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Design, synthesis, and anti-inflammatory activity both in vitro and in vivo of new betulinic acid analogues having an enone functionality in ring A

Tadashi Honda^{a,†,*}, Karen T. Liby^{b,†}, Xiaobo Su^a, Chitra Sundararajan^a, Yukiko Honda^a, Nanjoo Suh^b, Renee Risingsong^b, Charlotte R. Williams^b, Darlene B. Royce^b, Michael B. Sporn^b, and Gordon W. Gribble^{a,*}

a Department of Chemistry, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755, U.S.A.

b Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology, Dartmouth Medical School, Hanover, NH 03755, U.S.A.

Abstract

Fifteen new betulinic acid analogues were designed, synthesized, and tested for anti-inflammatory activity. Many of these analogues effectively suppress nitric oxide (NO) production in RAW cells stimulated with interferon- γ . Analogue **10** is highly and orally active in vivo for induction of the anti-inflammatory and cytoprotective enzyme, heme oxygenase-1.

Keywords

triterpene; betulinic acid; inhibitors of nitric oxide production; RAW 264.7 cells; inducer of heme oxygenase-1

Betulinic acid (BA, **1**) is a pentacyclic lupane-type triterpene isolated from various plants.¹ ² Betulinic acid selectively inhibits the growth of human melanoma cells in vitro and in vivo, ³ suppresses proliferation of neuroblastoma⁴ and ovarian carcinoma cells,⁵ and enhances differentiation and apoptosis of primary leukemia cells.⁶ Despite a lack of toxicity in animal studies even at high concentrations,³ the relatively low potency of betulinic acid itself lessens its clinical utility as an anti-cancer drug.

Our ongoing efforts to improve the anti-inflammatory and anti-proliferative activity of oleanolic acid (**2**), a naturally occurring oleanane-type triterpene, led us to discover 2-cyano-3,12-dioxooleana-1,9(11)-dien-28-oic acid (CDDO) and related compounds (e.g., CDDO-Me, CDDO-Im, and TP-222, see Figure 1).^{7–9} CDDO and CDDO-Me are currently being evaluated in phase I clinical trials for the treatment of leukemia and solid tumors. In these investigations, we discovered two important structure–activity relationships (SARs). The combination of enone functionalities with cyano and carboxyl groups in ring A and an enone functionality in ring C is an essential structure feature for high potency in various bioassays

*Corresponding authors. Tel.: +1 603 646 1591; fax: +1 603 646 3946; e-mail: th9@dartmouth.edu (for T. H.). Tel.: +1 603 646 3118; fax: +1 603 646 3946; e-mail: ggribble@dartmouth.edu (for G. W. G.).

[†]Co-first authors, contributed equally to this work.

The new betulinic acid analogue **10**, at oral dosing of 2 μ moles, causes significant induction of the anti-inflammatory, cytoprotective enzyme, heme oxygenase-1, in the liver.

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related to inflammation and cancer,⁸ and modifications of the C-17 carboxyl group affect both potency and pharmacokinetics.⁹ Thus, we envisioned incorporating the same structures into betulinic acid for increasing its anti-inflammatory activity.

We initially designed and synthesized methyl ester **3**¹⁰ and fifteen new betulinic acid analogues **4–18**¹¹ without the enone functionality in ring C (Table 1) because betulinic acid differs from oleanolic acid and is devoid of functionality in ring C. We evaluated the potency of the new analogues for inhibition against nitric oxide (NO) production in RAW 264.7 cells (in vitro) and induction of the anti-inflammatory, cytoprotective enzyme, heme oxygenase-1 (in vivo).¹² We report here that several new semi-synthetic betulinic acid analogues display highly potent anti-inflammatory activity in vitro, and we show that **10** is also highly and orally active in vivo.

Compounds **4–12** with a cyano enone functionality in ring A were synthesized by the sequence shown in Scheme 1. Acid **4** was obtained in 61% yield by cleavage of methoxycarbonyl group of **3** with AlBr₃ in Me₂S.¹³ Ethyl ester **5** was prepared in 78% yield from **4** using EtI and DBU in toluene.¹⁴ Reaction of **4** with oxalyl chloride gave acyl chloride **19** in quantitative yield. Amides **6–9** and imidazolides **10–12** were synthesized in moderate yields by condensation reactions between **19** and the corresponding amines and imidazoles (Scheme 1 and Table 1).

