

Docking for fragment inhibitors of AmpC β -lactamase

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Fragment screens for new ligands have had wide success, notwithstanding their constraint to libraries of 1,000–10,000 molecules. Larger libraries would be addressable were molecular docking reliable for fragment screens, but this has not been widely accepted. To investigate docking's ability to prioritize fragments, a library of >137,000 such molecules were docked against the structure of β -lactamase. Forty-eight fragments highly ranked by docking were acquired and tested; 23 had K_i values ranging from 0.7 to 9.2 mM. X-ray crystal structures of the enzyme-bound complexes were determined for 8 of the fragments. For 4, the correspondence between the predicted and experimental structures was high (RMSD between 1.2 and 1.4 Å), whereas for another 2, the fidelity was lower but retained most key interactions (RMSD 2.4–2.6 Å). Two of the 8 fragments adopted very different poses in the active site owing to enzyme conformational changes. The 48% hit rate of the fragment docking compares very favorably with "lead-like" docking and high-throughput screening against the same enzyme. To understand this, we investigated the occurrence of the fragment scaffolds among larger, lead-like molecules. Approximately 1% of commercially available fragments contain these inhibitors whereas only 10⁻⁷% of lead-like molecules do. This suggests that many more chemotypes and combinations of chemotypes are present among fragments than are available among lead-like molecules, contributing to the higher hit rates. The ability of docking to prioritize these fragments suggests that the technique can be used to exploit the better chemotype coverage that exists at the fragment level.

crystallography | drug design | hit rates | chemical space

Fragment-based screening has recently emerged as an important technique in early drug discovery (1–6). Typically constrained to libraries between 1,000 and 10,000 small molecules, it has nevertheless had hit rates of 5% or higher against many targets. Several of these have resisted ligand discovery by high-throughput screening (HTS), which exploits libraries containing 2–3 orders of magnitude more molecules than those typical for fragments. The high fragment hit rates have been attributed to 2 factors. First, fragments can complement subsites in the pocket without making the structural compromises necessary for larger, multifunctional molecules (7). Second, even a small fragment library typically explores many more chemotypes than is possible for libraries of larger molecules. The possible combinations of chemotypes rises exponentially with the size of the molecule (7), apparently increasing by a log order or more for every atom added in a reasonable size range (8, 9). Thus, one might well be more likely to find a good fragment from among a library of 1 thousand molecules than a good "drug-like" molecule from among a library of 1 million.

Still, the small size of fragment libraries leaves many accessible molecules untested. Even the most high-throughput fragment screen can now only address libraries of 10,000–20,000 compounds, whereas >250,000 fragments are commercially available (10). Although one might cover the 10⁶ commercially available, rule-of-five-compliant (11) compounds with a well-designed library that is one-tenth that size, the collapse in chemical space with molecular size means that leaving out 90–99% of available fragments will leave out approximately the same ratio of che-

motypes. Thus, it would be interesting to interrogate much larger compound libraries than are currently feasible for the biophysical assays on which fragment screens now rely.

One method to do so is molecular docking. Docking screens compound libraries for molecules that physically complement protein-binding sites. The technique has been used to discover new ligands in the "lead-like" (typically \leq 350 Da) or drug-like ranges (typically \leq 500 Da) (12, 13); some of these new ligands have been determined in complex with their targets by crystallography in geometries consistent with the docking predictions (14–17). Docking has also been used to prioritize molecules for fragment-based screens for several targets (5, 18–20). Despite these successes, doubt remains about applying docking to fragments because of possible promiscuous binding modes, the lack of handles to fit fragments into the pocket, and biases in docking scoring functions (21). This skepticism has been buttressed by the lack of structures directly comparing docking fragment predictions with subsequent crystallographic results.

We thus wanted to explore docking as a tool to prioritize fragments using AmpC β -lactamase as a model system. AmpC is well suited to addressing these questions because binding may be measured in a quantitative biochemical assay and biophysically by surface plasmon resonance (SPR), and high-resolution crystal structures can be readily obtained (22). Also, it is a protein that has been targeted by HTS and by docking (17) using the same library, and by docking alone (16). This allows us to compare the docking fragment hit rates with those from HTS and lead-like docking.

