Revista Brasileira de Farmacognosia xxx (2017) xxx–xxx

Brazilian Journal of Pharmacognosy
REVISTA BRASILEIRA DE FARMACOGNOSIA
www.elsevier.com/locate/bjp

Original Article

Maytenus distichophylla and *Salacia crassifolia*: source of products with potential acetylcholinesterase inhibition

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 21 July 2016
Accepted 16 December 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Celastraceae
Acetylcholinesterase
Natural products
Pentacyclic triterpenes
Physostigmine

ABSTRACT

The phytochemical study of the extract leaves from *Maytenus distichophylla* Mart. and *Salacia crassifolia* (Mart. ex Schult.) G. Don, Celastraceae, resulted in the isolation of 3-oxofriedelane, 3β-hydroxyfriedelane, 3β,24-dihydroxyfriedelane, 3-oxo-28,29-dihydroxyfriedelane, two mixtures of pentacyclic triterpenes (α-amyrin with β-amyrin and 3β-stearyloxy-urs-12-ene with 3β-stearyloxy-olean-12-ene), 3β-palmityloxy-urs-12-ene, the steroid β-sitosterol and its glycosylated derivative β-glucosyl-β-sitosterol, tritriacontanoic acid and the natural polymer gutta percha. The chemical structures of these constituents were established by IR, ^{1}H and ^{13}C NMR spectral data. Crude extracts, the mixtures of triterpenes and the isolated constituents were subjected to *in vitro* acetylcholinesterase inhibitory evaluation. Acetylcholinesterase inhibitory effect was observed for crude chloroform extract leaves from *M. distichophylla* (100%) and *S. crassifolia* (97.93 ± 5.63%) and for the triterpenes 3β,24-dihydroxyfriedelane (99.05 ± 1.12%), 3-oxo-28,29-dihydroxyfriedelane (90.59 ± 3.76%) and 3β-palmityloxy-urs-12-ene (97.93 ± 1.47%). The percent inhibitions induced by these natural products were very similar to those produced by physostigmine (93.94 ± 2.10%) a standard acetylcholinesterase inhibitor. Therefore, these results open perspectives for the use of these species as source of compounds with similar physostigmine pharmacological effect.

Introduction

Neurodegenerative diseases result from chronic breakdown and progressive functional or structural loss of neurons, particularly those of the central nervous system (CNS). The accumulation of aggregated proteins at neurons has been correlated to these types of diseases (Park, 2010). The neurodegeneration process observed in Alzheimer's disease (AD) has been characterized by progressive dementia and memory loss. Elevated levels of the peptide β-amyloid (Aβ) are associated with alterations of the synaptic function and neural network activity that probably underlies the cognitive deficits that occur in AD. Furthermore, the accumulation of this toxic peptide leads to deposition of Aβ into plaques and is thought to drive a pathologic cascade, which culminates in neuronal death (Cramer et al., 2012). The loss of cholinergic cells is accompanied by a decrease in the concentration of the acetylcholine (ACh). This endogenous compound is hydrolyzed by acetylcholinesterase (AChE), a hydrolytic enzyme of the serine class that is of major importance to physiology of the cholinergic synapses of the somatic system, the autonomic nervous system and the central nervous system (CNS) (Triggle et al., 1998). Therefore, one of the current accepted strategies in pharmacotherapy of AD has been the use of AChE inhibitors (Yang et al., 2012). As example, physostigmine (eserine) exerts a stereoselective inhibition of cholinesterase enzymes, such as AChE and butyrylcholinesterase (BuChE) by acting as a competitor or pseudosubstrate and transferring a carbamate residue to the enzyme's active site. Spontaneous hydrolysis regenerates the native enzyme and its function (Triggle et al., 1998).

The current drugs that act inhibiting AChE produce limited therapeutic results against AD, however, primarily provide a short-term alleviation of the symptoms, without blocking the progression of disease (Park et al., 2012). Until this moment, the development of more efficient AChE inhibitors, which act mainly in brain, has been

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bjp.2016.12.006

considered as an effective approach to be applied for treating AD (Liu et al., 2013).