Compounds **13–18** with a carboxyl or methoxycarbonyl enone functionality in ring A were synthesized by the sequence shown in Scheme 2. Methyl ester **21** was prepared in 85% yield from methyl betulonate (**20**), which was easily synthesized in 95% yield in 2 steps (methylation with CH₂N₂ and Jones oxidation) from **1**, by Stiles' reagent (methoxymagnesium methyl carbonate) in DMF,¹⁵ followed by methylation with CH₂N₂. The ¹H NMR spectrum showed that **21** is the single tautomer in CDCl₃ as depicted in Scheme 2. Initially, we expected that addition of phenylselenenyl chloride (PhSeCl, 2 equivalents) to **21** and subsequent oxidation/elimination of the selenated intermediate with H₂O₂ would give only **13**. However, these conditions¹⁶ afforded **14** (28% yield) and **22** (14%) in addition to **13** (22%). We believe that PhSeCl produces the rearranged allylic selenide **23** from **13** and/or **21** (Scheme 3).¹⁷ Oxidation of **23** with H₂O₂ forms allylic selenoxide **24**, which is converted to allylic selenenic ester **25** by a [2,3]sigmatropic rearrangement, followed by hydrolysis of **25** to give allylic alcohol **14** and/or **22**.¹⁸ Allylic fluoride **15** was obtained in 65% yield from **14** with DAST in CH₂Cl₂.¹⁹ Acids **16–18** were prepared from the corresponding methyl esters **13–15** by alkaline hydrolysis (86%, 100%, and 86% yield, respectively).

We have evaluated the potency of methyl ester **3** and new analogues **4–18** for inhibition of NO production in RAW 264.7 cells stimulated with interferon- γ , and induction of the anti-inflammatory, cytoprotective enzyme, heme oxygenase-1 in the liver (in vivo). In the RAW cell assay (Table 1), compounds **3–12** with a cyano enone functionality in ring A are highly active, with a potency that is similar to that of CDDO, whereas betulinic acid is inactive. The series of compounds **13–18** with a carboxyl or methoxycarbonyl enone functionality in ring A are less active, with a potency more than 10 fold less than that of CDDO. Most importantly, we have found that one of the new analogues, **10**, is significantly more potent in vivo than both betulinic acid and the oleanolic acid analogue, CDDO. Thus, as shown in Figure 2, oral dosing of 2 μ moles of compound **10** caused significant induction of the anti-inflammatory, cytoprotective enzyme, heme oxygenase-1, in the liver, while betulinic acid and CDDO were both ineffective at this low dose. There is major interest in stimulating heme oxygenase-1 as a protective enzyme in many chronic disease conditions in which inflammation and oxidative stress play a key role.¹²

In summary, in a series of new betulinic acid analogues, we have found the following interesting SARs: (1) A cyano enone functionality in ring A is necessary for exhibiting potent inhibitory

activity against NO production in RAW cells. (2) Noteworthy is that an enone functionality in ring C is not necessary for the potency. The SARs are entirely different from those of oleanolic acid analogues.^{7,8} (3) The methoxycarbonyl and carboxyl enone functionalities in ring A are not important for the potency. (4) C-17 modifications do not affect the potency in the RAW cell assay. These results are also different from those of CDDO analogues.⁹ However, interestingly, only the acyl imidazole increases the potency in vivo. (5) Isopropenyl side chains do not affect the potency. Overall, it is important to note that our present results are different from the oleanolic acid analogues that we have studied previously. Further syntheses and biological evaluation of new betulinic acid analogues are in progress.