Here, we dock a library of 137,639 fragments against the crystal structure of AmpC β -lactamase and investigate the following questions. Can docking reliably prioritize fragments that inhibit in biochemical and biophysical assays? How do the hit rates compare with those from HTS, docking screens of lead-like molecules, or simply sampling fragments at random? What is the role of chemical space coverage in these different hit rates? How diverse are the fragments compared with the inhibitors discovered from the drug-like libraries? Are the docking predictions right for the right reasons—do experimental structures of the fragment inhibitors correspond to the docked poses?

Results

Docking Prioritization of Fragments. A total of 137,639 compounds from the ZINC database were docked against a crystal structure

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Data deposition: The atomic coordinates have been deposited in the Research Collaboratory for Structural Bioinformatics Protein Data Bank, www.rcsb.org (RCSB ID codes 3GV9, 3GV9, 3GRJ, 3GR2, 3GTC, 3GQZ, 3G5G).

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Table 1. Twenty-three fragment inhibitors identified biochemically and biophysically

Fragment structure	No.	Rank*	K_i , mM	HAC [†]	Molecular mass, Da	LE [‡]
	1	270 [§]	2.0	17	236	0.21
	2	139 [§]	1.0	17	236	0.24
	3	274 [§]	3.0	14	193	0.24
	4	89 [§]	2.0	18	248	0.20
	5	210 [§]	6.7	18	246	0.16
	6	52 [§]	1.8	13	200	0.29
	7	76 [§]	3.5	17	234	0.20
	8	47 [§]	2.6	16	220	0.20
	9	18 [§]	0.7	18	244	0.24
	10	159 [§]	2.2	17	232	0.21
	11	193 [§]	6.0	13	219	0.23
	12	149 [§]	1.0	14	188	0.29
	13	1 [¶]	2.7	8	138	0.47
	14	15 [¶]	1.7/3.9	16	239	0.25
	15	373 [¶]	7.0	15	227	0.20
	16	22 [¶]	7.1	16	215	0.18
	17	34 [¶]	3.2	15	238	0.23
	18	27 [¶]	7.7/21.0	16	217	0.18
	19	87 [¶]	2.0/6.8	14	227	0.26
	20	159 [¶]	4.5	15	226	0.21
	21	162 [¶]	7.5	12	185	0.24
	22	48 [¶]	4.9/18.0	12	185	0.26
	23	39 [¶]	9.2	16	237	0.17

*Docking rank.

[†] Heavy atom count — defined as the number of nonhydrogen atoms.[‡] (kcal/mol) per atom.[§] Ranking based on docking of 117,567 compounds.^{||} K_i values calculated from SPR assays.[¶] Ranking based on docking of 47,997 compounds.

of AmpC. Two libraries were used for the docking calculations: the first developed by using the definition of fragments proposed by Carr and Rees (23) (47,997 compounds) and a second that removed restrictions on hydrogen bond acceptors and donors (89,642 new compounds plus 27,925 compounds overlapping with the original database). The total elapsed time for the calculation ranged from 5 h (47,997 compounds) to 32 h (117,567 compounds) on a cluster using between 4 (47,997 compounds) and 9 cpus (117,567 compounds). From among the 500 top-scoring molecules from each screen, 48 were purchased and tested in both enzyme and SPR assays (*Methods*).

Dose–response curves were fit to inhibition numbers to obtain IC_{50} and K_i values [Table 1, [supporting information \(SI\) Figs. S1A and S2](#)]. Varying substrate and inhibitor concentrations allowed us to construct a Dixon Plot of 2 of the compounds, which confirmed competitive inhibition ([Fig. S1B](#)). Of the 48 compounds tested, 23 had K_i values of <10 mM, ranging from 700 μ M to 9.2 mM, with ligand efficiencies ranging from 0.16 to 0.47 (Table 1). Three inhibitors, compounds 6, 12, and 13, had ligand efficiencies of 0.29, 0.29, and 0.47 kcal/mol per atom. Dock rankings of the inhibitors ranged from 1 to 373 of 137,639 docked. This gives a 48% hit rate, defined as (number of actives/number of compounds experimentally tested) \times 100. SPR experiments were conducted for 4 compounds, and for these biochemical K_i and biophysical K_d values correlated well (Table 1, [Fig. S3](#)).

