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Blocking and dislocation of *Candida albicans* Cdr1p transporter by styrylquinolines

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ABSTRACT

Styrylquinolines are a novel group of quinoline drugs that are known to have p53-independent antiproliferative activity and antiviral properties. This study evaluated the antifungal activity of these drugs more deeply, particularly their activity modulation towards Cdr1p, the main multidrug transporter of *Candida albicans*. Styrylquinolines were found to have antifungal activity and to work synergistically with fluconazole. Additionally, they decreased the extracellular concentration of rhodamine 6G in ABC-transporter-expressing cells. The cellular localization of GFP-tagged Cdr1p was assessed by epifluorescent microscopy. Styrylquinolines induce expression of Cdr1p, as confirmed by Western blotting. Three of four drugs tested caused the partial delocalization of transport protein to the cytoplasm. These results show the first evidence that styrylquinolines decrease the activity of ABC multidrug transporters in *C. albicans*.

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1. Introduction

Candida albicans is one of the leading causes of opportunistic mycoses, including hospital-borne infections. Most commonly, it causes superficial but often persistent oral or vaginal candidiasis. However, in patients with immunodeficiency infection, life-threatening systemic candidiasis can occur [1]. *C. albicans* can gain different mechanisms of resistance to commonly used antifungals such as azoles. The main reason for *C. albicans* drug resistance is the presence of ABC and MFS transporters in the plasma membrane. Three efflux pumps are responsible for decreasing the intracellular concentration of azoles. These pumps are encoded by genes for candida drug resistance (*CDR1* and *CDR2*) and multidrug resistance (*MDR1*). These proteins differ in the source of energy used for their activity and in their specificity to drug molecules [2]. The use of efflux pump inhibitors [3], or the synergistic action of two or more drugs with different mechanisms of action [4] could resolve the problem of candida drug resistance.

One of the most popular structural scaffolds is 8-hydroxyquinoline, which is found in many biologically active natural products and therapeutic agents [5]. Its derivatives have numerous applications, including antimicrobial agents for both Gram-negative and Gram-positive

bacteria [6], antiviral [7] and anticancer [8] therapy, anti-epileptic and anti-obesity treatments [9], and pain management drugs [10]. It generally has comparably low cytotoxicity and high clinical applicability. Additionally, it is widely used as fungistatics in agriculture [11]. For this reason, the quinoline moiety has been considered among other mono- and diazanaphthalene scaffolds as a privileged structure that is believed to produce active molecules more often [12].

Styrylquinolines consist of quinoline and phenyl rings connected with an unsaturated ethylene linker, which results in a flat and rigid conformation that is structurally related to amphotericin B (AmB) and naftifine. Styrylquinolines are known to inhibit HIV integrase [13] and have p53-independent antiproliferative activity [14]. Due to their structure and lipophilic character, they can interact with the cell membrane during passive transport. As with other quinoline derivatives, styrylquinolines are known to have potent antifungal activity. However, their mechanism of action is largely unexplored. While 8-hydroxyquinoline may act as a metal chelator and disrupt cell wall biosynthesis, it has been suggested recently that the mechanism of action may consist of more complex interactions [15]. Moreover, in more complex quinoline derivatives, it has been shown that metal chelation only plays a minor role in their antifungal activity [11,16]. Other 8-hydroxyquinoline derivatives are postulated to act as inhibitors of (1,3)- β -D-glucan synthase, chitin synthase [17] or P450 14- α -demethylase [18], or by changing the pH in the phagocytic vacuole [19]. This study examined styrylquinolines as possible inhibitors of *C. albicans* ABC transporters. The results demonstrate that these compounds work

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synergistically with fluconazole, and also inhibit the efflux of rhodamine 6G (R6G), a known substrate for ABC pumps.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Compounds

All four styrylquinolines were obtained as part of the search for novel active antifungal agents [16,20]. They were synthesized according to known methods from aromatic aldehydes and appropriate quinaldines [14,21]. Stepwise partial hydrolysis was afforded in acetylated (WK14B, WK15B) or fully hydrolysed products (WK14, WK15). After column chromatography purification, the compounds were used for biological tests. Styrylquinolines, fluconazole (Sigma Aldrich, Poznan, Poland) and AmB (Sigma Aldrich) were dissolved in dimethyl sulphoxide (DMSO, Bioshop, Rzeszów, Poland), and fluphenazine (Sigma Aldrich) was dissolved in sterile water.