The nature is a rich source of biological and chemical diversity. Complex chemical structures isolated from natural products cannot be easily obtained by synthesis or semi synthesis in laboratories (Filho et al., 2006). The natural compounds, represented by the class of pentacyclic triterpenes (PCTT), are secondary plant metabolites that have a potential inhibitory property of AChE (Gurovic et al., 2010). The PCTT with skeleton lupane and friedelane can be included amongst the compounds to be used to treat CNS disorders observed in AD (Rodrigues et al., 2014).

The Celastraceae family represents a good source of PCTT that are of great interest, due to their wide range of biological activities (Silva et al., 2013). Species of this family, like *Maytenus ilicifolia*, have been used in traditional medicine of different regions of Brazil, for the treatment of gastric ulcers (De Andrade et al., 2007), inflammations, and diarrhea (Santos et al., 2007). In addition, the pharmacological potential of some Celastraceae species have being evidenced through its traditional use in Northeast of Brazil, as CNS stimulant, and to treat insomnia and migraine (Omena, 2009).

In the present work extracts and constituents from two species of the Celastraceae family, *Maytenus distichophylla* and *Salacia crassifolia*, were investigates in relation to the *in vitro* AChE inhibitory activity.

Materials and methods

^{1}H (400 MHz) and ^{13}C (100 MHz) NMR experiments were carried out on a Bruker *Avance* DRX-400, operating at 300 K. The chemical shifts assignments (δ) were expressed in parts-per-million (ppm) and coupling constants (J) registered in Hertz (Hz). Tetramethylsilane (TMS) was used as internal standard ($\delta_H = \delta_C = 0$). The infrared spectra (IR) (1% KBr soln, 400–4000 cm^{-1}) were obtained on Shimadzu IR408 spectrometer. Melting points were determined on MQAPF-302 apparatus (Microquímica Equipamentos Ltda).

Column chromatography (CC) processes were performed using silica gel 60 [0.063–0.200 mm (70–230 mesh ASTM)], as stationary phase, and organic solvent pure, or in mixtures of crescent polarity, as mobile phase. Silica gel 60 (Merck) was used to prepare plates (0.25 mm) for analytic thin layer chromatography (TLC).

The leaves of *Maytenus distichophylla* Mart., Celastraceae, were collected in Jequié, Bahia, Brazil, and the species was identified by Dra. Guadalupe Licona de Macedo of Departamento de Botânica of Universidade Estadual do Sudoeste da Bahia (UESB), Brazil. A voucher specimen (No. HUESB 2093) was deposited in the *Herbarium* of Departamento de Botânica of UESB. The leaves of *Salacia crassifolia* (Mart. ex Schult.) G. Don, Celastraceae, were collected in Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, Brazil, and the species was identified by Dra. Maria Olívia Mercadante-Simões of Universidade Estadual de Montes Claros, Brazil. A voucher specimen (No. HBCB 144624) is preserved in the *Herbarium* of Instituto de Ciências Biológicas, UFMG. The plant materials were collected in accordance with authorization (Process: 010119/2014-0) to access to the genetic patrimony emitted by Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq), Brazil.

The leaves of *M. distichophylla* and *S. crassifolia* were dried at room temperature and fragmented on a mill, separately. Each powdered material was sequentially extracted with hexane, chloroform and ethyl acetate.

The chloroform extract (35.6 g) from *M. distichophylla* was subjected to silica gel CC, initially eluted with MeOH and then with $CHCl_3$, the last solvent yielded compound **13** (6 g). After removal the solvent, the fractions eluted with MeOH were submitted to successive silica gel CC, furnishing the constituents **7** and **8** as mixture (178 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 70:30), **1** (55 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 70:30), **2** (23 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 60:40), **5** and **6** as mixture (35 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 15:85), **10** (18 mg; hexane–EtOAc 95:05), **3** (272 mg; hexane–EtOAc 70:30), **12** (35 mg; $CHCl_3$–EtOAc 95:05), and **11** (87.3 mg; hexane–EtOAc 30:70).

