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Chemical biology tools for probing transcytosis at the blood–brain barrier†

Rhiannon Beard,^a David C. A. Gaboriau,^b Antony D. Gee^c and Edward W. Tate^{a,d}

Absorptive- and receptor-mediated transcytosis (AMT/RMT) are widely studied strategies to deliver therapeutics across the blood–brain barrier (BBB). However, an improved understanding of the mechanism surrounding trafficking is required that could promote delivery. Accordingly, we designed a flexible platform that merged AMT and RMT motifs on a single scaffold to probe various parameters (ligand, affinity, valency, position) in a screening campaign. During this process we adapted an *in vitro* BBB model to reliably rank transcytosis of the vehicle library. Our results demonstrate heightened uptake and trafficking for the shuttles, with a structure–activity relationship for transcytosis emerging. Notably, due to their small size, the majority of shuttles demonstrated increased permeation compared to transferrin, with the highest performing shuttle affording a 4.9-fold increase. Consequently, we have identified novel peptide conjugates that have the capacity to act as promising brain shuttles.

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Introduction

A major hurdle hindering the diagnosis and treatment of neurological disorders is the difficulty for biotherapeutics to enter the central nervous system (CNS). This is due to the blood–brain barrier (BBB), which is comprised of tightly connected polarized endothelial cells that limit the passage of hydrophilic components and prevents the accumulation of material for transport at the BBB.¹ Despite these limitations, specialized endogenous transport mechanisms exist to allow the transcytosis of nutrients and ions, thus enabling CNS homeostasis. Of these, absorptive mediated-(AMT) and receptor mediated-transcytosis (RMT) pathways are key vesicular based transport systems which have become long-standing approaches for drug delivery to the CNS.² While these routes have become widely exploited by conjugating molecules restricted by the barrier to those which have this capacity, transcytosis at the BBB is more complex than initially thought, and delivery of therapeutics and biologicals remains modest.^{3,4}

Whilst there is limited experimental data surrounding the molecular basis of uptake and trafficking for CNS delivery, it has been demonstrated that dissociation from receptors on the

brain side is essential for trafficking mediated by the transferrin receptor (TfR), the quintessential receptor for RMT.⁵ Therefore transcytosis is more likely when the overall affinity towards the receptor is moderate to low,⁵ or when bivalent engagement of the receptor is discouraged to limit avidity.⁶

Here we present the design, synthesis and validation of a diverse shuttle library to identify key physicochemical properties for transcytosis. We based our approach on two essential modular components to develop the chemical tool kit: (i) sweet-arrow-peptide (SAP), an isolated sequence derived from the N-terminal proline rich domain of γ -zein, and an innate CPP with a defined PPII secondary structure to act as a scaffold,^{3,7} and; (ii) a variety of validated RMT ligands to enable targeted delivery,^{8,9} Fig. 1 and Table 1.



Fig. 1 Structure and modification of SAP into targeted brain delivery vehicles. (A) SAP as a PPII helix. Hydrophilic residues (R) are shown in blue while hydrophobic residues (V and L) are shown in yellow. (B) Simplification of the defined faces presented by SAP demonstrating the defined structure of the PPII helix. (C) Mutation of similar (V and V) or alternative residues (V and L; as shown in figure) on the SAP scaffold enables RMT ligands to be appended on the same or opposite face of the PPII helix in a bivalent format.

^aDepartment of Chemistry, Imperial College London, Wood Lane, London, W12 0BZ, UK. E-mail: rhiannon.beard@gmail.com; e.tate@imperial.ac.uk

^bFacility for Imaging by Light Microscopy, Imperial College London, Exhibition Road, London SW7 2AZ, UK

^cDivision of Imaging Sciences, King's College London, St Thomas' Hospital, SE1 7EH, UK

^dFrancis Crick Institute, 1 Midland Road, London NW1 1AT, UK

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Scheme 1 General approach for introducing RMT ligands on the SAP backbone. (A) Introduction of RMT ligands (up to two), with azidolysine incorporated as the final amino acid in their sequence, by CuAAC when propargylglycine is included in the SAP sequence. (B) Route for introducing ligands by amide bond forming reaction with lysine. Following SPPS and N-terminal FAM conjugation, orthogonally protected lysine is selectively deprotected on resin to enable continuation of SPPS on the exposed ϵ -amino group. (C) Trifunctional vehicles incorporating TfRL2 on lysine can be formed by combining condensation and CuAAC routes. (D) Alternatively, trivalent vehicles can be formed in higher yield by performing CuAAC with an N-terminally capped ligand followed by conjugation of pentynoic acid on the ϵ -amino group of lysine. An alternative RMT ligand is then introduced by a secondary CuAAC reaction.