Acknowledgements

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10. Shortly after we started this project, a Korean group reported methyl ester **3**; You YJ, Kim Y, Nam NH, Ahn BZ. *Bioorg Med Chem Lett* 2003;13:3137. [PubMed: 12951080] This compound was synthesized from betulinic acid (**1**) by the same method as they reported
11. All new compounds **4–18** provided acceptable HRMS data (± 5 ppm) and ¹H NMR spectra that exhibit no discernible impurities. Compound **10**: amorphous solid. $[\alpha]_D^{25} +0.7^\circ$ (*c* 0.57, CHCl₃). CD (*c* 0.0016, EtOH) $\Delta\epsilon_{265} +1.71$ and $\Delta\epsilon_{346} -2.32$. ¹H NMR (CDCl₃) δ 8.30 (1H, brs), 7.82 (1H, s), 7.55 (1H, brs), 7.07 (1H, brs), 4.79 (1H, d, *J* = 1.46 Hz), 4.68 (1H, t, *J* = 1.46 Hz), 2.98 (1H, ddd, *J* = 4.76, 10.98, 10.98 Hz), 2.77 (1H, ddd, *J* = 3.66, 12.27, 12.27 Hz), 2.48 (1H, ddd, *J* = 3.29, 3.29, 13.91 Hz), 2.34 (1H, q, *J* = 6.59 Hz), 1.72, 1.18, 1.13, 1.12, 1.021, 1.016 (each 3H, s); ¹³C NMR (CDCl₃) δ 198.4, 173.1, 170.8, 149.5, 137.5, 130.0, 117.6, 115.2, 114.2, 110.7, 57.7, 52.8, 51.4, 45.3, 45.2, 44.2, 42.7, 42.1, 41.0, 37.2, 34.2, 33.6, 33.2, 30.7, 29.8, 27.9, 25.4, 21.6, 19.6, 19.0, 18.6, 16.7, 14.7. MS (ESI+) *m/z* 528 [M+H]⁺; HRMS (ESI+) calcd for C₃₅H₄₅N₃O₂ + H 528.3590, found 528.3580.
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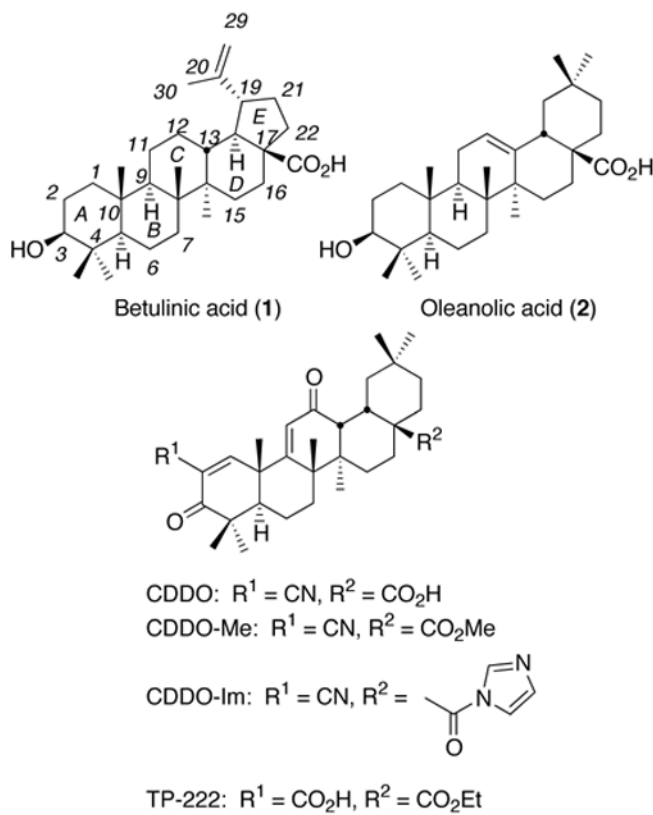


Figure 1.
Structures of betulinic acid, oleanolic acid, CDDO, and CDDO analogues.