2.2. Strains and growth media

The *C. albicans* strains used in this study were a generous gift from Prof. Dominique Sanglard (Table 1). All strains were kept as frozen stocks in glycerol at -80 °C and grown routinely at 28 °C on YPD medium with 2% dextrose, 1% Bacto peptone (Difco, Warsaw, Poland) and 1% yeast extract (Difco). For all experiments, with the exception of a rhodamine 6G assay, strains were subcultured in yeast nitrogen base (YNB) liquid medium [0.67% YNB (Difco) and 2% dextrose] at 28 °C and diluted to desirable optical density at 600 nm (OD₆₀₀). For growth on solid media, 2% agar (Difco) was added.

2.3. Susceptibility testing

Drug susceptibility testing was performed in microtitre plates with two-fold serial dilutions of tested compounds (Fig. 1) according

Table 1
Collection of *Candida albicans* strains used in this study.

Strain	Genotype	Reference
CAF 2-1	<i>ura3Δ::imm434/URA3</i>	[22]
DSY 448	<i>cdr1Δ::hisG-URA3-hisG/cdr1Δ::hisG</i>	[23]
DSY 653	<i>cdr2Δ::hisG-URA3-hisG/cdr2Δ::hisG</i>	[24]
DSY 654	<i>cdr1Δ::hisG/cdr1Δ::hisG cdr2Δ::hisG-URA3-hisG/ cdr2Δ::hisG</i>	[24]
ASCa1	<i>ura3Δ::imm434/URA3 CDR1-GFP</i>	[25]

Strain CAF 2-1 was treated as the wild-type strain.

to the European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing (EUCAST E.7.3) specifications with modifications. Cultures were grown for 18 h in YNB and diluted to A_{600} of 0.1 in a total volume of 200 μ L, with the tested compound in concentration so that the DMSO concentration was 1%. Microtitre plates were incubated at 28 °C for 24 h, shaken, and optical densities were read with a microtitre plate reader at a wavelength of 600 nm. The results are presented as the percentage of growth relative to control samples, and MIC₅₀ values are given as the lowest concentration inhibiting 50% of growth according to EUCAST standards. The experiment was performed in three biological replicates with three technical replicates for each of the four styrylquinolines.

2.4. Fluconazole-styrylquinoline combination assays

Interactions between fluconazole and tested drugs (Fig. 1) were measured by obtaining the fractional inhibitory concentration (FIC) index values [26]. Cultures were grown for 18 h in YNB and diluted to A_{600} of 0.1 in a total volume of 200 μ L with a mixture of fluconazole and styrylquinoline, each at a starting concentration of MIC_{50} . Microtitre plates were incubated at 28 °C for 24 h, shaken, and optical densities were read with a microtitre plate reader at a wavelength of 600 nm. The sum of the FICs (Σ FIC) was calculated for each well with the equation Σ FIC = $FICA + FICB = (MICA + B/MICA) + (MICB + A/MICB)$, where MICA and MICB are the MICs of drugs A and B alone, respectively, and $MICA + B$ and $MICB + A$ are the concentrations of the drugs in combination, respectively, in all the wells corresponding to an MIC_{50} . The experiment was performed in three biological replicates with three technical replicates.

2.5. Permeability assays

Yeast cultures were subcultured overnight in YNB and diluted to OD₆₀₀ of 0.4 in fresh medium. The styrylquinoline compounds, flu-phenazine (Sigma Aldrich) or AMB (Sigma Aldrich) were added and incubated at 28 °C with shaking at 180 rpm. Aliquots of cultures were taken after 4 h and stained with propidium iodine [27,28] for 5 min at room temperature to assess membrane permeability. Observations were made using fluorescent microscopy (Zeiss AxioVision, Poznan, Poland). The experiment was performed in three biological replicates.

