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Introduction

(*–*)-Morphine (**1**) is one of the oldest and most extensively used analgesics which led it, along with its congeners (*–*)-codeine (**2**) and (*–*)-thebaine (**3**), to garner significant attention from numerous organic chemists as targets for synthesis (Fig. 1).¹ Extensive modifications to the naturally occurring opioids have also been investigated in endeavors to increase potency and *in vivo* efficacy and have led to the discovery of semi-synthetic opioids such as (*–*)-ketorfanol (**4**)² and the extensively prescribed (*–*)-oxycodone (**5**).³ However, despite the medical importance of naturally occurring and semi-synthetic opioid agonists, undesired side effects such as addictive properties and the potential for fatal overdoses are enormous societal problems. Therefore, semi-synthetic opioid antagonists were developed to address these growing problems.⁴ Naltrexone (**6**) was first patented in 1967 (ref. 5) and is currently an important treatment option for opioid abuse and alcohol dependence.⁴ The C-14 hydroxyl and *N*-cyclopropylmethyl substituent are essential structural features that are important for (*–*)-naltrexone's potency and antagonistic properties.⁴

The prevalent commercial routes to (*–*)-naltrexone (**6**) employ the natural product (*–*)-thebaine (**3**) as the starting

material. A number of strategies have been developed for exchange of the *N*-methyl for an *N*-cyclopropylmethyl group.⁶

Hudlicky has extensively investigated this step,⁷ including a particularly efficient alkylation and demethylation sequence of the thebaine derivative oripavine to give **9** (Fig. 2).^{7c} The dienol ether functionality present in (*–*)-thebaine allows for the straightforward introduction of the C-14 hydroxyl group by oxidative methods. For example, in Hudlicky's sequence, the dienol ether functionality in **9** was epoxidized followed by *in situ* oxirane ring opening to generate enone **10** followed by hydrogenation to give (*–*)-naltrexone (Fig. 2).⁸ Rice has also reported a semi-synthesis of the (+)-enantiomer of naltrexone. His

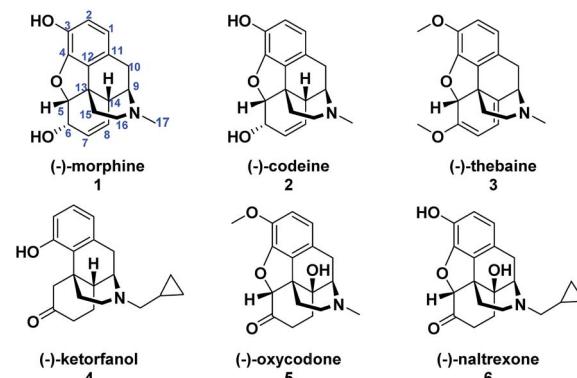
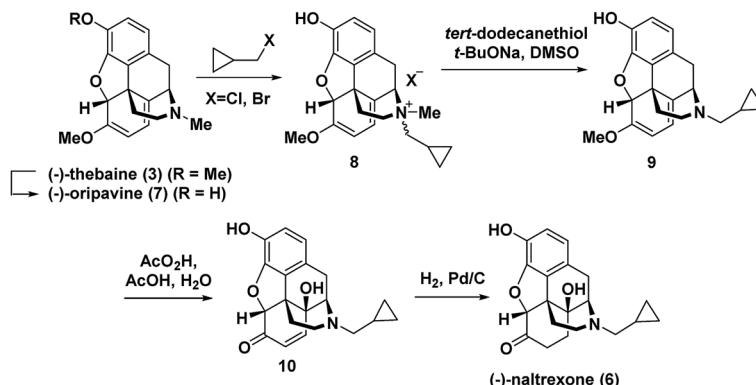


Fig. 1 Representative naturally occurring opioids (**1–3**) and semi-synthetic opioid agonists (**4–5**) and an antagonist (**6**).



