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Design and synthesis of reboxetine analogs morpholine derivatives as selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors

Wenjian Xu [a,*], David L. Gray [a,*], Shelly A. Glase [b], Nancy S. Barta [c]

[a] Department of Chemistry, Pfizer Global Research & Development Groton Laboratories, Ann Arbor, MI 48105
[b] Department of Chemistry, Pfizer Global Research & Development Ann Arbor Laboratories, 2800 Plymouth Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48105, USA
[c] Berry & Associates, 2434 Bishop Circle East, Dexter, MI 48130, USA

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ABSTRACT

As part of a discovery effort aimed at identifying novel norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (NRIs), a number of substituted morpholines were designed and synthesized. The target compounds contain vicinal stereogenic centers, and the program was greatly facilitated by the adoption of efficient synthetic routes which allowed for the late stage incorporation of structural and physicochemical diversity into the targets. Structure–activity relationships were developed by optimizing individual ring components of the structure for NRI potency and for selectivity against other monoamine reuptake transporters. Several novel morpholine derivatives with a potent and selective NRI profile are described.

Modulating central norepinephrine (NE) levels via its reuptake transporter (NET) has been shown to be an effective pharmacotherapy strategy for treating a variety of illnesses including ADHD,[1–4] depression,[5] fibromyalgia,[6] peripheral neuropathy, and other types of pain.[7] Consequently, there is much interest in developing agents which selectively inhibit the norepinephrine reuptake transporter (NRI's). The precise mechanism by which an NRI might have beneficial effects on each of these disease states varies – for instance, atomoxetine (**1**, Strattera™), a relatively selective NRI recently approved for the treatment of ADHD, is proposed to provide efficacy for ADHD symptoms by increasing synaptic NE and DA levels via blockade of the NET in cortical regions associated with attention and memory.[8] Similarly, elevated concentration of NE in the synaptic cleft is considered to increase or maintain the activity of the descending inhibitory bulbospinal pathway, which is compromised in chronic pain conditions, thereby leading to analgesic effects in some patients.[9] Previous work in the area of small molecule monoamine reuptake inhibitors has shown that it is challenging to identify molecules with high affinity for inhibition of NET which simultaneously exhibit high selectivity (>100×) versus the related serotonin reuptake transporter (SERT) and dopamine reuptake transporter (DAT). In this paper, we describe elements of a program which was aimed at identifying centrally acting NRI's with the potential for treating disease, specifically, the synthesis and structure–activity relationships of a series of morpholine-based NRIs with general structure **3**.

Certain substituted morpholines such as **2** have been shown to exhibit excellent binding selectivity for NET versus SERT and continue to attract attention to their synthesis and biological activity.[10–12] We developed an interest in evaluating structures of general form **3** (Fig. 1) for NRI potency, with the aim to access compounds with varied physicochemical properties while retaining selectivity and NRI activity. Initially, we looked to literature describing the preparation of related morpholine derivatives for synthetic inspiration.[13] The first published route to **2** is highly reliable, but lengthy. It requires a 10-step linear sequence where the desired diversity at R_1 and R_2 (**3**, Fig. 1) is incorporated into the molecules at the very beginning of the synthesis and R_2 is primarily limited to phenyl. Despite its excellent utility, this route did not incorporate suitable speed or design flexibility to allow for a rapid and complete exploration of the broader chemical space embodied within generic structure **3**. Our first attempt at a general synthesis of some target morpholines is outlined in Scheme 1. We expected

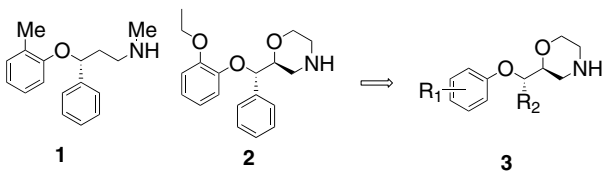

Figure 1. General structure of compounds targeting selective NRI activity.

* Corresponding authors. Tel.: +1 860 686 9158; fax: +1 860 686 7444.
E-mail address: david.l.gray@pfizer.com (D.L. Gray).

