

Cytotoxicity and Metabolic Study of New Psychoactive Substances

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Science)

under the supervision of Professor Shanlin Fu and
Professor Paul Kenneth Witting

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March 2021

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, *Huey Sze Leong* declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of *Doctor of Philosophy*, in the *School of Mathematical and Physical Sciences/ Faculty of Science* at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my upmost gratitude to Professor Shanlin Fu for all his kindness, support and invaluable guidance. I would particularly like to thank him for his patience and belief in me, which enabled me to finally arrive at the final stage of this challenging but rewarding journey. This academic pursuit would not have been accomplished without him.

To my co-supervisor, Professor Paul Kenneth Witting, I would like to thank him for his varied support in the laboratory and advice given to me throughout my candidature. Without his external collaboration, the success of this project would not be possible. I would also like to thank colleagues at the Discipline of Pathology, The University of Sydney, Mr Martin Simone for helping me to get orientated in the laboratory and instructing me with regard to cell biology, which added a new dimension to my science journey. Furthermore, I would also like to thank the staff at The Charles Perkin Centre, The University of Sydney, especially Mr Craig Jackson for providing administrative and technical support as well as instrumentation training whenever needed in the laboratory.

I thank all the academic and professional staff at UTS who supported me throughout my candidature. I wish to especially thank Ms Jane Cameron and Ms Zofia Winiarski for the technical support with the fungus study and allowing me the access to the incubation facility. I must also thank Dr Ronald Shimmon and Dr Dayanne Bordin Mozaner Bordin for all the support in the laboratory especially with the LC-MS instruments.

I would also like to thank Professor Claude Roux and the Centre for Forensic Science for their strong support, particularly with the attendance of conferences.

To the UTS friends especially colleagues from Drugs and Toxicology Group that I have made over the last couple of years, thank you for making my PhD enjoyable. Your thoughtful comments during our discussions added insight and shaped my perspectives throughout my candidature. I would also like to thank Mr Ahmad Yusri Mohd Yusop for being a great colleague with me at conferences and always extending help whenever I needed some.

Lastly, I want to express my deepest gratitude to God and my family for supporting me throughout my PhD journey both emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Your prayers and encouragement for me have spurred me on to do my best and empowered me to achieve something that I never thought possible. I love you all dearly.

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List of papers/publications

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For Chapter 3

Leong, H.S.; Philp, M.; Simone, M.; Witting, P.K.; Fu, S. Synthetic Cathinones Induce Cell Death in Dopaminergic SH-SY5Y Cells via Stimulating Mitochondrial Dysfunction. *Int. J. Mol. Sci.* **2020**, *21*, 1370
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms21041370>

For Chapter 4

Huey Sze Leong, Shimpei Watanabe, Unnikrishnan Kuzhiumparambil, Ching Yee Fong, Hooi Yan Moy, Yi Ju Yao, Paul K Witting, Shanlin Fu. Monitoring metabolism of synthetic cannabinoid 4F-MDMB-BINACA via high-resolution mass spectrometry assessed in cultured hepatoma cell line, fungus, liver microsomes and confirmed using urine samples. *Forensic Toxicol.* **2021**, *39*, 198–212
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11419-020-00562-7>

For Chapter 5

Huey Sze Leong, Morgan Philp, Paul Kenneth Witting, Shanlin Fu. The Detox Factory: Toxicology Profile of New Psychoactive Substances.

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Abstract

The unprecedented growth of new psychoactive substances (NPS) render identification a challenging issue to both the forensic and clinical laboratories. NPS readily available in myriad of unknown formulation, posing serious threat and acute harm for the users. At present, there is paucity of information on the potential potency, toxicity mechanisms, and toxicokinetic parameters associated with the use of these drugs. The present study aimed to investigate the neurotoxicity potency and cellular mechanism of NPS. Hepatotoxicity potency potential, metabolic stability and subsequent metabolism pathway of specific NPS is also explored for better understanding of the toxicokinetics of these NPS.

The neurotoxicity potential and mechanism of synthetic cathinones (SCs) butylone, pentylone and 3,4-methylenedioxypyrovalerone (MDPV) was investigated using differentiated SH-SY5Y cell line. Viability assays and end-point measurements that include markers of oxidative stress, mitochondrial bioenergetics, intracellular calcium (Ca^{2+}) and cell death pathways were employed. All the three SCs displayed dose-dependent neurotoxicity with the following order of potency: butylone (least cytotoxic) < pentylone < MDPV (most cytotoxic). The activation of apoptotic cell death pathway implicated the orchestration of mitochondrial-mediated neurotoxicity mechanisms via oxidative stress, compromised bioenergetics balance and changes in Ca^{2+} homeostasis ($p < 0.0001$ vs. control).

The metabolism of synthetic cannabinoid (SCB), 4F-MDMB-BINACA was investigated using *in vitro* models: HepG2 liver cells, fungus *Cunninghamella elegans* (*C. elegans*) and pooled human liver microsomes (HLM). Tentative structure elucidation of the *in vitro* metabolites was performed using high-resolution mass spectrometry whilst twenty authentic human urine samples were retrospectively analysed using liquid chromatography-orbitrap mass spectrometry. A total of twenty-five *in vitro* metabolites and eight *in vivo* metabolites were tentatively identified. Ester hydrolysis and ester hydrolysis dehydrogenation 4F-MDMB-BINACA metabolites were recommended as urinary markers for 4F-MDMB-BINACA intake. *C. elegans* has the potential to be used

as a complementary model to predict and characterise human metabolites, as well as identifying possible drug toxicities for emerging SCBs.

The metabolic stability and hepatotoxicity potential of butylone, pentylone, MDPV and 4F-MDMB-BINACA were studied using HLM and HepG2 liver cells, respectively. Drug-treated HepG2 exhibited the following cytotoxicity potency: butylone (least cytotoxic) < pentylone < MDPV < 4F-MDMB-BINACA (most cytotoxic). For the metabolic stability study, NPS incubated in HLM were collected at various time points and subsequently analysed by liquid-chromatography tandem mass spectrometry. Calculated *in vitro* half-lives together with estimated intrinsic clearance values categorised butylone, pentylone and MDPV as low clearance drugs and 4F-MDMB-BINACA as high clearance drug.

Keywords: New psychoactive substances, cytotoxicity, metabolic profile, *in vitro*