Simplified Method for Conjugating Macrocyclic Bifunctional Chelating Agents to Antibodies via 2-Iminothiolane

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A one-step method for conjugating macrocyclic chelators to antibodies using the protein modification reagent 2-iminothiolane controls aggregation, maintains immunoreactivity, and produces consistent chelate/antibody ratios. Conjugation conditions have been investigated with the macrocyclic chelates 6-[p-(bromoacetamido)benzyl]-1,4,8,11-tetraazacyclotetradecane-N,N',N'',N'''-tetraacetic acid and 2-[p-(bromoacetamido)benzyl]-1,4,7,10-tetraazacyclododecane-N,N',N'',N'''-tetraacetic acid, with three different monoclonal antibodies. The bifunctional chelating agents are prepared by bromoacetylation of their amine precursors using a two-phase H2O/CHCl3 system, which improves product purity.

The attachment of metal ions to monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) for medical applications demands extreme stability under physiological conditions, with no significant release of metal (1-4). Development of antibody-macrocyclic chelate conjugates for tumor localization and therapy has led to the following improvements.

In our earliest study of the conjugate of 6-[p-(bromoacetamido)benzyl]-1,4,8,11-tetraazacyclotetradecane-N,N',N'',N'''-tetraacetic acid (BAT) with the mouse mAb Lym-1 it was observed that, rather than linking the macrocyclic bifunctional chelating agent directly to the antibody, it was necessary to employ a spacer group between the two moieties (5). Without this spacer, no practical uptake of radiometal (copper or cobalt) was observed when radiolabeling was attempted after conjugation. For use with short-lived radionuclides, postconjugation radiolabeling is an important feature. As shown in Scheme I, linkage was accomplished in a two-step, overnight procedure using Traut’s reagent (6) 2-iminothiolane (2IT), which reacts with amino groups to produce mercaptobutyrimidyl groups, followed by alkylation of the mercapto sulfur with BAT. For Lym-1, this method led to variable amounts of protein aggregation via cross-linking. The degree of aggregation was difficult to control, ranging from 10% to >50%. Also, the use of ~0.4 M 2-mercaptoethanol in the Traut procedure (to prevent oxidation of the mercaptobutyrimidyl groups, which could form disulfide cross-links) could possibly reduce antibody disulfide bonds, and it was necessary to remove the 2-mercaptoethanol prior to the addition of BAT.

2-Iminothiolane has also been used as the cross-linking reagent in the synthesis of antibody-toxin conjugates. Since the disulfide bond between the antibody and toxin proved to be unstable in vivo (t1/2 = 6-8 h) (7), Carroll et al. (8) studied substituted 2IT’s with a view to increasing the disulfide bond stability. In the latter study, the nascent mercaptobutyrimidyl groups reacted with the activated disulfide 5,5'-dithiobis(2-nitrobenzoic acid) to form a mixed disulfide. This work called our attention to the possibility that, since under mildly alkaline conditions bromoacetamide reagents react rapidly with sulfhydryl groups but only slowly with amino groups, the antibody, BAT, and 2IT solutions could be combined in a single reaction mixture. The method has been explored with three mAbs, Lym-1, 155H.7, and chimeric L6, and with either BAT or 2-[p-(bromoacetamido)benzyl]-1,4,7,10-tetraazacyclododecane-N,N',N'',N'''-tetraacetic acid (BAD) as the chelator.

### EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

**Reagents.** Lym-1, an anti B cell lymphoma IgG2a mAb (9), was obtained from Damon Biotech (Needham Heights,
Technical Note

