Synthesis and biological evaluation of a new class of mitochondria-targeted gadolinium(III) agents


Abstract: A structure–activity relationship (SAR) study of a library of novel bifunctional Gd(III) complexes covalently linked to arylphosphonium cations is reported. Such complexes have been designed for potential application in cutting-edge binary cancer therapies such as neutron capture therapy (NCT) and photon activation therapy (PAT). A positive correlation was found between lipophilicity (logP) and cytotoxicity (IC50) of the complexes. Mitochondria uptake was determined by means of ICP-MS, and Gd uptake was determined by means of quantification using synchrotron X-ray fluorescence (XRF) imaging. A negative correlation between lipophilicity and tumor selectivity of the Gd(III) complexes was demonstrated. This study highlights the delicate balance required in order to minimise in vitro cytotoxicity and optimise in vitro tumor selectivity and mitochondrial localisation for this new class of mitochondria-targeted binary therapy agents. We also report the highest in vitro tumor selectivity for any Gd agent reported to date, with a T/N (tumor/normal cell) ratio of up to 23.5 ± 6.6.

Introduction

Gd(III) complexes are extensively used as contrast agents for magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).[1] Recently, there has been a great interest in the development of Gd agents for therapeutic application, in particular binary therapies for the treatment of cancers such as those of the brain.[2] The primary focus of binary therapies is to treat aggressive and intractable cancers whilst minimising toxic side-effects in order to improve patient outcomes. This therapeutic strategy contrasts with traditional cancer therapies, e.g. chemotherapy, which have the detrimental consequence of causing considerable collateral damage to a patient’s healthy tissue during the course of treatment. Binary therapies endeavor to address these types of issues by means of the combination of two relatively innocuous components which, when combined, allow for a powerful cytotoxic effect to occur in situ. In general, binary therapies employ a non-specific, “broad area” component such as neutrons or high-energy X-ray photons and a tumor-specific agent with low cytotoxicity. Of particular interest in this regard are the experimental binary therapies known as neutron capture therapy (NCT)[3] and photon activation therapy (PAT).[4] NCT combines non-ionising, low-energy (slow) thermal neutron irradiation with suitable nuclides such as the naturally-occurring and non-radioactive 157Gd or 157Gd isotopes.[5] Both of these nuclides possess very high neutron capture cross-sections which allow for site-specific neutron capture reactions leading to the formation of cytotoxic decay products with a limited range of less than one-cell diameter.[5] In the case of the 157Gd nucleus, the therapeutically-relevant decay products appear to be the Auger and Coster-König (ACK) electrons as they have high linear energy transfer (LET) particles.[5b-e] In contrast, PAT relies on high-energy X-ray photons to instigate the release of photoelectric species including ACK electrons from high-Z elements such as Pt or I which leads to cell death.[6] Synchrotron stereotactic radiotherapy (SSR) is a subset of PAT which incorporates X-ray photons sourced from a synchrotron and tuned at or slightly above the K-edge of the heavy element.

Rotation of the patient about the target site in order to increase the relative radiation dose within the tumor site is another feature of SSR.[7] GdSSR (GdPAT) has been proposed as a viable therapy for the treatment of the aggressive and intractable malignant brain tumor known as glioblastoma multiforme,[7] but clinically-suitable Gd agents are yet to be developed.

This has been demonstrated that ACK electrons generated from DNA-bound Gd3+ ions have the ability to cleave double-stranded DNA,[8] a direct way of effecting cell death. The lethal effects of ACK electrons are likely due to the subsequent generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) from water, increasing the oxidative stress within the target cell.[9] However, ACK electrons possess a mean path length of only ca. 12 nm.[9] This extremely short path length imposes another requirement on the design of new Gd-agents for use in binary therapies, i.e. the agents must accumulate within critical sub-cellular organelles such as the nucleus or the mitochondria. Damage to either of these entities can lead to apoptosis.

While there are ever-increasing facilities capable of providing suitable neutron and X-ray sources, there is a dearth of suitable Gd-agents for use in binary therapies such as NCT and PAT. The design of suitable agents for potential use in these binary therapies requires that certain key criteria are met, namely the ability to achieve high tumour selectivity and uptake,

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accumulation within critical cellular organelles, and low cytotoxicity in the absence of thermal neutrons or X-ray photons. The first class of compounds to be investigated for use in Gd-based binary therapies were Gd-based contrast agents which are already employed for clinical use in MRI. However, none of these Gd(III) complexes displayed a significant ability to selectively accumulate within tumor sites nor an ability to localise within important sub-cellular organelles. DNA-targeted agents have also been investigated in recent years. Two such agents include MGd,[7] 1, and a Pt(II)-Gd(III) complex 2.[19] MGd, initially investigated as a chemo- and radio-sensitiser, had been heavily investigated in vivo until the FDA ceased further clinical trials with this agent in late 2007.[11] It has been shown that MGd was able to localise within the nuclei of tumor cells.[7] The metallointercalator 2, was also shown to selectively accumulate within the nuclei of tumor cells in vitro.[10] However, the inherent cytotoxicity of DNA-targeted agents such as 2 has hindered further investigation of this class of compounds.