PPII scaffold, which was followed by subsequent coupling of small molecule pentynoic acid to lysine under amide bonding forming reactions. A secondary CuAAC reaction afforded bivalent scaffolds with alternative ligands in moderate yield (Scheme 1D). As demonstrated here and elsewhere, CuAAC mediated convergence provided rapid access to versatile bioconjugates that was reproducible.¹⁹ Detailed characterisation data and yields for all conjugates are reported in Table S2.†

Secondary structure determination of brain shuttles

We determined structural integrity of the PPII helix by circular dichroism (CD) spectroscopy, where spectra of unmodified SAP and the N-terminal FITC-conjugated analogue were collected as controls, Fig. 2A. Importantly, the results suggest preservation of the secondary PPII structure following modification to the backbone since all peptides demonstrated strong absorption at 203 nm, Fig. 2B–D. Specifically, PPII helicity was insensitive to the conjugate linkage chemistry, ligand type and number of additions to the PPII scaffold.

In vitro binding capacity of shuttles towards TfR

To evaluate functionality of the conjugated peptides, *in vitro* analyses were performed. TfR binding was assessed through an ELISA format, whereby FAM-conjugated shuttles were serially diluted and added to plates that were coated with TfR protein. FAM-labelled vehicles were detected by an anti-FAM HRP-conjugated antibody. As predicted, TfRL1-vehicles contained a higher affinity towards the TfR than the equivalent vehicle incorporating TfRL2 (PPII(L3X;L15X)TfRL1: 0.26 ± 0.17 nM; PPII(L3X;V13X)TfRL1: 0.31 ± 0.26 ; cf. PPII(L3X;L15X)TfRL2: 11.8 ± 1.11 nM; PPII(L3X;V13X)TfRL2: 12.7 ± 1.37), Fig. 2E.⁹ Notably, TfRL2 bivalent shuttles contained a similar affinity

towards TfR compared to Tf-biotin when assayed in a similar format (EC_{50} : 20.9 ± 2.1 nM). It is assumed that an avidity effect is demonstrated by the bivalent vehicles since monovalent TfR-targeting shuttles contained too low-affinity towards TfR to be detected. Further, positioning of the ligand did not affect TfR binding affinity since scaffolds that incorporated ligands on the same face afforded affinity values similar to those with ligands fused on different sides.

Evaluation of the BBB-shuttle properties of the conjugates in brain endothelial cells

Having demonstrated preservation of receptor binding, we next used bEnd.3 cells to screen the uptake capacity of the shuttle library by flow cytometry. We determined peptide uptake and internalisation in a confluent monolayer of bEnd.3 cells which is an immortalised mouse brain endothelial cell line that has similar characteristics to the BBB. TfR is an established receptor for clathrin dependent uptake of Tf, favoured in an iron bound form when at physiological pH (*i.e.* holo-Tf).²⁰ Flow cytometry (FC) and microscopy data obtained with human derived Alexa-Fluor 647-conjugated Tf (Tf-A647) confirmed functional, membrane resident TfR (see Fig. S1 and S2†).

Evaluation of the internalisation capacity in brain endothelial cells

For library screening, cells were exposed to equal concentrations (500 nM) of FAM labelled molecules in media for 3 h to allow binding, internalisation and sorting, and external FAM fluorescence was quenched by addition of trypan blue.²¹ Low temperature was shown to inhibit cellular uptake of the vehicles (Fig. S3†), demonstrating an energy-driven internalisation process. Furthermore, using DAPI as a viability indicator, no





Fig. 3 Cellular location of FAM labelled PPII vehicles and RMT ligands in bEnd.3 cells. (A–C) Show 3D segmentation of fluorescent signal for bivalent vehicle PPII(L3X;V13X)TfR1 (yellow, all images), showing low association with (A) the nucleus (grey), (B) LAMP1 (cyan), but high association with (C) Tf-A647 (magenta). Cultures were fixed in 4% PFA, permeabilised and immunostained with an antibody for the late endosome/lysosome marker LAMP1 as described in the ESI.† Scale bar represents 10 μm . (D) Colocalisation of vehicles with Tf-A647 (early and recycling endosomes; black) or LAMP1 (lysosomes; grey). Data shown is mean \pm SEM of the percentage of 3D spatial overlap between individual vehicle objects and Tf or LAMP1 objects.