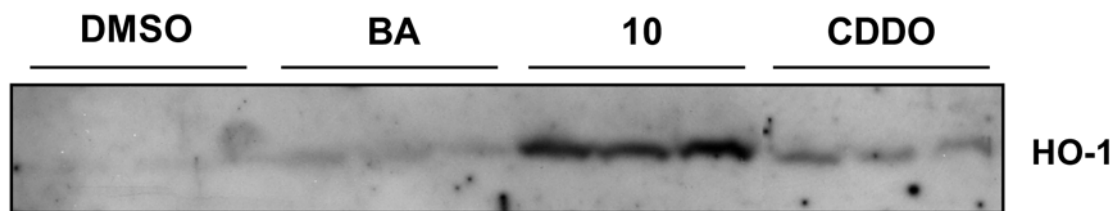
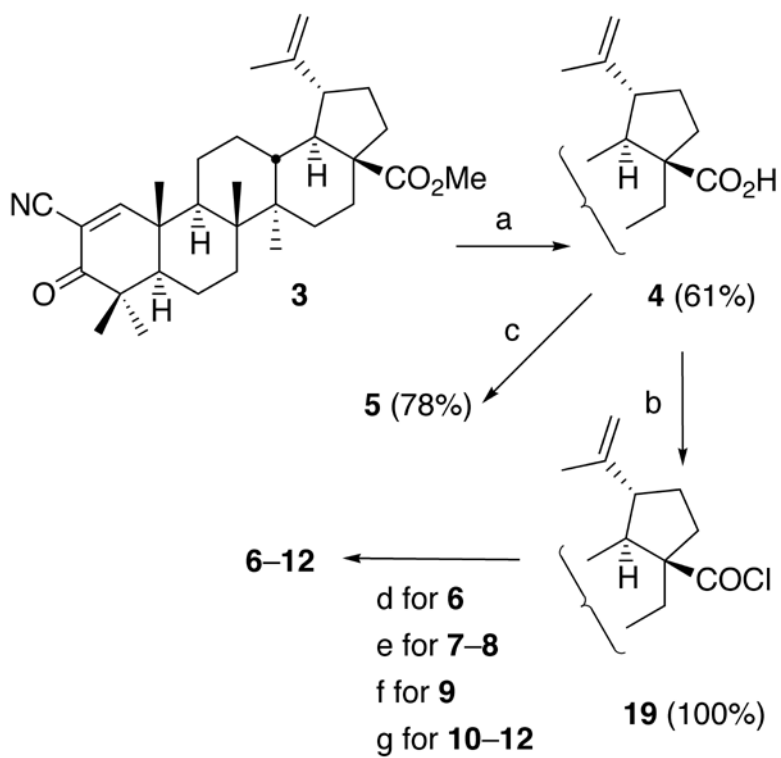
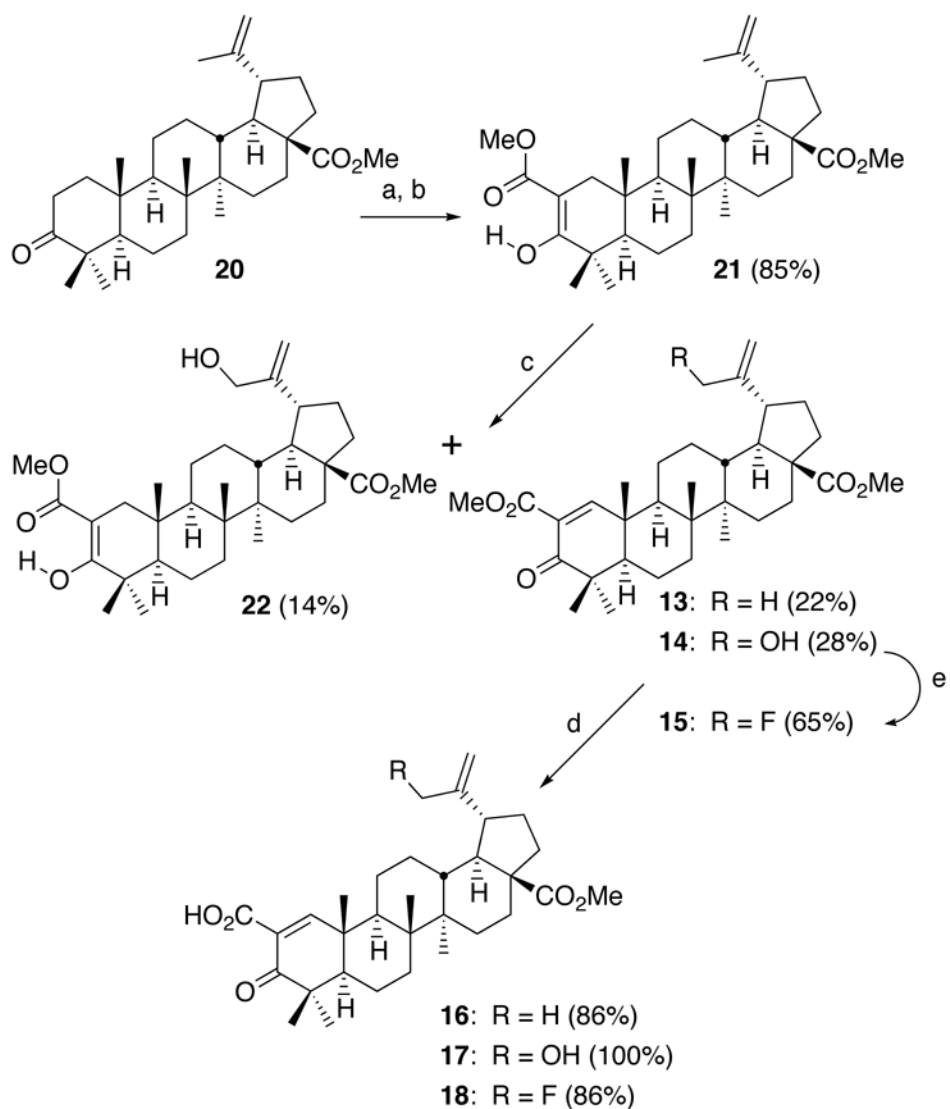


