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\[ R_{\text{NH}} + \text{CS}_2 + R'^{-}\text{SH} \xrightarrow{\text{Et}_3\text{N, CBr}_4, \text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2, \text{r.t., 2 h}} R_{\text{N}}\text{S}S\text{S}R'^{-}\] 

carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioate
Synthesis of substituted carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates as potential BCA2-inhibitory anticancer agents

Vincenzo Cilibrasi, a,b Kwok Tsang, a Matteo Morelli, a,c Francesca Solfa, a Helen L. Wiggins, a Arwyn T. Jones, a Andrew D. Westwell a*

a School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Cardiff University, Redwood Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, CF10 3NB, Wales, U.K.
b Dipartimento di Scienze e Tecnologie Molecolari e Biomolecolari (STEMBIO), University of Palermo, Via Archirafi, 32-90123, Palermo, Italy
c Dipartimento di Farmacia, University of Pisa, Via Bonanno 6, 56126 Pisa, Italy

Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0)2920875800. E-mail address: WestwellA@cf.ac.uk (A. Westwell).

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ABSTRACT

A new, simple, one-step synthetic route to carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates from commercially available starting materials is described. The key step of this new synthetic approach involves the tetrabromomethane-promoted reaction between secondary amines, carbon disulfide and alkyl thiols under basic conditions at room temperature. New compounds from this series selected for anticancer screening showed selective sub-micromolar activity within BCA2-expressing human breast cancer cell lines.

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The thiuram disulfide, disulfiram (Antabuse®, Figure 1) is a well-established drug used in the treatment of alcoholism (aversion therapy) by virtue of its aldehyde dehydrogenase (ALDH) inhibitory activity.1 Previous studies within our group have identified disulfiram as a zinc-binding inhibitor of the E3 ubiquitin ligase enzyme, BCA2 (Breast Cancer Associated protein 2), a clinically over-expressed protein in breast cancer patients and a target for cancer drug discovery.2 The interesting and multi-faceted anticancer activity of disulfiram, coupled with its favourable clinical toxicological and safety profile, has led to the initiation of several cancer clinical trials using this agent.3

Figure 1. Chemical structures of disulfiram and carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates as potential metabolites.

The in vivo pharmacokinetic profile of disulfiram in patients is complex and is incompletely understood. The initial cleavage of the weak disulfide bond to form the corresponding diethylthiocarbamate anion (known as ditiocarb) is well established. It has been postulated that the complex of ditiocarb with copper(II) ions (CuEt) formed in the blood is likely to be responsible for the anticancer activity of disulfiram.4 An alternative reported pharmacokinetic pathway involves the formation of carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates (mixed disulfides derived from disulfiram, Figure 1) following initial formation of ditiocarb. Notably carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates have been reported as inhibitors of human mitochondrial5 and sheep liver6 ALDH, the therapeutic target on which clinical approval of disulfiram is based.

During previous work investigating the BCA2-inhibitory activity of disulfiram analogues, we synthesized a small series of carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates by heating a mixture of disulfiram (or related piperidinyl or pyrrolidinyl analogues) with alkyl thiols in ethanol under reflux (Scheme 1).2 This procedure led to the formation of the required carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioate products in low yields (9-25%) following extensive column chromatography, alongside a number of mixed disulfide-based by-products.

Scheme 1. Previously reported synthesis of carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates by reaction of disulfiram analogues with alkyl thiols.

Testing of new disulfiram analogues and the structurally related carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates in human breast cancer cell lines with differing levels of expression of BCA2, including isogenic cell lines MDA-MB-231 (BCA low) and MDA-MB-231/ER (BCA2+), revealed interesting results.2 Of particular note were the carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates derived from reaction of disulfiram with hexanethiol or 2-mercaptopoethanol (Figure 1; R = n-hexyl, HOCH2CH3). Both of these analogues exhibited sub-micromolar IC50 activity selectively in BCA2-expressing breast cancer cell lines, whilst lacking the ALDH-inhibitory activity characteristic of the parent compound disulfiram.
Given the biological relevance of the carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates in the context of anticancer drug discovery, and the difficulties in obtaining pure products through the previously described mixed disulfide method, we required a new synthetic protocol for reliable and high yielding access to this class of compound. In this paper, we describe a simple, one-step protocol for the synthesis of a range of substituted carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates under mild conditions. Our new method is based on the procedure developed by Liang and co-workers, using tetrabromomethane (CBr₄) to promote the synthesis of thioureas and thiram disulfides via reaction of amines with carbon disulfide. The use of carbon tetrabromide to promote the reaction of dithioic acids or thiols with active methylene compounds to produce dithiocarbamates, xanthates, dithioesters and thioethers has also been previously reported. Critical to these studies was the proposed generation of a sulfenyl bromide intermediate.

