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Short Communication

Linking algal growth inhibition to chemical activity: Baseline toxicity required 1% of saturation

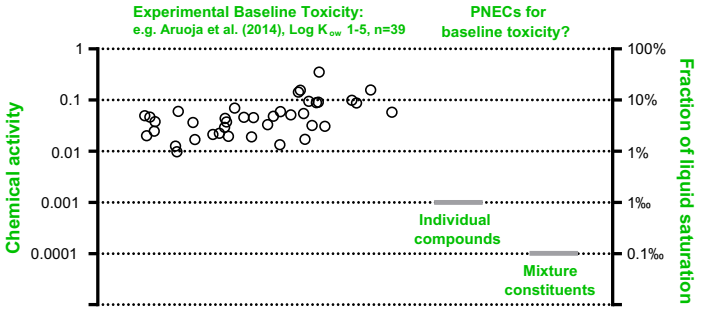
Stine N. Schmidt [a,1], Philipp Mayer [b,*]

[a] Department of Environmental Science, Faculty of Science and Technology, Aarhus University, Frederiksborgvej 399, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark
[b] Department of Environmental Engineering, DTU Environment, Technical University of Denmark, Miljøvej 113, 2800 Kgs. Lyngby, Denmark

HIGHLIGHTS

- Algal growth inhibition was linked to chemical activity.
- The chemical activity range for baseline toxicity (0.01–0.1) was supported.
- Baseline toxicity (EC_{50}) required 1% of liquid solubility.
- 1‰ of liquid solubility is suggested as PNEC for baseline toxicity.
- 0.1‰ of liquid solubility is suggested as PNEC for baseline toxicity of mixture constituents.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

Recently, high-quality data were published on the algal growth inhibition caused by 50 non-polar narcotic compounds, of which 39 were liquid compounds with defined water solubility. In the present study, the toxicity data for these liquids were applied to challenge the chemical activity range for baseline toxicity. First, the reported effective concentrations (EC_{50}) were divided by the respective water solubilities (S_{water}), since the obtained EC_{50}/S_{water} ratio essentially equals the effective chemical activity (Ea_{50}). The majority of EC_{50}/S_{water} ratios were within the expected chemical activity range of 0.01–0.1 for baseline toxicity, and none of the ratios were significantly below 0.01. On a practical level, these findings suggest EC_{50} values for baseline toxicity to be at or above 1% of liquid solubility, which would have been accurate or conservative for all 39 liquids with defined water solubility in the applied dataset. On an environmental risk assessment level, predicted no-effect concentrations (PNECs) for baseline toxicity could even be set as a percentage of saturation, which can easily be extended to mixtures. However, EC_{50} values well below 1% of liquid saturation can still occur and would be a direct indication of excess toxicity.

1. Introduction

In a recent study, Aruoja et al. (2014) determined the algal growth inhibition caused by 50 non-polar narcotic compounds and generated a quantitative structure-activity relationship (QSAR) between effective concentrations (EC_{50}) and octanol to water partition coefficients ($Log K_{ow}$, Fig. 1a). The data, and the accompanying QSAR developed for baseline toxicity, are useful within a regulatory risk assessment context, in that they provide additional guidance with respect to estimating EC_{50} values based on molecular descriptors. However, the dataset of Aruoja et al. (2014) also provides an opportunity to challenge the recently proposed chemical activity range for baseline toxicity (Reichenberg and Mayer,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 45251569.
E-mail address: philm@env.dtu.dk (P. Mayer).
[1] Present address: Department of Environmental Engineering, DTU Environment, Technical University of Denmark, Miljøvej 113, 2800 Kgs. Lyngby, Denmark.

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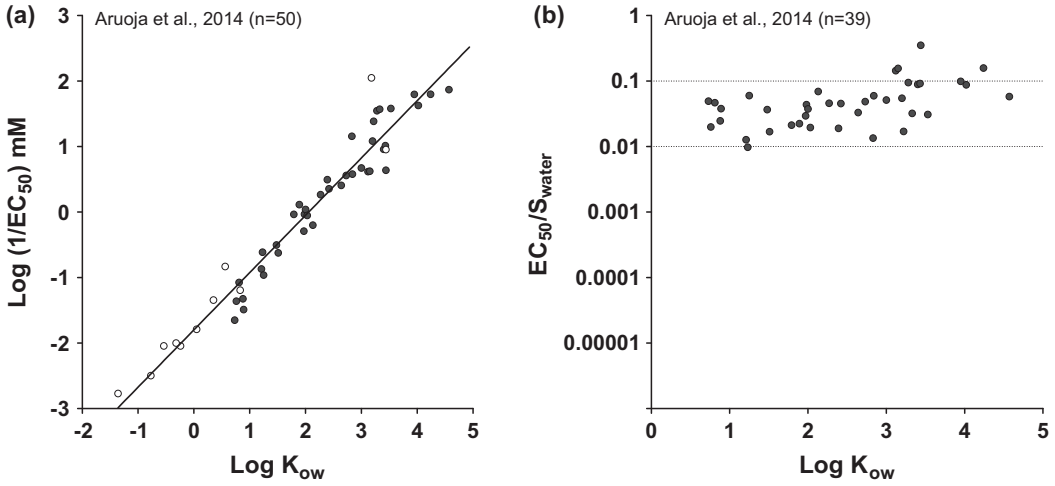

Fig. 1. (a) Quantitative structure-activity relationship (QSAR) between effective concentrations (EC_{50}) and octanol to water partition coefficients ($Log K_{ow}$) for 50 non-polar narcotic compounds (reproduced from Aruoja et al., 2014). Water miscible and solid test compounds ($n = 11$) are indicated by light circles. (b) Ratios of EC_{50} (mg L^{-1}) and water solubility (S_{water}, mg L^{-1}) for 39 non-polar narcotic liquids plotted as a function of $Log K_{ow}$.