To ensure that the high hit rate observed was not an artifact of screening at a high concentration, we tested a set of fragments chosen at random from the library. Of 20 random fragments tested, 1 inhibited detectably with a K_i of 3.1 mM. As it happened, this 1 random hit also scored well by docking (rank = 2,223, docking score = -60.3 kcal/mol), ranking among the top 5% of all molecules docked.

Similarity analysis was performed to measure the diversity of the 23 fragment hits relative to each other and relative to that of 21 known lead-like inhibitors of AmpC ([Fig. S4](#)) (16, 17). By using FCFP-4 fingerprints (SciTegic Inc. and Accelrys Inc.) generated with Pipeline Pilot, the average pairwise Tanimoto coefficient within the fragment set was 0.22, and the lowest and highest Tanimoto coefficients were 0.13 and 0.26. Conversely, similarity coefficients within the lead-like sulfonamides and phthalimides previously discovered for AmpC (16, 17) fell between 0.21 and 0.55, with an average value of 0.43. Comparing the similarity between the 2 sets (i.e., fragments vs. lead-like), the minimum Tanimoto coefficient was 0.16, the maximum was 0.23, and the mean value was 0.19. Thus, the known lead-like inhibitors are internally less diverse than the fragments, and the fragments are structurally distinct from the known inhibitors.

Comparing the Docking Predicted Pose to the Crystal Structure. Of the 23 active fragments, 8 crystal structures were determined with resolutions from 1.5 Å to 2.5 Å (Table S1). The location of the inhibitors was unambiguous in the final $2F_o - F_c$ electron density map (Fig. 1 *A–E*, *G*, and *H*). Fragment 22 (Fig. 1*F*) was previously crystallized (24). To evaluate accuracy, the structure predicted by docking, directly from the initial calculation and without further refinement, was overlaid by using protein backbone and ligand atoms onto the crystallographic conformation. RMSD values were then calculated by using ligand atoms only. For fragments 21, 12, 1, and 22, the docking predictions corresponded closely to the X-ray results, with RMSD values of 1.2, 1.6, 1.4, and 1.3 Å, respectively (Fig. 1 *C–F*). For compounds 8 and 20, the RMSD values were 2.5 and 2.6 Å, making the correspondence substantially worse. Even here, both crystal structures retain most of the contacts with the catalytic residues predicted in the docking pose (Fig. 1 *A* and *B*). For fragment 8, the crystallographic orientation differs mainly by a translational shift. We note that this fragment had 2 configurations in the

