

Cite this: *RSC Adv.*, 2017, 7, 51965

# Selective recognition of c-myc promoter G-quadruplex and down-regulation of oncogene c-myc transcription in human cancer cells by 3,8a-disubstituted indolizine†

Fengmin Yang,<sup>ab</sup> Xin Sun,<sup>a</sup> Lixia Wang,<sup>ID</sup> \*<sup>a</sup> Qian Li,<sup>\*a</sup> Ajjiao Guan,<sup>a</sup> Gang Shen<sup>ab</sup> and Yalin Tang<sup>ID</sup> \*<sup>ab</sup>

c-myc promoter G-quadruplex is a very important target for developing anti-cancer drugs. However, highly selective recognition of DNA c-myc G-quadruplex with parallel configuration is also a very challenging problem. Here, we showed a new type of N-containing alkaloid, 3,8a-disubstituted indolizine, which adopted a distorted configuration. 6-Methyl-3-(naphthalen-2-yl)-8a-(4-methylpyridin-2-yl)-indolizine could selectively recognize DNA c-myc G-quadruplex leading to an obvious fluorescence enhancement by 11-fold, and meanwhile the G-quadruplex can be stabilized up to 90 °C. Further, it could down-regulate the transcription of oncogene c-myc in both human non-small cell line (A549) and human laryngeal epithelial cell line (Hep-2).

Received 5th September 2017  
Accepted 2nd November 2017

DOI: 10.1039/c7ra09870g

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## Introduction

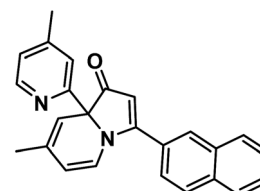
The G-quadruplex structure formed by tandem guanine (G) nucleotides, which are incorporated in nucleic acid sequences, has illuminated a new role for DNA in biology.<sup>1</sup> G-quadruplexes as one of the higher-order DNA and RNA structures have been identified in G-rich human telomeres and gene promoter regions. G-quadruplex as a therapeutic target has attracted a growing interest, due to its profound roles in a wide spectrum of diseases, such as cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disorders.<sup>2</sup> Several organic probes have been reported to recognize DNA G-quadruplex *via* diverse interaction modes.<sup>3</sup> Stabilization of G-quadruplex structures in the promoter region of certain oncogenes is an emerging field in anticancer drug design.<sup>4</sup> Human c-myc gene is one of these oncogenes, and G-quadruplexes have been proven to be the transcriptional controller of this gene.

Human c-myc gene or its product is a central regulator of cellular proliferation and cell growth, and over-expression of c-myc gene is related to various cancers.<sup>5</sup> C-myc is the first and most extensively studied system of promoter G-quadruplex formation. The major G-quadruplex formed in the c-myc

promoter is a parallel stranded structure with two G3NG3 single-nt strand-reversal loops, and parallel-stranded structures are found to be more common in the promoter G-quadruplexes.<sup>1</sup> Some known G-quadruplex-interactive compounds have become prospective anticancer agents that display relatively low cytotoxicity. In particular, Quarfloxin, a first-in-class G-quadruplex-interactive drug reached phase 2 clinical trials, which was considered to be a c-myc G-quadruplex ligand at first.<sup>6</sup> Quarfloxin is a fluoroquinolone derivative with antineoplastic activity, and another known c-myc G-quadruplex ligand quindoline is a derivative of the natural product cryptolepine,<sup>4</sup> and both of them are N-containing alkaloids. Here we reported a new type of N-containing alkaloid, indolizine (Scheme 1), which can selectively recognize DNA c-myc G-quadruplex (DNA MycG4) and down-regulate oncogene c-myc.

## Results

Indolizines are N-heterocycles that have only recently appeared in the chemical literature,<sup>7</sup> and to the best of our



Scheme 1 Structure of 6-methyl-3-(naphthalen-2-yl)-8a-(4-methylpyridin-2-yl)-indolizine (indolizine).

