

**BIOLOGICAL ACTIVITY OF RHODIUM METALLOINSERTORS AND  
THE DESIGN OF BIFUNCTIONAL CONJUGATES**

Thesis by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Chemistry

California Institute of Technology

Pasadena, CA

2015

(Defended May 28, 2015)

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## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Jacqueline Barton. You have been an endless source of wisdom, optimism, enthusiasm, and support. My growth as a scientist has been in no small part due to your guidance and example. Your faith in me continued even when I did not have faith in myself, and for that I will always be grateful. It has truly been a privilege to be a member of this lab.

I am deeply thankful to my dissertation committee for being a tremendous source of insight, inspiration, and perspective. To Professor Harry Gray, you have been the most wonderful committee chair; I thank you for all of your advice and guidance. To Professor Brian Stoltz, I am grateful for all of your support and encouragement. I would also like to thank Professor Jonas Peters for your enthusiasm, collegiality, and approachability. I have been so fortunate to have a committee comprised of incredibly creative and knowledgeable faculty who are committed to academic excellence, yet at the same time are down to earth and accessible. Thank you.

I have also had the privilege of working as a teaching assistant for Chem 10. I thank Professor Peter Dervan, whose unparalleled commitment to undergraduate research has served as an example in mentorship. I also thank Professor Andre Hoelz, for your dedication to academic rigor as well as your unmatched sense of humor. It has been great fun TA-ing this class for you both these past four years.

I would also like to thank the people who make the Caltech Chemistry Department run like a well-oiled machine: Agnes Tong, you have been a fantastic Option Administrator as well as an amazing friend. Our Ath lunches hold a special place in my heart. To Mo Renta, thank you for keeping the lab in tip top shape. Thank you to Joe

Drew, Memo, and the rest of the stockroom crew for all that you do, as well as always being down for a good football conversation (thank you for not making too much fun of my beloved New York Giants). Thank you also to Silva Virgil, Amy Woodall-Ojeda, Anne Penney, Steve Gould, and Elisa Brink for always being willing to lend a helping hand. I am also grateful to Mona Shahgholi and Dave VanderVelde – no chemistry would get done without you. Thank you Larry Henling, for diffracting my crystals even though they were crappy. And thank you Felicia Hunt, for always being a friendly face willing to listen.

I am deeply indebted to Nathan Dalleska and the Environmental Analysis Center, without whom half the data in my thesis would simply not exist. Nathan, your endless patience with the ICP-MS instruments has been admirable and invaluable. Thank you for teaching me analytical chemistry (which has, to my delight, involved boiling cancerous human flesh in concentrated acid) as well as how to not take the little things (such as a malfunctioning ball of plasma at 20,000 °C) too seriously.

Thank you to our amazing collaborators for helping to bring our metalloinsertor complexes ever closer to the clinic. Julie Bailis, you have been absolutely wonderful in your diligence and passion for these complexes. Thank you also to Professor Jeremy Stark for your openness to collaboration and creative ideas. I am deeply grateful to Diana Yanez for patiently teaching me immunofluorescence staining and collecting microscopy images. It has been a delight to work with you and I wish you all the best in your M.D.-Ph.D. program. Thank you also to the rest of the Stark Lab, who have welcomed me from Day 1 and have always been a friendly, supportive bunch. I wish your lab all the success in the world.

I must also thank the people from my undergraduate institutions who have played a huge role in my decision to go to grad school: to Columbia University Dean Jim Valentini (Deantini), who got me my first summer research position back when he was head of the Chemistry Department, which changed the course of my life. Thank you also to Professors Koji Nakanishi and Nina Berova of Columbia University, who welcomed me into their lab and taught me magic tricks in addition to chemistry. I am incredibly grateful to Professor JoAnne Stubbe of MIT; your incredible research and group solidified my decision to pursue a Ph.D and inspired me to study bioinorganic chemistry. Thank you also to Joey Cotruvo for your amazing mentorship, and to the rest of the Stubbe lab, for being wonderful co-workers and friends. I am also grateful to the professors who provided guidance and advice to me as an undergraduate: Professor Cathy Drennan, Professor Brent Stockwell (who talked me out of grad school), and Professor Jon Owen (who talked me back into it).