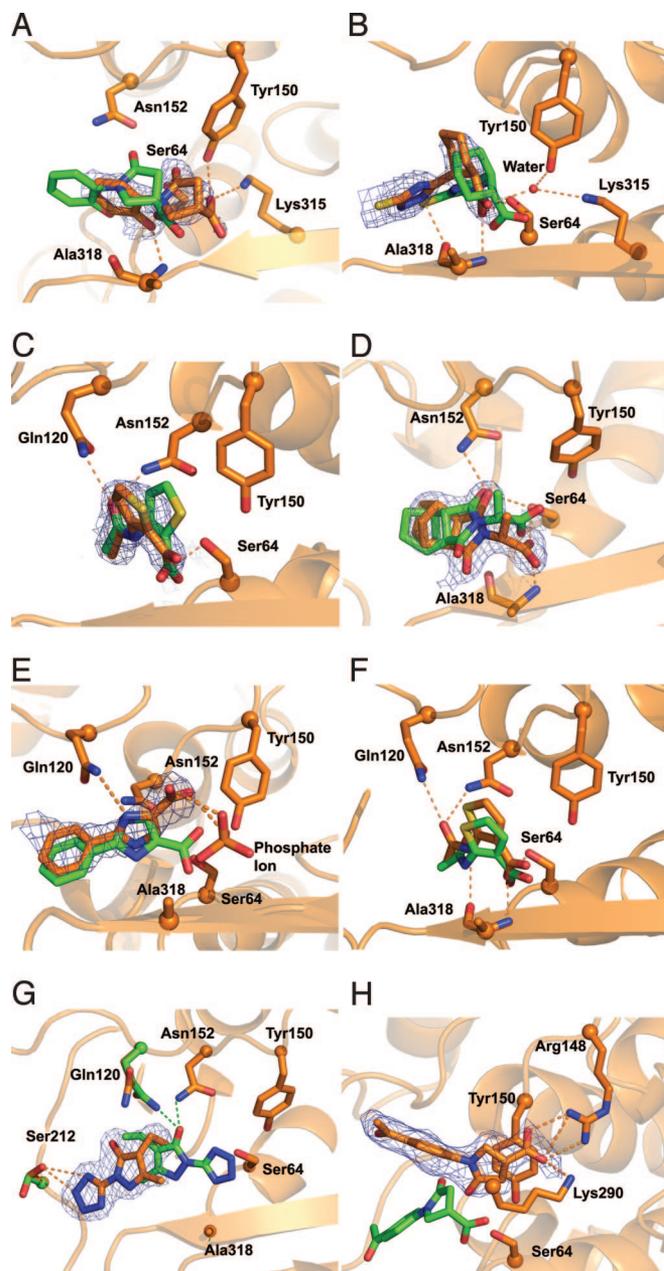


Fig. 1. Overlay of docked pose (green) and crystallographic pose (orange) for 8 of the fragment inhibitors prioritized by docking. The compounds shown are: 8 (*A*), 20 (*B*), 21 (*C*), 1 (*D*), 12 (*E*), 22 (*F*), 3 (*G*), and 5 (*H*). The final $2F_o - F_c$ maps contoured at 1σ are shown for *A–E*, *G*, and *H*. Compound 22, although discovered as part of the docking screen described here, was reported previously and no density is shown for it (24).

electron density, both modeled at 50% occupancy; here, we consider only that one closest to the docking prediction. For compound 20, the “warhead” carboxylate group interacts with both the catalytic serine and the oxyanion hole, as predicted in the docked pose (Fig. 1*B*). The only substantial change is in the position of the triazole group, which results from favorable van der Waals interactions between the cyclohexyl ring and the protein.

In all these AmpC-fragment crystal structures, with 2 exceptions noted below, we typically observe hydrogen bonds between the ligand and the following residues: the catalytic Ser-64, one or both of the oxyanion hole nitrogens from Ala-318 and Ser-64,

and hydrogen bonds mediated by Gln-120 and Asn-152. The ligands also consistently form van der Waals contacts with Tyr-150 (Fig. 1*A–H*). These interactions are normally conserved in the docking pose. In the case of compound **12**, the warhead carboxylate group is swung away from the catalytic serine, inconsistent with the prediction. However, this may be a crystallographic artifact caused by the high concentration of phosphate (1.7 M) present in the crystallizing buffer, leading to interference by a phosphate ion that binds in the active site (Fig. 1*E*).

Whereas most of the docked poses corresponded to the crystallographic structures, the complexes with compounds **5** and **3** disagreed with the docking predictions. This failure results from changes in the protein conformation in the holo forms. In complex with **3**, Gln-120 swings away from the binding pocket and instead of hydrogen bonding with the fragment hydroxyl, it interacts with a water molecule (Fig. 1*G*). Additionally, Ser-212 rotates into the pocket, stabilizing the crystal pose through a hydrogen bond with the tetrazole nitrogen of compound **3** (Fig. 1*G*).

Much greater protein flexibility is observed in the crystal structure of the AmpC/5 complex. Here, the helix formed by residues 275–295 unwinds to accommodate the ligand. This reveals a cryptic binding pocket hidden in the apo structure against which we docked. This new site is stabilized by a salt bridge between the ligand carboxylate and Arg-148, π – π stacking interactions with Tyr-150, and by hydrogen bonds with Lys-290, which swings in toward the pocket (Fig. 1*H* and Fig. S5). Compound **5** seems to well complement this cryptic site: in the crystallographic geometry, the DOCK score is -80.1 kcal/mol, which would have put it as the top-ranking compound from the entire fragment screen. Admittedly, this score does not account for the protein reorganization necessary to form this site. Still, this site has been observed previously with 2 different fragment inhibitors of AmpC (24) and may merit further evaluation.

