The Role of Thr139 in the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Type 1 Reverse Transcriptase Sensitivity to (+)-Calanolide A

Joeri Auwerx, Fátima Rodríguez-Barrios, Francesca Ceccherini-Silberstein, Ana San-Félix, Sonsoles Velázquez, Erik De Clercq, María-José Camarasas, Carlo-Federico Perno, Federico Gago, and Jan Balzarini

Rega Institute for Medical Research, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium (J.A., E.D.C., J.B.); Department of Pharmacology, University of Alcalá, Alcalá de Henares, Spain (F.R.-B., F.G.); Department of Experimental Medicine, University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, Rome, Italy (F.C.-S., C.-F.P.); and Instituto de Química Médica, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid, Spain (A.S.-F., S.V., M.-J.C.)

Received February 25, 2005; accepted June 13, 2005

ABSTRACT

The coumarins represent a unique class of non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NNRTIs) that were isolated from tropical plants. (+)-Calanolide A, the most potent compound of this class, selects for the T139I resistance mutation in HIV-1 reverse transcriptase (RT). Seven RTs mutated at amino acid position 139 (Ala, Lys, Tyr, Asp, Ile, Ser, and Gin) were constructed by site-directed mutagenesis. The mutant T139Q enzyme retained full catalytic activity compared with wild-type RT, whereas the mutant T139I, T139S, and T139A RTs retained only 85 to 50% of the activity. Mutant T139K, T139D, and T139Y RTs had seriously impaired catalytic activities. The mutations in the T139I and T139D RTs were shown to destabilize the RT heterodimer. (+)-Calanolide A lost inhibitory activity (up to 20-fold) against the mutant T139Y, T139Q, T139K, and T139I enzymes. All of the mutant enzymes retained marked susceptibility toward the other NNRTIs, including nevirapine, delavirdine, efavirenz, thiooxocarboxamide UC-781, quinoxaline GW867420X, TSAO [2',5'-bis-O-(4-chlorophenyl)-2-ethyl-7-fluoro-3-spiro-5',-di(oxyethylene)-2',-dioxide]; m3T, [2',5'-bis-O-[(1,1-dimethylethoxy)methylphosphoryl]-2-methyl-3-furan-carbothiamide]; m4T, N3-methylthymine; UC-781, N-[4-chloro-3-[(1,1-dimethylethoxy)zimidophenyl]-2-methyl-3-furan-carbothiamide; GW420867X, (S)-2-ethyl-7-fluoro-3-oxo-3,4-dihydro-2H-quinoxaline-1-carboxylic acid isopropyl ester.

Polycyclic coumarins, originally isolated as natural products from several plants of the genus Calophyllum, have been demonstrated to be active against HIV-1 (for a review, see Yu et al., 2003). (+)-Calanolide A, the most potent compound of this class, has been evaluated in antiviral activity studies against non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NNRTI)-resistant HIV-1 strains and related mutated RTs. This work was supported by the European Commission [QLRT-2000-30291 (HIV resistance), HPF/2002-10004 (Bert Descartes Prize-2001), and QLRT-2001-01311 (Virulence)], the "Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek-Vlaanderen" (G-0267-04), and a Research Grant from GlaxoSmithKline, Verona, Italy. J.A. was supported by a Ph.D. grant of the Institute for the Promotion of Innovation through Science and Technology (IWT-Vlaanderen) in Flanders, The Netherlands.

Article, publication date, and citation information can be found at http://molpharm.aspetjournals.org. doi:10.1124/mol.105.012351.

ABBRIVIATIONS: HIV-1, human immunodeficiency virus type 1; NNRTIs, nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors; NI-NTA, nickel-nitritriacetate acid; NNRTIs, non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors; RT, reverse transcriptase(s); ddGTP, 2',3'-dideoxy-GTP; dGTP, 2',3'-deoxy-GTP; dNTP, 2',3'-deoxy-NTP; TSAO, [2',5'-bis-O-(4-chlorobenzyl)-2-ethyl-7-fluoro-3-spiro-5',-di(oxyethylene)-2',-dioxide]; m3T, [2',5'-bis-O-[(1,1-dimethylethoxy)methylphosphoryl]-2-methyl-3-furan-carbothiamide]; m4T, N3-methylthymine; UC-781, N-[4-chloro-3-[(1,1-dimethylethoxy)zimidophenyl]-2-methyl-3-furan-carbothiamide; GW420867X, (S)-2-ethyl-7-fluoro-3-oxo-3,4-dihydro-2H-quinoxaline-1-carboxylic acid isopropyl ester.
the rapid emergence of drug resistant virus strains (Van- 
damme et al., 1998; Balzarini, 1999, 2004; De Clercq, 1999).
Indeed, HIV-1 resistance to regular NNRTIs is primarily 
associated with mutations of amino acids that line the 
lipophilic NNRTI-specific binding pocket (Balzarini, 1999).
(+)-Calanolide A selects in cell culture for the rather unusual 
T139I mutation in the HIV-1 RT (Buckheit et al., 1995). The 
mutant T139I HIV-1 strains are resistant to (+)-calanolide A 
but retain marked sensitivity to many other NNRTIs as well 
as several nucleoside RT inhibitors (NRTIs) (Buckheit et al., 
1999). The Thr139 amino acid is part of the so-called 
β7-β8 loop, which comprises a six-amino acid motif denoted as 
SINNET. Whereas this loop is exposed to the solvent in the 
p66 subunit, the equivalent loop in p51 is snugly lodged into 
a cleft on the surface of the p66 subunit (Kohlstaedt et al., 
1992). In fact, this loop, which is close to both the putative 
entrance to the NNRTI-binding pocket and the active site (Fig. 1), is essential for the catalytic function of the p66 
subunit because it is required to form a stable heterodimeric 
enzyme (Pandey et al., 2001, 2002). It is also worth mention-