<sup>a</sup>National Laboratory for Molecular Sciences, Center for Molecular Sciences, State Key Laboratory for Structural Chemistry of Unstable and Stable Species, Institute of Chemistry Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, 100190, P. R. China. E-mail: tangyl@iccas.ac.cn; Fax: +86 10 62522090; Tel: +86 10 82617304

<sup>b</sup>Graduate University of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Yuquan Road 19 (A), Shijingshan District, Beijing, 100049, P. R. China

† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/c7ra09870g



knowledge, any application of which wasn't found to be reported. Recently, we firstly reported a copper-catalyzed domino reaction to construct functionalized 3,8a-disubstituted indolizines, and this protocol was simple and highly efficient.<sup>8</sup> In the solid state, 3,8a-disubstituted indolizines adopted distorted configuration, and thus they provided no obviously strong fluorescence spectra in solution due to the lack of a larger conjugated  $\pi$  system. Most of DNA MycG4 ligands that have been previously reported are N-heterocycles with planar  $\pi$  systems, which can't distinguish DNA MycG4 from other configurations of G-quadruplexes. In this report, we found 6-methyl-3-(naphthalen-2-yl)-8a-(4-methylpyridin-2-yl)-indolizine (indolizine) here could selectively recognize DNA MycG4, leading to its greatly enhanced fluorescence intensity. We firstly compared the fluorescence intensity of indolizine with five oligonucleotides of known G4 structures (Table S1†): intermolecular parallel configuration H7, intramolecular hybrid-type configuration M24, intramolecular anti-parallel configuration A24, intramolecular parallel configuration Kit and Myc, relative to the signal of indolizine alone. As shown in Fig. 1, indolizine itself at 4  $\mu$ M gives a very weak fluorescence signal. While addition of 8  $\mu$ M DNA MycG4, and then standing for 24 hours, the fluorescence signal of indolizine lead to an obvious enhancement by 11-fold. Addition of other types of G-quadruplexes, such as intermolecular parallel type H7 led to 0.5-fold enhancement, and for intramolecular types, parallel DNA c-Kit 4.5-fold, hybrid-type M24 1.6-fold and anti-parallel type A24 2.5-fold, respectively. These results indicated that indolizine preferred to recognize DNA MycG4.

Furthermore, fluorescence titrations were carried out to evaluate the binding constants of indolizine with these five nucleic acid sequences (Fig. S1–S3†). A 1 : 1 binding model for indolizine with DNA G-quadruplex was confirmed by the job's plot analysis. The typical titration curves and fitting results according to the 1 : 1 binding model are presented. The binding constants for indolizine with Myc and Kit are  $(9.91 \pm 0.65) \times 10^5$  and  $(5.77 \pm 1.60) \times 10^5$ , respectively. The binding strength to Myc was obviously more strong than to Kit. In comparison with other intramolecular DNAG4s, the binding strength to A24 or M24 was much weaker, with binding constants  $(2.43 \pm 0.37) \times 10^4$  and  $(1.88 \pm 0.65) \times 10^4$ , respectively. Of note, the binding

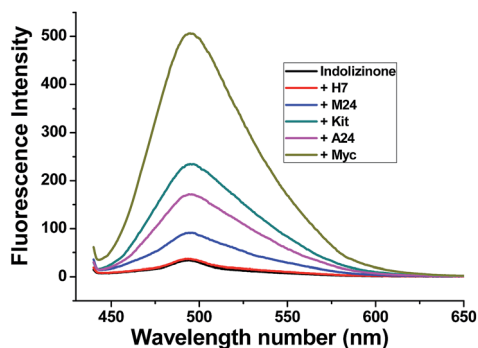


Fig. 1 Fluorescence intensity of indolizine with five varied DNA G-quadruplexes in a 20 mM Tris HCl (40 mM  $K^+$ , pH 7.0) solution at room temperature,  $E_x = 423$  nm.

strength to intermolecular H7 was very weak, and the binding constant is less than 10. As shown in Table 1, the trend of the binding constants is consistent with the  $F/F_0$  values.