2.6. Western blotting

The assay was performed in accordance with a previous method [29] with modifications. Crude protein extract was prepared from

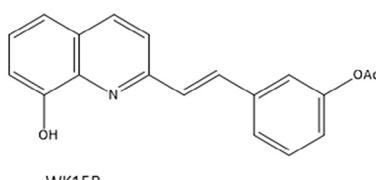
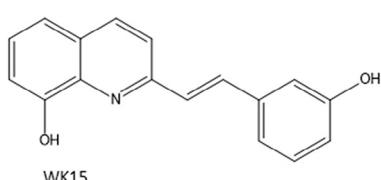
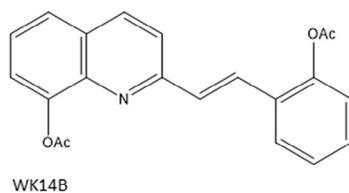
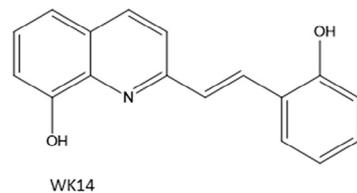


Fig. 1. Styrylquinoline compounds used in this study.

cell suspensions after 4 h of induction with the tested compounds. Aliquots of cell suspensions were pelleted by centrifugation at $2260 \times g$ for 5 min and resuspended in 1 mL of deionized water. Cells were lysed by adding 150 μL of 1.85 M NaOH–7.5% β -mercaptoethanol and incubated on ice for 10 min. Proteins were precipitated by adding 150 μL of 50% trichloroacetic acid and incubated on ice for 10 min. Samples were centrifuged at $10,000 \times g$ for 5 min at 4 °C, washed in 1 mL of 1 M Tris–HCl pH 8.0, and re-suspended in 50 μL of sample buffer (40 mM Tris–HCl, 8 M urea, 5% SDS, 0.1 mM EDTA 1% β -mercaptoethanol, 0.1 mg/mL bromophenol blue). Following incubation at 37 °C for 30 min, samples were loaded on 6% sodium dodecyl sulphate–polyacrylamide gel and developed in a Mini-PROTEAN II electrophoresis cell (Bio-Rad, Poznan, Poland). Samples were then transferred onto nitrocellulose membrane using a Mini-PROTEAN Tetra System electrophoresis cell (Bio-Rad). Membranes were stained with Ponceau S to check for equal loading of gels. Immunodetection of Cdr1p was performed using polyclonal mouse anti-GFP antiserum and horseradish-peroxidase-conjugated antimouse antiserum as a secondary antibody. Signals were detected using an ECL kit (PerkinElmer, Krakow, Poland) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The experiment was performed in four biological replicates.

2.7. Rhodamine 6G assay

R6G assay was performed according to Nakamura et al [30] with modifications. The cell culture was pelleted in the log phase and washed twice in double-distilled water and once in HEPES buffer (50 mM, pH 7.0). Cells were diluted in fresh HEPES buffer to OD₆₀₀ of 1.0 and incubated for 60 min at 30 °C and 200 rpm with 5 mM 2-deoxy-D-glucose (Sigma Aldrich). Next, the tested compounds were added in half MIC₅₀ concentrations, and cells were incubated for 5 min in the same conditions. Next, 10 μM R6G was added and the cell suspension was incubated for an additional 90 min. Cells were pelleted, washed twice in HEPES buffer, and suspended in fresh HEPES at OD₆₀₀ of 10.0. The cell suspension was incubated for 5 min at 30 °C with shaking, R6G efflux was initiated by adding 10 mM glucose, and suspensions were incubated for 30 min with aliquots removed at 15-min intervals. Aliquots of 400 μL were pelleted, and three duplicates of 100 μL of supernatant were added to black microtitre plates. Fluorescence was measured in a Cary Eclipse spectrophotometer (Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA, USA) at an excitation wavelength of 529 nm (slit 5) and emission of 553 nm (slit 10). The experiment was performed in three biological replicates with three technical replicates.