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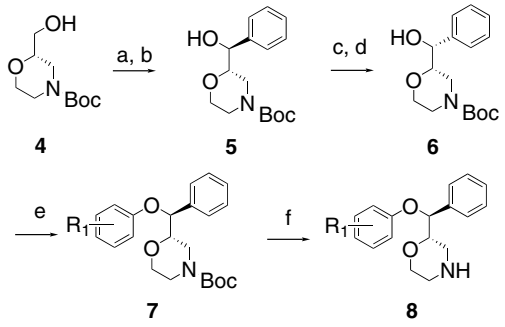
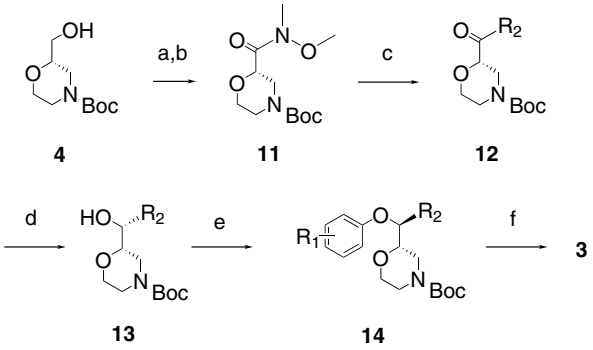


Scheme 1. Reagents and conditions: (a) IBX; (b) C_6H_5MgBr, −78 °C, 67% for two steps; (c) C_6H_5COOH, PPh_3, DIAD; (d) 5% NaOH, 60 °C, 81% for two steps; (e) C_6H_5OH, PPh_3, DIAD, 70–85%; (f) CF_3COOH or 4 M HCl in Dioxane, 0 °C, 80–90%.



Scheme 2. Reagents and conditions: (a) NaOCl, TEMPO, KBr, TBACl; (b) 1-propanephosphonic acid cyclic anhydride, 91% for two steps; (c) C_6H_5Li, −78 °C–rt, 45–80%; (d) H_2, *trans*-$RuCl_2$[(*R*)-xylbinap][(*R*)-daipen], 85%; (e) C_6H_5OH, PPh_3, DIAD, 70–85%; (f) CF_3COOH or 4 M HCl in Dioxane, 0°C, 80–90%.

that hydroxymorpholine **4** would be a useful common intermediate from which to access our targets. This important starting material was prepared in high optical purity according to a literature procedure.[14] In this approach, IBX was used to oxidize (*S*)-hydroxymorpholine **4** to deliver its aldehyde derivative in high yield.[15,16] For R_2 = phenyl (Fig. 1), Grignard addition of phenyl magnesium bromide to this sensitive aldehyde afforded a 6:1 mixture of diastereoisomeric secondary alcohols **5** which were chromatographically separated. A purified single isomer was subjected to a two-step inversion procedure consisting of Mitsunobu reaction with benzoic acid followed by benzoate hydrolysis. This process effectively converged the mixture to a single isomer (either one as desired) and provided a common intermediate for exploring the SAR of phenoxy ring substitution. Mitsunobu conditions were employed to couple the appropriate phenol with **6** (Scheme 1, (*S*,*S*) series shown), affording the Boc-protected targets **7** which were deprotected upon exposure to HCl in dioxane, providing the products **8** as their corresponding HCl salts in good yield. In order to verify the stereochemical identity of the chromatographically separated intermediates **5**, each isomer was carried independently through the outlined sequence to **2** and co-injected with standards of the same on chiral HPLC. This procedure indicated that the (2*S*,3*S*) alcohol (**5**) was the major isomer arising from the addition of phenyl magnesium bromide to the aldehyde. For most nucleophiles, the substrate-based stereocontrol of addition to the aldehyde was between 3:1 and 8:1 favoring the (2*S*, 3*S*) isomer. The new route had certain advantages, however, the addition of lithium-based organometallic nucleophiles to the aldehyde resulted in moderate to poor yields of the desired adducts; some Grignard reagents were also problematic. With benzyl magnesium bromide, we observed rearrangement to the scrambled toluene adducts (**9** → **10**, Fig. 2).

