

# Toll-like receptor 2 antagonists identified through virtual screening and experimental validation

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## Keywords

antagonist; pharmacophore; plasmon resonance analysis; Toll-like receptor 2; virtual screening

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Toll-like receptor 2 (TLR2) antagonists are key therapeutic targets because they inhibit several inflammatory diseases caused by surplus TLR2 activation. In this study, we identified two novel nonpeptide TLR2 antagonists, C11 and C13, through pharmacophore-based virtual screening. At 10  $\mu\text{M}$ , the level of interleukin (IL)-8 inhibition by C13 and C11 in human embryonic kidney TLR2 overexpressing cells was comparable to the commercially available TLR2 inhibitor CU-CPT22. In addition, C11 and C13 acted in mouse macrophage-like RAW 264.7 cells as TLR2-specific inhibitors and did not suppress the tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  induction by TLR3 and TLR4 activators. Moreover, the two identified compounds bound directly to the human recombinant TLR2 ectodomain, during surface plasmon resonance analysis, and did not affect cell viability in a 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-5(3-carboxymethoxyphenyl)-2-(4-sulfophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium assay. In total, two virtually screened molecules, C11 and C13, were experimentally proven to be effective as TLR2 antagonists, and thus will provide new insights into the structure of TLR2 antagonists, and pave the way for the development of TLR2-targeted drug molecules.

## Introduction

Toll-like receptors (TLRs) act as the first line of host defense, by sensing a wide range of conserved microbial molecules called pathogen-associated molecular patterns [1]. In contrast, excessive TLR stimulation can lead to several immune-related diseases [2]. Vertebrate TLRs, located in the plasma membrane or on endosomes, are evolutionarily classified into six subfamilies: TLR1/2/6/10, TLR3, TLR4, TLR5, TLR7/8/9 and TLR11/12/13/21/22/23 [3]. The members of each

subfamily recognize a specific type of ligand and form homo- or heterodimers to activate the downstream signal transduction cascades [4]. A few studies have reported that certain TLRs are species-specific, but sense the same type of ligand [5,6]. TLRs are type I transmembrane proteins that contain three types of domains: an N-terminal ligand-binding ectodomain (ECD) composed of leucine-rich repeats (LRRs), a transmembrane helix domain, and a Toll/interleukin

## Abbreviations

AD, AUTODOCK; ADMET, absorption, distribution, metabolism, excretion and toxicity; CD, CDOCKER; DS, DISCOVERY STUDIO; ECD, ectodomain; HBA, hydrogen bond acceptor; HBD, hydrogen bond donor; HEK293-hTLR2, human embryonic kidney TLR2 overexpressing; HYD, hydrophobic feature; IL, interleukin; LRR, leucine-rich repeat; MD, molecular dynamics; MM/PBSA, molecular mechanics/Poisson–Boltzmann surface area; MTS, 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-5(3-carboxymethoxyphenyl)-2-(4-sulfophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium; MyD88, myeloid differentiation primary-response protein 88; PDB, Protein Data Bank; SPR, surface plasmon resonance; TIR, Toll/interleukin-1 receptor; TLR, Toll-like receptor; TNF, tumor necrosis factor; VS, virtual screening.

(IL)-1 receptor (TIR) homology domain, which initiates TLR signaling and results in the production of proinflammatory cytokines and type I interferons [7,8]. To date, crystal structures have been determined for the agonist-bound ECDs of TLRs 1, 2, 4 and 8 (human); TLRs 2, 3, 6 and 13 (mouse); and TLR5 (zebrafish) [9–12]. With regard to the crystal structure of the antagonist-bound TLR ECD and molecular dynamics (MD)-2, staphylococcal superantigen-like protein 3-TLR2 (mouse), Eritoran-TLR4-MD-2 (human), lipid IVA-MD-2 (human) and TLR9-inhibitory DNA4084 (horse) complexes have been solved [9,13,14].