It was further purified by protein A affinity column chromatography prior to use. Chimeric (where the immunoglobulin constant domains, C_{\text{H}2a} and C_{\text{H}2}, of the mouse mAb have been replaced by human C_{\text{H}2a} and C_{\text{H}2} domains) L6, a mAb against a carbohydrate antigen found at the surface of cells from human carcinomas of the lung, breast, colon, and ovary (10) (lot 88/42E), was obtained from Dr. I. Hellstrom, Oncogen, Seattle, WA. 155H.7, a murine antibody (lgG_{\text{a}}) raised against a synthetic \( \beta \)-anomer of the Thomson–Friedenreich antigen (11) (lot 250588), was obtained from Dr. A. Noujaim, University of Alberta, Canada. Protein A on Sepharose-CL-4B and 21T were pur chased from Sigma Chemical Co. Co. Encapcel murine mAb, lot \# 3-171-860818). It was further purified by protein A affinity column chromatography prior to use. Chimeric (where the immunoglobulin constant domains, C_{\text{H}2a} and C_{\text{H}2}, of the mouse mAb have been replaced by human C_{\text{H}2a} and C_{\text{H}2} domains)

Thin-Layer Chromatography. TLC was run on plastic-backed silica gel plates (EM Science) using a 10\% water. All other reagents were the purest commercially available. It was further purified by protein A affinity column chromatography prior to use. Chimeric (where the immunoglobulin constant domains, C_{\text{H}2a} and C_{\text{H}2}, of the mouse mAb have been replaced by human C_{\text{H}2a} and C_{\text{H}2} domains) L6, a mAb against a carbohydrate antigen found at the surface of cells from human carcinomas of the lung, breast, colon, and ovary (10) (lot 88/42E), was obtained from Dr. I. Hellstrom, Oncogen, Seattle, WA. 155H.7, a murine antibody (lgG_{\text{a}}) raised against a synthetic \( \beta \)-anomer of the Thomson–Friedenreich antigen (11) (lot 250588), was obtained from Dr. A. Noujaim, University of Alberta, Canada. Protein A on Sepharose-CL-4B and 21T were pur chased from Sigma Chemical Co. Co. Encapcel murine mAb, lot \# 3-171-860818).

High-Performance Liquid Chromatography. Gel-filtration HPLC of the immunospecific was performed at room temperature with Spherogel G3000SW (Altex). Protein molecular weight markers (Bio-Rad) were used to calibrate the column. The eluent was 0.1 M sodium phosphate buffer, pH 7.0, containing 0.025\% NaN\textsubscript{3} by weight. The flow rate was 0.5 mL/min. The UV-absorbing fractions were detected at 280 nm.

Reversed-phase HPLC of BAT and BAD was performed at room temperature with a 10 x 250 mm C\textsubscript{18} column (Altex). A 20-min linear gradient, from 0.1 M sodium acetate, pH 7 (containing 1 mM EDTA), to 100\% methanol, was used at a flow rate of 3.0 mL/min. The UV-absorbing fractions were detected at 254 nm.

Glycineamido-Bn-DOTA was purified by reversed-phase HPLC using a 21.4 x 250 mm C\textsubscript{18} column (Dynax). A 20-min linear gradient from 0.1 M ammonium acetate, pH 6, to 100\% methanol was used at a flow rate of 12.5 mL/min, detected at 254 nm.

Radiation Counting. Gamma counting was done in a Beckman Model 310 counter with the appropriate energy windows set for \(^{57}\text{Co}\). TLC plates containing radiolabeled materials were visualized with an AMBIS Radioanalytic Imaging System. Gamma counting was done in a Beckman Model 310 counter with the appropriate energy windows set for \(^{57}\text{Co}\). TLC plates containing radiolabeled materials were visualized with an AMBIS Radioanalytic Imaging System. Beta counting was done in Aquasol, using a Beckman LS 6800 liquid-scintillation counter with the energy windows set for \(^{14}\text{C}\).

Macrocycles. 6-(p-Nitrobenzyl)-1,4,8,11-tetraazacyclotetradecane-N',N',N'',N'''-tetraacetic acid (NO\textsubscript{2}Bn-TETA) and 2-(p-nitrobenzyl)-1,4,7,10-tetraazacyclodecane-N',N',N'',N'''-tetraacetic acid (NO\textsubscript{2}Bn-DOTA) were prepared according to the method of Moi et al. (2, 5).