Then we subsequently performed this assay on a larger set of 25 nucleic acid sequences. Structures of these oligonucleotides have been characterized, and these oligonucleotides have been used in the G4-Fluorescence Intercalator Displacement (FID) assay.<sup>9</sup> All sequences are listed in Table 2, and results are presented in Fig. 2. Fifteen of the 25 sequences are likely to form G4s. The fluorescence enhancements of indolizine interacted with the parallel configuration G4 in the promoter region (c-myc, c-kit1, c-kit2, bcl-2, AKT1, VAV1, 35B1, 27Kras) were 11-fold, 4.0-fold, 3.7-fold, 2.5-fold, 4.0-fold, 5.2-fold, 4.3-fold, and 3.4-fold, respectively. And the human telomeric DNA G-quadruplex 22Ag and 45Ag, which adopt anti-parallel configuration in the presence of  $K^+$ , led to the fluorescence enhancements of indolizine with the value  $F/F_0$  1.5-fold and 2.8-fold, respectively. And meanwhile, in the presence of another five G-quadruplex forming sequences (21CTA, TBA, Ceb25, CT4, CGG12), and other non-G-quadruplex DNA templates including single-stranded (G-tripl, dT30), double-stranded (ds26, 19AT, dx12, PS1c), stem-loop (GCdx), triplex, and trinucleotide (CTG12, CAG12), all these oligonucleotide sequences led to a  $F/F_0 < 2$ . Indolizine showed higher response towards intramolecular DNA G-quadruplex with parallel configuration, especially most to DNA MycG4, comparing to other types of G-quadruplex and non-G-quadruplex templates. While it presented very weak response to intermolecular parallel G-quadruplex H7, just leading to 0.5-fold enhancement, probably attributing to its lack of loop-binding sites.

To evaluate the effect of indolizine on the specific recognition of DNA MycG4, we applied circular dichroism to monitor the melting temperature ( $T_m$ ) of DNA MycG4 in the presence of 1 equiv. molar ratio of indolizine. The change of  $T_m$  in the folded and unfolded quadruplex structure upon interacting with ligand provides evidence of thermal stabilization of DNA structure.<sup>10</sup> DNA MycG4 was incubated with indolizine for 24 h, the  $T_m$  values for DNA MycG4 were calculated as shown in Fig. 3. Indolizine shows the preference to stabilize DNA MycG4 by raising the temperature up to 90 °C monitored at 265 nm. In the contrast, indolizine shows a weak ability obviously to stabilize other types of G-quadruplexes (see Fig. S4†).

Based on the emission enhancement and the absorption spectral results, fluorescence intensity decay measurements

Table 1  $F/F_0$ s and binding constants for the indolizine with different DNAG4s determined from the fitted curves,  $E_m = 494$  nm

Oligonucleotides	$F/F_0^a$	Binding constants
Myc	11	$(9.91 \pm 0.65) \times 10^5$
Kit	4.5	$(5.77 \pm 1.60) \times 10^5$
A24	2.5	$(2.43 \pm 0.37) \times 10^4$
M24	1.6	$(1.88 \pm 0.65) \times 10^4$
H7	0.5	<10

<sup>a</sup> The concentrations of indolizine and DNAG4 are 4  $\mu$ M and 8  $\mu$ M, respectively.