I am incredibly grateful also to my labmates in the Barton laboratory, especially those who took the time to train and teach me. Russ Ernst, you took me under your wing from the very beginning. Your good-naturedness and scientific rigor have been an example to me throughout my graduate career. Thank you also to Curtis Schneider, for teaching me everything I know about synthesis, inorganic chemistry, and beer. And to Alexis Komor, who has been both a great friend as well as an example for me to look up to in lab. I always knew that if I was doing an experiment the way you did it, I was doing it right. Thanks to Jessica Yeung, my incredibly talented former SURF, who continues to amaze me with her dedication and passion for research.

Thank you also to the rest of the Barton lab – all of you have made my time at Caltech a special and unique experience. Natalie Muren, you have always floored me with your unending support and willingness to help or just lend an ear. Phil Bartels, you have been a steadfast worker, an outstanding co-TA, and a true friend. Thank you also to Katie Schaefer, Liz O'Brien, and Anna Arnold for being wonderful co-workers and great sources of conversation and animal videos. A special shout-out to everyone in Subgroup 1, for never making me doubt for a second that I joined the right subgroup: Hang Song, for your optimism and friendliness; Anna McConnell, for all of your synthetic knowledge and sunny disposition; Adam Boynton, for filling the South Side with positivity and sick beatz; and Kelsey Boyle for your rigor and eagerness to learn. It has been a pleasure working with you. I have no doubt that I am leaving Team Rhodium/Ruthenium in the best of hands.

Finally, I must thank the people who truly kept me sane throughout my Ph.D: my amazing friends and family. I would not have gotten through this without your support. Special thanks in particular to Breanne Siegel, Julianna Parapugna, Albert Lee, Andrew Wang, Myles Herbert, Jeremy Kallick, Alex Goldberg, Guy Edouard, Brad Hulse, Mike Post, Jeff Holder, Tim Aarons, Seth Tallob, Ethan van Arnam, Judy Lattimer, Michael van Vliet, Megan McDuffie, and Lina Schatz. Thank you especially to Tim Mui, who *everybody knows* is a fabulous co-worker (as well as a great friend!).

And to Ariel Furst, my partner in crime, my common-law spouse, my roommate and best friend: without you, I literally would have gone insane. I would have gone batshit, Michael-Jackson-baby-dangling, Britney-Spears-head-shaving, let's-make-a-Star-Wars-prequel, communism-works-in-theory c-r-a-z-y. From our wine nights and

bad TV to all the amazing trips we've taken, it's been a blast. So thank you for being there for me always, and for keeping me out of the looney bin, and for being the type of friend who would visit me in the looney bin and bring me cheese and contraband. It has been a long road that we've crab-walked, but we've finally made it and now we can adopt a bunch of cats and drink our way through San Francisco. You are a true gem and an incredibly talented chemist, and I am so grateful to have such an amazing friend in my life.

And thank you, truly, to my family, who have unquestioningly supported me throughout this entire process. Mom, Dad, and Danielle, I am so thankful to have you in my life and so honored to have made you proud. I would not be the person that I am, and would not have achieved the success that I have without you. Thank you. I love you.



## Abstract

The Barton laboratory has established that octahedral rhodium complexes bearing the sterically expansive 5,6-chrysene diimine ligand can target thermodynamically destabilized sites, such as base pair mismatches, in DNA with high affinity and selectivity. These complexes approach DNA from the minor groove, ejecting the mismatched base pairs from the duplex in a binding mode termed metalloinsertion. In recent years, we have shown that these metalloinsertor complexes also exhibit cytotoxicity preferentially in cancer cells that are deficient in the mismatch repair (MMR) machinery.