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Conversion of the p-amino compounds to the p-bromoacetylamido macrocycles BAT and BAD used a modification of Mukkala's method (16) rather than the solvent system used previously (15). The lyophilization residue containing NH\textsubscript{2}Bn-TETA (ca. 0.22 mmol) was dissolved in 8.6 mL of water, and 231 \mu L (1.33 mmol) of N\textsubscript{2}N\textsubscript{2}bis-isopropylylamine was added to adjust the pH to 8. Bromoacetyl bromide (159 \mu L, 1.82 mmol) was dissolved in 8.6 mL of CHCl\textsubscript{3}. The chloroform and aqueous solutions were mixed and stirred vigorously for 10 min. A fluorescamine test on the aqueous layer indicated that amine groups were still present. The pH of the aqueous layer was adjusted to 8 with \( N\textsubscript{2}N\textsubscript{2}bis-isopropylylamine (1.1 \text{ mL in } 100-\mu \text{L increments}) and bromoacetyl bromide (two 100-\mu \text{L portions}) was added until the aqueous layer no longer tested positive for primary amine groups. A 2-\mu L portion of water was added, the chloroform layer was removed, and the aqueous layer was extracted with CHCl\textsubscript{3} (8 \times 5 \text{ mL}). The aqueous layer was acidified to pH 1 with 1 M HCl and again extracted with CHCl\textsubscript{3} until a test for alkylating groups using 4-(p-nitrobenzyl)pyridine (17) showed the absence of bromoacetyl acid in the chloroform extracts. Following extraction, the aqueous solution's pH was adjusted to 6.4, and it was frozen in liquid N\textsubscript{2} and stored at -80 \degree C. FAB mass spectroscopy of the BAT solution gave the two expected M + 1 peaks of the product at 658 and 660 mass units, typical of a bromine (\textsuperscript{79}Br and \textsuperscript{81}Br) containing compound.

The macrocyclic chelate BAD was synthesized from NH\textsubscript{2}Bn-DOTA by the same procedure. FAB mass spectroscopy results for BAD were unsatisfactory due to interference by matrix peaks.

In order to characterize BAD, an aqueous solution of BAD was treated with NH\textsubscript{3}(g) to form the stable amino derivative glycineamido-Bn-DOTA. The derivative was purified by C\textsubscript{18} HPLC (see above) and lyophilized. It was positive for amino groups by fluorescamine test and
negative for alkyl bromide with 4-(p-nitrobenzyl)pyridine. FAB mass spectrometry showed the expected M + 1 peak at m/e 567. 1H NMR (D2O, pH 4.1, 300 MHz): 7.2-7.4 ppm (4 H, aromatic a,a'), 3.9 ppm (2 H, s, NH2CH2C=O), 2.6-3.8 ppm (27 H, broad multiplet, expected 25 H).

HPLC analysis of BAD indicated a major peak at retention time 15.8 min and several minor peaks (total less than 10%). Upon lyophilization one of the minor peaks (retention time 15.2 min) increased, whereas the major peak decreased. Similarly the 15.2 min peak grew gradually when the sample was allowed to stand over a period of time (Figure 1). Both peaks tested positive for alkyl bromide with 4-(p-nitrobenzyl)pyridine, and both chelated 57Co. To prevent this conversion, the sample should be frozen in liquid Nz and stored at -80 °C. BAT behaved similarly.

[14C]BAD was synthesized from NH2Bn-DOTA by the procedures above except that [1-14C]bromoacetyl chloride was substituted for bromoacetyl bromide used in the earlier preparation. The [1-14C]bromoacetyl chloride was prepared by adding 1 mmol of bromoacetyl chloride to 2.00 mL of CHC13 containing approximately 246 µCi of [1-14C]bromoacetyl acid and allowing an exchange reaction to occur (12 days at room temperature in the dark) to form [1-14C]bromoacetyl chloride. Aliquots of this compound were allowed to react with NH2Bn-DOTA as above to give the product [14C]BAD. HPLC analysis of the product also gave a major and minor peak as with the unlabeled compound; the separation was too small for efficient isolation. The [14C]BAD stock solution was standardized by 57Co assay.

