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Communication

Diaminodiacid bridge improves enzymatic and *in vivo* inhibitory activity of peptide CPI-1 against botulinum toxin serotype A

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ABSTRACT

The replacement of the disulfide bridge of CPI-1, a peptide inhibitor of light chain of Botulinum toxin serotype A, with the thioether-containing and biscarba-containing diaminodiacid bridge leads to a significant decrease in the degradation by trypsin and increase in the detoxification activity *in vivo*, the addition of hydrophobic or positive amino acid at C-terminus of modified peptides further improves the inhibitory activity.

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BoNT/A is the most potent toxin known to mankind and an important bio-threat agent. It is composed of a heavy chain (HC) and a light chain (LC). The HC is responsible for receptor recognition and toxin internalization, while the LC is a Zn^{2+} metalloprotease that selectively hydrolyzes SNAP-25 (synapto-some-associated protein-25 kDa) [1–3]. As a result of SNAP-25 cleavage, the release of acetylcholine is inhibited, leading to muscle paralysis and death.

The current treatment of BoNT/A poisoning is through antitoxin administration, but the current antitoxins are ineffective once the BoNT/A is internalized into neuromuscular cells [4], where the LC persistently cleaves SNAP-25 and results in the prolonged poisoning or even death of poison victims. Therefore, it is important to develop non-antibody drugs for the treatment of BoNT poisoning, especially drugs that are effective against the BoNT/A LC [5]. To date, some LC inhibitors, such as hydroxamate [6-8], quinolone derivatives [6,9,10], peptides [11-15] and other small molecules [16,17] have been found to potently inhibit the LC of BoNT/A in vitro, but no inhibitor has been reported to improve survival rate in animal lethality assays, only few inhibitors showed modest extension of time to death of mice [18,19]. CPI-1 [Dab(C)-RWTKCL-NH₂] is a cyclic peptide linked by a disulfide bridge, has been found to be the most potent peptide inhibitor for the BoNT/A LC, but it has no detoxification activity in vivo [15]. This loss of

* Corresponding authors. E-mail addresses: yue_junjie@126.com (J. Yue), daiqy@bmi.ac.cn (Q. Dai). activity is partly due to the reduction of the disulfide bridge by reducing agents *in vivo*.

It has been reported that cyclic peptides possess higher activity and stability compared to linear peptides [20]. The stability of easily reduced disulfide bridge-containing peptides could be improved by using disulfide bridges mimics, such as thioether (S-C)- or biscarba (C-C) bridge, triazole bridge, *etc.* [21–24]. In order to improve the inhibitory activity of CPI-1 *in vivo* against BoNT/A, we used either thioether (S-C)- or biscarba (C-C)-bridged diaminodiacid to replace the disulfide bridge of CPI-1 (Scheme 1). Based on the structure–activity of CPI-1 (unpublished data), hydrophobic and positively charged amino acids (*e.g.*, Trp, Leu and Arg) were further added at the C-terminus of CPI-1 disulfide bond mimics (Table 1). We then determined the inhibitory activities of CPI-1 derivatives against the LC of BoNT/A, the degradation of these derivatives by trypsin and the detoxification activities of the derivatives against BoNT/A *in vivo*.

The C-S diaminodiacids X_1 and X_2 [Scheme 1a] were synthesized from protected L-homoserine and L-cystine as reported previously [22,25]. The C-C-bridged diaminodiacid (X_3) was prepared by using nickel-catalyzed reductive crosscoupling reaction according to the literature [23]. The allyl/ allyloxycarbonyl (alloc) protecting group was employed because it remains stable during the subsequent Fmoc solidphase peptide synthesis (SPPS) and can be easily removed by [Pd(PPh_3)_4]/PhSiH_3. The synthesis steps, mass and nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectra are shown in Figs. S1–S9 (Supporting information).