Fig. 1. Left, schematic representation of the dimeric structure of HIV-1 RT in complex with a DNA template-primer. The protein Cα trace of each subunit is shown as a ribbon colored pink for p66 and cyan for p51, whereas the DNA molecule (C atoms in green) and the incoming deoxythymidine triphosphate nucleotide (C atoms in gray) are displayed as sticks. The Mg^{2+} ions at the active site are shown as yellow spheres. Right, enlarged view of the framed area shown on the left providing detail of the location of the β7–β8 loop of p51 at the subunit interface which includes Thr139 (side chain as sticks with C atoms in cyan and the OH oxygen in red).

Compounds. TSAO derivatives of N^2-methylthymine (m^2T) and 
thymine were synthesized as described previously (Balzarini et al., 
1992). Nevirapine (BI-RG-587, dipridodiazepinone) was obtained 
from Boehringer Ingleheim USA (Ridgefield, CT). Delavirdine [bis-
(heteroaryl)piperazine, U-90152], and efavirenz (DMP-266) were 
provided by Dr. R. Kirch (at that time at Aventis, Frankfurt, Ger-
many) and Dr. J.-P. Klein (currently at GlaxoSmithKline, Steve-
nage, UK). The thiacarboxanilide derivative UC-781 was obtained 
from W. G. Brouwer (Crompton, Ltd., Guelph, Ontario, Canada). The 
quinoxaline GW420867X was provided by Dr. J.-P. Klein. 2,3’-dideoxy-GTP (ddGTP) was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, 
MO). (+)-Calanolide A was delivered by Sarawak MediChem Phar-
maceuticals Inc. (Sarawak, Malaysia).

Site-Directed Mutagenesis of HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase. 
Mutant RT enzymes containing the T139A, T139Q, T139Y, T139K, 
T139I, T139S, or T139D mutations in both p66 and p51 subunits 
were derived from the RT sequence cloned in pKRT2His (D’Aquila 
and Summers, 1989). Site-directed mutagenesis was performed us-
ing the QuikChange site-directed mutagenesis kit (Stratagene, Cam-
bridge, UK) as described previously (Pelemans et al., 1998). Two 
synthetic oligonucleotide primers (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO) 
contained the desired mutation at amino acid position 139 of HIV-1 
RT. The presence of the desired resistance and structural modeling have suggested an influence of TSAO on RT dimerization, which places this com-

Materials and Methods

In this study, we constructed seven different recombinant 
RT enzymes bearing a mutation at position 139 of RT and 
determined their catalytic activity as well as their resistance 
profiles against a variety of NNRTIs, including (+)-calanol-

 pound in a unique position among the NNRTIs (Sluis-Cremer 
et al., 2000; Rodríguez-Barrios et al., 2001).

...
mutants, the mutation was introduced in both p66 and p51 subunits. For only the mutant T139I and T139D RT, the mutation was introduced solely in p66, solely in p51, or in both p66 and p51 subunits.

Construction of Plasmids Expressing Mutant and Wild-Type Recombinant HIV-1 RT. Recombinant HIV-1 RT were expressed from a two-plasmid coexpression system as described previously (Jonckheere et al., 1996). The p66 subunit of RT was expressed from pACyC66His and the p51 subunit from pKRT51. To construct wild-type and 139-mutated pACyC66His, wild-type and 139-mutated pKRT51 His were digested with EcoRI and FspI, and the RT-containing fragments were ligated into pACYC184 digested with EcoRI and ScaI. To construct wild-type and 139-mutated pKRT51, wild-type and 139-mutated pKRT2His were digested with Neol and KpnI, and the RT-containing fragment was ligated into pKRT51 digested with Neol and KpnI.