A new avenue for the design of Gd-agents for use in binary therapies includes mitochondria-targeted agents.[12] Delocalised lipophilic cations (DLCs) have garnered increasing attention for their ability to act as tumor-targeted delivery vectors for a range of tumor imaging and therapeutic applications.[13] In particular, tetracycliphosphonium (TPP) and triphenylmethylphosphonium (TPMP) cations were shown to selectively accumulate in brain tumors with a tumor to normal (T/N) tissue ratio of up to 48 : 1 in a canine brain tumor model.[14] The ability of DLCs to accumulate selectively within the mitochondria of cancer cells stems from the fact that cancer cells typically possess elevated plasma and mitochondria membrane potentials ($\Delta \psi_m$).[15] For example, the mitochondrial membrane potential of most cancer cells is elevated by 60 mV when compared to normal, healthy cells. This difference in $\Delta \psi_m$ promotes the selective uptake of cationic species.

Phosphonium salts have also been implemented extensively in BNCT applications and as PET imaging agents.[13b-d] Their use in the therapeutic delivery of Gd to tumor sites represents a new direction for GdNCT and GdPAT. We recently reported the tumor cell uptake and selectivity of two phosphonium-containing Gd(III) complexes which have set a new benchmark as potential GdNCT and GdPAT agents.[12] Such Gd(III) complexes showed very low in vitro cytotoxicity, high tumor uptake and selectivity, and an ability to accumulate within the mitochondria of tumor cells. Indeed, the Gd(III) complexes were able to achieve comparable tumor cell selectivity to the DNA-targeted agents such as 2, but with far greater tumor uptake and lower cytotoxicity. By means of synchrotron X-ray fluorescence (XRF) quantification, it was demonstrated that these complexes were able to accumulate Gd at high levels (ca. $10^{11}$ Gd atoms per tumor cell), a few orders of magnitude higher than therapeutically-relevant thresholds.[12]

Herein we report a comprehensive evaluation of selected phosphonium-bearing Gd(III)-agents in an effort to aid in their future design to optimise the key criteria of tumor selectivity, tumor cell uptake, cytotoxicity, and mitochondrial localisation.

Results and Discussion

A primary challenge in the design of mitochondria-targeted Gd(III) complexes is the incorporation of a charged lipophilic species within a Gd(III)-chelator whilst not compromising the high complexation capacity of the chelating agent nor the tumor-targeting ability of the DLM. Ideally, the complex should be monocationic at the phosphonium site and the Gd-macrocycle remains unchanged in order to allow for a selective response to the elevated membrane potentials of cancer cells as well as preserving its ability to cross cell membranes. A, 1,4,7,10-tetraazacyclododecane-1,4,7-triacetic acid (DO3A) provides a highly suitable scaffold in order to achieve this aim because not only is the DO3A-Gd(III) moiety neutral at physiological pH (7.4),[16] it also provides the strong binding affinity associated with the cyclen-derived polycatate class of macrocycles and a secondary amine site for further synthetic functionalisation.[17] A triphenylphosphonium moiety can easily be generated from the quaternisation of triarylporphines by using a standard alkylation reaction. Indeed, coupling the two functional moieties by means of a xylil linker allows for facile reactions by the use of a dibromoxylene reagent which can undergo nucleophilic substitution reactions involving both triarylporphines and the secondary amine site of the DO3A macrocycle.

A small library of phosphonium-containing bifunctional Gd(III) complexes was synthesised and characterised in this work. The library consisted of three distinct series of Gd(III) complexes, defined by the nature of the phosphonium cation present. Within each series, the complexes were varied by the substitution pattern of the xylil group (i.e. para-, meta- and ortho-xylil) linking the phosphonium centre to the DO3A-Gd(III) macrocycle. The different isomers allowed for a variation in intramolecular...
distance between the functional moieties, which may have a significant effect on the biological activity of the complexes, in particular their ability to cross cell membranes. The first series of Gd(III) complexes were linked to the parent triphenylyphosphonium cation. The second series bore an ido-functionalitiy in the form of an iodophenylidiphenylphosphonium cation, while the third series contained methoxy substituents in the form of a tris(methoxyphenyl)phosphonium cation. These latter two classes were synthesised in order to modulate the lipophilicity of the complexes to allow for structure-activity relationships (SARs) to be established on the basis of lipophilicity of the phosphonium cation.

**Synthesis**

The synthesis of the novel Gd(III) complexes 3 - 11 is summarised in Scheme 1. Commencing from the appropriate triarylphosphine, the dibromoxylene underwent a nucleophilic substitution reaction with the triarylphosphine to give a bromo-xylene functionalised arylphosphonium salt. This reaction was performed in a non-polar solvent (toluene) to promote the precipitation of the monosubstituted species from solution, thus precluding the formation of the undesired dissubstituted species. The presence of the bromoxyl group within the phosphonium salts allowed for facile coupling to a tert-butyl protected DO3A macrocycle under basic conditions. Deprotection under acidic conditions using TFA yielded the free ligand in high yield. The ligands were purified by means of reverse-phase HPLC prior to the complexation of Gd\(^{3+}\) ions. The complexation reaction was performed by using Gd\(_2\)O\(_3\) as this allowed for any excess (insoluble) Gd\(_2\)O\(_3\) to be readily removed by means of filtration. The Gd(III) complexes were purified by means of analytical reverse-phase HPLC, with a purity of > 95% achieved for all complexes. The identity of each complex was confirmed by means of high resolution ESI-MS. Through a series of qualitative experiments, the complexes were found to be stable in aqueous media at biologically significant pH following incubation at 37 °C for prolonged periods. Both ESI mass spectrometry and UV-Vis spectroscopy confirmed the robustness of the complexes, even after 24 h in solution.