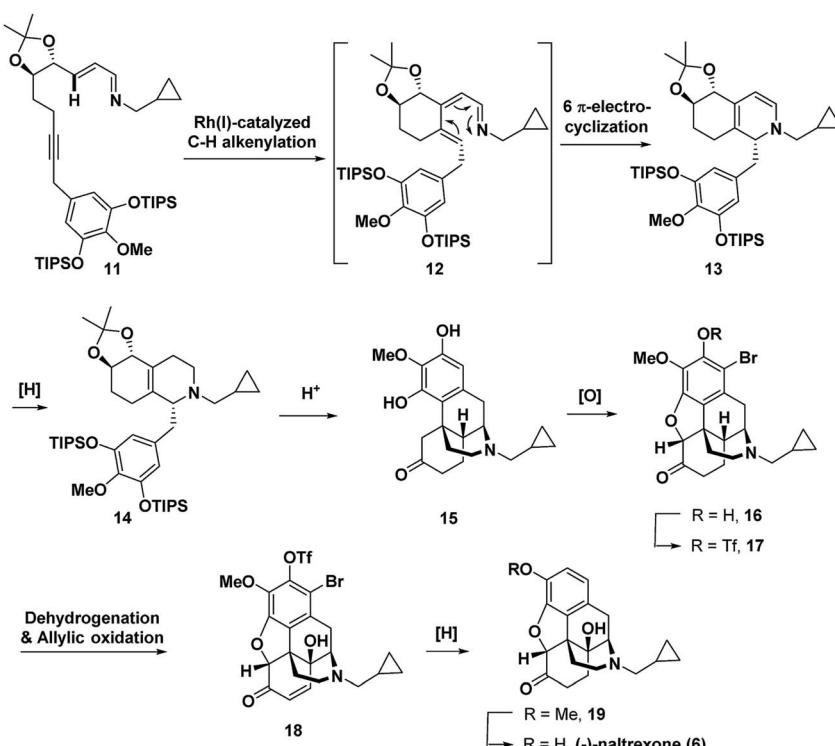
Fig. 2 Hudlicky's semi-synthesis of (-)-naltrexone.^{7c}

synthesis proceeded through (+)-thebaine, which was prepared in five steps from the natural product (+)-sinomenine as an innovative starting material.⁹

(-)Thebaine is currently isolated from opium poppies but is only a minor component of opium (0.3–1.5%), and poppy farming is problematic due to illicit drug activities.¹⁰ An alternative synthetic route that bypasses (–)-thebaine and starts with commercially available achiral precursors would provide novel entry to (–)-naltrexone. Moreover, starting from simple inputs should enable the investigation of a variety of analogs not accessible from more fully elaborated and densely functionalized morphinan natural products like (–)-thebaine.¹¹

Recently, we reported the synthesis of the unnatural enantiomer of the opioid agonist (+)-ketorfanol (4) (Fig. 1) using

a Rh(i) -catalysed C–H alkenylation and torquoselective 6- π electrocyclization cascade as a key step in the sequence.¹² Herein, we further apply this cascade approach to the synthesis of the considerably more complex opioid antagonist (–)-naltrexone (6) (Scheme 1). Imine **11** is efficiently prepared from achiral starting materials with catalytic asymmetric dihydroxylation used to introduce the stereogenic centers. Intramolecular Rh(i) -catalysed alkenylation to give azatriene **12** is followed by *in situ* torquoselective electrocyclization to set the desired stereochemistry in bicyclic hexahydroisoquinoline **13**, which is reduced to obtain **14** as a single diastereomer. Acid treatment provides the tetracyclic morphinan **15** by concomitant removal of the protecting groups, Grewe cyclization and redox neutral conversion of the diol to the desired keto group.



Scheme 1 Approach to (–)-naltrexone from simple, achiral precursors.

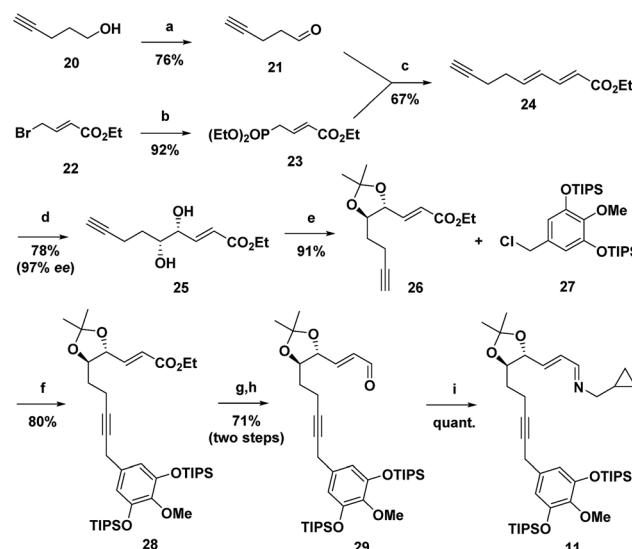
The 4-methoxy-3,5-disilyloxy substitution pattern on the phenyl ring of **14** was designed to allow for incorporation of the required aromatic ring oxygen substitution pattern while simultaneously ensuring that Grewe cyclization occurs without the possibility of generating regiosomeric products (*vide infra*).^{1f} The pentacyclic ether **16** is then obtained from tetracyclic **15** by treatment with Br_2 in AcOH according to methods developed for the synthesis of codeine.¹³