Expression and Purification of Wild-Type and Mutant HIV-1 RT. Expression of recombinant HIV-1 RT was performed as described previously (Auwerx et al., 2004). Luria broth (800 ml) containing 100 μg/ml ampicillin and 10 μg/ml tetracycline was inoculated with an overnight culture of Escherichia coli JM109 transformed with both plasmids of the coexpression system and started at an OD600 of 0.1. The culture was grown at 37°C and induced with a 1 mM final concentration of isopropyl-1-thio-D-galactopyranoside for expression of RT, and after centrifugation, the pellet was stored at −20°C. Later, the bacterial cell pellet was resuspended in 15 ml of lysis buffer (50 mM sodium phosphate buffer, 5 mM β-mercaptoethanol, 0.9% glucose, 100 mM NaCl, 1 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride, 10 μg/ml pepstatin, 10 μg/ml leupeptin, and 10% glycerol) and passed through an SLM Amino Frenche Pressure Cell Press (Beau de Ronde, La Abcoude, The Netherlands). The lysate was centrifuged for 20 min at 17,000g.

The purification of RT was performed as described previously (Auwerx et al., 2004). Briefly, the supernatant of the lysed bacterial cell culture was incubated with Ni-NTA resin (QIAGEN, Valencia, CA). After sedimentation of the Ni-NTA resin with the bound (His)6-tagged proteins, a column was formed and washed twice with a sodium phosphate buffer containing 10 mM imidazole. The RT then changed with a Tris-HCl buffer, and the eluate was concentrated to a volume of 1.5 ml. The RT was further purified for 20 min at 17,000 g. After sedimentation of the Ni-NTA resin with the bound (His)6-tagged RT, the RNA-dependent DNA polymerase assay was performed as described previously (Balzarini et al., 1992), except that the reaction mixtures were incubated for 30 min instead of 60 min during the assays with variable substrate (dGTP) or template/primer [poly(rC):oligo(dG)12–18] concentrations. Under these experimental conditions, the catalytic reaction of the different enzymes proceeded linearly and proportionally with time. The Ka and Vmax (kcat) values were derived from the Lineweaver-Burk plots of the variable substrate (dGTP) or template/primer [poly(rC):oligo(dG)12–18] concentrations versus the velocities of dGTP incorporation at each substrate or template/primer concentration.

Stability of Wild-Type and Mutant Heterodimer HIV-1 RTs in the Presence of Urea. Denaturation curves were plotted by preincubation of RT with different concentrations of urea ranging from 0.0625 up to 2.5 M for 10 min at 37°C in a 50-μl reaction buffer containing 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.8, 0.06% Triton X-100, 5 mM dithiothreitol, 150 mM, 0.3 mM glutathione, 1.25 mg/ml bovine serum albumin, 0.5 mM EDTA, 5 mM MgCl2, and 1.4 mM poly(rC):oligo(dG)12–18 (Amersham Biosciences). The polymerase reaction was initiated by adding [8-3H]dGTP (0.1 mM, 1 mCi/ml) (Amersham Biosciences) substrate. After incubating for 10 min at 37°C, the reactions were terminated by the addition of 1 ml of 5% trichloroacetic acid in 200 mM Na2HPO4 and 200 μl of yeast RNA (2 mg/ml) and 1 ml of 200 μl of yeast RNA (2 mg/ml, pH 8.0). Reaction products were incubated on ice for 30 min and precipitated on a Whatman GF/C filter. The filters were washed with 20 ml of 5% trichloroacetic acid and dried with 2 ml of ethanol. The amount of incorporated radioactive substrate was analyzed in a TR-2500 liquid scintillation counter (PerkinElmer Life and Analytical Sciences, Boston, MA) by adding 4 ml of HiSafe2 (PerkinElmer Life and Analytical Sciences). Polymerase activity was determined as the amount of nucleotide incorporated at each urea concentration relative to the amount of nucleotide incorporation in the absence of denaturant. The percentage polymerase activity was plotted versus the urea concentration, and the data were fitted to a curve using the program SigmaPlot Version 8.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) to determine the concentration of urea at the midpoint of the denaturation curve.

Molecular Modeling and Structure Visualization. The protein environment around Thr139 in HIV-1 RT was visualized and pictured using the PyMOL molecular graphics program (DeLano, 2004), and the X-ray coordinates of a covalently trapped catalytic complex between HIV-1 RT and a DNA template/primer were deposited in the Protein Data Bank (http://www.rcsb.org/PDB/) with code 1RTD (Huang et al., 1998).