**Determination of lipophilicity**

The lipophilicity of DLCs largely governs their ability to traverse and accumulate within tumor-cell mitochondria. Furthermore, lipophilicity plays an important role in the absorption, distribution, metabolism and excretion of therapeutic compounds, and so the lipophilicity of the prepared complexes was used as the basis for determining structure-activity relationships (SARs) of the novel Gd(III) complexes. LogP values were determined for the Gd(III) complexes 3 - 11, as well as the parent triarylphosphonium salts TPP, TPMP and ITPMP, by using a reverse-phase HPLC method involving standard reference compounds. A summary of results is shown in Table 1. The logP values determined for the Gd(III) complexes were comparable to those of the simple phosphonium cations, indicating that the inclusion of the DO3A macrocycle does not greatly impact on the overall lipophilicity of the Gd(III) complexes. Structural variation of the phosphonium cation resulted in the observed trend for lipophilicity being trimethoxy-bearing > iodo-bearing > parent phosphonium complexes. The experimental logP values were consistent with the observed aqueous solubility of the complexes, where both the parent and the iodo-parent analogue were soluble at levels > 20 mg/mL, while the methoxy-bearing analogue was only found to be soluble at ca. 10 mg/mL. Isomeric variations pertaining to the xylyl linker used within the Gd(III) complexes resulted in the observed trend for lipophilicity being ortho > meta > para. This trend indicates that the greater the spatial separation of the two functional moieties, the lower the overall lipophilicity of the complexes. This is likely to be related to the increase in the overall dipole moment of the complexes in the order ortho < meta < para.

**In vitro cytotoxicity studies**

In vitro cytotoxicities were determined by means of standard MTT colourimetric assays. Assays were performed up to 500 μM of Gd(III) complex. The maximum concentration used in these experiments exceeded the expected dosing concentrations for subsequent in vitro and in vivo testing. At this maximum concentration, cell viability was not reduced below 50% by any of the Gd(III) complexes. However the cell viability at the maximum concentrations were determined and used as the basis for comparing cytotoxicities (Table 2). Statistical analyses, by means of a two-tailed Student’s t-test with an α value of 0.05, were performed in order to ascertain which differences in cell viability as a result from treatment with the Gd(III) complexes were significant. The only instances where cell viability did not differ significantly from the control cells following treatment were for complexes 3 and 4. As cell viability correlates inversely with
Cytotoxicity, preliminary trends for in vitro cytotoxicity could thus be determined. In the parent series, complexes 3 and 4 exhibited a lower cytotoxicity than complex 5. For the iodo-bearing series, complex 6 exhibited lower cytotoxicity than complexes 7 and 8. No significant difference was observed between complexes 7 and 8. For the methoxy-bearing series, there was no observed difference between the three complexes 9 - 11. This gives a general trend that increased lipophilicity due to decreasing the distance between the functional moieties led to either a comparable or higher cytotoxicity.

Comparing the different sets of compounds with similar xylyl isomers, complex 3 was found to be less cytotoxic than 6. Complex 9 was not found to be significantly different from either complex 3 or 6. Complex 4 was the least cytotoxic of the meta-xylyl bearing complexes, followed by 10, with 7 found to be the most cytotoxic. Complexes 5 and 11 did not show any significant difference between cytotoxicity and were both less cytotoxic than 8. The effect of the inclusion of the iodo functionality into the phosphonium cation led to a clear increase in cytotoxicity in all cases. However, the effect of inclusion of methoxy-substituents was less clear. Indeed, due to the lack of any statistically significant differences, general trends cannot be drawn from these comparisons.

For the parent series and the iodo-bearing series, it was found that an increase in lipophilicity led to comparable or higher cytotoxicities. This trend was not observed for the methoxy-bearing series and may indicate that these species behave differently within cells to the parent and iodo-bearing series.

Indeed, previously reported synchrotron X-ray fluorescence (XRF) elemental mapping has shown a significant difference between the cellular localisation of the iodo-series and the methoxy-series. In order to further probe the in vitro cytotoxicity of the complexes, higher concentrations of Gd(III) complex were used (up to a final concentration of 4 mM). IC50 values are reported in Table 3. The IC50 values agree with previously obtained trends for cytotoxicity by means of cell viability at 500 μM. (vide supra).

### Table 1. Experimental logP values for Gd(III) complexes and phosphonium cations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>logP[μ]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.24 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.35 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.56 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.44 ± 0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.53 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.09 ± 0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.86 ± 0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.91 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.73 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPP</td>
<td>1.20 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPMP</td>
<td>0.72 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITPMP</td>
<td>1.47 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[a] Mean ± SE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>%Viability [%]</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>97 ± 3%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>101 ± 4%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>85 ± 2%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>85 ± 3%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>60 ± 3%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>85 ± 4%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>89 ± 4%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>90 ± 2%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>87 ± 2%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[a] Mean ± SE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>IC50 (mM)[a]</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.55 ± 0.33</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.14 ± 0.32</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.42 ± 0.20</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[a] Mean ± SE

In vitro uptake studies on whole cells

In vitro cellular uptake studies were performed with complexes 3, 6 and 9 in the T98G cell line and primary human carotid artery endothelial cells (HCAEC). Cells were incubated in the presence of 100 μM of Gd(III) complex for 48 h, prior to cell harvesting and analysis by means of ICP-MS. All three of the complexes showed significantly greater uptake into the T98G...
tumor cell line compared to the HCTAEC normal cells. Tables 4 and 5 provide a summary of Gd uptake into the tumor and normal cell lines expressed in terms of ng of Gd per mg of protein, respectively.