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ARTICLE IN PRESS

J. Shen, J. Liu, S. Yu et al.





Scheme 1. Synthesis route of CPI-1 disulfide bridge mimics. (a) Structures of orthogonally protected diaminodiacids. (b) Solid-phase synthesis route of CPI-1 disulfide bridge mimic by using the protected diaminodiacids. The following protecting groups for amino acid side chains were used: *tert*-butyl (for Thr), 2,2,4,6,7-pentamethyldihydrobenzofurane-5-sulfonyl (Pbf; for Arg) and *tert*-butyloxycarbonyl (Boc; for Trp, Dab and Lys).

With purified diaminodiacid building blocks, we synthesized CPI-1 disulfide bridge mimics (Table 1) using solid-phase method as described previously [Scheme 1b] [22]. Fmoc-protected amino acids were assembled on Rink resin by using the coupling reagent 2-(1H-benzotriazole-1-yl)-1,1,3,3-tetramethyluronium hexafluorophosphate (HBTU)/1-hydroxybenzotriazole (HOBt)/N,N-diisopropyl ethylamine (DIPEA). First, the alloc and allyl groups of diaminodiacids on the protected linear peptide were removed with [Pd(PPh₃)₄]/PhSiH₃. The Fmoc group at the N-terminus was subsequently removed with 20% piperidine in N,N-dimethylformamide. Cyclization was then conducted by lactamization using benzotriazole-1-yl-oxytripyrrolidinophosphonium hexafluorophosphate (PyBOP)/HOBt/N-methylmorpholine (NMM). Finally, the peptide-resin was cleaved by trifluoroacetic acid, and the crude peptide was further purified by semi-preparative high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). The linear CPI-1 (0.5 mg/mL) was allowed to fold into the cyclic peptide CPI-1 in the NH_4HCO_3 buffer (0.1 mol/L, pH = 8.0–8.2) at room temperature, and the cyclic peptides were then concentrated and purified by reversed-phase (C18) HPLC [26]. HPLC analyses of the cyclization products of linear CPI-1 derivative with the S-C bridge (peptide 5) are shown in Fig. 1. Other CPI-1 derivatives were also individually cyclized and the major products were purified. The SNAPtide [FITC-T(D)RIDQANQRATK(DABCYL)Nle-NH₂], which is an enzymatic substrate of the BoNT/A LC used in a fluorescence resonance energy transfer (FRET)-based assay of inhibitory activity, was synthesized as described previously (Scheme S1 in Supporting information) [27]. The purity of all final cyclic peptide products were above 95%, as confirmed by HPLC with C18 column



Fig. 1. HPLC analysis of the products of cyclization of typical linear CPI-1 disulfide bridge mimics. (a) Linear peptide **5**; (b) Cyclic products of linear peptide **5**; (c) Peptide **5** purified products. Samples were applied to a Calesil ODS-100 C₁₈ column (4.6 mm × 250 mm) and eluted with a linear gradient of 0–1 min, 5%–10% B (B is acetonitrile containing 0.1% TFA); 1–25 min, 10%–50% B; 25–28 min, 50%–95% B at a flow rate of 1 mL/min, 214 nm of wavelength.

(Figs. S10–S17 in Supporting information). The mass spectra of CPI-1 and its variants are consistent with the corresponding theoretical molecular weight (Figs. S18–S25 in Supporting information). The circular dichroism (CD) spectra of CPI-1 and its variants in 0.01 mol/L phosphate buffer show random coil structure around 190 and 260 nm (Fig. S26 in Supporting information).