Lym-1-2IT-BAT Conjugation. The Lym-1 antibody solution (15-20 mg/mL) was prepared for conjugation with a centrifuged gel-filtration column (15, 18) with 0.1 M tetramethylammonium phosphate, pH 8, as the column buffer. To the collected effluent was added (in order) excess BAT in aqueous solution and freshly prepared 2IT in 50 mM triethanolamine hydrochloride, pH 8.7 (final approximate concentrations: Lym-1, 0.1 mM; BAT, 2 mM; 2IT, 1 mM). The pH of the solution was adjusted to 7.8 and the solution was incubated at 37 °C for 30 min. Excess BAT and 2IT were removed and the conjugate was placed in a 0.1 M tetramethylammonium acetate solution, pH 7, with a centrifuged gel-filtration column.

Antibody-2IT-BAD Conjugation. Conjugations using the macrocycle BAD were done as above, with the following exception. Following the 30-min incubation at 37 °C, 2-mercaptoethanol (1%; v/v aqueous solution) was added in sufficient quantity to bring its final concentration to approximately 2 mM, and the solution was incubated at 37 °C for 10 min more to reduce the level of any alkylated methionine adduct side products. The excess 2-mercaptoethanol was removed in the final centrifuged gel-filtration column. Further experiments have shown that this 2-mercaptopethanol incubation was not necessary; the amount of readily dealkylated side products is quite small (see the Discussion Section).

Parallel Lym-1-2IT-BAT-57Co and Lym-1-BAT-57Co Conjugations (Scheme II). These were performed at pH 8 by the above procedures on two samples of Lym-1, with BAT which had been radiolabeled with 57Co prior to conjugation (21.8 µCi 57Co/mol BAT). One solution contained 2IT while the other did not. Relative concentrations of Lym-1 and BAT were maintained by adding the appropriate amount of buffer (50 mM triethanolamine hydrochloride) to the second conjugation solution. Relative chelate to antibody ratios were determined from UV absorbances and radioactivities of the conjugate products.

Immunoreactivity Assay. Solid-phase radioimmunoassays for immunoreactivity on either 111In- or 57Co-labeled conjugates were done as reported previously (19) using 125I-labeled antibody as the standard. Immunoreactivity values given in Tables I and II are relative to 125I-labeled antibody.

RESULTS

Table I shows the results of four Lym-1-2IT-BAT conjugations using the new procedure, while Figure 2, parts
A and B, show typical "old and new" HPLC traces of the conjugate solutions with the decrease in aggregation clearly evident. The new method uses, consistent (±20%) chelate/antibody ratios and consistently low aggregation compared to the earlier method, while high immunoreactivity is maintained.

Exploring the scope of the method using a different macrocyclic chelate (BAD vs BAT), three different antibodies, and three different pH's gave the results shown in Table II. To test for reproducibility, five or six conjugations (7-10 mg each) of each of the three antibodies with BAD were done at the pH affording the best immunoreactivity. Chelate/antibody ratios and degree of aggregation were consistent and comparable to the values in Table II.

The results of three Lym-1–2IT–[14C]BAD conjugations at pH 8.0 gave 5.6 ± 0.4 available chelates per antibody by 14C analysis. However, 57Co metal binding assay revealed that only 3.6 ± 0.2 chelates per antibody were still capable of radiolabel uptake, in excellent agreement with the corresponding data point in Table II.

As shown in Scheme I, the 2IT reacted with the antibody to form mercaptobutymidyIm groups, which were then alkylated by BAT. By keeping the BAT concentration high with respect to the nascent thiol groups, alkylation by BAT became the preferred reaction pathway rather than thiol oxidation to disulfides. Thus, the need for 2-mercaptoethanol (final concentration 10 mM) and incubating at 37 °C for 0.5 h showed by TLC that the directly alkylated Lym-1–BA T–57Co conjugate was unstable, losing 30-40% of its radiolabel. There was only a minor loss of radiolabel (≤2.5%) for Lym-1–2IT–BAT–57Co under the same conditions, with no change on further incubation up to 1.5 h.