Table 2 Oligonucleotides used in the study

Name	Type/origin	Sequence (from 5' to 3')
c-myc (Myc)	G4-promoter	TGAG <sub>3</sub> TG <sub>3</sub> GAG <sub>3</sub> TG <sub>3</sub> GAA
c-kit1 (Kit)	G4-promoter	G <sub>3</sub> AG <sub>3</sub> CGCTG <sub>3</sub> AGGAG <sub>3</sub>
c-kit2	G4-promoter	G <sub>3</sub> CG <sub>3</sub> CGCGAG <sub>3</sub> AGG <sub>3</sub>
BCL-2	G4-promoter	G <sub>3</sub> CGCG <sub>3</sub> AG <sub>2</sub> AATTG <sub>3</sub> CG <sub>3</sub>
AKT1	G4-promoter	G <sub>3</sub> CG <sub>3</sub> CGGCTCCG <sub>3</sub> CGCG <sub>3</sub>
VAV1	G4-promoter	G <sub>3</sub> CAG <sub>3</sub> AG <sub>3</sub> AACTG <sub>3</sub>
35B1 (Kras)	G4-promoter	AG <sub>3</sub> CGGTGTG <sub>3</sub> AAGAG <sub>3</sub> AAGAG <sub>3</sub> GGAGGCAG
27 Kras	G4-promoter	G <sub>3</sub> CG <sub>2</sub> TGTG <sub>3</sub> AAGAG <sub>3</sub> AAGAG <sub>3</sub> G
7Ag (H7)	G4-humanDNA telomere	TTAG <sub>3</sub> T
22Ag	G4-humanDNA telomere	AG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub>
24Ag (A24)	G4-humanDNA telomere	TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub>
24AgA (M24)	G4-humanDNA telomere	TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> A
45Ag	G4-human DNA telomere	G <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub> TTAG <sub>3</sub>
21CTA	G4-human telomere variant	G <sub>3</sub> CTAG <sub>3</sub> CTAG <sub>3</sub> CTAG <sub>3</sub>
TBA	G4-aptamer	GGTTGGTGTGGTTGG
Ceb25	G4-minisatellites	AG <sub>3</sub> TG <sub>3</sub> TGTAAGTGTG <sub>3</sub> TG <sub>3</sub> T
CT4	G4/mixed quartets	G <sub>3</sub> CTTTTG <sub>3</sub> C
CGG12	Trinucleotide	(CGG) <sub>12</sub>
CTG12	Trinucleotide	(CTG) <sub>12</sub>
CAG12	Trinucleotide	(CAG) <sub>12</sub>
G-tripl	Single strand	GGTTGGTGTGG
dT30	Single strand	T <sub>30</sub>
Triplex	Triplex	(a) TTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT (b) AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA (c) TTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT
GCdx	Stem-loop	GCGCGCGCTTTGCGCGCGC
PS1c	Parallel-duplex	(a) TTTTTTTTTTATTTAAATTTATAA (b) AAAAAAAAAATAATTTTAAATATT
ds26	Duplex	CAATCGGATCGAATTCGATCCGATTG
19AT	Duplex	(a) ACGTCGATTATAGACGAGC (b) GCTCGTCTATAATCGACGT
dx12	Duplex	(a) GCGTGAGTTCGG (b) CCGAACTCACGC

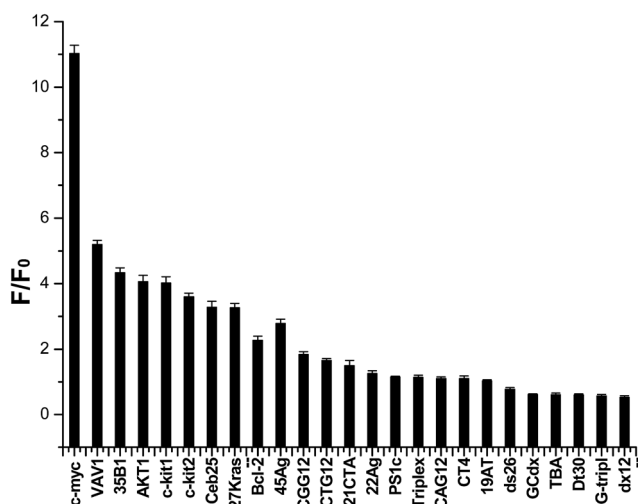


Fig. 2 Dependence of indolizone (4  $\mu$ M) fluorescence intensity at 494 nm for a variety of DNA sequences (8  $\mu$ M) in a 20 mM Tris HCl (40 mM K<sup>+</sup>, pH 7.0) solution.

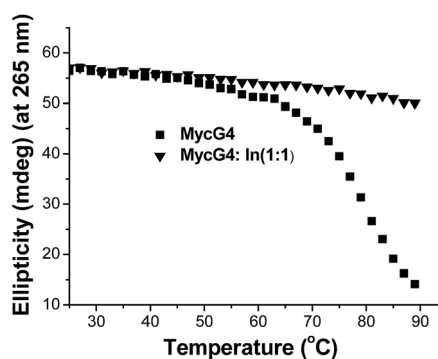


Fig. 3 CD melting profile of 4  $\mu$ M DNA MycG4 alone or in the presence of 1 equiv. molar ratio of indolizone in a 20 mM Tris HCl (40 mM K<sup>+</sup>, pH 7.0) solution.

were conducted to demonstrate the strong binding of indolizone with DNA MycG4. The fluorescence decay of indolizone was fast (<1 ns) in solution due to the highly feasible torsional

relation channel in the excited state. However, the lifetimes increased to the nanosecond level in the presence of DNA MycG4. As shown in Fig. 4, the fluorescence decay was much lower for indolizone in the presence of 1 equiv. or 2 equiv. molar ratio of DNA MycG4, with the  $\tau$  value of 3.54 ns and 3.71 ns, respectively. This result indicated that the interaction between indolizone and DNA MycG4 hinders the rotation of indolizone and increases its lifetime.