The ratio of tumor to normal uptake (T/N) provides an indication of in vitro selectivity of the complexes. Complex 3 showed the highest T/N selectivity at 23.5 ± 6.6, while complexes 6 and 7 exhibited T/N selectivities of 7.7 ± 1.6 and 6.0 ± 1.8, respectively. The significantly greater selectivity of complex 3 is likely due to its lower relative uptake into the normal cell line compared to 6 and 9. All three complexes showed comparable uptake into tumor cells under the conditions of the experiment. The observed uptake and selectivity results for the complexes indicate that a higher lipophilicity is not a necessary requirement for significant uptake into tumor cells whilst increased lipophilicity can lead to greater uptake into normal cells leading to a decrease in overall selectivity and a potentially lowered effectiveness of the Gd agent.

### Table 4. ICP-MS analysis of Gd in T98G tumor cells treated with 3, 6 and 9 (100 μM) for 48 h, expressed as ng Gd/mg of protein.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>4071.6</td>
<td>5355.0</td>
<td>4824.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>605.8</td>
<td>124.7</td>
<td>1006.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. Different (Y/N)[a]</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[a] Statistical significance was accepted at the 95% confidence interval with p-values determined using the Mann-Whitney U test.

### Table 5. ICP-MS analysis of Gd in HCTAEC cells treated with 3, 6 and 9 (100 μM) for 48 h, expressed as ng Gd/mg of protein.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>173.3</td>
<td>697.9</td>
<td>863.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>144.1</td>
<td>168.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. Different (Y/N)[a]</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[a] Statistical significance was accepted at the 95% confidence interval with p-values determined using the Mann-Whitney U test.

In vitro mitochondria uptake studies

In vitro mitochondria uptake studies were performed with complexes 3, 6 and 9 in the T98G cell line. Cells were incubated in the presence of 100 μM of Gd(III) complex for 48 h prior to cell harvesting and then subjected to a reagent-based mitochondria isolation kit. The fractions for the pure mitochondria and the cytosol were collected and analysed by means of ICP-MS for Gd content. All three complexes showed Gd accumulated into the mitochondria. Results for mitochondrial selectivity are reported in terms of the ratio of the mitochondrial to cytosolic fractions (M/C) (Table 6).

Complex 9 showed the highest mitochondrial selectivity with an M/C ratio of 5.4 ± 2.4, while complexes 3 and 6 had M/C ratios of 2.0 ± 0.6 and 3.4 ± 2.3 respectively. These results indicate that, as expected, increased lipophilicity allows for greater mitochondrial accumulation. When the M/C ratios are considered along with the results for tumor uptake and selectivity it is clear that overall lipophilicity is an important tunable property for maximising tumor uptake and mitochondrial accumulation of phosphonium-bearing Gd-D03A complexes.

### Table 6. ICP-MS analysis of Gd in T98G cells treated with 3, 6 and 9 (100 μM) for 48 h, expressed as a ratio of Gd content in the mitochondrial fraction compared to the cytosolic fraction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Synchrotron X-ray Fluorescence (XRF) Studies

T98G Human Glioblastoma Cell Line

Synchrotron X-Ray fluorescence (XRF) studies were performed on T98G tumor cells treated with selected Gd(III) complexes to allow for visualisation of elemental distribution within individual cells. Data were collected for control cells and cells treated with 100 μM of complexes 3, 6 and 7 for 24 h. Cells were grown on SiN4 windows and fixed using MeOH at -78 °C. Figures 1 - 3 show elemental maps of a single T98G cell incubated with 100 μM of 3, 6 and 7 for 24 h, respectively. XRF quantitation of intracellular Gd content is summarized in Table 7. Statistically significant (single-tailed Mann-Whitney U test, p < 0.05) levels of Gd were present in the cells after treatment with all of the complexes. For all three complexes, the synchrotron XRF elemental density maps for Gd showed a strong correlation to regions of high intensity in the Fe elemental density maps. This elemental correlation is consistent with mitochondrial accumulation of phosphonium-bearing Gd-D03A complexes due to mitochondrial Fe regulation, metabolism (e.g. heme synthesis and Fe–S cluster assembly), and storage due to mitochondrial ferritin (MfFe). Quantified intracellular content of Gd within the cells following treatment with 3, 6 and 7 exhibited a positive correlation with lipophilicity.
A549 Human Lung Cancer Cell Line
Synchrotron X-Ray fluorescence (XRF) studies were performed on A549 tumor cells treated with selected Gd(III) complexes to allow for visualisation of elemental distribution within individual cells. Data were collected for control cells and cells treated with 100 μM of complexes 3 and 6 for 24 h. Cells were grown on Si3N4 windows and fixed using MeOH at -78 °C. For comparison, additional cells treated with 6 were fixed by means of flash freezing in a liquid N2/isopentane slurry.