The inhibitory activities of peptides were evaluated with BoNT/A light chain 1-424 (Balc424) [27], which was expressed and purified according to the procedure described in supporting information using SNAPtide as the enzymatic substrate [28]. Dose response curves and the IC₅₀ values of CPI-1 and its variants are shown in Fig. 2a and Table 1, respectively. After the replacement of its disulfide bridge by a C-S or C-C bridge, the IC₅₀ values of peptides 1, 5 and 6 became 1.06, 1.32 and 2.72 µmol/L, which decreased about 1–5 fold compared to CPI-1 ($IC_{50} = 0.36 \mu mol/L$). On the other hand, the introduction of hydrophobic (Leu or Try) or positive charge amino acid (Arg) at the C-terminus of peptide 1 (peptides 2-4) resulted in 1-2-fold increases in the inhibitory activities. In addition, the inhibitory activities of CPI-1 and its derivatives were also assessed with full length SNAP-25 as enzymatic substrate. The peptides were pre-incubated with Balc424 at 37 °C for 1 h, and SNAP-25 was subsequently added and incubated for another 1 h at the same temperature. The reaction mixture was terminated by adding SDS-PAGE loading buffer and the products were analyzed by electrophoresis on a 15% polyacrylamide gel. We found that at the same concentrations, CPI-1 derivatives 3 and 4 more efficiently inhibited the BoNT/A LCmediated cleavage of SNAP-25 compared to wild type CPI-1 and other derivatives (Fig. 2b). It should be noted that the IC_{50} or K_i of CPI-1 is higher than that $(K_i = 39.2 \text{ nmol/L})$ reported in the literature [15], the reason is that the FRET substrate of CFP-SNAP-25(141-206)-YFP is more sensitive than the SANPtide [FITC-SNAP-25(189-202)-DABCYL] used in this study.

To assess the stability of CPI-1 and its derivatives with disulfide bridge mimics, trypsin degradation assays were conducted. The

Table	1
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Peptide	Amino acid sequence	Theoretical (experimental) MW (Da) [#]	IC ₅₀ (µmol/L)	95% C.I. (µmol/L)	K _i (μmol/L)
CPI-1	Dab-(C)RWTKCL*	1005.5 (1028.49)	0.36	0.33-0.39	$\textbf{0.24} \pm \textbf{0.01}$
1	Dab-RWTKX ₁ L*	987.54 (1010.53)	1.06	0.90-1.25	$\textbf{0.75} \pm \textbf{0.07}$
2	Dab-RWTKX ₁ LL*	1100.63 (1101.37)	0.63	0.50-0.80	$\textbf{0.45} \pm \textbf{0.06}$
3	Dab-RWTKX ₁ LW*	1173.64 (1174.58)	0.82	0.62-1.08	$\textbf{0.59} \pm \textbf{0.10}$
4	Dab-RWTKX ₁ LR*	1143.68 (1144.53)	0.37	0.31-0.43	$\textbf{0.25} \pm \textbf{0.02}$
5	Dab-RWTKX ₂ L*	987.54 (1010.53)	1.32	1.06-1.63	$\textbf{0.93} \pm \textbf{0.12}$
6	Dab-RWTKX ₃ L*	969.62 (970.59)	2.72	1.58-4.71	$\textbf{2.14} \pm \textbf{0.66}$

X₁ and X₂ represent the C-S- and S-C-bridged diaminodiacid, respectively; X₃ represents biscarba diaminodiacids. *, C-terminus is amidated; [#], M + H or M + Na, isotopic; C.I. is confidence interval; K_i is inhibition constant.

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J. Shen, J. Liu, S. Yu et al.



Fig. 2. Inhibitory activities of CPI-1 disulfide bridge mimics against LC of BoNT/A. (a) Concentration-activity curves of Balc424-mediated (40 nmol/L) cleavage of SNAPtide in a FRET assay (n = 3). (b) SDS-PAGE of cleavage products of SNAP-25 (10 μ mol/L) in the presence of Balc424 (1 μ mol/L) and peptide inhibitors (125 μ mol/L). Left to right: marker, control (SNAP-25), SNAP-25 + LC and SNAP-25 + LC + peptide.

inhibitors were allowed to incubate with trypsin (100 ng/mL) in the reaction buffer (50 mmol/L Tris-HCl, 20 mmol/L CaCl₂, pH 8) at 37 °C for 0, 1, 2 and 3 h, respectively. HPLC analysis was used to determine the percent of degradation. As shown in Fig. 3, CPI-1 (0.25 mmol/L) was degraded by 73.4% after 8 h of incubation. The derivatives with the C-S or S-C bridge (peptides **1**, **2**, **3**, **5**) and the derivative with the C-C bridge (peptide **6**) had much lower degradation, at 37.4%, 30.4%, 37.5%, 58.8% and 16.06%, respectively. Since arginine is a specific recognition site for trypsin, peptide **4** was degraded faster than other peptides. These results demonstrate that the substitution of disulfide bridge with a S-C or C-S or C-C bridge significantly improves the anti-trypsin degradation properties of the peptides.

