Structure of a Penicillin Binding Protein Complexed with a Cephalosporin-Peptidoglycan Mimic

M.A. McDonough¹, W. Lee², N.R. Silvaggi¹, L.P. Kotra², Z-H. Li², Y. Takeda², S.O. Mobashery², and J.A. Kelly¹

¹Department of Molecular and Cell Biology and Institute for Materials Science, Univ. of Connecticut, Storrs, CT
²Institute for Drug Design and the Department of Chemistry, Wayne State Univ., Detroit, MI

Many bacteria that are responsible for causing diseases in humans are rapidly developing mutant strains resistant to existing antibiotics. Proliferation of these mutant strains is likely to be a serious health-care problem of increasing proportions. Almost sixty percent of all clinically used antibiotics are beta-lactams, which stop the growth of bacteria by interfering with their cell-wall biosynthesis. The cell walls are made of glycan chains that polymerize to form a structure that gives strength and shape to the bacteria. An understanding of the process how the cell wall is synthesized may help in designing more potent antibiotics.

D-Ala-D-Ala-carboxypeptidase/transpeptidases (DD-peptidases) are penicillin-binding proteins (PBPs), the targets of beta-lactam antibiotics such as penicillins and cephalosporins (Figure 1A). These enzymes catalyze the final cross-linking step of bacterial cell wall biosynthesis. In vivo inhibition of PBPs by beta-lactams results in the cessation of bacterial growth.

The bacterial cell wall is primarily composed of peptidoglycan, which forms a sacculus around the inner cell membrane. Peptidoglycan is made up of a polymer of \(-\text{N-acetylmuramic acid-N-acetylglucosamine-} (\text{-NAM-NAG-})\) repeating saccharide units cross-linked by peptides, typically five residues or more in length. Tipper and Strominger first proposed the hypothesis that beta-lactam antibiotics are effective because they mimic the terminal D-Ala-D-Ala portion of the donor peptidoglycan strand during cross-linking [1].

Beta-lactam antibiotics constitute over 60% of the clinically valuable antibiotics today. We are in danger of losing this important class of antibiotics due to the rapid emergence and spread of drug resistant bacterial strains. Resistance is mostly acquired through the transfer of plasmids encoding beta-lactamases, enzymes that quickly hydrolyze beta-lactam antibiotics rendering them ineffective.

There is strong evidence that beta-lactamases are evolutionary descendents of penicillin binding proteins [2, 3]. It is important then to define why penicillin-binding proteins turn over natural peptidoglycan substrates so rapidly but only slowly deacylate and release beta-lactams. Also, one questions why beta-lactamases hydrolyze beta-lactams and release them rapidly but they do not react with peptide substrates.

To help answer these questions, structural studies of the Streptomyces sp. R61 D-Ala-D-Ala-peptidase have been undertaken to investigate how the enzyme

![Figure 1](A) The cephalosporin nucleus. The highly strained four-membered beta-lactam ring readily reacts with the catalytic nucleophile, usually a serine, of PBPs forming a long-lived acyl-enzyme complex, thus inhibiting the enzyme. (B) Schematic of cephalosporin 1 after formation of the acyl-enzyme complex with the DD-peptidase. The red portion of cephalosporin 1 mimics the D-Ala-D-Ala part of the donor peptide strand, which in the cross-linking reaction is the first substrate attacked by the catalytic serine. The terminal D-Alanine is lost and an acyl-enzyme is formed with the penultimate D-Alanine. The green portion of Cephalosporin 1 mimics the second substrate, or acceptor strand, poised for attack on the carbonyl carbon of the acyl-enzyme to complete cross-link formation between the donor and acceptor strands.
binds to and reacts with a peptidoglycan analog. This enzyme has been used extensively as a model for membrane bound PBPs [4, 5]. Since previous structural studies using di- and tri-peptide substrates have been unsuccessful in trapping a PBP enzyme-substrate complex [2, 6], a new approach described here was developed.

A novel cephalosporin, called cephalosporin 1, was designed and synthesized with side chains that mimic peptidoglycan strands typically found in bacteria (Figure 1B). Since a long-lived, covalent complex is formed with cephalosporin 1, it has proven useful for capturing crystallographically an image of this enzyme-substrate analog complex [7].

Crystals of the R61 DD-peptidase were grown as previously described [6]. Pre-formed DD-peptidase crystals were soaked in a 5.4mM solution of cephalosporin 1 for four days to allow enough time for the compound to react. Following the soak, X-ray data were collected at NSLS Beamline X12C on the acyl-enzyme intermediate [7].

Data sets for protein structures with resolutions better than 1.2Å and I/sig(I) greater than 2 in the last resolution bin are considered to be ultra-high resolution data [8]. With the use of synchrotron radiation sources, ultra-high resolution data are becoming more common in the structures deposited in the RCSB-PDB. Other factors enhancing protein crystallographic studies today are the development of CCD detectors with large areas and fast image readout times, and the development of cryo-techniques [9].

Crystals of the DD-peptidase/cephalosporin 1 complex diffracted to ultra-high resolution, 1.2 Å. This resolution permitted the atomic coordinates to be determined with great accuracy and also allowed the assignment of 10% of possible protein hydrogen atoms based on difference electron density maps. Initial phases were based on the wild type 1.6Å structure [10]. Refinement was carried out initially in CNS and continued in SHELXL, which is more suited to refinement of anisotropic displacement parameters [11, 12] (See Tables 1 and 2).

The resulting structure gives, for the first time, a snapshot of how the natural peptidoglycan would bind to and react with PBPs. The complex reveals deep grooves on the surface of the enzyme that accommodate binding of the donor and acceptor peptidoglycan strands, the substrates in the natural reaction. The

<table>
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<th>NP</th>
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NP: number of protein atoms; NH: number of hydrogen atoms; NW/NW₉₀: number of waters/half occupancy waters; Nₚαr: number of parameters; R₁ and R_free: crystallographic and free residuals.
grooves position the strands in the active site so that the cross-linking reaction could take place (Figure 2 - left).

Modeling of a NAM-NAG dimer onto each peptide fragment of the crystal structure indicates additional grooves on the enzyme surface that would accommodate the polysaccharide portion of peptidoglycan. This extended structure was energy minimized without significant change in position, signifying that the model is realistic [7] (Figure 2-right). This new knowledge of PBP substrate binding sites will aid in the development of more effective antibiotics.

References