Table 7. Mean Gd uptake within individual T98G human glioblastoma cells following treatment with complexes 3, 6 and 7, as determined by synchrotron X-ray fluorescence (XRF) imaging.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex</th>
<th>Incubation Time (h)</th>
<th>Gd density /cell(^4)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.004 ± 0.002</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.06 ± 0.04</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.12 ± 0.05</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[a] Mean ± SD in μg cm\(^2\).
Figures 4 and 5 show elemental maps of a single A549 cell incubated with 100 μM of 3 and 6, respectively, for 24 h and then fixed in MeOH. Figure 6 shows elemental maps of a single A549 cell incubated with 6 for 24 h and fixed by flash freezing. XRF quantitation of intracellular Gd content is summarized in Table 8. Statistically significant (single-tailed Mann-Whitney U test, p < 0.05) levels of Gd were present in the cells after treatment with all of the complexes. For all three cases, the synchrotron XRF elemental density maps for Gd showed a strong correlation to regions of high intensity in the Fe elemental density maps. This observation agrees with the observations made for the XRF experiments performed using the T98G cell line (*vide supra*), supporting the hypothesis of mitochondrial localisation. Similarly, the difference in uptake of 3 and 6 were positively correlated to lipophilicity.

Table 8. Mean Gd uptake within individual A549 human lung cancer cells following treatment with complexes 3 and 6, as determined by synchrotron X-ray fluorescence (XRF) imaging.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex</th>
<th>Incubation Time (h)</th>
<th>Gd density /cell</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3[^{[b]}]</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.010 ± 0.009</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6[^{[b]}]</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.050 ± 0.03</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6[^{[c]}]</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.02 ± 0.01</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[^{[a]}\] Mean ± SD in μg cm\(^{-2}\). \[^{[b]}\] Fixed by using MeOH at -78°C. \[^{[c]}\] Fixed by flash freezing in a liquid N\(_2\)/iso-pentane slurry.

The difference in Gd uptake observed for 6, when the means of fixation were varied, highlights the effect of elemental leaching during the fixation process and the importance of selection of an appropriate protocol to minimise this effect. Flash freezing in a slurry of liquid N\(_2\)/iso-pentane appears to have a more profound effect on the leaching of Gd compared to fixation in MeOH at -78°C. Studies that used formaldehyde for fixation showed higher Gd uptake in T98G cells in comparison to the values reported here, lending to the hypothesis that less Gd is leached from the cells during fixation with formaldehyde compared to MeOH or flash freezing.\(^{12}\) Alternatively, variations may arise from differences in uptake between cells in different phases.
Conclusions

A library of new Gd(III) complexes 3 – 11 was shown to address many key criteria for the development of new therapeutic PAT and NCT agents. All complexes were found to be essentially non-cytotoxic at the expected therapeutically-relevant concentrations. They were also shown to selectively accumulate within tumor cells more effectively than normal cells and achieve excellent mitochondrial localisation. Lipophilicity appears to play a major role in the cytotoxicity, uptake and selectivity of this class of phosphonium-bearing complexes. Of particular interest, the parent complex 3 exhibited a T/N ratio of 23.5 ± 6.6, a value which was 3 - 4 times greater than the substituted derivatives 6 and 9. Indeed, this selectivity value exceeds those previously determined for clinical agents such as MGd.

The series of complexes containing the tris(methoxyphenyl)phosphonium cation exhibited differing behaviour compared to the parent and iodophenylidiphenylphosphonium series. In the parent and iodinated series, lipophilicity correlated well with increased cytotoxicity. However, for the methoxy-bearing series, lipophilicity did not strongly correlate with cytotoxicity. Coupled with the significant difference in the biological behaviour of the methoxy-bearing complexes, we hypothesise that these complexes may undergo a different mechanism of uptake or mode of action within the cell compared to the parent or iodobearing complexes. Further experiments are required to understand the apparent differences in biological behaviour between these classes of complexes.

There were key differences found in the observed trends for Gd uptake correlated to lipophilicity between the ICP-MS studies and the XRF studies. These differences are likely to arise from the differences in experimental conditions, e.g. the cell growth density, the incubation times, and the treatment of the cells post incubation; however, further work is required to unravel the factors involved. Notably, the ICP-MS studies indicate that lipophilicity may play a role in the ability of the Gd(III) complexes to be taken up into normal, healthy cells. This factor alone led to significant differences in the observed in vitro tumor selectivity of the complexes. Additionally, mitochondrial isolation studies indicate that an increased lipophilicity can lead to enhanced mitochondrial localisation of the Gd(III) complexes.

Taken together, the in vitro cytotoxicity and whole cell uptake studies demonstrate that an increased lipophilicity of the Gd(III) complexes prepared in this work can lead to a somewhat increased cytotoxicity and a decreased tumor cell selectivity. However, this observation must be tempered against the enhanced mitochondrial localisation that any increased lipophilicity might bring. However, it is clear from this study that a delicate balance exists between lipophilicity, cytotoxicity, tumor cell selectivity, and mitochondrial localisation, and all these properties must be considered in the design of new phosphonium-based Gd-agents for potential use in binary therapies such as GdNCT and GdPAT. Furthermore, in vivo data are required to confirm the observed in vitro trends and such studies will be conducted in due course.

Experimental Section

General

All reactions were performed under a dry N2 atmosphere where required. All manipulations were performed by using conventional Schlenk techniques.[19]

Instrumentation

All 1H, 13C(1H), 19F(1H), 31P(1H) NMR spectra were recorded at 300 K on a Bruker Avance300 spectrometer (1H at 300 MHz, 13C at 75 MHz, 19F at 282 MHz, and 31P at 121 MHz). All NMR signals (δ) are reported in ppm. 1H and 13C(1H) NMR spectra were referenced according to their solvent residual peaks. 31P(1H) NMR spectra were referenced to external P(OMe)3 at 140.85 ppm. Relaxivity measurements were recorded on a Bruker Minispec mq60 spectrometer at 60 MHz. UV-Visible spectra were recorded on a Thermo Scientific Nanodrop 2000 UV-Vis spectrophotometer. Low resolution ESI-MS were recorded on a Finnigan LCQ mass spectrometer. High resolution ESI-FT-ICR-MS data was recorded on a Bruker 7.0T mass spectrometer. Melting points were recorded on a Barnstead Electrothermal IA9100 digital melting point apparatus. Values reported are uncorrected.