After observing the higher anti-protease degradation resistance CPI-1 disulfide-bond mimics, we decided to further evaluate the protective activities *in vivo* using Kunming mice. BoNT/A [2 \times median lethal dose (LD₅₀)/mice] was mixed with CPI-1 or its derivatives (5 mg/kg), and then injected intraperitoneally into mice. The survival rates and deaths were recorded every 12 h during a time period of 72 h (Fig. 4). The results show that CPI-1 derivatives **1**, **3**, **4**, **5** and **6** prolonged the survival time of mice. All





Fig. 4. Survival curves of mice after the intraperitoneal injection of BoNT/A ($2 \times LD_{50}$) and CPI-1 or its derivatives. $2 \times LD_{50}$ BoNT/A was pre-incubated with 5 mg/kg different peptides for 30 min, and was then injected intraperitoneally into mice. The death rates of mice were recorded every 12 h for 72 h. *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01 vs. CPI-1 group.

mice in CPI-1 or the control group died 24 h after challenge, while the survival rate of peptide **1**, **3**, **4**, **5** and **6** groups was 75%–100%. After 72 h, 25%, 25%, 25% and 37.5% of the mice receiving peptides **1**, **3**, **4**, **5** and **6** were still alive, significantly higher than that of CPI-1 and control groups.

To investigate why peptides 1, 5 and 6 have lower inhibitory activity against the BoNT/A LC, and how the introduction of hydrophobic or positive charge amino acid at the C-terminus of the peptide enhances the inhibitory activity, we compared the intermolecular interactions of Balc424 with CPI-1 and its derivatives. The crystal structure of the enzyme-CPI-1 complex shows that two salt bridge contacts exist [15], the Arg residue of CPI-1 interacts with Asp370 of Balc424, and Lys201 of CPI-1 interacts with Asp159 of Balc424. However, the salt bridge interaction between Arg of CPI-1 and Asp370 of Balc424 was not observed in Balc424-peptide 6 complex (Fig. S28A in Supporting information). CPI-1 disulfide bridge mimics have smaller size compared to wild type CPI-1, mainly due to the shorter carbon-carbon and carbon-sulfur bonds in mimics. This decrease in size may disturb salt bridge interactions and decrease the binding affinities of the peptides with the light chain of BoNT/A. For peptide 4, after the introduction of Arg at the Cterminal of peptide 1, this residue forms a salt bridge with Glu257 at Balc424 (Fig. S28B in Supporting information), which may improve the binding affinity between the two molecules.

In conclusion, we have developed a series of CPI-1 derivatives with thioether-containing and biscarba-containing diaminodiacid bridges which are more resistant to trypsin degradation.



Fig. 3. HPLC analysis of the degradation products of CPI-1 and its derivatives in the presence of trypsin. (a) CPI-1; (b) Peptide 1; (c) Peptide 6; (d) Degradation rates-time curves of CPI-1 and disulfide bridge mimics in the presence of trypsin. Analytical conditions were the same as described in Fig. 1.

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ARTICLE IN PRESS

J. Shen, J. Liu, S. Yu et al.

Importantly, these peptides can prolong the survival rate of mice administered with $2 \times LD_{50} \times BoNT/A$. The addition of hydrophic or positive amino acid at C-terminus further improves the inhibitory activity. This research provides an efficient strategy for developing potent peptides inhibitors against BoNT/A.

Declaration of competing interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cclet.2021.03.055.

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Chinese Chemical Letters xxx (xxxx) xxx-xxx

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