For intermediate **16**, installation of the hydroxyl group at C-14 would most efficiently be accomplished by dehydrogenation to an enone followed by C-H γ -hydroxylation. However, in syntheses of morphinan natural products such as morphine and codeine, researchers have found that for the efficient dehydrogenation of 6-keto derivatives to enones the nitrogen must be protected by an electron withdrawing carbamoyl or sulphonamide rather than an *N*-alkyl group as is present in **16**.^{1g,1h,14} Therefore, to enable dehydrogenation and γ -hydroxylation of **16** without the protection of the nitrogen, a Pd-mediated dehydrogenation method and $\text{Cu}(\text{II})$ -catalysed O_2 -mediated allylic C-H oxidation conditions were developed. Alkene hydrogenation with concomitant reductive cleavage of both the triflate and the bromide in **18** gave **19**, which upon demethylation provided (–)-naltrexone in 17 steps for the longest linear sequence. Because the stereochemistry is set by asymmetric catalytic dihydroxylation, the same route could equally be employed to prepare the (+)-enantiomer of naltrexone, which has been reported to have antagonist activity toward Toll-like receptor 4.¹⁵

Results and discussion

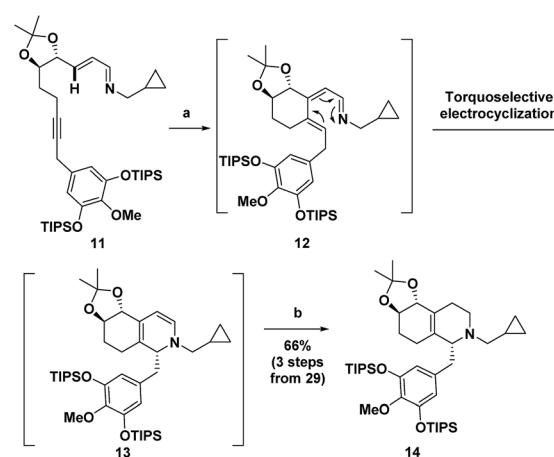
The synthesis commenced with the preparation of imine **11** in seven steps from simple achiral starting materials (Scheme 2). Horner–Wadsworth–Emmons (HWE) reaction of aldehyde **21** and phosphonate **23** afforded **24** in 67% yield. Based upon a report by Takacs,¹⁶ we found that use of $\text{LiOH} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$ as the base in the presence of 4 Å molecular sieves minimized competitive self-condensation of aldehyde **21** and thus provided the most robust and reproducible HWE reaction conditions particularly on larger scales. Highly regio- and enantioselective dihydroxylation with AD-mix- β followed by protection of the diol as an acetonide gave **26** in high overall yield. The benzyl chloride **27**, which was coupled with alkyne **26**, was readily prepared in 75% overall yield from 4-O-methyl-3,5-dihydroxybenzoic acid, by silylation,¹⁷ LiAlH_4 reduction to the benzyl alcohol,^{1a,f} and chlorination with thionyl chloride. For the coupling of benzyl chloride **27** and alkyne **26**, the Cu-free conditions developed by Buchwald for the Heck alkynylation of benzyl chlorides proved to be the most effective approach.¹⁸ Coupling product **28** was reliably obtained in good yield using $\text{Pd}(\text{OAc})_2$ as the precatalyst and X-Phos as the ligand. DIBAL reduction of the ester followed by Dess–Martin periodinane (DMP) oxidation of the resulting alcohol gave aldehyde **29** in 71% overall yield. Condensation with cyclopropylmethylamine then provided **11**, which was taken on to the next step without purification.