Results

RNA-Dependent DNA Polymerase Activities of Wild-Type and Mutant T139X HIV-1 RTs. To assess the influence of changes at the amino acid residue Thr139 on the catalytic activity of HIV-1 RT, seven recombinant RTs were constructed by site-directed mutagenesis: T139A, T139Q, T139Y, T139K, T139I, T139S, and T139D. In this way, the different types of amino acid side chains were represented: an aliphatic side chain in alanine, an aromatic side chain in tyrosine, a protonated amino group in the positively charged lysine, a carboxylate group in the negatively charged aspartic acid-insoluble material was filtered over GF/C glass-fiber filters (Whatman, Maidstone, UK) and washed with 5% trichloroacetic acid in H2O and ethanol. The filters were then analyzed for radioactivity in a liquid scintillation counter (Canberra Industries, Meriden, CT). The IC50 for each test compound was determined as the compound concentration that inhibited HIV-1 RT activity by 50%.

Steady-state kinetic assays were also performed as described previously (Balzarini et al., 1992), except that the reaction mixtures were incubated for 30 min instead of 60 min during the assays with variable substrate (dGTP) or template/primer [poly(rC):oligo(dG)12–18] concentrations. Under these experimental conditions, the catalytic reaction of the different enzymes proceeded linearly and proportionally with time. The Ka and Vmax (kcat) values were derived from the double reciprocal Lineweaver-Burk plots of the variable substrate (dGTP) or template/primer [poly(rC):oligo(dG)12–18] concentrations versus the velocities of dGTP incorporation at each substrate or template/primer concentration.

Stability of Wild-Type and Mutant Heterodimer HIV-1 RTs in the Presence of Urea. Denaturation curves were plotted by preincubation of RT with different concentrations of urea ranging from 0.0625 up to 2.5 M for 10 min at 37°C in a 50-μl reaction buffer containing 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.8, 0.06% Triton X-100, 5 mM dithiothreitol, 150 mM, 0.3 mM glutathione, 1.25 mg/ml bovine serum albumin, 0.5 mM EDTA, 5 mM MgCl2, and 1.4 mM poly(rC):oligo(dG)12–18 (Amersham Biosciences). The polymerase reaction was initiated by adding [8-3H]dGTP (0.1 mM, 1 mCi/ml) (Amersham Biosciences) substrate. After incubating for 10 min at 37°C, the reactions were terminated by the addition of 1 ml of 5% trichloroacetic acid in 200 mM Na2HPO4 and 200 μl of yeast RNA (2 mg/ml) and 1 ml of 200 μl of yeast RNA (2 mg/ml, pH 8.0). Reaction products were incubated on ice for 30 min and precipitated on a Whatman GF/C filter. The filters were washed with 20 ml of 5% trichloroacetic acid and dried with 2 ml of ethanol. The amount of incorporated radioactive substrate was analyzed in a TR-2500 liquid scintillation counter (PerkinElmer Life and Analytical Sciences, Boston, MA) by adding 4 ml of HiSafe2 (PerkinElmer Life and Analytical Sciences). Polymerase activity was determined as the amount of nucleotide incorporated at each urea concentration relative to the amount of nucleotide incorporation in the absence of denaturant. The percentage polymerase activity was plotted versus the urea concentration, and the data were fitted to a curve using the program SigmaPlot Version 8.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) to determine the concentration of urea at the midpoint of the denaturation curve.

Molecular Modeling and Structure Visualization. The protein environment around Thr139 in HIV-1 RT was visualized and pictured using the PyMOL molecular graphics program (DeLano, 2004), and the X-ray coordinates of a covalently trapped catalytic complex between HIV-1 RT and a DNA template/primer were deposited in the Protein Data Bank (http://www.rcsb.org/PDB/) with code 1RTD (Huang et al., 1998).
acid, and a polar uncharged group in serine and glutamine. The T139I mutation was also introduced, because it consistently appears in cell culture under (+)-calanolide A-selective pressure. The mutations were introduced in both p66 and p51 subunits of the RT heterodimer, and all of the mutant recombinant RTs were purified to ≥98% homogeneity through Ni-NTA- and heparin-containing affinity columns.

Using poly(rC)-oligo(dG)12–18 as the template/primer and [8-3H]dGTP as the radiolabeled substrate, the RNA-dependent DNA polymerase activity was fully retained in the T139Q mutant and was reduced by only 15% in the mutant T139I RT compared with wild type (Fig. 2). The polymerase activity was reduced by approximately 50% in the T139S and T139A RT mutants and was severely impaired in the other mutants containing the negatively charged Asp139, the positively charged Lys139, and the aromatic amino acid mutation Tyr139.

