ChemComm

Chloride transport activities of *trans*- and *cis*-amide-linked bisureas†

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Of the bisurea compounds linked through *trans*- and *cis*-benzanilide spacers, the *cis*-amide derivatives were found to be effective in chloride transport, using which a stimuli-responsive mobile carrier was devised.

Nature uses amide bonds to connect amino acids and synthesize peptides and proteins. Most of the amide bonds predominantly adopt *trans* conformations but the population of *cis* conformations tends to increase in the tertiary amides prepared from proline and *N*-substituted amino acids such as sarcosine.[1] The relative stabilities of *trans* and *cis* conformers are reversed in some unnatural amides such as *N*-methyl acetanilide and benzanilide, showing a strong preference for the *cis* conformation in the solid state and in solution.[2] This feature has been nicely utilised for the construction of amide-based foldamers and molecular switches.[3]

Transmembrane anion transport is essential to control the cellular ion concentration, osmotic pressure, volume and pH in living organisms, and it is also associated with signal production, cell-to-cell communication, neuronal proliferation, differentiation, *etc.*[4] It is well known that anion transport in the biological systems is facilitated by proteins functioning as anion channels, transporters, and exchangers. A variety of synthetic molecules that can facilitate anion transport across lipid and cell membranes have been described in the last few decades.[5,6] These synthetic transporters may have applications in biomedical research and potential therapeutics for diseases related to defective anion transport.[7]

In recent years, we have synthesized small synthetic molecules that can facilitate anion transport across lipid membranes *via* antiport or symport.[8] It was also demonstrated that the transmembrane transport of chloride ions could be controlled by light stimulus using diazobenzene-based synthetic transporters.[9] As part of our continuing efforts to develop stimuli-responsive synthetic

anion transporters,[10] we have herein prepared a series of bisurea compounds **1–7** containing *trans*- or *cis*-amides, and their transport abilities for chloride ions across a lipid membrane have been revealed. Furthermore, it is also demonstrated that the transport activity can be modulated by chemical and enzymatic reactions, leading to the conversion of *cis*-to-*trans* amide.

The syntheses of bisurea compounds **1–7** are outlined in Scheme 1. Coupling of **10** and **11** in the presence of 1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)carbodiimide (EDCI) and 1-hydroxybenzo-triazole (HOBt) afforded compound **12**.[11] After removal of the *t*-butyloxycarbonyl (Boc) protecting groups, the resulting amine was directly coupled with *p*-cyanophenyl isocyanate to afford bisurea **1**. On the other hand, *N*-methylation of **12** yielded compound **13**, which was converted to bisurea compounds **2–7** *via* sequential deprotection and coupling reactions.

We first compared the chloride transport abilities of two urea compounds **1** and **2**, which contain *trans*- and *cis*-amides, respectively. Both compounds have identical *p*-cyanophenyl substituents, which are known to greatly enhance the anion transport activities of urea receptors across lipid membranes.[8a,9] The chloride transport abilities of **1** and **2** were estimated using unilamellar 1-palmitoyl-2-oleoyl-2-oleoylphosphatidyl-choline (POPC) vesicles which contain a phosphate buffer (10 mM, pH = 7.2), lucigenin (1 mM) and $NaNO_3$ (200 mM). These vesicles were suspended in a phosphate buffer (10 mM, pH = 7.2) containing $NaNO_3$ (200 mM) and NaCl (30 mM). Chloride influx into vesicles upon addition of each compound in DMSO solution (2 mol% to lipid) was monitored *via* fluorescence quenching of lucigenin. As shown in Fig. 1a, compound **1** with a *trans*-amide is nearly inactive while compound **2** with a *cis*-amide is highly efficient to facilitate chloride transport across a POPC membrane. The Hill plot afforded the EC_{50} value of 0.24 mol% (**2** to lipid), which is the concentration needed to achieve 50% completion of chloride transport at 300 s. A dramatic difference in the chloride transport activities of **1** and **2** is attributed in part to their binding affinities with the chloride ion. In compound **2** with a *cis*-amide, two urea functional groups can be involved in the binding of the chloride ion in a chelate manner, thus simultaneously forming four hydrogen bonds. The association