DISCUSSION

As shown in Scheme I, the 2IT reacted with the antibody to form mercaptobutyrimidyIm groups, which were then alkylated by BAT. By keeping the BAT concentration high with respect to the nascent thiol groups, alkylation by BAT became the preferred reaction pathway rather than thiol oxidation to disulfides. Thus, the need for 2-mercaptoethanol to prevent oxidation was eliminated, and antibody aggregation was kept to a minimum. As shown in Table I, this single-step method takes less than 1 h to complete and gives consistent yields with relatively little aggregation of Lym-1. For unknown reasons, aggregate formation with Lym-1 is greater than with the other antibodies under similar conditions (Table II). The chelate/antibody ratios are similar for each antibody, but depend on the reaction pH, with the maximum yield occurring around pH 8 in each case. The degree of Lym-1 aggregation in each case is lower than that encountered with the previous two-step method (consistently ≤50% versus variable 10-50%) and is lowest at pH 9. Changes in immunoreactivity with reaction pH are antibody dependent, with the best 15S.7 immunoreactivity seen with the pH 7 conjugate and the best Lym-1 immunoreactivity seen with the pH 9 conjugate. For chimeric L6, changing the reaction pH has only a minor effect on immunoreactivity.

To estimate the degree of direct attachment of BAT to Lym-1 and the efficiency of uptake of radiolabel by an attached versus a free chelate, a set of parallel Lym-1 + [57Co]BAT experiments was conducted (Scheme III). One reaction contained 2IT and the other did not. No drastic differences in the rates of reaction were expected for [57Co]BAT versus BAT since the location of change in the chelate's structure is distant from the point of attachment to the antibody and since the binding of Co2+ is accompanied by the loss of 2H+ (20).

As haloacetamides, BAT and BAD can attach to amine, sulfhydryl, imidazole, or thioether groups on amino acid side chains, with the sulfhydryl group being the most reactive (21). The relatively low pH of conjugation and the observed instability of the product Lym-1–BAT–57Co led to the suggestion that, in the absence of 2IT, side chains of methionines were alkylated by [57Co]BAT to form sulfonium adducts, which would be susceptible to hydrolysis (thus releasing the chelate). In the case of Lym-1–2IT–BAT–57Co, the thioether linkage proved to be stable under the conditions employed. It is possible that a small number of methionine residues were alkylated during the preparation of Lym-1–2IT–BAT–57Co, and the minor loss of radiolabel may reflect the loss of these chelates by hydrolysis.

The differences in the chelate/antibody ratios of the Lym-1–2IT–[14C]BAD (total 5.6 chelates/mAb versus 3.6 chelates/mAb available to bind metal) suggest that even the 2IT linker does not make all antibody-bound chelating groups accessible for postconjugation radiolabeling. This was not unexpected, since previous work with backbone-substituted [14C]EDTA's has shown that not all attached EDTA groups may be available for metal binding (22). The differences in the chelate/antibody ratios of the Lym-1–2IT–BAT seen in the parallel reactions (pre- and postradilabeling, 4.1 chelates/mAb versus the standard procedure (pre- and postradilabeling, 1.45 chelates/mAb) are generally consistent with the [14C]BAD results. While the observed differences might be caused by metal contamination during processing, such was not the case in ref 22, and we feel that steric hindrance of the protein-bound chelate is a more likely cause.
Finally, comparison of Table II values for Lym-1 + BAD at pH 8.0 with those of Table I for Lym-1 + BAT at pH 7.8 shows differences in chelate/antibody ratios. One possible reason for this may be that the attached BAT is more efficient in taking up the 5'Co used in the labeling and distribution in RAJI Tumored Mice. Our experience with the two macrocyclic chelates indicates that BAD is a good ligand for a variety of metals, while BAT appears to be limited to Cu and Co. The use of other linkers may improve accessibility of the bound macrocycles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We wish to thank Linda A. Kroger for performing the immunoreactivity analyses. This work was supported by National Cancer Institute Grant CA47829 and DOE Grant DE F903-84ER60233.

LITERATURE CITED


Registry No. 2T, 6539-14-8; BAT, 121697-38-9; BAD, 126753-62-6; NO3Bn-TETA, 126753-63-7; NO3Bn-DOTA, 123317-51-1; NH2Bn-DOTA, 123317-52-2; NH2Bn-TETA, 126753-64-8; bromoacetyl bromide, 598-21-0.