PPII(L3X;L15K)TfR1(K)APep2(X) had low Tf-A647 colocalisation and the highest LAMP1 association out of the vehicles screened. This could imply that the ligands are incompatible when combined on the same vehicle, or that endocytosis is supported through a different mechanism of uptake. Alternatively, trivalent vehicle PPII(L3X;L15K)TfR1(X)APep2(Kx) gave high Tf-A647 colocalisation and moderate LAMP1 association.

Permeability experiments

To study transcytosis potential of the vehicles *in vitro* we optimised a BBB model using a 3D-transwell format. We found that a bEnd.3/mesenchymal stem cell (MSC) co-culture reproducibly afforded the highest resistance to paracellular diffusion through assessment with transepithelial electrical resistance measurements (TEER) and small molecule permeability studies (Fig. S6†). This is similar to results shown by others.¹⁶ Immunostaining for TJ protein ZO-1 in the bEnd.3 cell line confirmed its presence and trafficking towards the cell junctions (Fig. S7†). While this indicates that an adequate and reproducible barrier was formed from the bEnd.3/MSC co-culture model, we found that it was of paramount importance to distinguish transcytosis from the expected background of paracellular flow since others have reported issues distinguishing these values.²²

Optimisation and adaptation of BBB *in vitro* model

Often *in vitro* assays of the BBB overlook contributions of paracellular flux that can lead to overestimations of brain exposure, and offer no valid comparison between the individual molecules being screened. We believed that without a quantifiable probe for paracellular diffusion, it would be difficult to accurately screen the transcytosis capacity of our vehicles.

It seemed plausible that a similar sized marker (such as TexasRed labelled dextran (dex-TeXR; 3000 g mol^{-1}) that is incapable of AMT or RMT uptake could serve as an internal standard to quantify paracellular contribution of the vehicles. As exemplified in Fig. 4A, experiments are performed in parallel

with probes (both dex-TeXR and FAM-PPII vehicle or Tf-A647) fed to insets containing either the cell monolayer (PS_i) or filter alone (PS_f). The corresponding P_{app} for dex-TeXR in both scenarios is first calculated and the extent in which movement is reduced by presence of the monolayer (defined here as the transport ratio (TR)) is used to determine the expected paracellular diffusion rate of the individual vehicles. We employed Tf-A647 and a similarly sized TexasRed labelled dextran (dex-TeXR; 70 000 g mol^{-1}) as a positive control for transcytosis. Typical clearance profiles when compounds are incubated with and without cells, are shown in Fig. 4B–C. As expected, due to their similar molecular weight, both dex-TeXR and Tf-A647 afforded comparable clearance when incubated without cells (PS_f). When incubated in the presence of cells, dex-TeXR was detected in the basolateral compartment indicating background paracellular flux. However, Tf-A647 was cleared at a faster rate in comparison, confirming transcytosis of the molecule.

Corrected values were subsequently calculated to internally rank the transcytosis capacity of BBB-shuttles. In addition, to verify validity of the model, a selection of high permeability vehicles were selected for further studies at low temperature, where uptake and transcytosis should be inhibited. In agreement, shuttles showed permeability similar to dex-TeXR (3000 g mol^{-1}), demonstrating negligible true transcytosis in this condition (Fig. S8†).