2.8. Cytotoxicity assay

Normal human fibroblasts were grown in MEM alpha medium with foetal bovine serum supplementation at 5%. Cells were cultured in 25-cm² tissue culture flasks at 37 °C in 5% CO₂/95% humidified air, and passaged twice per week, using 0.25% trypsin solution with 0.05% EDTA added. Cells were seeded in 96-well plates. They were grown for 24 h and styrylquinoline cytotoxicity was tested by MTT assay [31]. Styrylquinolines were added to the cells and incubated for 48 h, after which 5 μL of MTT stock solution (5 mg/mL) was added. Cells were incubated for 4 h at 37 °C. Following removal of the medium, 50 μL of DMSO was added to the cells and plates were stirred for 10 min. The absorbance of formazan, a metabolite of MTT, was measured at a wavelength of 570 nm using an ASYS UVM340 microplate reader (Biogenet, Jozefow, Poland). The experiment was performed in two biological replicates with three technical replicates.

3. Results

3.1. Antifungal activity of styrylquinolines

The MICs of styrylquinolines were determined for the wild-type strain and for single and double *cdrΔ* mutants. All four tested drugs were diluted in DMSO and then diluted in YNB to final concentrations of 0.4, 0.2, 0.1 and 0.05 mM, followed by incubation for 24 h as described above. The two compounds with a hydroxyl group in the phenyl ring, WK14 and WK15, had the lowest MIC₅₀ values among the drugs tested (Table 2). Control compounds 8-hydroxyquinoline and 8-hydroxyquinaldine had a similar effect on the strains. Substitution of an acetoxy group in the same positions (WK14B, WK15B) decreased drug activity, particularly for *cdr2Δ* and wild-type strains. In general, the cells with *CDR1* deletion showed a significant increase in sensitivity to styrylquinolines in contrast to 8-hydroxyquinoline and 8-hydroxyquinaldine, suggesting that styrylquinolines are Cdr1p substrates. This indicates a possible mode of action as competitive inhibitors of this transporter. As Cdr1p has a higher impact on fluconazole resistance than Cdr2p, the strain without Cdr1p transporters is characterized by a lower fluconazole MIC than strains that express Cdr1p transporters (0.25 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$ vs. 2 $\mu\text{g}/\text{mL}$ for *cdr2Δ* and wild-type strains). However, the simultaneous presence of fluconazole and styrylquinolines abolishes the Cdr1p-induced resistance, as evidenced by the FIC index values in Table 3. No synergistic effect was observed in the case of the *cdr1Δ* strain. This presumably occurs because styrylquinolines only have a minor effect on Cdr2p, as the MIC profile of the *cdr1Δ* strain is comparable with that of the wild-type strain (Table 2). Interestingly, the compound with the highest synergistic activity, WK14B, has acetoxy groups in both the phenyl and quinolone rings. For all subsequent studies, the styrylquinoline concentration was half MIC₅₀ if not noted otherwise.

3.2. Styrylquinolines inhibit R6G efflux

One of the hypotheses explaining the preference for some structures in synergistic activity is the competitive export of compounds with varying intensity outside the cells. An R6G efflux assay was used to determine if styrylquinolines can influence ABC transporters in *C. albicans*. Tested compounds are structurally related to AmB, which may result in membrane permeabilization, so this drug was used as a control. As expected, high levels of R6G were absorbed

Table 2

Minimum inhibitory concentration (mM) at which 50% of isolates were inhibited (MIC₅₀) for tested styrylquinoline compounds (*n* = 3).

	Wild-type	<i>cdr1Δ</i>	<i>cdr2Δ</i>	<i>cdr1Δ cdr2Δ</i>
WK14B	>0.4	0.1	>0.4	0.05
WK15B	>0.4	0.4	>0.4	0.1
WK15	0.1	0.01	0.2	0.01
WK14	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.05
8HQ	0.12	0.25	0.12	0.12
8HQD	0.12	0.25	0.12	0.12
AmB	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001

Table 3

Synergistic effect of tested compounds and fluconazole on *Candida albicans* strains. The results are presented as fractional inhibitory concentration values for tested styrylquinoline compounds (*n* = 3).