As a result of these and other issues with the generality and reliability of this route, we chose to seek an alternative method for generating diverse morpholine derivatives (**3**, Fig. 1), in particular, an approach which would be more amenable to generating non-phenyl substitutions at R_2 and allow isolation of single isomers at the R_2 stereocenter. Weinreb amide **11** was deemed to be a good alternate intermediate from which the target morpholine derivatives might be readily accessed.

This key compound was obtained in a two-step procedure wherein hydroxymorpholine **4** was oxidized by exposure to buffered bleach,[17] and the derived acid subsequently converted to the desired intermediate N,O dimethyl amide **11** via cyclic phosphinic acid anhydride promoted amidation (Scheme 2).[18] With the target electrophile (**11**) in hand, various organometallic reagents were added to the amide, typically affording the functionalized ketone **12** in moderate to good yield. The next task, namely reduction of ketone **12** in a stereocontrolled fashion, was critical to the success of this synthetic route, and several approaches were adopted to successfully address the stereocontrol in subclasses of these molecules.[19–21] Some substitutions required chromatography at this stage to upgrade the diastereoisomeric purity of the products. After establishing the required stereocenters, Mitsunobu coupling of selected substituted phenols with the secondary alcohols **13** proceeded without event, affording the Boc-protected ethers **14**. Removal of the carbamate protecting group was smoothly effected by treatment with HCl in dioxane as before, affording the morpholine products **3** in good yield.

Catalytic hydrogenation was initially effective in setting the second stereocenter adjacent to the morpholine ring for $R_2 \neq$ phenyl, however, one drawback of this method was that a small amount (<10%) of racemization was sometimes observed at the morpholine center during the chiral reduction (**12** → **13**). Additionally, in some of the later cases, the resultant isomeric mixture of heterocyclic alcohol isomers (**13**) was not separable by flash chromatography.

An inelegant, but workable solution to this problem was found by carrying these mixtures through the remaining steps of the synthesis and separating the final target isomers by chiral preparatory HPLC. For such compounds, lacking positive proof of the stereochemical identity of the separated isomers, both isomers were screened for activity. The binding affinities for some of the more potent morpholine derivatives are given in Tables 1–4.

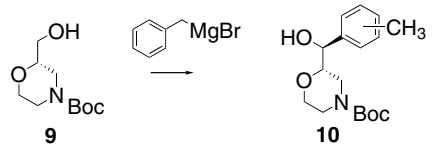


Figure 2. Undesired rearrangement observed during Grignard addition.

Table 1
Monoamine transporter binding of compounds with (R,S) and (S,S) configurations

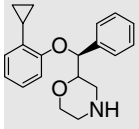
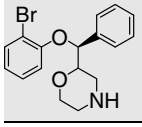
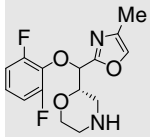
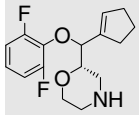
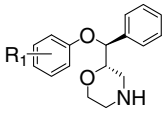
Structures	Entry	Stereo chem	NET (nM)	SERT (nM)
	**1**	(2*S*,3*S*)	2	482
	2	(2*R*,3*S*)	35	75
	**3**	(2*S*,3*S*)	3	477
	4	(2*R*,3*S*)	17	105

Table 2
Comparison of NET activities of compounds with (*S*,*R*) and (*S*,*S*) configurations

Structures	Entry	Stereo chem	NET (nM)	SERT (nM)
	**1**[a]	(2*S*,3*R*)	19	>10,000
	2	(2*S*,3*S*)	6940	>10,000
	**3**[a]	(2*S*,3*S*)	20	3703
	4	(2*S*,3*R*)	2570	2530

Absolute stereochemistry assignments change because of convention.
[a] **1** and **3** represent the same stereochemical configuration.

Table 3
Binding affinities of NET active (*S*,*S*) morpholine analogs with various aryl substitutions



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Entry	R1	NET (nM)	SERT (nM)
1	2,6-diF	7	1210
2	2-F,6-OMe	2	>3500
3	2-F,6-OEt	4	2570
4	2,4-diF	16	617
5	4-F	21	1620
6[a]	3-F	11	13
7	2-F	7	6390
8	2-Cyano	18	>10,000
9	2-Methylsulfonyl	1360	>10,000

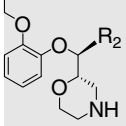
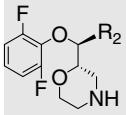
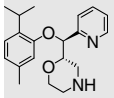
[a] Entry 6 contains 20% of (R,R) isomer.