HPLC Methods

Method 1 - Preparative

Performed on a Waters 600 HPLC system with a Waters 486 tuneable absorbance UV/Vis detector (λ = 254 nm) and a Sunfire C18 preparative column (19 × 150 mm, 5 µm pore size). Flow rate 7 ml/min. HPLC was performed under gradient flow conditions, commencing with 95% Solvent A (0.1% trifluoro acetic acid in water) and 5% Solvent B (0.1% trifluoro acetic acid in acetonitrile) and moving to 20% Solvent A and 80% Solvent B over 30 min.

Method 2 - Analytical

Performed on a Waters 2965 separation module HPLC system with a Waters 2996 photodiode array (PDA) detector (λ = 200 to 300 nm) and a Sunfire C18 analytical column (2.1 × 150 mm, 5 µm pore size). Flow rate 0.2 ml/min. HPLC was performed under gradient flow conditions, commencing with 95% Solvent A (water) and 5% Solvent B (acetonitrile) going to 0% Solvent A and 100% Solvent B over 15 min.

Materials and Methods

Distilled water was used for all experiments requiring water. MeCN, and PhMe were dried prior to use according to Armarego and Choi.[20] MeCN was freshly distilled from CaH2 before use. PhMe was dried over sodium wire and freshly distilled prior to use. All other solvents were used without prior preparation.

All precursor chemicals used in this study were commercially available. Triethylentetramine was purchased from Alfa Aesar. All other reagents were purchased from the Sigma Aldrich Chemical Co.

Cyclen was prepared by methods previously described by Athey et al.[21] DO3A-Bu3HBr was prepared as previously described by Moore.[22]

Synthesis of precursors and ligand intermediates are detailed in the Supporting Information.
Gd(III) Complexes

General procedure

The free bifunctional ligands L1-L9 were stirred in a suspension with Gd2O3 (2 equiv.) in H2O at 80 °C for 12 h (or until completion). The mixture was then centrifuged and filtered off to remove unreacted and insoluble Gd2O3. The filtrate was then reduced in vacuo and the product lyophilised to give a white powder. The purity of the complex was confirmed by means of analytical reverse-phase HPLC (Method 2).

The reaction was performed using H by HPLC. M.p. > 300 °C (decomp.). ESI-FT-ICR-MS for [M-CF3COO]": Calculated m/z 866.2322; Found 866.2322.

2.2’.2’’-1(4-((4-iodophenyl)phosphino)methyl)benzyl)-1,4,7,10-tetraazaacyclododecane-1,4,7-triylietricatagatodolinium(III) trifluoroacetate (6)

The reaction was performed using L4 (15.0 mg, 61.5 µmol) and Gd2O3 (13.7 mg, 37.7 µmol). Yield 49.0 µg (68.1%), tR = 13.5 min. Purity > 95% by HPLC. M.p. > 270 °C (decomp.). ESI-FT-ICR-MS for [M-CF3COO]": Calculated m/z 992.1285; Found 992.1289.

2.2’.2’’-1(3-((4-iodophenyl)phosphino)methyl)benzyl)-1,4,7,10-tetraazaacyclododecane-1,4,7-triylietricatagatodolinium(III) trifluoroacetate (7)

The reaction was performed using L5 (107.6 mg, 113 µmol) and Gd2O3 (43.7 mg, 12.1 µmol). Yield 65.5 µg (52.4%), tR = 18.4 min. Purity > 95% by HPLC. M.p. > 250 °C (decomp.). ESI-FT-ICR-MS for [M-CF3COO]": Calculated m/z 992.1285; Found 992.1289.

2.2’.2’’-1(2-((4-iodophenyl)phosphino)methyl)benzyl)-1,4,7,10-tetraazaacyclododecane-1,4,7-triylietricatagatodolinium(III) trifluoroacetate (8)

The reaction was performed using L6 (107.6 mg, 113 µmol) and Gd2O3 (43.7 mg, 12.1 µmol). Yield 65.5 µg (52.4%), tR = 18.4 min. Purity > 95% by HPLC. M.p. > 250 °C (decomp.). ESI-FT-ICR-MS for [M-CF3COO]": Calculated m/z 992.1285; Found 992.1289.

2.2’.2’’-1(4-((Tris(4-methoxyphenyl)phosphino)methyl)benzyl)-1,4,7,10-tetraazaacyclododecane-1,4,7-triylietricatagatodolinium(III) trifluoroacetate (9)

The reaction was performed using L7 (98.8 mg, 108 µmol), and Gd2O3 (47.6 mg, 131 µmol). Yield 94.8 mg (81.5%), tR = 14.7 min. Purity > 95% by HPLC. M.p. > 300 °C (decomp.). ESI-FT-ICR-MS for [M-CF3COO]": Calculated m/z 956.2636; Found 956.2646.