	Wild-type	<i>cdr1Δ</i>	<i>cdr2Δ</i>
WK14B	0.26	1	0.03
WK15B	0.26	1.2	0.02
WK15	2	1	2
WK14	1	2	1

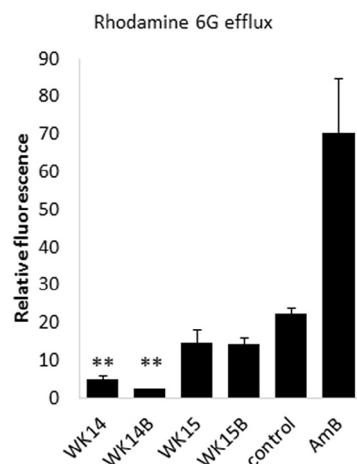


Fig. 2. Influence of styrylquinolines (half of minimum inhibitory concentration) on energy-dependent rhodamine 6G efflux, 30 minutes after efflux was induced by addition of glucose (**P < 0.005; n = 3).

in the sample treated with AmB (Fig. 2). However, as in the fluconazole synergy experiment, WK14B and (surprisingly) WK14 showed inhibition of R6G efflux. WK15 and WK15B had no effect on R6G export from cells. It seems that the change of substituents in the ortho position on the phenol ring reduced the affinity of these compounds for pumps and efflux from the cell. However, in combination with fluconazole, WK15B was more active than WK15, indicating that the -OAc group is significant for synergistic action of the tested drugs.

To confirm that the cell membrane of *C. albicans* is not disrupted, cells treated with styrylquinolines were stained with non-permeable dye propidium iodine and observed under a fluorescent microscope. As shown in Fig. 3a, none of the tested compounds showed red staining characteristic of membrane disruption, as shown in cells after treatment with AmB. However, when the concentration of styrylquinolines was increased, cells were stained with propidium iodine (Fig. 3b).



Fig. 4. Cdr1p-GFP protein levels in crude protein extracts from cells after treatment with styrylquinolines (half of minimum inhibitory concentration) as evidenced by anti-GFP Western blot (n = 4). DMSO-treated *Candida albicans* cells were used as a control.

3.3. Styrylquinolines induce Cdr1p production and affect its localization in cells

The treatment of *C. albicans* cells with ABC transporter substrates increases their expression [32]. Fluorescent microscopy (Fig. 3) shows a stronger signal from GFP-tagged Cdr1p for cells incubated with styrylquinolines than control samples. The Cdr1p-GFP protein level in crude extract was also higher in treated cells (Fig. 4). WK14B, WK14 and WK15 at half MIC₅₀ showed partial delocalization of the signal to the inside of the cell (Fig. 3). At concentrations higher than MIC₅₀ of WK14 and WK15, the signal came from the whole cells (Fig. 3b). The AmB-positive control for delocalization showed complete intracellular delocalization of the signal, but as this drug is not a substrate for ABC transporters, there was no increase in Cdr1p levels (Fig. 3).

3.4. Cytotoxic activity of styrylquinolines

An MTT assay on normal human fibroblasts was performed to examine the toxicity of styrylquinolines to human cells. The results showed (Table 4) that three compounds (WK14, WK15 and WK15B) had the same cytotoxicity value (0.1 mM), with WK14 and WK15 having comparable MIC₅₀ and cell viability values. However, the cytotoxicity level of WK14B was >0.1 mM.

4. Discussion

Styrylquinolines consist of two aromatic parts connected by an unsaturated ethylene linker that results in a flat rigid structure with relatively high lipophilicity. Such molecules are generally