To assess the role of the T139D and T139I mutations when separately located in the p66 and the p51 subunits of the RT heterodimer, four additional mutant RTs were constructed in which the T139D or T139I mutation was introduced solely in either the p66 or the p51 subunit of the heterodimeric RT enzyme. Whereas the mutant RT enzyme in which T139D was solely present in the p51 subunit had a catalytic activity that was 21 ± 3% wild-type enzyme, the heterodimeric enzyme at which T139D was solely present in p66 had a catalytic activity of 91 ± 3% wild-type enzyme. For the T139I mutation solely present in the p51 subunit, the catalytic activity was 59 ± 1% wild type, whereas the presence of this mutation in the p66 alone was 89 ± 3% wild type. Thus, the exclusive presence of the T139D or T139I mutation in the p51 subunit of the RT heterodimer had a much more deleterious effect on the catalytic activity of the mutant enzyme than when these mutations were solely present in the p66 subunit of the RT heterodimer.

**Inhibitory Activities of NNRTIs and ddGTP against Wild-Type and Mutant T139X HIV-1 RTs.** The mutant T139Q/T139I/T139S/T139A/T139K/T139D/T139Y RT enzymes were evaluated for their sensitivity to the inhibitory activity of a variety of NNRTIs and the NRTI ddGTP (Table 1). Among all of the NNRTIs evaluated, (+)-calanolide A showed the most pronounced loss of inhibitory potential against the mutated enzymes. Indeed, the mutant T139K (20-fold), T139I (8-fold), T139Y (6-fold), and T139Q (6-fold) HIV-1 RT enzymes displayed marked resistance toward (+)-calanolide A compared with wild-type enzyme.

The RT enzyme bearing the T139K mutation was 4-fold less susceptible to the inhibitory activity of the TSAO derivatives of thymine and m^3^T. In contrast, most mutant enzymes gained significant sensitivity toward the second-generation NNRTIs, such as thiocarboxanilide UC-781 and efavirenz. This was most noticeable for the mutant T139A and T139D RTs (increases of up to 5- to 10-fold and 3- to 4-fold in sensitivity for UC-781 and efavirenz, respectively). The greater susceptibility of most mutant Thr139 enzymes to UC-781 and efavirenz was not a general property of second-generation NNRTIs, because the quinoxaline GW867420X kept a virtually similar inhibitory potential against each of the mutant RTs. As already observed for UC-781 and efavirenz, the mutated T139D RT enzyme was 5-fold more sensitive toward the inhibitory activity of the first-generation NNRTI nevirapine (Table 1). We were surprised that ddGTP showed a markedly decreased inhibitory activity (~7-fold) against several mutant RTs, in particular, T139Y and T139D RT.

When (+)-calanolide A was evaluated for its inhibitory activity against the HIV-1 RT heterodimers that contained the T139I or T139D mutation solely in either the p66 or the p51 subunit, marked resistance of mutant T139I RT toward (+)-calanolide A was only evident when the T139I mutation was solely introduced in the p51 subunit (Fig. 3). Thus, the resistance against (+)-calanolide A is clearly originating from the amino acid mutation in the p51 subunit and not in the p66 subunit of the heterodimer.

**Kinetic Analysis of Wild-Type and Mutant T139I HIV-1 RTs.** Kinetic analysis of the wild-type and mutant T139I RTs was performed with the substrate dGTP or the template/primer poly(rC)-oligo(dG) as variables. The kinetic parameters are summarized in Table 2. When dGTP or the template/primer poly(rC)-oligo(dG) was used as the variable substrate, no marked differences in $K_m$ were noted between wild-type and mutant T139I enzyme. The catalytic efficiency of the mutant enzyme ($k_{cat}/K_m$) was very comparable between the mutant T139I and wild-type enzyme, indicating that the T139I mutation has no marked influence on positioning of the template/primer or the substrate in an optimal position to allow efficient catalysis.

**Effects of Urea on Wild-Type and Mutant T139I and T139D HIV-1 RT Activity.** Wild-type and mutant T139I and T139D RTs were exposed to a variety of urea concentrations, and their catalytic activity was determined (Fig. 4). For the wild-type enzyme, the polymerase activity gradually decreased in the presence of increasing concentrations of urea. A urea concentration as high as 0.5 M decreased the catalytic activity of wild-type RT by 20% (residual activity ~80%), whereas 2.0 M urea decreased its catalytic activity to less than 10%. Half of the wild-type RT catalytic activity was retained at ~0.80 M urea (i.e., the urea-$IC_{50}$). When the mutant T139I and T139D RT enzymes were exposed to similar concentrations of urea, the enzymes showed increased sensitivity toward the denaturing effect of urea compared with wild-type RT. Indeed, whereas the urea-$IC_{50}$ shifted from 0.80 to 0.55 M for the mutant T139I RT, the urea-$IC_{50}$ was further decreased to 0.45 M for the mutant T139D RT enzyme (Fig. 4). A similar increased sensitivity to urea was observed for mutant T139D RT when the T139D mutation...
was solely introduced in the p51 subunit (urea-IC$_{50}$ = 0.60 M), whereas the sensitivity to urea was not increased (urea-IC$_{50}$ = 0.95 M) when the T139D mutation was solely introduced in the p66 subunit (data not shown). There was a close correlation between the catalytic activity of the mutant T139D RT with mutation in both subunits, p66 solely and p51 solely, and the urea concentration required to decrease RT activity by 50%. The $r$-value of the regression line was as high as 0.995.