Next, imine **11** was treated with 5 mol% of $[\text{RhCl}(\text{coe})_2]$ precatalyst using $(\text{pNMe}_2)\text{PhPEt}_2$ as the ligand with heating in



Scheme 2 Reactions and conditions: (a) $(\text{COCl})_2$ (1.16 equiv.), DMSO (2.2 equiv.), Et_3N (5.0 equiv.), CH_2Cl_2 , $-78 \rightarrow 23^\circ\text{C}$; (b) $\text{P}(\text{OEt})_3$, neat, 120°C ; (c) $\text{LiOH} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$ (1.1 equiv.), MS 4 Å, THF, reflux; (d) $\text{K}_2\text{OsO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (1 mol%), $(\text{DHQD})_2\text{PHAL}$ (5 mol%), $\text{K}_3\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6$ (3.0 equiv.), K_2CO_3 (3.0 equiv.), MeSO_2NH_2 (1.00 equiv.), $\text{tBuOH} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$, 0°C ; (e) 2,2-dimethoxypropane (10 equiv.), $\text{TsOH} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$ (10 mol%), CH_2Cl_2 , 0°C ; (f) $\text{Pd}(\text{OAc})_2$ (5 mol%), XPhos (15 mol%), Cs_2CO_3 (1.5 equiv.), dioxane, 65°C ; (g) DIBAL (4.0 equiv.), THF, -78°C ; (h) DMP (1.75 equiv.), pyridine (6.0 equiv.), CH_2Cl_2 , 0°C ; (i) cyclopropylmethylamine (1.2 equiv.), MS 3 Å, PhMe , 23°C .

toluene to initiate the $\text{Rh}(\text{I})$ -catalysed cascade sequence. This process proceeds by $\text{Rh}(\text{I})$ -catalysed C-H activation followed by intramolecular insertion of the alkyne to give azatriene **12**, which *in situ* undergoes rapid electrocyclization to provide 1,2-dihydropyridine **13** (Scheme 3). This cascade process not only forms the desired bicyclic ring system, but also proceeds with high torque-selectivity as enforced by the isopropylidene protected diol to provide the desired diastereomer.¹² Without isolation, hexahydroisoquinoline **13** was reduced under mild



Scheme 3 $\text{Rh}(\text{I})$ C-H functionalization cascade. Condition and reagents: (a) $[\text{RhCl}(\text{coc})_2]$ (5 mol%), $(\text{pNMe}_2)\text{PhPEt}_2$ (10 mol%), PhMe , 85°C ; (b) $\text{NaBH}(\text{OAc})_3$ (5.0 equiv.), AcOH , EtOH , 0°C .

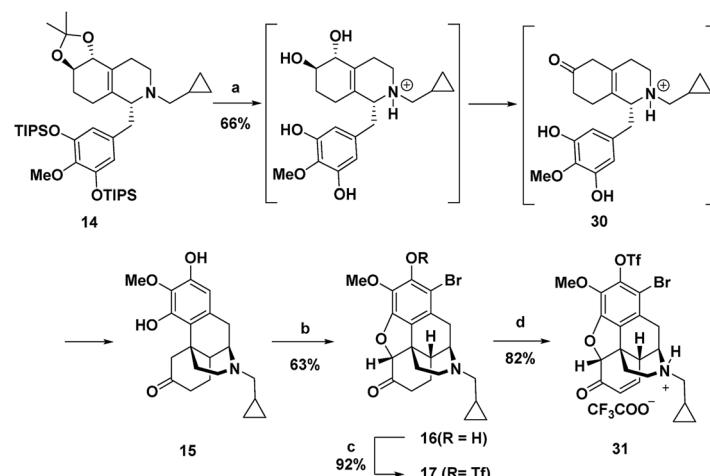
conditions to give the octahydroisoquinoline **14** as a single stereoisomer in 66% overall yield from imine **11**.

Treatment of octahydroisoquinoline **14** with dilute H_3PO_4 and heat afforded morphinan **15** in 66% yield (Scheme 4). Acid treatment to provide morphinan **15** likely proceeds by removal of the silyl and acetonide protecting groups followed by *in situ* redox neutral conversion of the diol to the keto group *via* allylic alcohol ionization and a hydride shift to provide **30**, which then undergoes Grewe cyclization. Methods for α -bromination and subsequent nucleophilic displacement by an adjacent phenol as developed for the synthesis of codeine¹³ gave the dihydrobenzofuran **16** in good overall yield. Two equivalents of Br_2 were needed because the first equivalent of Br_2 was very rapidly consumed by bromination of the highly electron-rich aromatic ring. Bromine substitution did not pose a problem because we anticipated that it could be removed with a global reduction step planned for later in the sequence (*vide infra*). Prior to installation of the C-14 hydroxyl, the free phenol in **16** was converted to the triflate in **17**,¹⁷ which would also be removed in the reduction step.