2006; Mayer and Holmstrup, 2008; Mackay et al., 2009, 2014). The chemical activity (a) quantifies the energetic level of an organic compound relative to the energetic level in its pure liquid (reference state, $a = 1$), and the chemical activity of a liquid is thus defined between 0 and 1 (Reichenberg and Mayer, 2006). Several recent experimental and modelling studies have proposed, and to some degree also confirmed, that baseline toxicity requires a chemical activity of at least 0.01–0.1 (e.g., Reichenberg and Mayer, 2006; Mayer and Holmstrup, 2008; Mackay et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2010; Mackay et al., 2011, 2014; Lee et al., 2013). While the experimental studies tend to be limited in terms of tested compounds, the modelling studies have involved data selection and estimation of data. Thus, larger datasets of experimental toxicity data, which can easily be converted to chemical activity, can profitably complement the reported experimental and modelling studies.

The interpretation of toxicity data on a chemical activity basis can be achieved using an approach that is both relatively simple and elegant. Specifically, when a liquid compound is dissolved in water, and has limited water solubility (S_{water}), the ratio of EC_{50}/S_{water} provides a unitless metric that essentially equals the effective chemical activity (Ea_{50}) (Ferguson, 1939; Reichenberg and Mayer, 2006). The dataset reported by Aruoja et al. (2014) is thus well suited for assessing the utility of the chemical activity approach within a risk assessment paradigm for several reasons: First, the algal growth inhibition tests were conducted in closed vessels without headspace and at reduced algal density, which both minimises the loss of test compound. Second, the majority of test compounds were liquids, which simplifies the conversion from aqueous concentration to chemical activity. Finally, a wide range of chemical groups were included (Aruoja et al., 2014). Thus, the aims of the present study are: (1) to convert toxicity data published by Aruoja and co-workers to chemical activity, (2) to challenge the proposed chemical activity range of 0.01–0.1 for baseline toxicity and finally (3) to provide a framework for how the obtained findings can be used in practise.

2. Methods

Algal growth inhibition tests of 50 non-polar narcotic compounds were recently reported by Aruoja et al. (2014). The 72-h tests were conducted in closed vessels without headspace and at reduced algal density in order to minimise losses of test compound (Mayer et al., 2000). Inhibition of growth rate was used as the toxicity endpoint and expressed as effective concentrations (EC_{50}). In the present study, we determined the ratio of EC_{50} (mg L^{-1}) and water solubility (S_{water}, mg L^{-1}) for all the liquid compounds with defined water solubility, for which this ratio essentially equals the effective chemical activity (Ea_{50}). Test compounds that were either water miscible ($n = 9$) or solids ($n = 2$) were excluded from this data analysis, because their Ea_{50} not simply can be approximated as the ratio of EC_{50} and S_{water}. The EC_{50}/S_{water} ratios of the remaining 39 test compounds were plotted as a function of their respective $Log K_{ow}$ (Fig. 1b. See Supplementary Table 1 for a list of the 39 liquids). Additional data from closed algal growth inhibition tests were found in the literature for 14 of the 39 test compounds (Hsieh et al., 2006; Lin et al., 2005). The additional data were included in Supplementary Fig. 1 for validation and as an additional reference, in the absence of analytical exposure confirmation in the study by Aruoja et al. (2014).

The water solubilities and $Log K_{ow}$ values given by Aruoja and co-workers were double-checked in the PhysProp Database (SRC Inc.), and the following four corrections were made; the water solubilities of diethylether, 1,2-dichlorobenzene and pentachloroethane were corrected to 60400 mg L^{-1}, 156 mg L^{-1} and 490 mg L^{-1}, respectively, while the $Log K_{ow}$ value of 1,2-dichlorobenzene was corrected to 3.43. In all other cases, data were used as reported by Aruoja et al. (2014).

3. Results and discussion

The EC_{50}/S_{water} ratios for the 39 non-polar narcotic liquids were essentially within the chemical activity range of 0.01–0.1 (Fig. 1b). These ratios represent effective chemical activities (Ea_{50}) for liquids with limited water solubility (e.g. $S_{water} < 1$–10 g L^{-1} or $Log K_{ow} \geqslant 2$, Supplementary Fig. 2), whereas they still roughly approximate Ea_{50} for the more water soluble compounds (Ferguson, 1939; Reichenberg and Mayer, 2006). In this way, the EC_{50}/S_{water} ratios shown in Fig. 1b clearly support the recently established chemical activity range for baseline toxicity (Reichenberg and Mayer, 2006; Mayer and Holmstrup, 2008; Mackay et al., 2009, 2014). This finding was confirmed by additional toxicity data for 14 of the 39 test compounds (Supplementary Fig. 1). Again, the EC_{50}/S_{water} ratios were essentially within the expected range of 0.01–0.1 for baseline toxicity, and none of the ratios (in total $n = 56$) were significantly below 0.01 (Supplementary Fig. 1).