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Conformational stabilization of isatin Schiff bases – biologically active chemical probes†

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Isatin Schiff base derivatives have a wide range of biological effects. Unfortunately, these compounds possess a serious topological shortcoming: the conformational $E \rightleftharpoons Z$ interconversion. Two ways of conformation stabilization are reported here: complexation with metals that stabilize the E -conformer and substitution in the 4th position of the isatin core stabilizing the Z -form.

Isatin¹ is a naturally occurring alkaloid first discovered in plant species and later found as a blood circulation molecule that can easily cross the blood–brain barrier acting as an endogenous neurotransmitter activator.³ To date it is known that isatin and its analogues have a plethora of biological effects⁴ including antitumor activities.⁵ Modified by hyrdoxamic acids, isatin-3-oxymes are potent for T-cell lymphoma killing, acting as a micromolar histone deacetylase inhibitors.⁶ It was shown on a cellular leukemia model that N -substituted acrylate isatin derivatives promote cell cycle arrest and apoptosis induction.⁷ Isatin- β -thiosemicarbazones show selective proliferation inhibition towards multidrug-resistant cell lines.⁸ 5-Sulfonamide and -aryl substituted isatins act as inhibitors of cancer associated matrix metalloproteinases.^{9,10} Isatin Schiff bases with benzenesulfonamide moiety have been recently identified as tumor associated carbonic anhydrase IX and XII inhibitors.¹¹ Our previous work¹² showed that isatin Schiff base derivatives (ISBDs) activate p53 transcription factor – the major oncosuppressor protein. Unfortunately, ISBDs poses a serious drawback – intramolecular isomeric interconversion. Since E and Z isomers significantly differ topologically, one becomes almost an impurity that may cause undesirable side effects. $E \rightleftharpoons Z$ equilibrium occurs in most of the solvents (the ratio is slightly dependent on the solvent¹⁴) with preferable E -conformation, which makes *circa* 80–90%.¹³ It is recognized that indole like scaffolds are privileged in medicinal chemistry molecule space,¹⁵ thus making ISBDs more conformationally rigid is an important and actual objective.

This report is a proof-of-principle that shows how conformational interconversion may be stopped by applying two different approaches: substitution in the isatin aromatic moiety (ring A on Fig. 1) and complexation with d-metals. These data are supported by the structural X-ray solid state and NMR solution studies that are accompanied by DFT calculations. It is worth noting, that the structural findings in coordination chemistry of isatin–aromatic amines Schiff bases up-to-date remain scarce and are limited to one work describing homoleptic bischelatate copper(II) complex with isatin-4-hexylaniline.¹⁶

To study the metal complexation processes we have prepared the model compound – 1-methyl-3(phenylimino)indolinone-2-one (**I**) by the method described in our previous paper.¹⁴ As non-protected amide nitrogen (NH) is acidic enough to form contacts with d-metals, this potential reactive center was blocked by N -methylation.

XRD study showed that ISBD **I** adopts only E -conformation outlined in Fig. 2§:

In solution interconversion results in methyl proton peak signal splitting and the E/Z ratio can be estimated as a peak surface relation. Solution phase NMR data (Fig. 2B) shows that 10 : 1 E - to Z -conformer ratio is settled in CDCl₃ for ISBD **I**.

We have expected that introduction of substituent in the 4th position (Fig. 1) can force the molecule to adopt Z -conformation, as a reason of steric repulsion between substituent and aromatic ring C. Using CAM-B3LYP functional that includes long-range corrections, total energy differences ($\Delta E_{\text{tot}} = E_Z - E_E$, kJ mol^{−1}, for R₄ = H, $\Delta E_{\text{tot}} = 0$) between two conformers with various substituents in ring A were estimated. For the most common isatin derivatives ΔE_{tot} changes in the following order: H (0), Me (−23.5), CF₃ (−30.0), Et (−28.3), OMe (−6.2), F (−5.4), Cl (−19.4), Br (−23.5), CN (−24.5). Hence using methyl substituent should be enough to make the molecule adopt

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§ Here and further atoms are drawn in thermal ellipsoids at 50% probability level and hydrogens are omitted for clarity. Of note, compound **I** polymorph was earlier described.²

As depicted in Fig. 3, introduction of methyl group in the 4th position results in the crystallization of compound **II** Z-conformer. Up to date it is the first crystallized ISBD in Z-conformation. The absence of methyl signal splitting in ¹H NMR spectrum (Fig. 3B) confirms that no interconversion occurs in solution. Thus, it can be stated that substitution in the isatin core can be used as a strategy to stabilize Z-form of ISBD and may be further applied for medicinal chemistry purposes.

The negligible solubility turned to be the issue of the polymeric crystal structure.[‡] It is seen in the figure below that Cd(II) ions form monochelate complex with ISBD **I** and are bridged by two bromide anions forming infinite chain with mean Cd to Cd distance of ~ 3.95 Å (Fig. 5).

RSC Adv., 2017, 7, 10070–10073 | 10071

Fig. 4 Superimposition of IR spectra for I, V and VI.

Fig. 5 ORTEP plot of X-ray determined structure of V (coordination polymer).

By the analogy with Cd(II), coordination of **I** to Hg(II) ions resulted in the *N,O*-monochelate complex formation $[M(L)]Br_2$ (Fig. S19,† $M/Z = 516.98$). The bischelate complex $[Hg(L)_2]Br_2$ was also detected by MS method, but in a less extent (Fig. S19,† $M/Z = 735.07$). We have isolated a monocrystalline sample and characterized the molecular structure of monochelate complex $[Hg(L)]Br_2$ (**VI**)† that is outlined in Fig. 6A:

The cell unit of **VI** is formed by the several types of slightly different elemental fragments of the monochelate mercury(II) complex (unequal Hg–N and Hg–O bond lengths). The weak interactions between Hg^{2+} cation and Br^- anions of the neighboring molecules might be the reason of such inequalities (Fig. 7):

The solution study of $[Hg(L)_2]Br_2$ complex showed that coordination resulted in ^{13}C carbonyl signal shift to the lower field and total reduction of the *Z*-component according to 1H NMR *N*-methyl signal (Fig. 6B and C).

Thus, the current report elucidates two approaches of freezing *E/Z* isomeric interconversion within ISBDs that may further find implementation in the medicinal chemistry field. Substitution in the 4th position of the isatin core results in total reduction of *E*-conformation existence, whereas complexation of the isatin Schiff base with Hg(II) ions stabilizes the ligand *E*-conformation. X-ray powder patterns confirmed the isomeric purity of samples.

† Attempts to isolate Hg(II) complex with ligands **II** or **III** didn't succeed.

Fig. 6 (A) ORTEP plot of X-ray determined molecular structure of VI; (B) ^{13}C NMR signal for carbonyl of I and VI; (C) 1H NMR signal for methyl group of VI.

Fig. 7 Schematic representation of Hg(II) – ISBD I supramolecular structures.

It's worthwhile to say that, our ongoing studies show that biogenic 3d-metal ions (Cu^{2+} , Co^{2+} , Ni^{2+} , Mn^{2+}) form stable complexes with ISBDs that are more likely to be studied in biochemical assays. Moreover, by the analogy with the homologue iminoquinone complexes catalyst,²⁰ the combination of non-innocent ISBDs ligands with RedOx active metals can result in unexpected electrochemical properties of their complexes.

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