### Discussion

(+-)-Calanolide A possesses antiviral properties characteristically ascribed to NNRTIs (i.e., selectivity for HIV-1, but not HIV-2 strains, and rapid selection of drug-resistant virus strains containing NNRTI-characteristic mutations in RT). It is noteworthy that (+-)-calanolide A exhibits a 10-fold enhanced activity against certain drug-resistant viruses that bear the most prevalent NNRTI resistance mutations such as the Y181C mutation (Buckheit et al., 1999). (+)-Calanolide A-resistant virus strains may carry, besides T139I, also L100I, Y188H, L187F, and N348K mutations in the RT (Currens et al., 1996b; Buckheit et al., 1999). Among these mutations, the single amino acid substitution T139I proved to be of major importance for the resistance against (+)-calanolide A and the effect of this mutation on drug resistance is engendered from its presence in the p51 subunit (Boyer et al., 1994). This p51 subunit dependence was also proven by the fact that resistance toward (+-)-calanolide A was found in the mutant RT with a wild-type p66 and a mutant T139I p51 subunit and not vice versa. However, the occurrence of additional amino acid changes besides the T139I mutation in the RT of the selected virus strains must explain the pronounced resistance to (+-)-calanolide A, because the single amino acid T139T mutation confers a relatively low level of resistance to this drug (up to 20-fold).

To the best of our knowledge, no detailed site-directed mutagenesis studies of the RT enzyme at this amino acid position have ever been performed to assess the impact of the different mutations on (+-)-calanolide A sensitivity, RT catalytic activity, and the structural dynamics of HIV-1 RT. Moreover, the proximity of Thr139 to Gln138, the amino acid that is important for binding of TSAO derivatives to HIV-1 RT (Camarasa et al., 2004), also suggests that the binding sites for (+-)-calanolide A and TSAO in HIV-1 RT could be near each other or even overlapping. Glu138 is one of the amino acid residues located near the putative entrance to the well defined NNRTI-binding pocket (Esnouf et al., 1997). Although (+)-calanolide A is structurally quite distinct from TSAO, it is not unfeasible that the predominant interaction of (+)-calanolide A with HIV-1 RT occurs with the $\beta\beta$-$\gamma\gamma$ loop located in the p51 RT subunit of RT. However, attempts to dock this drug in this region failed to provide a unique and distinctive binding mode (data not shown). This $\beta\beta$-$\gamma\gamma$ loop is important for heterodimerization of the RT enzyme as shown earlier for the TSAO interaction with Glu138 of the $\beta\beta$-$\gamma\gamma$ loop (Pandey et al., 2001, 2002; Rodriguez-Barrios et al., 2001). As found for TSAO-derivatives, perhaps (+)-calanolide A can also enhance RT heterodimer dissociation, a feature that has previously not been observed for other types of NNRTIs (Sluis-Cremer et al., 2000).

The T139I mutation that appears under (+-)-calanolide A selection is indeed located in the $\beta\beta$-$\gamma\gamma$ loop of p51 (Fig. 1) that is of crucial importance for efficient dimerization of both subunits. In agreement with the experimental data, molecular modeling of TSAO-m$_{3T}$ binding to this loop in wild-type RT suggests that the observed destabilization of the heterodimeric RT may result from structural and conformational perturbations at the RT subunit interface (Sluis-Cremer et al., 2000; Rodriguez-Barrios et al., 2001). Likewise, mutations at the 139 position of the HIV-1 RT may destabilize the p66/p51 heterodimer in a similar way, thus diminishing the catalytic activity of the enzyme as described previously for some amino acid mutations at position 138 (Pelemans et al., 2001) and recently also at positions 136 (Balzarini et al., 2005) and 137 (Auwерx et al., 2005) of HIV-1 RT. Indeed, a seriously compromised RT activity was observed for several amino acid mutations at position 139, especially for the lysine and aspartic acid residues, which also resulted in a higher susceptibility of the mutated RT to the inactivating (denaturation) action of urea (Fig. 4). Therefore, it may be hypothesized that certain mutations at position 139, such as Lys or Asp, compromise the optimal conformation at the p66/p51 heterodimer interface, resulting in a decreased catalytic activity and easier separation of both subunits in the presence of urea. Low concentrations of urea probably have already a marked influence on RT activity, because it can destabilize the heterodimer before full dissociation into monomers occurs. Sluis-Cremer et al. (2000) reported a higher urea-IC$_{50}$ for wild-type RT (2.3 M) than that found in our study. This could be explained by the fact that the reaction buffer and purification methods of the RT are