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Synthetic procedures and characterization, experimental details for titrations and transports. See DOI: 10.1039/c5cc02757h
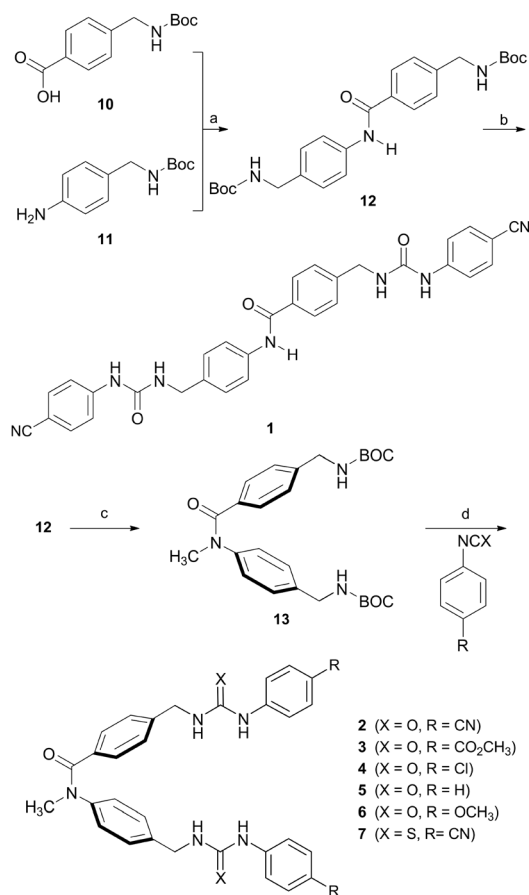
Scheme 1 *Reagents and conditions*: (a) EDCI, HOBt, Et$_3$N, CH$_2$Cl$_2$, r.t., 5 h, 72%; (b) TFA, then *p*-cyanophenyl isocyanate, anhydrous Et$_3$N, CH$_2$Cl$_2$, r.t., 6 h, 56% (for two steps); (c) KOH, MeI, acetone, reflux, 1 h, 97%; (d) TFA, then each isocyanate, anhydrous Et$_3$N, CH$_2$Cl$_2$, r.t., 4–7 h, 49–76% (for two steps).

Fig. 1 (a) Chloride influxes facilitated by **1** and **2** (2 mol% to lipid) (b) chloride influxes facilitated by **2–7** (2 mol% to lipid). Vesicles which contain a phosphate buffer (10 mM, pH = 7.2), lucigenin (1 mM) and NaNO$_3$ (200 mM) were suspended in a phosphate buffer (10 mM, pH = 7.2) containing NaNO$_3$ (200 mM) and NaCl (30 mM).

