Novel Phosphorus Radical-Based Routes to Horsfiline

John A. Murphy,* Régis Tripoli, Tanweer A. Khan, and Umesh W. Mali

WestCHEM, Department of Pure and Applied Chemistry, University of Strathclyde, 295 Cathedral Street, Glasgow G1 1XL, United Kingdom

john.murphy@strath.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT



Radicals derived from the phosphorus reagents, ethylpiperidine hypophosphite (EPHP) and diethylphosphine oxide (DEPO), are used in two related approaches to synthesis of the alkaloid horsfiline (1). In particular, DEPO proves beneficial for effecting cyclizations at 80 °C that are difficult or impossible with Bu₃SnH.

Horsfiline **1** is a member of the spiropyrrolidinyloxindole family of alkaloids and was first isolated¹ by Bodo et al. from the roots of *Horsfieldia superba*, a small tree native to Malaysia. The spiropyrrolidinyloxindole molecules, and particularly horsfiline, have been popular targets for synthesis with quite a variety of approaches being recorded.²

These and related molecules are of interest in relation to cancer treatment. The findings³ of Danishefsky et al. are particularly interesting in this regard; they tested compounds **3** and **4** (both diastereomers) (Figure 1) and reported significant activity against human breast cancer cells.



Figure 1. Natural and synthetic spiropyrrolidinoxindoles.

The two diastereoisomers **4**, differing in the configuration at the spiro-center, are equally active against the quoted cell line, suggesting either different mechanisms of action or an insensitivity to stereochemical configuration at this center. Compound **3** bears only the three basic rings of the spiropyrrolidinoindolones that are present in horsfiline (**1**) and coerulescine (**2**). Accordingly, new synthetic approaches to spiropyrrolidinoindolones are welcome.

In defining our new approach to horsfiline, we were attracted by the possibility of using a 1,5-hydrogen atom translocation (1,5-HAT) as the key step,⁴ starting from **5** (X = I or Br) (Scheme 1).

Beckwith and Storey had already studied⁵ the preparation of oxindoles, including 7 [R, R' = $(CH_2)_n$, n = 2-5] by

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hydrogen atom abstraction, using tributyltin hydride. At 80 °C in benzene and using AIBN as initiator, significant amounts of uncyclized, reduced compounds **8** (X = H) had been formed. However, reaction at 160 °C with *t*-Bu₂O₂ as initiator was much more successful. The formation of the desired cyclized product was, therefore, favored by the increase of temperature.

Recently, as part of the general drive to develop alternatives to toxic organotin reagents, we have explored the chemistry of modern phosphorus-based radical precursors. The chosen reagents, ethylpiperidine hypophosphite (EPHP)⁶ and diethylphosphine oxide (DEPO),⁴ provide easy isolation of products as the phosphorus byproducts can be washed into water.⁷ The phosphorus-based reagents appear to have relatively strong P–H bonds, facilitating cyclizations where Bu₃SnH might, in contrast, encourage premature reduction of radicals.^{6,7} They are thus poorer chain-transfer reagents, but low cost and easy reaction workup make the reagents attractive.

Our initial cyclizations in this study featured ethylpiperidine hypophosphite (EPHP) (Scheme 2).

Pyrrolidine ester **10a** was prepared from the pyrrolidine $9a^8$ in 80% overall yield. This pyrrolidine was then coupled^{9a}

(7) For other phosphorus reagents under development, see: (a)Jessop C. M.; Parsons, A. F.; Routledge, A.; Irvine, D. *Tetrahedron Lett.* 2004, 45, 5095. (b) Jessop C. M.; Parsons, A. F.; Routledge, A.; Irvine, D. *Tetrahedron Lett.* 2003, 44, 479.

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with 2-iodo-4-methoxybenzenamine 11,^{2h,10} and the amide **12a** was then protected to give the desired precursor **12b** (R = SEM) for the cyclization.^{2a} The best conditions for the radical cyclization were found to use EPHP and AIBN in refluxing toluene. However, this gave the desired cyclized product **13** in a disappointing yield (33%) along with reduced compound **14a** as a dominant side product (51%) (Scheme 2).

When the cyclization experiment was carried out with substrate **12b** using EPHP-*d* and AIBN in refluxing benzene, a much improved yield (60%) of cyclized product **13**, along with 36% reduced product **14b**, was isolated. This compound showed three aromatic protons in the ¹H NMR spectrum and a single deuterium resonance at 7.16 ppm in the ²H NMR spectrum.