Chemical Space Analysis. Many of the 23 fragment inhibitors represent chemotypes not previously seen among larger inhibitors of AmpC. We wondered whether these had been simply missed from the previous HTS and docking screens or whether they were genuinely absent among larger molecules. To investigate this, a substructure search was conducted against 2 libraries: that of the 10 million commercially available compounds in ZINC (10) and that of the 70,563 compounds from the Molecular Libraries-Small Molecule Repository (MLSMR) used in the previous HTS against AmpC (17). We looked for lead-like molecules (defined as heavy atom count, HAC, ≤ 25) that contained any of the 23 fragments and maintained their key warhead groups (e.g., we did not allow key carboxylates to be derivitized to esters) (Fig. 2*A*). This found 675 larger lead-like molecules from ZINC and 14 from the MLSMR, from which several of the lead-like inhibitors had been originally found. We then asked how many lead-like molecules containing these fragments might be possible. For a pool of side chains with which to elaborate the 23 fragment inhibitors, we drew from the precalculated generated database (GDB) of molecules, a theoretical library that contains all possible “stable” compounds up to 11 heavy atoms composed of C, O, N, and F, as well as hydrogens (8). We split the GDB into 11 sets by HAC ($i = 1$ –11), such that each set contains m_i potential decorations, taking into consideration that a given GDB molecule can be attached to our fragment at multiple points (Fig. 2*B*). We calculated all of the ways to add these side chains to the fragments through up to k attachment points without exceeding 25 HAC. These criteria are filled by each unique combination of $q_1, q_2, q_3, \dots, q_{11}$ values that simultaneously satisfies the following 2 equations:

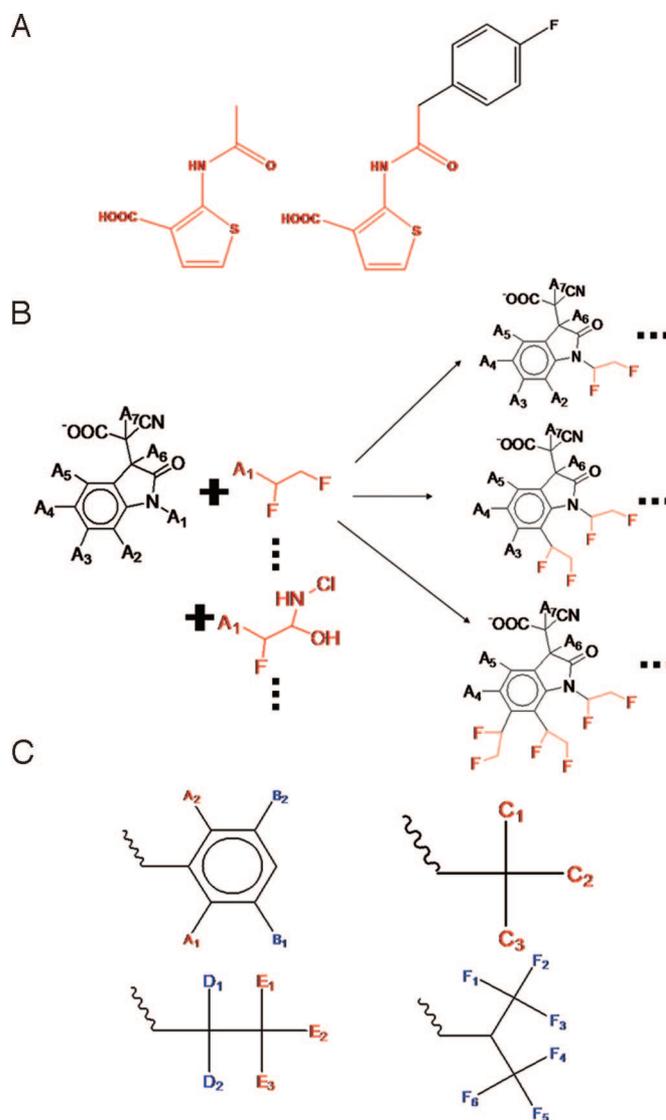


Fig. 2. Illustration of fragment substructures and their expansions with side chains. (A) The fragment (red, *Left*) is a substructure of the larger lead-like compound (*Right*). (B) The number of attachment points on the fragment scaffold (A_1 to A_7) and on the example side chain (A_1) was determined by generating smiles strings of each and identifying the number of hydrogen atoms. Each decoration was allowed only 1 attachment point at a time (excluding ring closing within the fragment). The possible number of lead-like expansions (≤ 25 HAC) that could be formed by combining each decoration to attachment points on the 23 fragment scaffolds was calculated analytically by using Eq. 3. (C) Structures of the different kinds of symmetry elements seen in the fragments. In each case, the symmetrical attachment points (e.g., A_1 and A_2 , C_1 , C_2 , and C_3) were collapsed into a single attachment point (e.g., A_1 and A_2 count as only 1 attachment point). These provided a lower limit for the possible number of compounds that contain the fragments as substructures. The upper limit is calculated by assuming each attachment point is unique (no symmetry).

$$\sum_{i=1}^{11} i \cdot q_i \leq 25 - fHAC. \quad [1]$$

and

$$k = \sum_{i=1}^{11} q_i \leq n. \quad [2]$$

is bias in the library, such as aminergic GPCR ligands (26, 27). Said another way, the chances of discovering interesting chemotypes for biological targets is many orders of magnitude higher when targeting molecules in the fragment weight range than even at slightly higher size ranges. These points have been made by others, and have been modeled by Hann and colleagues (7). The contribution of this work is to reduce general principles and models to specific quantification for a particular series of chemotypes actually found to inhibit an enzyme, and to show how structure-based docking can prioritize molecules from among a large set of available fragments that would be inaccessible by empirical approaches alone.

Materials and Methods

Docking. Fragment-like molecules from the ZINC database (10) were docked into an apo AmpC structure (PDB ID code 1KE4) (28) by using DOCK3.5.54. Two screens of the ZINC fragments were conducted: once when the library contained 50,000 fragments and again after it had expanded to 137,000 fragments. For the first screen, compounds were filtered for the following properties: $150 \leq$ molecular mass ≤ 250 Da, $-2 \leq$ ClogP ≤ 3 , number of rotatable bonds ≤ 3 , number of H-bond donors ≤ 2 , and acceptors ≤ 4 . In the second screen, the restrictions on rotatable bonds and hydrogen bonding were removed. To prepare the protein-binding site, all water and ion molecules were removed except for Wat403 (in the first screen), and Wat466 and Wat565 (in the second) (SI Text).

For the docking calculations themselves, a sphere set was constructed based on 13 ligand-bound X-ray structures (17); these spheres determine how ligand orientations in the active site are calculated. Ligand-protein fit was calculated based van der Waals and electrostatic complementarity between enzyme and

ligand, corrected for ligand desolvation (see SI Text). After docking, the 500 top-ranking poses were visually inspected. In addition to simple rank, which for 137,000 compounds must be the primary criterion, compounds were prioritized for contacts to key catalytic residues (e.g., Ser-64 and the oxyanion hole), chemotype novelty, and commercial availability. This is our common practice in prosecuting docking screens, and these criteria are consistent with previous studies. Forty-eight high-scoring docking compounds were purchased and tested experimentally, as were 20 fragments selected at random (SI Text).

Absorbance and SPR Assays. For information on absorbance and SPR assays, see SI Text.

Ligand Similarity and Substructure Search. For information on ligand similarity and substructure search, See SI Text.

Crystallography. All AmpC/fragment structures were based on cocrystallization and structures determined by molecular replacement (see SI Text).

Theoretical Number of Lead-Like Compounds. Eq. 1 was used to determine how many lead-like compounds should theoretically contain the 23 active fragments as substructures. The GDB was used as a source of side chains to add to fragment scaffolds (8). Multiple boundary conditions were set to make the calculation feasible (see Results).

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