### TABLE 1

Inhibitory activity of test compounds against mutant T139Q/I/S/A/R/D/Y HIV-1 RTs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Template/primer</th>
<th>IC$_{50}$ µM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nevirapine</td>
<td>1.1 ± 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delavirdine</td>
<td>0.9 ± 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efavirenz</td>
<td>1.2 ± 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC-781</td>
<td>0.2 ± 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GW867420X</td>
<td>0.01 ± 0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSAO-m$_{3T}$</td>
<td>0.0001 ± 0.0009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thymine</td>
<td>0.00001 ± 0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+)-CalanolideA</td>
<td>0.0000 ± 0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ddGTP</td>
<td>0.0000 ± 0.0002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are the means of two to three independent experiments ± S.D. The amino acid mutations are concomitantly present in both p66 and p51 subunits of the HIV-1 RT heterodimer.
quite different in our methods; it also cannot be excluded that different salt concentrations have an influence on the urea-ICH50 as well. The different nature of the particular RT gene construct may also account for the observed differences.

Although Thr139 is rather conserved in wild-type HIV-1 strains, Ceccherini-Silberstein et al. (2005) found that 3.7% of drug-treated HIV-1-infected patients were bearing mutations at position 139. These amino acid mutations seemed to be Ala, Arg, Lys, Met, Ser, Val, Ile, and Pro. The absence of the aspartic acid and the tyrosine mutations at position 139 in NNRTI-treated patients is in agreement with our site-directed mutagenesis observations, because viruses with highly impaired enzymes, such as the mutant T139D RT (2.5% wild-type activity) and the mutant T139Y RT (0.6% wild-type activity), would probably not be viable in cell culture and/or patients. Because none of the patients was treated with (+)-calanolide A, it seems that other drugs may in some cases also select for mutations at Thr139 either to decrease the sensitivity of the virus for the particular drug or to compensate for a potential decreased replication capacity of other mutations in RT. There was clearly a drug pressure on the virus, because in drug-naive individuals, six different mutations were spontaneously found in 10 of 457 isolates (i.e., Val1, Met1, Ala1, Arg2, Ile2, and Pro3), whereas in drug-treated individuals nine different mutations were found in 72 of 1556 isolates (i.e., Lys19, Arg18, Ala13, Gln9, Met6, Ile3, Ser2, Val1, and Pro1).

A mutation at position 139 to either Gln, Ile, Lys, or Tyr would result in a 6- to 20-fold resistance to this compound at the enzymatic level, whereas the influence of the mutations Gln, Ile, Lys, or Tyr on the resistance/sensitivity of RT to other NNRTIs or NRTIs are very minor (Table 1). Therefore, these amino acid mutations can be theoretically expected to appear under (+)-calanolide A pressure. However, a Thr-to-Ile conversion can emerge by a single transition point mutation (ACA→ATA), whereas double transversion point mutations (ACA→CAA) are required for the Thr-to-Gln conversion, and even triple transversion point mutations (ACA→TAT) are needed for the Thr to Tyr conversion. Therefore, a T139I RT mutation would be more likely to appear than the T139Q or T139Y mutations in HIV-1 RT. Moreover, the (+)-calanolide A-resistant T139K RT (which can also arise from a single point mutation) and mutant T139Y RT have a much lower catalytic activity than the mutant T139I RT enzyme. Thus, our site-directed mutagenesis and kinetic analysis of mutated T139X RTs makes it obvious why the T139I mutation must preferentially occur under (+)-calanolide A pressure in cell culture.