C-14 C–H hydroxylation of triflate **17** first required dehydrogenation to enone **31** in order to activate this site for γ oxidation (Scheme 4). Direct dehydrogenation has been reported to proceed with low yield for basic opioids with *N*-alkyl amine substituents.¹⁴ To overcome this challenge in the synthesis of opioids, the amine is typically protected as a sulfonamide or carbamate,^{19,20,21,22} which then requires subsequent protecting group removal and installation of the *N*-alkyl group. Alternatively, more indirect, longer sequences have been developed to introduce this unsaturation.¹⁹ We instead chose to investigate contemporary ketone dehydrogenation approaches that have been reported to be compatible with amine functionality. We first evaluated the IBX-MPO system, but the conversion of **17** to enone **31** was not observed.²⁰ Efficient, catalytic dehydrogenation methods utilizing $[Pd(\text{allyl})_2\text{Cl}]_2$ with zinc amide bases have recently been reported,²¹ but only partial conversion to enone **31** along with some allylation at the α -position occurred. Dehydrogenation with $Pd(\text{TFA})_2$ in AcOH using O_2 as an external oxidant resulted in significant *N*-dealkylation.²² This outcome is not

surprising because $Pd(\text{II})$ catalysts under oxidizing conditions have been developed for the *N*-dealkylation of tertiary amines.²³ However, by addition of trifluoroacetic acid to protect the amine as the corresponding salt, along with $DMSO$ as a coordinating solvent to stabilize $Pd(\text{TFA})_2$, complete conversion of ketone **17** was observed, with enone **31** isolated in 82% yield.

For the C-14 C–H hydroxylation of enone **31**, we looked for inspiration in prior semi-syntheses of oxycodone from morphine and codeine. Unfortunately, neither $Co(\text{OAc})_3$ in acetic acid as reported by Rice²⁴ nor MnO_2 in CHCl_3 as reported by Sainsbury²⁵ resulted in C-14 hydroxylation of **31**. We next investigated a method reported for the direct C-14 C–H hydroxylation of codeinone by metal-catalysed peroxidation with O_2 followed by *in situ* reduction with sodium thiosulfate (entry 1, Table 1).²⁶ Disappointingly, no product was detected presumably because enone **31** is completely insoluble in the aqueous pH 8 buffer used as the solvent.²⁷ This led us to extensively explore organic co-solvents in combination with different oxidation catalysts and reductants. A large number of different co-solvents were first investigated, including DMF , THF , EtOH , $DMSO$ and CH_3CN , but little to no product was detected. With pyridine as a 1 : 1 co-solvent with aqueous pH 8 buffer, enone **31** was highly soluble, and while some of the desired C–H hydroxylation product **18** was formed, extensive over-oxidation occurred as determined by LCMS (entry 2). However, by attenuating the basicity of the PBS buffer to pH 7, an improved yield of desired product **18** was obtained (entry 3). Under these conditions, $CuSO_4$ proved to be a superior oxidation catalyst than $KMnO_4$ (entry 4). Use of ketoglutaric acid instead of thiosulfate to reduce the peroxide intermediate was investigated for both $KMnO_4$ (entry 5) and $CuSO_4$ (entry 6). A significant improvement was observed for both catalysts with the highest yield obtained for $CuSO_4$ (entry 6). Finally, varying the ratio of pyridine to PBS buffer resulted in vast differences in reaction rate. While the use of pyridine without any aqueous co-solvent resulted in a slower rate, reaction progress could be more easily monitored and therefore the reaction could be reliably terminated before significant over-oxidation had occurred (entry 7).



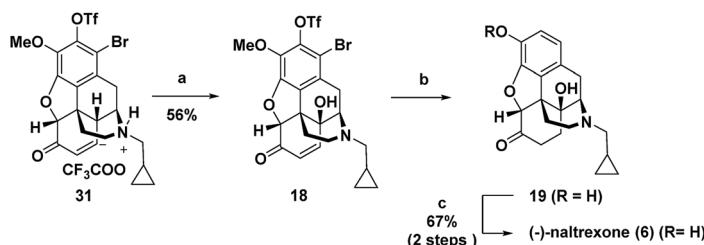
Scheme 4 Synthesis of dehydrogenated enone **31** as the precursor to Installation of C-14. Conditions and reagents: (a) 55% H_3PO_4 , 125 °C; (b) Br_2 (2.0 equiv.), AcOH , 23 °C; $NaOH_{(\text{aq})}$, 23 °C; (c) Tf_2O (3.3 equiv.), pyridine, 0 °C; (d) $Pd(\text{TFA})_2$ (1.4 equiv.), TFA , $DMSO$, 80 °C.