The completion of the synthesis consisted in removal of the protecting groups from **13** and N-methylation in situ using formaldehyde and NaCNBH₃ in CH₂Cl₂ to afford horsfiline (**1**) (47% in first step; 89% yield over the last two steps) (Scheme 3) with spectroscopic data identical to an authentic sample.^{2f}

The results obtained from EPHP-*d* in this case were welcome since the cyclization proceeded in much higher yield and also because no HAT was identified from the SEM protecting group or from undesired positions on the pyrrolidine to the aryl radical. However, the position of the

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⁽¹⁰⁾ Kondo, Y.; Kojima, S.; Sakamoto, T. J. Org. Chem. 1997, 62, 6507.

deuterium label in the reduced byproduct **14b** was surprising. The outcome contrasted with results reported by Beckwith et al. in a cyclization reaction on a simpler substrate [6, R, $R' = (CH_2)_2$] using tributyltin deuteride.⁵ In that case, the entire isotope found in the reduced product **8** resided in the side chain at C-1 in the cyclopropane ring [**8**, R, $R' = (CH_2)_2$, X = D] (Scheme 1). That result indicated that the radical translocation step was much faster than the deuterium atom transfer from Bu₃SnD to the aryl radical.⁵ In turn, that meant that the later cyclization step was the less efficient of the two key steps since it suffered competition by radical reduction.

However, our observation of no deuterium incorporation at the aliphatic carbon atom in **14** and the high yield of **13** implies that, under our conditions and with our substrate, the radical generated after 1,5-hydrogen atom abstraction in a reaction of **12b** does not abstract deuterium from EPHP-*d* but cyclizes with total efficiency (Scheme 2).

This surprising observation persuaded us to investigate an alternative and more direct route to the indolones, avoiding HAT and featuring, instead, direct radical generation in the alkyl side chain, followed by cyclization. The most direct route to a formal total synthesis of horsfiline would be by synthesis of **19**, an advanced precursor in the Fuji synthesis^{2e} of horsfiline. Accordingly, we prepared precursor **17** for horsfiline synthesis, as illustrated in Scheme 4.



Ester **10b** was prepared easily from pyrrolidine $9b^{11}$ (Scheme 2), and the phenylseleno group was introduced to give selenide **15**. This was directly reacted with *p*-anisidine in the presence of trimethylaluminum⁹ to give amide **16**. The amide nitrogen of **16** was protected to produce the desired precursor **17** in 85% yield (Scheme 4). This was then treated with EPHP and AIBN in refluxing toluene, but only reduced product **18** was obtained.¹²

We have recently established that DEPO⁴ has all of the advantages of EPHP, but that it is significantly slower to quench carbon radicals.¹³ Hence, it was tried in this reaction. When precursor **17** was treated with DEPO and AIBN in refluxing dry benzene, the substrate underwent smooth radical cyclization and the only product obtained was the desired cyclized product **19** in 85% isolated yield (Scheme



4).¹⁴ [This is also in complete contrast to the findings of Beckwith and Storey⁵ for a related bromide **8** ($\mathbf{R} = \mathbf{R'} = \mathbf{Me}$, $X = \mathbf{Br}$), which under Bu₃SnH conditions at 80 °C underwent 98% reduction and only 2% cyclization to indolone.]

As mentioned, **19** is an advanced precursor in the Fuji synthesis^{2e} of horsfiline (**1**). We thus completed a formal synthesis of the horsfiline (**1**) using the newly developed phosphorus radical precursor, diethylphosphine oxide (DEPO). In particular, this work shows the advantages of DEPO in synthesis, compared to either tributyltin hydride or EPHP.

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Supporting Information Available: Experimental methods and spectroscopic data for selected compounds are provided. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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⁽¹³⁾ Although the kinetics of hydrogen atom abstraction for DEPO and EPHP appear not to have been studied quantitatively, kinetic data for hydrogen abstraction from other H–P bonds (e.g., dialkyl phosphites) show them to be relatively poor hydrogen donors. See: Chatgilialoglu, C.; Timokhin, V. I.; Ballestri, M. J. Org. Chem. **1998**, *63*, 1327.

⁽¹⁴⁾ A blank experiment was conducted in which DEPO was not added. This led solely to recovery of starting material **17**; no cyclization was observed.