In a previous study using the Y2H RT dimerization assay, (+)-calanolide A had no detectable effect on RT dimerization (Tachedjian et al., 2001; Tachedjian and Goff, 2003). However, failure of an effect of (+)-calanolide A on RT dimerization can be explained by lack of entry of this compound in the yeast cells. Because the kinetic studies with (+)-calanolide A may suggest more than one site of interaction with the HIV-1 RT (Currens et al., 1996b), it would be very interesting to evaluate (+)-calanolide A in other p66-p51 RT dimerization assays. Given the fact that it has been shown that TSAO derivatives affect RT subunit dimerization, the appearance of the T139I resistance mutation under (+)-calanolide A pressure, which is near the TSAO-binding amino acid, Glu138, supports this view. In addition, the fact that the mutant T139D and T139I RT enzymes have increased sensitivity

### TABLE 2

**Kinetic analysis of wild-type and mutant T139I RT enzymes**

The data are means (± S.D.) of at least two to three independent experiments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Substrate or Template/Primer</th>
<th>Reverse Transcriptase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wild-Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dGTP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$K_m$</td>
<td>0.50 ± 0.05 µM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_{cat}$</td>
<td>0.015 ± 0.004 s⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_{cat}/K_m$</td>
<td>0.03 µM⁻¹ s⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PolyrC/oligo(dG)₁₂₋₁₅</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$K_m$</td>
<td>0.25 ± 0.08 µM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_{cat}$</td>
<td>0.15 ± 0.01 s⁻¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_{cat}/K_m$</td>
<td>0.6 µM⁻¹ s⁻¹</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Fig. 3. Inhibitory activity of (+)-calanolide A against the catalytic activity of wild-type and mutant HIV-1 RT enzymes that contain the T139I or T139D mutation solely in the p66, solely in the p51, or both in the p66 and p51 subunits.](image)

![Fig. 4. Effect of urea on the catalytic activity of mutant T139I, T139D, and wild-type HIV-1 RTs.](image)
toward the denaturation activity of urea is also supportive of a role for Thr139 in the stabilization of the HIV-1 RT heterodimer. In addition, the lower catalytic efficiency that was observed for the mutant T139I enzyme can also be explained by ensuing structural/conformational differences at the dimerization interface that critically affect proper positioning of the primer/template and/or the orientation of the incoming substrate molecules (i.e., dGTP). Additional support to this hypothesis is provided by the markedly decreased inhibitory activity of the NRTI ddGTP against some of the T139X mutants (Table 1).

The observed hypersensitivity (up to 20-fold) toward the thiocarboxanilide UC-781 (and efavirenz) for the majority of HIV-1 RT mutants, with the exception of T139I, is intriguing. In particular, hypersensitivity of RT to UC-781 as a result of mutations at amino acid position 139 in RT is rather puzzling because UC-781 makes direct contacts with Lys101, Val106, Tyr181, and Phe227 of p66 but not with the p51 subunit (Balzarini et al., 1998; Ren et al., 2004). One possible explanation is that the definite shape that the NNRTI-binding pocket adopts when this inhibitor is lodged into it can be achieved more easily in the presence of these types of mutations.

The protein stretch ranging from Ile135 to Thr139 makes up the tip of the so-called β-β8 loop that is present in both p66 and p51 subunits. An important difference, however, is that in p66, this loop is exposed to the solvent, whereas in p51 it lies close to the dimerization interface (Fig. 1). The importance of the structural support imparted by the β-β8 loop is demonstrated by the severe impairment of the polymerase pocket adopts when this inhibitor is lodged into it can be explained by the marked decrease of resistance of Thr139I RT against (+)-calanolide A and the requirement of only one (transition) point mutation in the 139 codon to afford an amino acid substitution may probably explain why the T139I mutation in HIV-1 RT consistently and predominantly appears in cell culture under (+)-calanolide A pressure. Based on the location of the 139-mutation in the crucial β7-β8 loop of the p51 subunit in the p66/p51 dimer interface and the more pronounced denaturation effect of urea against mutant T139I and T139D versus wild-type RT enzymes, it can be well possible that (++)-calanolide A affects dimerization of the HIV-1 RT heterodimer and thus represents the prototype compound of a new class of RT dimerization inhibitors.

Acknowledgments

We thank Kris Uyttersprot and Kristien Minner for excellent technical assistance and Christiane Callebaut for fine editorial help.

References


Calanolide A Sensitivity to HIV-1 Thr19 RT Mutants

De Clercq E (1999) Perspectives of non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NNRTIs) in the therapy of HIV-1 infection. II Pharmaco 54:26–45.


Pelemans H, Esnouf RM, Jonckheere H, De Clercq E, and Balzarini J (1998) Muta-
tional analysis of Tyr-318 within the non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibi-

Pérez-Pérez M-J, San-Félix A, Balzarini J, De Clercq E, and Camarasa M-J (1992) TSAO analogues. Stereospecific synthesis and anti-HIV-1 activity of 1-[2’5’-bis-
O-(tert-butyldimethylsilyl)-beta-o-ribofuranosyl]-3’-spiro-5’-(4’-amino-1’,2’-


Address correspondence to: Dr. J. Balzarini, Rega Institute for Medical Research, Minderbroedersstraat 10, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. E-mail: jan.balzarini@rega.kuleuven.be