Table 1 Optimization of γ -C–H hydroxylation of 31

| Entry | Catalyst ^a (2 mol%) | Reductant ^b (4.5 equiv.) | Solvent ^c | Time ^d (h) | NMR yield ^e (%) | |
|-------|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------|
| | | | | | sm(31) | pdt(18) |
| 1 | KMnO ₄ | Na ₂ S ₂ O ₃ | PBS pH 8 | 42 | 49 | 0 |
| 2 | KMnO ₄ | Na ₂ S ₂ O ₃ | PBS pH 8/pyridine (1 : 1) | 42 | 0 | 11 |
| 3 | KMnO ₄ | Na ₂ S ₂ O ₃ | PBS pH 7/pyridine (1 : 1) | 42 | 11 | 17 |
| 4 | CuSO ₄ | Na ₂ S ₂ O ₃ | PBS pH 7/pyridine (1 : 1) | 5 | 5 | 31 |
| 5 | KMnO ₄ | Ketoglutaric acid | PBS pH 7/pyridine (1 : 1) | 18 | 15 | 33 |
| 6 | CuSO ₄ | Ketoglutaric acid | PBS pH 7/pyridine (1 : 1) | 1.5 | 0 | 55 |
| 7 | CuSO ₄ | Ketoglutaric acid | Pyridine | 48 | 8 | 59 |

^a Catalysts were added as 5 mM stock solutions in deionized H₂O. ^b Reductants were added as a 150 mM stock solution in deionized H₂O. ^c All solvents were sparged with O₂ prior to reaction. ^d The reaction was stopped when the product was at maximum yield as determined by LCMS exact ion count. ^e 1,3,5-Trimethoxybenzene was used as a standard for NMR yields. Remaining percent balance corresponds to unidentified overoxidized or degraded product.



Scheme 5 Installation of C-14 hydroxylation and endgame synthesis to (–)-naltrexone (6). Conditions and reagents: (a) CuSO₄ (2 mol%), ketoglutarate (4.5 equiv.), pyridine, 23 °C, O₂; (b) Et₃N (10 equiv.), Pd(OH)₂ (20 wt%), EtOAc : MeOH = 1 : 3, H₂, 23 °C; (c) BBr₃ (5 equiv.), CH₂Cl₂, –40 → 0 °C.

After γ -hydroxylation to afford 18, we attempted to remove the aryl bromide and triflate as well as hydrogenate the enone to access 19 in a single step (Scheme 5). While formic acid with Pd(PPh₃)₄ only reductively cleaved the triflate and bromide, hydrogenation with H₂ and Pd/C reduced the double bond and achieved hydrodebromination but without reductive cleavage of the triflate. However, Pearlman's catalyst (Pd(OH)₂) under 1 atm of H₂ resulted in the complete reduction of the double bond along with the reductive removal of both the bromide and the triflate to give 19 in nearly quantitative yield.²⁸ For this reason, 19 was not purified but rather was directly submitted to final BBr₃ mediated demethylation, affording (–)-naltrexone 6 in 67% yield over the two steps.

Conclusions

We have developed a new approach for the synthesis of (–)-naltrexone in 17 linear steps. Starting with commercially available achiral substrates, a bicyclic hexahydroquinoline intermediate was accessed *via* a Rh(I)-catalyzed C–H alkenylation

and torquoselective electrocyclization cascade. Grewe cyclization then provided the morphinan core with a concomitant hydride shift introducing the C-6 oxo functionality present in naltrexone. After formation of the dihydrobenzofuran, Pd-mediated dehydrogenation to the enone followed by allylic C–H oxidation using Cu(II) and O₂ introduced the C-14 hydroxyl group. This new route for the asymmetric synthesis of (–)-naltrexone from simple, achiral precursors could provide a means to prepare morphinan derivatives that would be difficult to access through semi-synthesis from opioid natural products.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Acknowledgements

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