The chloroform extract (44 g) from *S. crassifolia* was subjected to silica gel CC eluted with MeOH followed by $CHCl_3$ allowing the isolation of compound **13** (30 g). The fractions obtained with methanol, after the removal the solvent, were submitted to successive silica gel CC, furnishing the constituents, **9** (11.2 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 80:20), **1** (10.2 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 25:75), **2** (9.7 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 15:85), **5** and **6** as mixture (3.7 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 10:90), **10** (11.8 mg; hexane–$CHCl_3$ 5:95), **4** (24.4 mg; $CHCl_3$–EtOAc 27:75) and **12** (167.3 mg; $CHCl_3$–EtOAc 10:90).

The *in vitro* AChE inhibitory activity of extracts and constituents was evaluated using a 96-well microtiter plate following the Ellman's method (Ellman et al., 1961). The buffer A (50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 8, containing 0.1 M NaCl and 0.02 M $MgCl_2 \cdot 6H_2O$), B (50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 8, containing 0.1% bovine serum albumin), and C (50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 8) were prepared and used in this assay. The volumes of 25 μl of ACh iodide (15 mM in water), 125 μl of 5,5-dithiobis-(2-nitrobenzoic acid) (3 mM in buffer A), 50 μl of buffer B, and 25 μl of sample (10 mg/ml in MeOH diluted by 10 times with buffer C, providing a final concentration of 1 mg/ml) were added into each well of a 96-well microtiter plate. Instead of the addition of sample solution, 25 μl of buffer C was used to prepare the blank sample. The positive control physostigmine was prepared using similar procedure. Each assay was carried out in quintuplicate. The absorbance was measured at 405 nm every 60 s by eight times using an Elisa Thermoplate microplate reader. After addition of 25 μl of AChE solution (0.226 U/ml in buffer B), the absorbance was again measured every 60 s, for 10 times. The increase in absorbance relative to spontaneous hydrolysis of substrate was corrected by reaction rate variation before and after addition of the enzyme. The inhibition percentage was calculated by comparing the results produced by the samples and physostigmine, in relation to blank.

Results and discussion

Using phytochemical methods the following known compounds were isolated and identified of the leaves from *M. distichophylla* and *S. crassifolia*: 3-oxofriedelane (**1**) (Mahato and Kundu, 1994), 3β-hydroxyfriedelane (**2**) (Mahato and Kundu, 1994), 3β,24-dihydroxyfriedelane (**3**) (Costa and Carvalho, 2003) and 3-oxo-28,29-dihydroxyfriedelane (**4**) (Weeratunga et al., 1982), mixture of α-amyrin (**5**) and β-amyrin (**8**) (Mahato and Kundu, 1994), mixture of derivates of PCTT 3β-stearyloxy-urs-12-ene (**6**) (Miranda et al., 2006) and 3β-stearyloxy-olean-12-ene (**9**) (Vieira-Filho et al., 2003), 3β-palmityloxy-urs-12-ene (**7**) (Vieira-Filho et al., 2003), the steroid β-sitosterol (**10**) (Lendl et al., 2005) and its glycosylated derivative β-glucosyl-β-sitosterol (**11**) (Lendl et al., 2005), tritriacontanoic acid (**12**) (Hamdan et al., 2014), and the natural polymer gutta percha (**13**) (Oliveira et al., 2006). Even though occurring in distinct biomes, located about 1100 km far from one another, both species, *M. distichophylla* and *S. crassifolia* presents the compounds **1**, **2**, **5**, **10**, **12** and **13**. This fact contributes to confirm that species of the Celastraceae family uses similar biosynthetic routes to produce its secondary metabolites. The main chemical shift assignments observed in the NMR spectra of compounds **1**–**13** are presented below.

Please cite this article in press as: Ferreira, F.L., et al. *Maytenus distichophylla* and *Salacia crassifolia*: source of products with potential acetylcholinesterase inhibition. Revista Brasileira de Farmacognosia (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bjp.2016.12.006