Here, we present evidence to support the notion that mismatches in genomic DNA are the primary biological target of rhodium metalloinsertors and the source of their cell-selectivity. A structure-activity study on a family of ten metalloinsertor complexes revealed a highly sensitive relationship between the lipophilicity of the non-inserting ancillary ligands and the biological activity of the complex. Complexes with hydrophilic ligands were found to be highly cell selective, exhibiting preferential cytotoxicity in MMR-deficient cells at low concentrations and short incubation periods, whereas complexes with lipophilic ligands displayed poor cell-selectivity. ICP-MS studies were carried out to determine the cellular uptake and localization patterns of the ten compounds. The lipophilic complexes displayed enhanced cellular uptake compared to the more polar compounds, and their uptake patterns were indicative of a passive diffusion mechanism. Curiously, there was no correlation between cellular uptake of rhodium and selectivity for MMR-deficient cells. In fact, the complexes with the most selective activity exhibited low cellular accumulation overall. It was also discovered that

all of the complexes localized to the nucleus in concentrations sufficient for mismatch binding; however, highly lipophilic complexes also exhibited high mitochondrial uptake, consistent with the previous study. This relationship between subcellular localization and cell-selective biological activity confirms that mitochondrial DNA is not the desired target of metalloinsertor complexes; rather, these complexes recognize mismatches in genomic DNA.

We have also explored the potential for metalloinsertors to be developed into more complex structures with multiple functionalities that could either enhance their overall potency or impart mismatch selectivity onto other therapeutic cargo. We have constructed a family of bifunctional metalloinsertor conjugates incorporating *cis*-platinum, each unique in its chemical structure, DNA binding interactions, and biological activity. Attachment of a potent oxaliplatin derivative to a metalloinsertor through the leaving group ligand afforded an intrinsically metastable complex with high cytotoxicity in MMR-deficient cancer cells as well as enhanced cellular uptake properties. Additionally, we developed a bimetallic complex derived from a new family of potent and selective metalloinsertors containing an unusual Rh—O axial coordination. This complex also incorporates a platinum center containing only one labile site for coordination of DNA, rather than two, which leads to nonclassical platinum adduct formation selectively at mismatched DNA. Finally, we synthesized a mixed metal dinuclear Rh(III)/Pt(II) complex, wherein both the rhodium and platinum centers are coordinated to a bridging aromatic ligand capable of interaction with the DNA base stack through either intercalation or insertion. These complexes bind DNA mismatches from

the minor groove through metalloinsertion, situating the reactive platinum metal center directly at the mismatched site.

In the development of metalloinsertor-*cis*-platinum conjugates, we have acquired a diverse repertoire of bifunctional complexes with mismatch recognition capability as well as the ability to form covalent adducts. Although we have yet to achieve cell-selective toxicity in MMR-deficient cells, we almost universally observe potency surpassing that of the FDA-approved chemotherapeutic cisplatin in a variety of human cancer cell lines. Moreover, a significant finding in our study of these conjugates has been the discovery that these complexes induce apoptotic cell death, rather than the necrotic pathway typically triggered by rhodium metalloinsertors. It appears that rerouting to the apoptotic pathway is incongruous with the uniquely selective biological activity observed for metalloinsertors. This result suggests that there is a critical response to mismatch recognition in a cellular environment that leads to cell-selective activity.

We further explored the underlying mechanisms surrounding the biological response to mismatch recognition by metalloinsertors in the genome. Immunofluorescence assays of MMR-deficient and MMR-proficient cells revealed that a critical biomarker for DNA damage, phosphorylation of histone H2AX ( $\gamma$ H2AX) rapidly accumulates in response to metalloinsertor treatment, signifying the induction of double strand breaks in the genome. Significantly, we have discovered that our metalloinsertor complexes selectively inhibit transcription in MMR-deficient cells, which may be a crucial checkpoint in the eventual breakdown of the cell via necrosis. Additionally, preliminary *in vivo* studies have revealed the capability of these compounds to traverse the complex environments of multicellular organisms and accumulate in MMR-deficient

tumors. Our ever-increasing understanding of metalloinsertors, as well as the development of new generations of complexes both monofunctional and bifunctional, enables their continued progress into the clinic as promising new chemotherapeutic agents.

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