Members of the TLR2 subfamily reside in the plasma membrane and bind primarily to bacterial, fungal and viral substances. The main TLR2 ligands are lipopeptides, peptidoglycans, lipoteichoic acids, lipoarabinomannans, the phosphatidylethanolamine-diethylene triamine pentaacetic acid, phenol-soluble modulins, glycosylphosphatidylinositols and zymosan [4,15–17]. In the TLR2 subfamily, the crystal structures of dimeric TLR2-TLR1 with triacyl lipopeptide, Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> and dimeric TLR2-TLR6 with diacyl lipopeptide Pam<sub>2</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> have been described [18,19]. The results of our recent protein-ligand molecular docking study suggested that triacyl lipopeptides may be the ligands for TLR2-TLR10, and diacyl lipopeptides may activate TLR10-TLR1 and TLR10-TLR10 complexes [20]. Another study experimentally confirmed the hypothesis that TLR2-TLR10 recognizes triacyl lipopeptides [21]. Structural studies have shown that ligand-induced dimerization of the ECDs of TLR2 subfamily members leads to the dimerization of their TIR domains and the initiation of downstream signaling [7]. TLR2 signaling starts with the recruitment of the TIR-domain-containing adaptor molecule, myeloid differentiation primary-response protein 88 (MyD88), which regulates the canonical pathway [8]. Subsequently, molecules such as IL-1-receptor-associated kinase family members [22], tumor necrosis factor (TNF) receptor-associated factor 6 and transforming growth factor  $\beta$ -activated kinase 1 activate the I $\kappa$ B kinase complex. This complex activates nuclear factor- $\kappa$ B to initiate the transcription of inflammatory genes [23]. As in other TLRs, the ECDs of TLR2 subfamily members contain LRRs of 19–33 residues [7]. However, similar to TLR4, the ECDs of TLR2 subfamily members can be divided into three subdomains: N-terminal, central and C-terminal [7]. TLR2 subfamily members occur as monomers, but after ligand binding, TLR2 binds with TLR1 or TLR6, to activate the signaling cascade [7]. In the TLR2-TLR1-Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> crystal structure [Protein Data Bank (PDB) ID: 2Z7X], LRRs 9–12, in the convex regions of both

TLR2 and TLR1, are the binding region for triacyl lipopeptide agonists [18].

Accumulating evidence suggests that TLR2 antagonists act against ischemia, atopic dermatitis and atherosclerosis [15,24,25]. Hence, there is a need for therapeutically appropriate ligands to block TLR2 signaling, and there is a growing interest in the development of drug-like nonpeptide TLR2 antagonists with increased efficacy. Here, we present a receptor-ligand-based and ligand-based virtual screening (VS) approach, based on structural insights from the crystal structure of 2Z7X and a recent high-throughput screening study of TLR2 synthetic small-molecule agonists [18,26]. The major benefit of pharmacophore-based VS is its capacity to identify active compounds with different chemical structures that bind to the same target [27]. In addition, VS is economical and time-efficient [28]. Approximately seven million molecules in our in-house virtual library were screened in this study, and the initial hits were filtered to select drug-like molecules. Furthermore, the predicted binding modes of the compounds were investigated using molecular docking and MD simulations, combined with binding free energy calculations. Sixteen selected molecules were evaluated for their direct binding to human recombinant TLR2, using surface plasmon resonance (SPR) assay. Further, we tested the ability of these molecules to inhibit the synthesis and secretion of IL-8 in human embryonic kidney cells overexpressing TLR2 (HEK293-hTLR2) stimulated with the TLR2 agonist Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>. We ultimately chose the two molecules (C11 and C13) that displayed sufficient direct binding to TLR2 ECD and significantly reduced Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced IL-8 production. Interestingly, C11 and C13 also reduced the TNF- $\alpha$  secretion activated by Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> in RAW 264.7 cells. Moreover, the antagonists presented here were proven to be non-cytotoxic in cell viability assays and may possess positive pharmacological properties, because of their low molecular mass (< 500 Da). They also are nonpeptides that are distinct from several known TLR2 inhibitors with fatty acid chains [29]. Thus, these antagonists will be important in the rational design of novel drugs appropriate for the treatment of various TLR2-related inflammatory diseases.