Permeability screen of BBB shuttles

Our screen shows that the majority of functionalised vehicles had higher rates of permeability than Tf-A647 with PPII(R8X)TfR1, PPII(L3X;L15X)APep2 and both bivalent TfR2 vehicles being the exception, Fig. 4D. TfR1 modified vehicles preferred a bivalent format (PPII(L3X;V13X)TfR1: 3.5-fold increase relative to Tf-A647; PPII(L3X;L15X)TfR1: 3.0-fold), whereas TfR2 and APep2 monovalent vehicles experienced higher levels of basal transport (PPII(R8X)TfR2: 1.4-fold; PPII(R8X)APep2: 4.9-





Fig. 4 Modified workflow and results for determining the cP_{app} of a macromolecule, accounting for contributions made by paracellular diffusion across an *in vitro* barrier. (A) Experimental workflow demonstrating that compounds are co-incubated with dex-TeXR either in the presence of cell monolayer (PS_f ; (+) cells) or with filters alone (PS_f ; (-) cells) to obtain P_{app} values through generation of clearance plots. (B–C) Clearance plots obtained by incubation of Tf-A647 or dex-TeXR with filters alone (B; PS_f) or with cells (C; PS_f). Clearance is significantly lowered in the presence of cells. Division of PS_f/PS_f for dextran generates the transport ratio (TR). Expected paracellular contribution of the vehicle is obtained by multiplying TR by the P_{app} of the compound of interest without cells. cP_{app} values are obtained by subtracting this value from P_{app} of compound with cells. Key: red = dex-TeXR; blue = Tf-A647; dashed lines = filter insert only; solid lines = transwell culture (D) cP_{app} values for delivery vehicles screened in the transcytosis assay.

fold), with the latter vehicle showcasing the best permeability of those screened. In agreement with the endocytosis and microscopy studies, TfR targeting bivalent vehicles showed a moderate or no clear positional preference for ligands attached to alternative faces, whereas Apep2 highly favoured ligands attached to alternative faces of the scaffold with PPII(L3X;L15X)Apep2 showing limited transcytosis. In agreement with the microscopy data, trivalent vehicles where both ligands are directed towards the TfR demonstrated improved transcytosis when ligands were incorporated on opposite sides of the scaffold. In addition, the data implies that affinity

towards the TfR does not govern transport ability for our peptidic BBB shuttles since trivalent vehicles combining high and low affinity ligands showed lower permeability than the corresponding bivalent high affinity TfRL1 vehicles.

Whilst vehicle PPII(L3X;V13K)TfRL2(K);APep2(X) gave the highest level of transcytosis for a highly functionalised shuttle (3.8-fold increase relative to Tf-A647), the increased permeability may be attributed to the ligands interacting independently with their receptors, since both ligands enjoyed higher transport in a monovalent form. In line with this hypothesis, transcytosis for PPII(L3X;L15K)TfRL2(K);APep2(X) was lowest for trifunctional vehicles with ligands merged to the same face (1.8-fold), implying that the ligands are not working in synergy. This result is in contrast to when ligand TfRL1 and APep2 are combined, which showed improved permeability when ligands are arranged on the same face.

Conclusions

Here we report the first use of CPP SAP as a scaffold for developing targeted BBB penetrable shuttles, which constitutes one of the most restrictive barriers in the body. In this regard, we designed a versatile vehicle library by a convergent approach, strategically introducing mutations within the sequence to graft RMT ligands in a selective manner using either amide bond forming or CuAAC mediated reactions. As noted elsewhere, CuAAC provided a superior and flexible reaction for these modifications. Notably, SAP retained a helical PPII structure after modification, and vehicles screened in biologically relevant assays demonstrated uptake and trafficking of cargo at the BBB. It was shown that AMT and RMT motifs worked in synergy to encourage cellular uptake, with certain molecular characteristics such as affinity, position and valency influencing both uptake and transcytosis for individual ligands. Notably, the majority of vehicles screened demonstrated heightened transcytosis rates compared to Tf in a BBB model. Here we believe the small size of the peptide conjugates, compared to Tf and other macromolecule shuttles, afford them an advantage for targeted transcytosis due to higher diffusion rates. Within our permeability screening campaign, dex-TeXR was successfully included as an internal standard for quantifying paracellular and non-specific movement. Consequently, the results presented demonstrate that PPII derived shuttles represent novel, exciting and promising classes of bioconjugates for enhancing uptake at the BBB. The flexibility of the screening approach could be readily adopted to investigate other ligands for AMT and RMT uptake at the BBB to validate and identify optimal ligands and shuttles for delivery.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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