red only (see Fig. S3 and S4, ESI<sup>†</sup>). In solution the Cy5.5 fluorescence intensity remained constant before and after cleavage (Fig. 1b), demonstrating that its

intensity was independent of the FRET pairing. HPLC analysis confirmed that the Cy5.5-fragment obtained after cleavage was much more hydrophobic than the other two components, with its retention factor shifting from  $k = 4.2$  for parent compound **3**, to  $k = 8.0$  for the Cy5.5 fragment (Fig. 1c and e), while MMP-13 treatment of the peptide **3** in biphasic buffer/octanol led to migration of the cleaved Cy5.5-labelled peptide into the octanol phase (Fig. 1d and Fig. S5, ESI<sup>†</sup>) demonstrating the hydrophobicity “switch-on” upon cleavage.

**3** (5  $\mu$ M) was applied onto human lung tumour tissue, from three individual patients: two with squamous cell carcinoma and one with adenocarcinoma (MMPs presence within these tissues was confirmed by gelatin zymography,<sup>36</sup> Fig. S6, ESI<sup>†</sup>) and imaged over 30 min (Fig. 2 and ESI<sup>†</sup> videos) with a fibre-based imaging







**Fig. 3** Macroscopic imaging of **3** delineating tumour margins. (a) Bright field microscopy image and fluorescence image of freshly excised lung slice, with pathologically identified adenocarcinoma (**Ad**), transition zone (**Tr**) and normal (**N**) tissue, following incubation with compound **3**. (b) Control tissue from the same patient sample without the addition of compound **3** was used as a measure of tissue autofluorescence within this spectral window. Scale bar is 1 mm.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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