2.2’.2’’-1(3-((Tris(4-methoxyphenyl)phosphino)methyl)benzyl)-1,4,7,10-tetraazaacyclododecane-1,4,7-triylietricatagatodolinium(III) trifluoroacetate (10)

The reaction was performed using L8 (46.5 mg, 50.8 µmol), and Gd2O3 (62.77 mg, 173 µmol). Yield 52.2 mg (96.0%), tR = 11.5 min. Purity > 95% by HPLC. M.p. > 300 °C (decomp.). ESI-FT-ICR-MS for [M-CF3COO]": Calculated m/z 955.9307; Found 955.9320.

2.2’.2’’-1(2-((Tris(4-methoxyphenyl)phosphino)methyl)benzyl)-1,4,7,10-tetraazaacyclododecane-1,4,7-triylietricatagatodolinium(III) trifluoroacetate (11)

The reaction was performed using L9 (126.5 mg, 138 µmol), and Gd2O3 (234.76 mg, 648 µmol). Yield 144.3 mg (97.7%), tR = 11.5 min. Purity > 95% by HPLC. M.p. > 300 °C (decomp.). ESI-FT-ICR-MS for [M-CF3COO]": Calculated m/z 956.2639; Found 956.2629.

Determination of LogP values by a HPLC method

The LogP values of complexes 3-11 were measured using a standard reverse phase HPLC method. Phosphate buffer (0.05 M) was prepared by dissolving KH2PO4 (3.4 g, 25 mmol) in H2O (500 mL) and the pH was
adjusted to ca. 7 with NaOH solution (0.1 M). Samples were analysed using a Waters Sunfire C18 column (2.1 x 150 mm) with a mobile phase of MeOH and phosphate buffer (65:35 v/v) with a flow rate of 0.2 mL/min, UV absorbance at 254 nm. The lipophilicity of each compound was calculated by comparison of its retention time to that of known standards. The standard curve was generated using acetone, 2-butanol, aniline, tolune, diphenylamine, triphenylamine, and hexachlorobenzene. Samples were prepared at a concentration of 1 mg/mL in MeOH. Retention times were collected in duplicate. Retention times were adjusted for the T<sub>0</sub>, and a standard curve plotting log<sub>P</sub> vs. retention time was generated (y = 0.5368e<sup>0.8971</sup)x, r<sup>2</sup> = 0.9949).

**Biological Assays**

**In vitro cytotoxicity and cell uptake studies**

Human glioblastoma multiforme (T98G) cells were maintained as monolayers in minimum essential medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, penicillin (100 units/mL), streptomycin (100 µg/mL) and L-glutamine (2.5 mM), at 37 °C in a humidified 5% CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere. Primary human carotid artery endothelial cells (HCtAEC) were harvested from normal carotid arteries and obtained commercially (Cell Applications, Inc, SD). Where required, HCtAECs were cultured in complete media comprising MesoEndo Cell Growth Medium (Cell applications, SD), fetal bovine serum (10% v/v), 2 mM L-glutamine, 100 units/mL penicillin, 100 µg/mL streptomycin, and 15 µg/mL endothelial cell growth supplement (Millipore, Sydney, Australia) at 37°C under 5% CO<sub>2</sub>. The HCtAEC cells were cultured as a monolayer in 6 well plates to 70-80% confluence and then incubated with the Gd-containing culture medium at 100 µM for 48 h at 37 °C in a humidified 5% CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere. The medium was removed and the cells were washed once with PBS (1 mL). Cells were harvested with trypsin (1 mL, 0.1% v/v) for 5 minutes at 37 °C, and then media (1 mL) was added. Harvested cells were sedimented by centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 5 min, then the supernatant removed, and the cell pellet was analysed for Gd content by means of ICP-MS.

Cell pellets were digested in HNO<sub>3</sub> (0.5 mL, 69%) at 65 °C in a water bath for 18 h. The digest was diluted to 10 mL with HCl (0.1 M), and then measured for Gd by means of ICP-MS. ICP-MS was run on a Perkin Elmer ELAN 6100 Inductively Coupled Plasma Emission Mass Spectrometer (ICP-MS) at the Solid State and Elemental Analysis Unit (UNSW Analytical Centre). Gd uptake concentrations are reported as ng Gd/mg protein.

**Mitochondria isolation studies**

Stock solutions of 3 and 6 (20 mM in H<sub>2</sub>O) and 9 (10 mM in H<sub>2</sub>O) were prepared. Warm (37 °C) culture medium was treated with the stock Gd solutions to a final concentration of 100 µM. The T98G cells were cultured as a monolayer in 75-cm<sup>2</sup> flasks to 70-80% confluence and then incubated with the Gd-containing culture medium at 100 µM (treated) or with untreated culture medium (control) for 48 h at 37 °C in a humidified 5% CO<sub>2</sub> atmosphere. The medium was removed and the cells were washed once with PBS (1 mL). Cells were treated with trypsin (1 mL, 0.1% v/v) for 5 minutes at 37 °C, and then media (1 mL) was added. Harvested cells were sedimented by centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 5 min, then the supernatant removed. PBS (1 mL) was added to the cell pellet, which was then pipetted until a single cell suspension was achieved. The cells were re-sedimented by centrifugation. PBS (2 mL) was added to the cell pellet, which was then pipetted until a single cell suspension was achieved. An aliquot (100 µL) was taken for protein analysis. The remaining cells were sedimented by centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 5 min, then the supernatant was removed and the cell pellet was analysed for Gd content by means of ICP-MS.