Published studies have suggested that (2*R*,3*R*) analogs of **2** are not selective NRI's.[22] In order to further define the importance of stereochemistry for NRI binding and MAT selectivity, some (2*R*,3*S*) and (2*S*,3*R*) analogs were targeted. All synthesized isomers were tested in the monoamine transporter binding assays.[23] The results in Tables 1 and 2 show that the (*R*, *S*) and (*S*,*R*) isomers lack the desired selectivity and potency compared to the (*S*,*S*) isomers. Having established the advantages of the (*S*,*S*) series for our purposes, specific effort to pursue other diasteromers was discontinued.

Next, we turned our attention to the phenoxy moiety and designed analogs to probe both the electronic and steric effects of modifications in this region. We observed that a number of analogs with *ortho* substituents (i.e. alkyl, alkoxy, and halogen groups) on the phenoxy ring demonstrated good NET potency and maintained selectivity over the other MATs. A selection of morpholine analogs displaying low nanomolar potency at NET is presented in Table 3, along with the corresponding SERT binding affinities. In profiling these analogs, it appeared that SERT binding affinity was affected by phenoxy substitution, most strikingly illustrated by the 500-fold gain in SERT potency observed in going from 2-F to 3-F substitution in regard to the compounds corresponding to entries 7 and 6 in Table 3.

Additional in-vivo and functional binding assessment of NET-potent compounds in this series (data not shown) led to the confirmation that the 2- substituted and 2,6-di-substituted phenoxy ring systems were among those present in the better NET inhibitors. As one example of further elaborating an active series of compounds, these phenoxy ring substitutions were then held constant together with the unsubstituted morpholine ring and (2*S*,3*S*) stereochemistry during additional rounds of design and synthesis targeting analogs in the series where $R_2 \neq$ phenyl (**3**, Fig. 1).

Table 4
MAT binding activities for non-phenyl (S,S) morpholine derivatives

Structures	Entry	R2	NET (nM)	SERT (nM)
	**1**		7	6909
	2		114	>10000
	3		27	3680
	4		49	8210
	5		28	676
	**6**		6	8980
	7		19	>10000
	8		18	>4500
	9		9	>10000
	10		20	3703
	11		13	445
	12		66	912
	**13**		457	>8400

A number of such compounds were synthesized using the described chemistry and several of these morpholine derivatives are potent and selective NRI's as demonstrated by the measured MAT binding affinities for representative examples given in Table 4. Early in this SAR development, we replaced the phenyl group (R_2, Fig. 1) with a 2-pyridyl ring. We were pleased to find that the R_2 = 2-pyridyl analogs (entries 1 and 6, Table 4) had favorable binding potency and NET selectivity. These compounds also had significantly lower log*D*'s and an altered ADME profiles as compared to analogs in Table 1. At the same time, 3-pyridyl analogs were noticeably weaker at NET in the particular examples tested (for example entry 2, Table 4). This result led us to design and synthesize additional, related heterocyclic derivatives that were also potent NRIs (entries 6 and 9, Table 4). Various analogs also demonstrated the feasibility of using non-aromatic surrogates for the R_2 phenyl and found, for example, that potency could be retained

with compounds that contained a bulky cycloalkyl such as cyclopentenyl (see entry 3, Table 2 and entry 10, Table 4). Taken together with prior work, these results further define structural features for the binding of morpholine derivatives **3** to NET and SERT.

We have designed, synthesized and tested a number of novel, potent, and selective NRIs. Favorable substitution patterns were identified in our systematic SAR study of the phenoxy- and phenyl portions of the lead structure **2**. Several analogs showed promising binding potency and selectivity for NET over SERT. A redesigned chemical synthesis which allowed access to an expanded set of analogs was key in enabling the discovery program, as it provided potent NRIs which cover a range of physicochemical properties.

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23. NET and SERT binding were carried out in transfected HEK 293 cells measuring displacement of radiolabelled RTI-55.