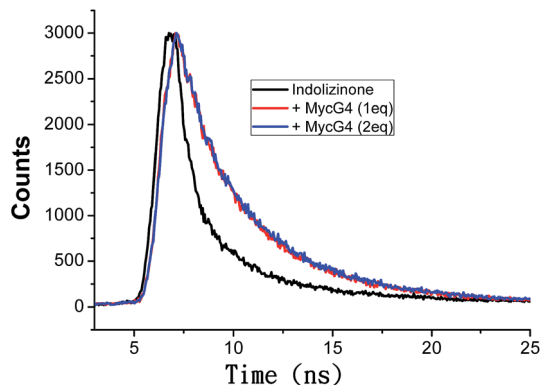


Fig. 4 Fluorescence decay traces of indolizine (4  $\mu\text{M}$ ) in the absence and presence of DNA MycG4 in a 20 mM Tris HCl (40 mM  $\text{K}^+$ , pH 7.0) solution.

Oncogene *c-myc* encodes an important transcriptional regulator *c-myc* protein, which is involved in cell proliferation, senescence, and apoptosis.<sup>11</sup> Because *c-myc* promoter region contains G-quadruplex forming G-rich sequence, its binding with indolizine could increase its stability resulting in down-regulation of oncogene *c-myc* transcription, which would be identified using real-time RT-PCR.<sup>12</sup> To test the above hypothesis and understand the effect of indolizine on oncogene *c-myc*, two cancer cell lines with different translocation break points within the oncogene *c-myc* were tested. Human non-small cell line (A549) and human laryngeal epithelial cell line (Hep-2) were obtained from the National Infrastructure of Cell Line Resource (Beijing, China). As shown in Fig. 5, indolizine

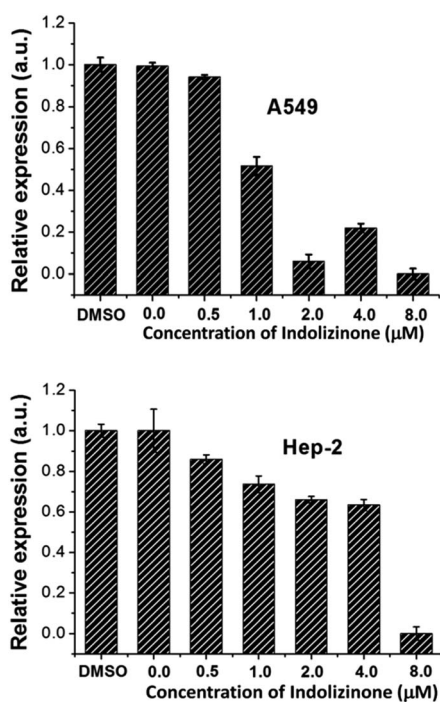


Fig. 5 qRT-PCR to determine the transcription of oncogene *c-myc* in the A549 and Hep-2 cells treated with indolizine.

could down-regulate the transcription of oncogene *c-myc* in both A549 and Hep-2 cells, after treated with indolizine at 0.5, 1.0, 2.0, 4.0, and 8.0  $\mu\text{M}$  for 48 h. The total RNA was extracted and reverse transcribed to cDNA. This cDNA was then used as a template for specific RCR amplification of the *c-myc* sequence and controlled by  $\beta$ -actin.

## Conclusions

Indolizines are N-heterocycles that have only recently appeared in the chemical literature, which can be prepared from the simple and achievable starting materials efficiently. Here, we firstly reported the indolizine has the potential ability to recognize DNA MycG4 by fluorescence spectra and varied temperature CD spectra. When indolizine complexed with DNA MycG4 in the ratio of 1 : 2, and thus it can give an obvious fluorescence enhancement by 11-fold, and meanwhile the DNA MycG4 can be stabilized up to 90  $^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Further, we found indolizine could down-regulate the transcription of oncogene *c-myc* in both of human non-small cell line (A549) and human laryngeal epithelial cell line (Hep-2) by real-time RT-PCR experiment. We believed that indolizine will have a potential application in the exploration of anticancer drugs.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No. 21472197, 21675162, 21778058, 21302188), the Beijing Natural Science Foundation (Grant No. 7172248), Funding for open access charge: The National Natural Science Foundation of China (21603071).

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