We now report the extension of the above studies to the synthesis of carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates. Initially, we optimized the reaction conditions based on the reaction between diethylamine, carbon disulfide, 2-mercaptoethanol or hexanethiol, and triethylenethane as the base, to investigate the formation of the previously described lead compounds shown in Figure 1 (R = n-hexyl, HOCH₂CH₃). As a first adaptation of the previously reported method, the use of equimolar quantities of reagents without base in DMF as the solvent at room temperature gave very low yields of product. Reactions of equimolar quantities of these reagents promoted by triethylenethane in dichloromethane in the absence of CBr₄ did not lead to the desired carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioate products. Adding one equivalent of CBr₄ in dichloromethane produced the products in 48% and 38% yields, respectively. Surprisingly, the use of two equivalents of alkyl thiol did not lead to the desired products, instead yielding the corresponding dithiocarbamates (confirmed by mass spectrometry and NMR) as by-products. Finally, it was found that the use of two equivalents of CBr₄ gave the products in good yields (85% and 58%, respectively) under mild conditions (room temperature, 2 h reaction time). This optimized procedure was subsequently adopted for the synthesis of new carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioate analogues.

Following mixing of equimolar quantities of secondary amine (1a-f) and alkyl thiol (2a-d) in anhydrous dichloromethane, the mixture was cooled in an ice bath. Carbon disulfide (1 equiv) was then added dropwise, followed by slow addition of triethylenethane (1.1 equiv). After a further five minutes, a solution of CBr₄ (2 equiv) in dichloromethane was added, followed by stirring at room temperature for two hours. Product work-up and purification by column chromatography gave carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates 3a-x (>60% yield in most cases) (Scheme 2).

Scheme 2. Optimized synthesis of carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioate analogues 3a-x.

The identity of the carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioate products was confirmed by NMR spectroscopy and mass spectrometry. Compound purity following column chromatography was further verified by either microanalysis (duplicate % CHN) or accurate mass determination (see Supplementary data). Good yields were obtained for the majority of products, however, in the case of compounds 3q and 3u (derived from 2-mercaptoethanol and morpholine or N-methylpiperazine), lower yields (25% and 30% respectively) were obtained. Overall, our results are consistent with the formation of an intermediate sulfenyl bromide, as was postulated in the previous related studies.

As a continuation of our previously published studies on the anticancer properties of these new disulfiram-derived molecules, we carried out a preliminary in vitro evaluation across human breast cancer cell lines where BCA2 expression status was known (72 h compound treatment time). The mean IC₅₀ values (triplicate analysis) for compounds 3i, 3k, 3o, 3s and 3w (derived from a variety of secondary amines) in human breast cancer cell lines MCF-7 (BCA2-positive), MDA-MB-231 (BCA2-negative) and MCF-10A (non-cancerous control) were determined. The results presented in Table 1 indicate selective sub-micromolar IC₅₀ activity selectively within MCF-7 cells, consistent with previously synthesized analogues of this broad class. One analogue (3o) possessed a biphasic dose-response profile, a phenomenon previously observed within our group for disulfiram.

In conclusion, we have developed and optimized a new one-pot synthetic route to a range of potential anticancer carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates in high yields, including the previous BCA2-inhibitory compounds from our previous study (compounds 3a and 3c in 58% and 85% yields, respectively). Further studies of the anticancer properties of this new series are ongoing.

Acknowledgments

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Supplementary Data

Supplementary data (experimental procedures and characterization data, including NMR and mass spectrometry data for all isolated compounds, and the in vitro testing protocol) associated with this article can be found in the online version.

References

### Table 1. IC<sub>50</sub> values (μM) in human breast cancer cell lines MCF-7 (BCA2 +ve), MDA-MB-231 (BCA2 –ve) and MCF-10A (control proliferative cell line).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>MCF-7</th>
<th>MDA-MB-231</th>
<th>MCF-10A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3i</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3k</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3o</td>
<td>0.6&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3w</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results are the mean values from three independent experiments; * indicates the first IC<sub>50</sub> value of a biphasic dose-response profile.

### Figure 1. Chemical structures of disulfiram and carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates as potential metabolites.

**Scheme 1.** Previously reported synthesis of carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioates by reaction of disulfiram analogues with alkyl thiols.

### Scheme 2. Optimized synthesis of carbamo(dithioperoxo)thioate analogues 3a-x.