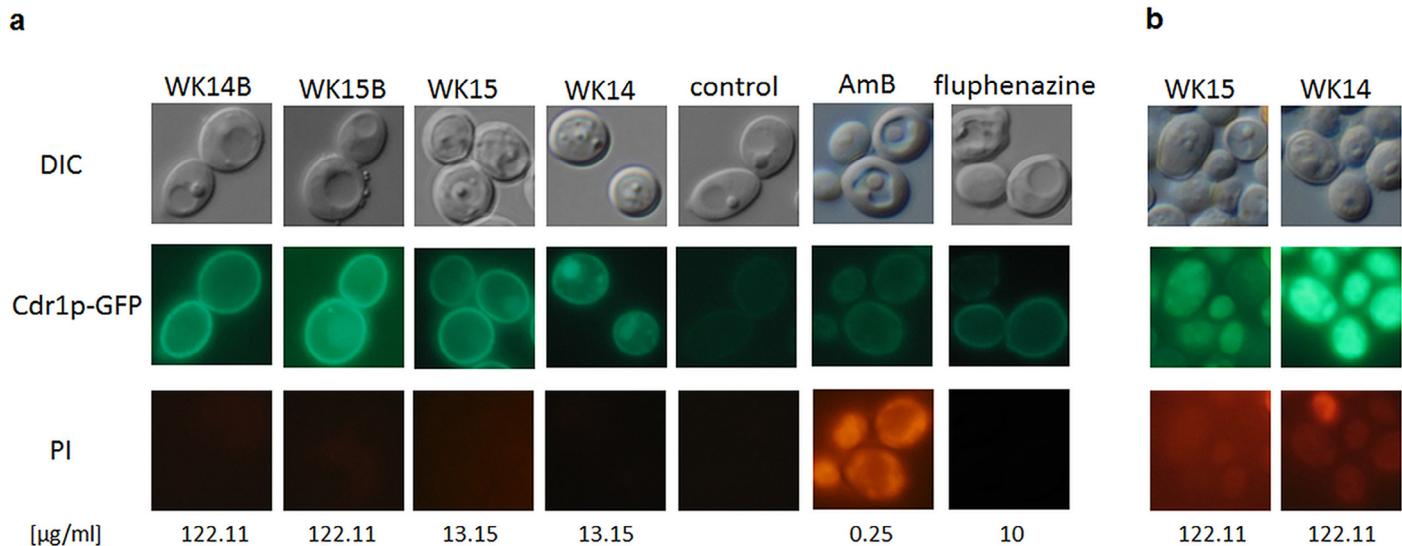


Fig. 3. Microscopic imagining of *Candida albicans* cells. (A) After treatment with styrylquinolines (half of minimum inhibitory concentration), amphotericin B (0.25 μg/mL) or fluphenazine (10 μg/mL). (B) After treatment with WK14 and WK15 (0.4 mM). Top panels, differential interference contrast; middle panels, Cdr1p-GFP; bottom panels, propidium iodine staining (n = 3).

Table 4

Effect of styrylquinolines on cell viability (IC_{50}) as measured by MTT test.

	Normal human fibroblast IC_{50} (mM)
WK14B	>0.1
WK15B	0.1
WK15	0.1
WK14	0.1

expected to penetrate cell membranes effectively; moreover, they may interact with lipid structures such as ergosterol. The polyenes, such as AMB, are a class of these drugs [33]. Other compounds with large, flat aromatic structures may act similarly, including doxorubicin, tetracycline and thiordiazine [34]. Lipophilic drugs are known for their unspecific interactions, disrupting membrane integrity [35].

As a result of screening for antifungal activity of a large group of styrylquinolines, four compounds with interesting structure–activity relationships were selected for inclusion in this study.

WK14 and WK15 have a hydroxyl group on both the phenyl and quinolone rings, and have a high antifungal activity, regardless of the position of the –OH group. The use of both compounds at MIC_{50} causes membrane permeabilization in *C. albicans* (Fig. 3b). Replacement of the –OH group with the –OAc group strongly reduces the activity of these compounds (Table 2), which is consistent with other reports [16]. The antifungal and anticandida properties of phenolic compounds have been widely described, and they are known for activity such as inactivation of enzyme production [36], antibiofilm effects and anti-adhesive effects [37,38]. Some phenolic compounds can damage the cell membrane of *C. albicans* [39,40], cause considerable reduction in ergosterol biosynthesis [41], or bind to chitin in the cell wall [42]. It appears that the –OH group plays an important role in the destruction of fungal cells.