constant between **2** and tetrabutylammonium chloride was determined to be 3950 M^{-1} in 10% (v/v) DMSO-d_6/CDCl$_3$ saturated with water (<0.1%) at 24 ± 1 °C (Fig. S1, ESI†). However, such a chelate binding mode is not possible in compound **1** with a *trans*-amide. Instead, compound **1** showed complex binding isotherms and therefore monourea compound **8** was prepared as a reference compound, which showed the association constant of 170 M^{-1} under the identical conditions (Fig. S7, ESI†). Another possible reason for different transport activities is because compound **2** has a folded, C-shaped conformation with an internal binding cavity wherein the chloride ion binds. This geometric feature may reduce the contact area with the lipid surface, which may facilitate the shuttling movement of **2** and its chloride complex inside the lipid membrane.[9,12]
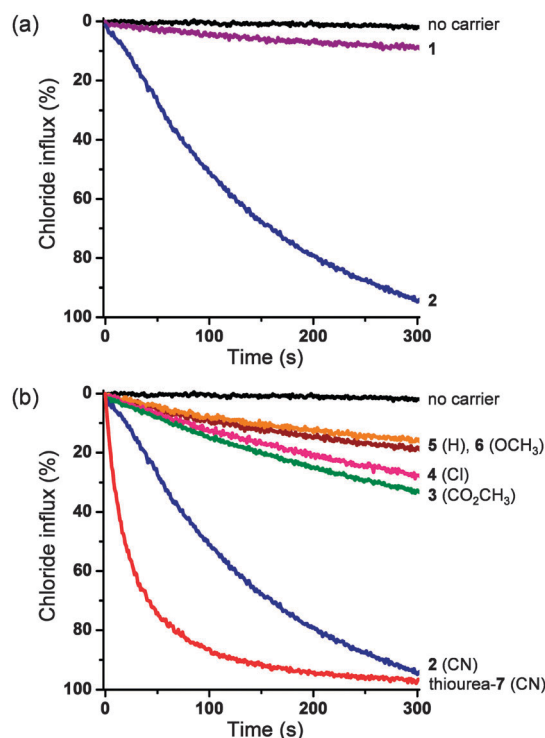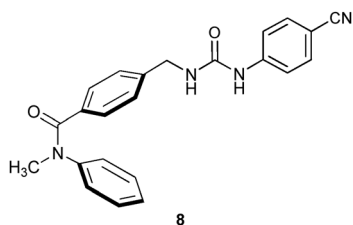

Next, we investigated the substituent effects on the chloride transport activities using bisurea compounds **2–6** with different substituents on the terminal phenyl rings (Fig. 1b). The transport activities increase in the order of **6** (OCH$_3$) ∼ **5** (H) < **4** (Cl) < **3** (CO$_2$CH$_3$) ≪ **2** (CN). This trend matches well with the increasing order of association constants between **2–6** and tetrabutylammonium chloride; that is **6** (250 M^{-1}) < **5** (370 M^{-1}) < **4** (860 M^{-1}) < **3** (1230 M^{-1}) < **2** (3950 M^{-1}) in 10% (v/v) DMSO-d_6/CDCl$_3$ saturated with water (<0.1%) at 24 ± 1 °C (Fig. S1–S5, ESI†).[13] In addition, we also prepared thiourea compound **7** with the cyano substituent, which bound the chloride ion more strongly (9500 M^{-1}) than the corresponding urea compound **2** (Fig. S6, ESI†). Compound **7** was found to be most efficient in the chloride transport and the EC$_{50}$ value was 0.08 molar ratio of **7** to POPC. These results suggest that the transport ability of synthetic transporters of the same molecular framework can be enhanced by increasing the binding affinity with a target ion. In order to reveal the transport mechanism, we investigated the chloride transport of compound **2** using POPC vesicles containing Na$_2$SO$_4$ (67 mM), instead of NaNO$_3$ (200 mM). The transport activity of **2** was practically ineffective under these conditions (Fig. S10, ESI†), indicating that the chloride transport occurs *via* Cl$^-$/NO$_3^-$ antiport mechanism. Furthermore, we carried out transport experiments with vesicles prepared from a 7:3 POPC/cholesterol mixture. It has been known that cholesterol may reduce the membrane fluidity due to its rigid structure, thus slowing down the chloride transport.[14] Both compounds **2** and **7** exhibited
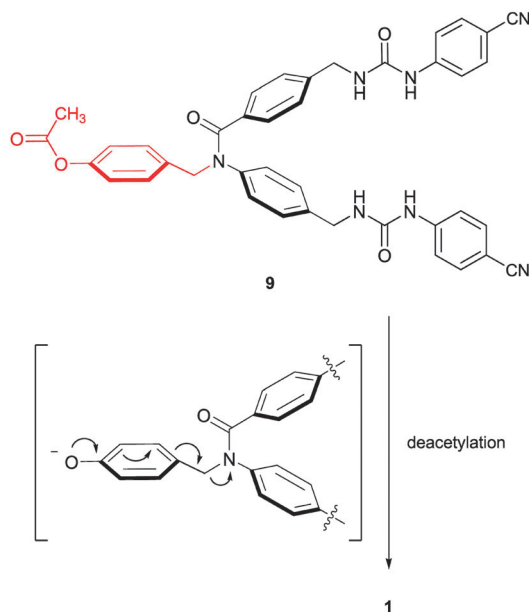
Scheme 2 Plausible mechanism for the *cis*-to-*trans* isomerization of **9** upon deacetylation by chemical and enzymatic reactions.