Figure 2. Analog 10 induces heme oxygenase-1 (HO-1) in vivo in liver

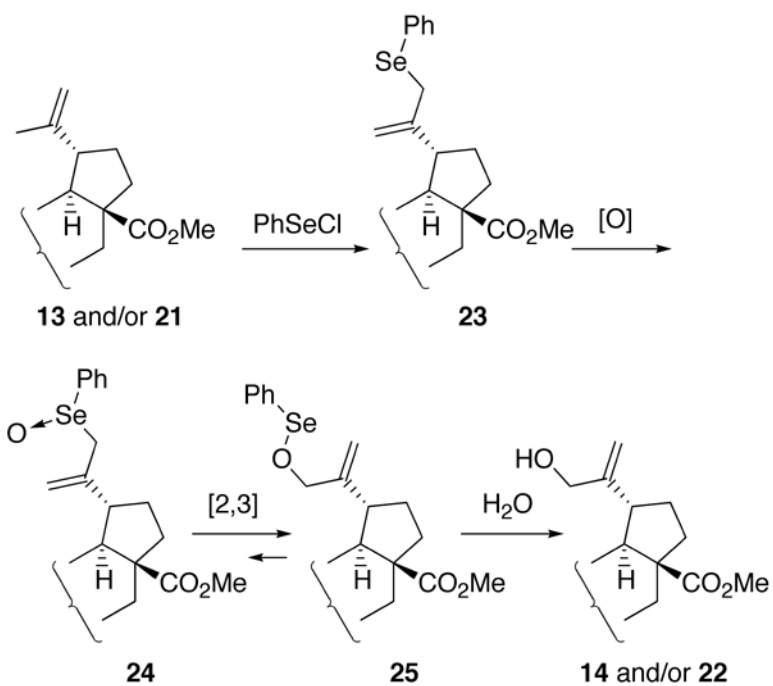
Male CD-1 mice (3 mice per group) were gavaged with triterpenoids (2 μ mole) in DMSO. After 6 h, livers were collected and analyzed by Western blot for heme oxygenase-1.²⁰

**Scheme 1.**

(a) AlBr_3 , Me_2S (room temp.); (b) $(\text{COCl})_2$, CH_2Cl_2 (room temp.); (c) EtI , DBU , toluene (reflux); (d) NH_3 , PhH (room temp.); (e) amine hydrochloride, NaHCO_3 , PhH , water (reflux); (f) Me_2NH , PhH (reflux); (g) imidazole, PhH (room temp.).

**Scheme 2.**

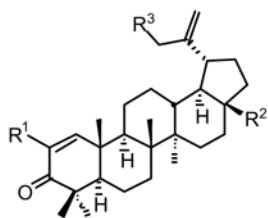
(a) Stiles' reagent, DMF (at 110 °C); (b) CH_2N_2 , Et_2O , THF (room temp.); (c) PhSeCl, pyr., CH_2Cl_2 (at 4 °C); 30% H_2O_2 , CH_2Cl_2 (at 4 °C); (d) aqueous KOH, MeOH (reflux); (e) DAST, CH_2Cl_2 (-78 °C).






Scheme 3.
Conversion of **13/21** to **14/22** using $\text{PhSeCl-H}_2\text{O}_2$

Table 1

Inhibition of NO production in RAW cells stimulated with interferon- γ by methyl ester **3** and new betulinic acid analogues **4–18**.



Compds	R ¹	R ²	R ³	Yield (%)	Inhibition of NO IC ₅₀ μ M ^c
3	CN	CO ₂ Me	H	Ref. 10	0.03
4	CN	CO ₂ H	H	a	0.2
5	CN	CO ₂ Et	H	a	0.02
6	CN	CONH ₂	H	74 ^b	0.03
7	CN	CONHMe	H	70 ^b	0.05
8	CN	CONHEt	H	79 ^b	0.07
9	CN	CONMe ₂	H	77 ^b	0.03
10	CN		H	91 ^b	0.03
11	CN		H	62 ^b	0.05
12	CN		H	60 ^b	0.03
13	CO ₂ Me	CO ₂ Me	H	a	0.6
14	CO ₂ Me	CO ₂ Me	OH	a	1
15	CO ₂ Me	CO ₂ Me	F	a	0.3
16	CO ₂ H	CO ₂ Me	H	a	0.3
17	CO ₂ H	CO ₂ Me	OH	a	0.9
18	CO ₂ H	CO ₂ Me	F	a	0.3
BA (1)					inactive
CDDO					0.02

^aYield is shown in the text.

^bYield from **19**.

^cRAW 264.7 cells were treated with various concentrations of compounds and interferon- γ (10 ng/mL) for 24 h. Supernatants were analyzed for NO by the Griess reaction.