For further explanation of the effects of styrylquinolines on ABC transporters in *C. albicans* cells, strains with deletions in genes encoding Cdr1p and Cdr2p pumps were tested. The cells with *CDR1* deletion showed a significant increase in sensitivity to styrylquinolines, suggesting that these compounds are Cdr1p substrates. This indicates a possible mode of action as competitive inhibitors of this transporter. In the case of WK14, a significant reduction in resistance was only observed in the case of double *cdrΔ* mutant. Both observations imply that Cdr2p removes the tested styrylquinolines from cells less effectively than Cdr1p.

Another strategy in combating fungal infections is to study the synergism of a new class of compounds and existing antifungal agents in order to maximize the antifungal effect. Promising synergism was found between WK14B, WK15B and fluconazole against strains of *C. albicans*. All styrylquinolines were tested in double-diluted concentrations starting with MIC_{50} . In this system, WK14 and WK15 with fluconazole were less active than WK14B and WK15B (Table 3). Fluconazole is a substrate for the ABC and MFS transporters of *C. albicans*. No synergistic effect was observed in the case of the *cdr1Δ* strain. This presumably occurs because styrylquinolines have only a minor effect on Cdr2p, as the MIC profile of the *cdr2Δ* strain is comparable with that of the wild-type strain (Table 2). Interestingly, the compound that had the highest synergistic activity, WK14B, has acetoxy groups in both the phenyl and quinolone rings, indicating that while the –OH group is important for compound antifungal activity, the –OAc group increases synergistic action.

Very similar results to wild-type strain MICs were obtained in cytotoxicity testing using normal human fibroblast cells. This suggests excluding the use of higher concentrations of styrylquinolines as antifungal drugs. However, in combination, styrylquinolines increased sensitivity to fluconazole in concentrations as little as 64 times lower than MIC_{50} .

One of the hypotheses explaining the preference for some structures of compounds in synergistic activity is the competitive pumping of compounds with varying intensity outside the cells. The experiment with R6G showed that WK14 and WK14B significantly block the efflux of R6G, unlike WK15 and WK15B (Fig. 2). It seems that the substitution of the –OH or –OAc groups in the ortho position on the quinolone ring reduced the affinity of these compounds for the rhodamine-binding site in ABC transporters [43]. However, in combination with fluconazole, WK15B was more active than WK15, indicating an additional but yet unknown mechanism of action.

The delocalization of Cdr1p from the membrane into the cell is observed under certain conditions and in the presence of some compounds [25,44]. Kumar et al [45] found that higher membrane fluidity can lead to incorrect localization of the Cdr1p pump and a lack of pump activity. In some cases, decreases in cellular ergosterol level and mis-sorting of Cdr1p into vacuoles were observed during the dysfunction of mitochondria [46]. The structures of styrylquinolines and their lipophilic properties predispose them to accumulate in cellular membranes. Their intrinsic mechanism of action may consist of non-specific interactions or alteration of the arrangement of ergosterol. Except for WK14B, the tested compounds caused intracellular delocalization of Cdr1p (Fig. 4). One of the mechanisms of action could be reducing the activity of Cdr1p and its relocation by disrupting the construction of the membrane. Another study has shown that some phenolic compounds significantly decrease the expression levels of *CDR1* and *MDR1* genes in fluconazole-resistant *C. albicans* [47]. However, the present results indicate an increase in Cdr1p concentration in candida cells under the action of styrylquinolines (Fig. 4), which suggests that the excess quantity of transporter cannot anchor in the plasma membrane where Cdr1p localization is supposed to occur.

5. Conclusions

Four promising styrylquinolines with high activity against pathogenic fungi were tested for their anti-*C. albicans* activity. In combination with fluconazole, the tested compounds showed synergistic interactions that may result from mutual efflux by Cdr proteins. The styrylquinolines may also interact with the cell membrane, leading to delocalization of pumps. These findings are promising for designing novel antifungal agents. Highly active compounds that disrupt natural fungal defence against xenobiotic substances may be particularly desirable for effective therapy, which is even more important in highly resistant strains of candida.

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Competing interests: None declared.

Ethical approval: Not required.

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