noticeably decreased activities of chloride transport in the presence of cholesterol (Fig. S11, ESI†), supporting the functioning of the compounds as mobile carriers. Furthermore, the Hill coefficients of **2** and **7** were determined to be 1.09 and 1.06, respectively, indicative of monomeric carriers (Table S1, ESI†).[15]

Utilizing different transport activities between *trans*- and *cis*-amide-linked bisureas, we have designed and prepared compound **9** as a stimulus-responsive anion transporter. To adopt a *cis*-amide conformation, the *N*-methyl moiety is replaced by *p*-acetyloxybenzyl group which can be degraded *via* deacetylation to produce compound **1** with a *trans*-amide (Scheme 2). We first examined the chloride transport ability of compound **9** using POPC vesicles under the conditions described earlier. As anticipated, compound **9** itself is very efficient to transport chloride ions *via* a Cl⁻/NO₃⁻ antiport (Fig. 2). To show stimuli-responsive chloride transport, we examined two different approaches.
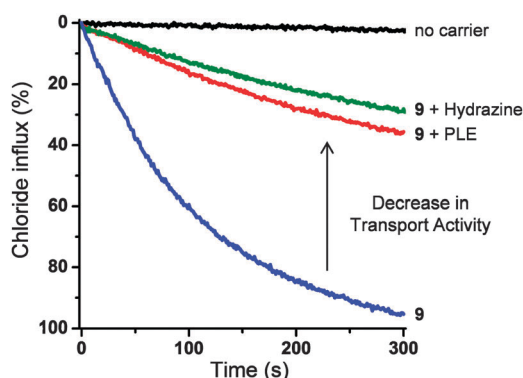

Fig. 2 Decrease in transport activity of **9** when treated with hydrazine in a 3 : 1 (v/v) DMSO : a phosphate buffer (pH = 7.2) at 21 °C for 10 min or PLE in a phosphate buffer (pH = 7.2) at 21 °C for 30 min.

One was the addition of a good nucleophile, hydrazine for deacetylation. The transport ability of **9** was found to be significantly dropped (Fig. 2) when treated for 10 min with hydrazine hydrate (10 equiv., 3 : 1 (v/v) DMSO : a phosphate buffer (pH = 7.2), 21 °C). Under these conditions, compound **9** was gradually converted to compound **1** with the *trans* conformation as demonstrated by ¹H NMR spectroscopy (Fig. S12, ESI†). Another approach examined here was more bio-relevant degradation *via* the enzymatic hydrolysis of the ester residue. Upon incubation of **9** with porcine liver esterase (PLE) for 30 min in a phosphate buffer (pH = 7.2, 21 °C), the transport activity of chloride ions was significantly suppressed as a result of the conversion of **9** to **1** under the given conditions (Fig. 2).

In conclusion, we have shown that the chloride transport activities of amide-linked bisurea compounds depend strongly on the central amide conformation as well as the binding affinities with the chloride ion. The *trans*-amide with an unfolded, extended structure shows negligible transport ability while the *N*-methylated *cis*-amide with a folded, curved shape functions as a very potent mobile carrier across POPC membranes. Anion transports in living organisms are controlled by biological stimuli such as concentration gradient changes, ligand binding, and chemical reactions.[16] In this context, it is also demonstrated that the transport activity can be modulated by the *cis*-to-*trans* conversion by the chemical and enzymatic degradation.

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