The mitochondria of the cell pellets were isolated using a reagent-based mitochondria isolation kit (Thermo Scientific Prod# 89874). At 4°C, the cell pellets were centrifuged at 12 000 rpm for 2 min and the supernatant removed. To the cell pellet 500 µL of reagent A was added, before mixing by means of vortex and incubation on ice for 2 minutes. Then 10 µL of reagent B was added before mixing by means of vortex and further incubation on ice with intermittent vortex mixing (every minute). 500 µL of Reagent C was added to the sample prior to centrifugation at 2900 rpm. The supernatant was transferred to a new vial, and the pellet was
retained for analysis. The supernatant was centrifuged at 12 000 rpm for 15 min. The pellet was removed and retained as the cytosol fraction. The supernatant was washed with a further 500 μL of reagent C, centrifuged at 12 000 rpm for 5 minutes and the supernatant discarded and the pellet retained as the mitochondrial fraction. These cell fractions were analysed for Gd content by means of ICP-MS.

Cell fractions were digested in HNO3 (0.5 mL, 69%) at 65 °C in a water bath for 18 h. The digest was diluted to 10 mL with HCl (0.1 M), and then measured for Gd by means of ICP-MS. ICP-MS was run on a Perkin Elmer ELAN 6100 Inductively Coupled Plasma Emission Mass Spectrometer (ICP-MS) at the Solid State and Elemental Analysis Unit (UNSW Analytical Centre). Gd uptake concentrations are reported as ng Gd/mg protein.

Protein analyses

The bicinchoninic acid (BCA) protein assay was used to determine protein concentration, as described previously. This assay relies on the reduction of alkaline Cu(II) by proteins. A bovine serum albumin (BSA) protein standard curve was prepared each time the assay was performed. Lysis of cells was achieved using three snap freeze–thaw cycles and cell debris was sedimented by centrifugation at 13 300 rcf for 5 min. The supernatant solution was then analysed for protein content by taking repeated 10 or 25 μL samples (N = 3 or 4) of the blank, 1 mg/mL BSA protein standard (200, 400, 800, and 1000 μg/mL, made up to volume with MQ water) or Gd-treated protein samples and depositing these into a 96-well plate format. Next, a freshly prepared solution of commercially sourced BCA and CuSO4·5H2O (50:1, 200 μL) was added to each well and the mixture was incubated at 37°C for 60 min. Absorbance was then measured at 600 nm using a Victor3 microplate reader (PerkinElmer) and protein was determined by comparison with the BSA standard curve.

Synchrotron X-ray fluorescence imaging

T98G human glioblastoma cells were grown directly on 500 nm thick SiN windows (Silson Pty Ltd) and incubated for 24 h in the presence of 100 μM of 3, 6 or 7 in MEM buffer (treated cells) or for 24 h with MEM buffer alone (control cells). Following incubation, the cells were washed with PBS buffer and the cells fixed to the window by dipping in MeOH at -78°C.

A549 human lung cancer cells were grown directly on 500 nm thick SiN windows (Silson, Pty Ltd) and incubated for 24 h in the presence of 100 μM of 3 or 6 in MEM buffer (treated cells) or for 24 h with MEM buffer alone (control cells). Following incubation, the cells were fixed to the SiN windows, by either one of two methods. In the first method, the silicon nitride windows were washed with PBS buffer and the cells fixed to the window by dipping in MeOH on dry ice. This method was used for sample windows of the control cells and cells treated with 3 and 6. Additionally, a small number of sample windows containing cells treated with 6 were fixed using the second fixation method. In this method, the SiN windows were washed with ammonium acetate solution (0.2 M), before flash freezing in a slurry of liquid N2/iso-pentane. The windows were then freeze-dried overnight.

X-ray fluorescence imaging experiments were performed at the Australian Synchrotron. A monochromatic 10.2 keV X-ray beam was focussed (to a spot size of 1 μm) using a zone plate, and the fluorescence signal was collected using a single-element silicon drift diode energy dispersive detector (Vortex EM, SII Nanotechnology), oriented at 73 degrees to the incident beam for 2 s per spatial point. Individual cells were located using images obtained from an optical microscope positioned in the beamline downstream from the sample. Data were quantified (elemental area densities in μg/cm²) by fitting the full fluorescence spectrum at every spatial point to modified Gaussian and comparing it with corresponding measurements on the thin-film standards NBS-1832 and NBS-1833 from the National Bureau of Standards (Gaithersburg, MD, USA).

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided by Dr Ian Luck with the NMR studies, Dr Keith Fisher and Dr Nick Proschogo for collection of the ESI-MS data, Assoc. Prof. Paul Witting and Dr Xiaoping Cai for providing HCAEC cells for analysis, Dr Dorothy Yu (UNSW) for ICP-MS analyses, and Dr David Paterson and Dr Daryl Howard (Australian Synchrotron) for beamline assistance. We are grateful to the Australian Research Council (ARC) for funding. This research was in part undertaken on the XFM beamline at the Australian Synchrotron, Victoria, Australia.

Keywords: gadolinium • mitochondria • phosphonium • X-ray fluorescence • tumor


A library of new, bifunctional Gd(III) complexes has been evaluated to address many key criteria for cutting-edge binary therapies such as photon activation therapy and neutron capture therapy. The highest in vitro tumor selectivity for any Gd agent is also reported.

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Synthesis and biological evaluation of a new class of mitochondria-targeted gadolinium(III) agents