## Results

### *In silico* alanine scanning mutagenesis and pharmacophore models

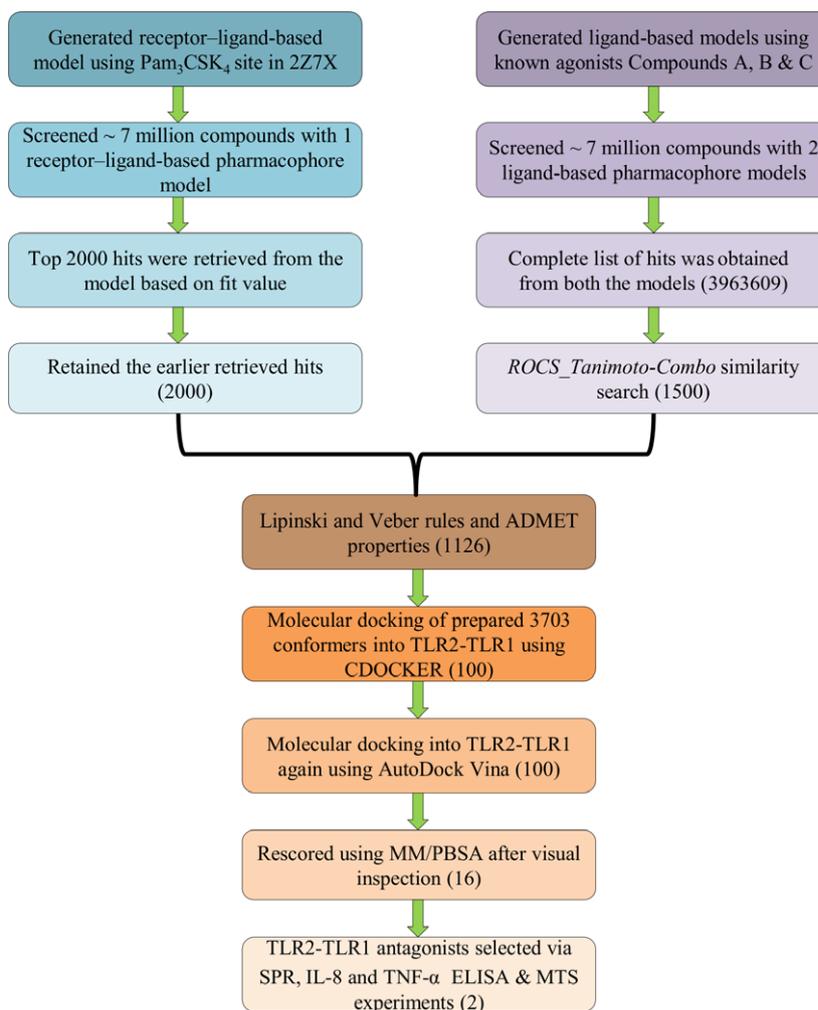
The availability of high-resolution crystal structures for TLR2-TLR1-Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> and of a high-throughput

library of derived agonists provides an excellent opportunity to identify potent TLR2 antagonists using VS. The complete pharmacophore-based VS workflow is shown in Fig. 1. By using Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> as the reference ligand, the residues in the Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> binding site of 2Z7X were mutated to alanine, and the mutation energy was calculated based on the difference in the binding free energies of mutated and wild-type protein structures (Fig. 2). Residues with mutation energies > 0.5 kcal·mol<sup>-1</sup> are considered destabilizing, and thereby influence the binding affinity of protein–ligand complexes. The values for all residues for which mutation energy was calculated are shown in Table 1.

To generate the receptor–ligand-based pharmacophore model, we used the 2Z7X protein–lipopeptide complex (Fig. 3A) to identify ligand features that facilitate the interactions with the protein; some of these

features were also expected to be relevant small non-peptide molecules [30]. All of the pharmacophore features based on the TLR2–TLR1–Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> interactions were created first (Fig. 3B). These features were then edited to build a pharmacophore model with the following five features, which are located near key residues, as shown in Fig. 3C,D: two hydrogen bond acceptors (HBAs), one hydrogen bond donor (HBD) and two hydrophobic features (HYDs). The significant pharmacophore features in the model were situated in the active site, near the Phe325 and Phe349 residues of TLR2 and the Gln316 residue of TLR1. The importance of these three residues has been established experimentally [18,26,31].

Next, ligand-based models were developed with compounds A, B and C (Fig. 4A), because they were the known nonpeptide TLR2 modulators [26]. Although these compounds are TLR2 activators, in



**Fig. 1.** Workflow of the current study. Steps followed to identify nonpeptide TLR2 antagonists.

**Central domain**

|              |                     |     |           |        |            |      |     |         |     |
|--------------|---------------------|-----|-----------|--------|------------|------|-----|---------|-----|
| <b>LRR9</b>  |                     |     |           |        |            |      |     |         |     |
| hTLR2        | TNSLIKKFTFRNVKITDES | FQV | KLLN      | 274    |            |      |     |         |     |
| hTLR1        | TNPKLSSLTLNNIETT    | WNS | IRI       | QLV    | 268        |      |     |         |     |
| <b>LRR10</b> |                     |     |           |        |            |      |     |         |     |
| hTLR2        | QISGLEL             | EF  | DDCT      | LNGVGN | FRASDNDRVI | 304  |     |         |     |
| hTLR1        | WHTTVWYSSISNVK      | IQ  | QLDFRDFDY |        | 294        |      |     |         |     |
| <b>LRR11</b> |                     |     |           |        |            |      |     |         |     |
| hTLR2        | DPGK                | VET | IT        | TRR    | HI         | PRFY | LFY | DLSTLYS | 333 |
| hTLR1        | SGTSLKALS           | THQ | VSD       | VEG    | FP         | QSY  | TYE | EIF     | 323 |

**C-terminal domain**

|              |                    |     |     |         |   |        |     |     |    |    |     |     |
|--------------|--------------------|-----|-----|---------|---|--------|-----|-----|----|----|-----|-----|
| <b>LRR12</b> |                    |     |     |         |   |        |     |     |    |    |     |     |
| hTLR2        | I                  | TER | V   | KRI     | T | VENS   | SKV | FLV | LP | CL | LSQ | 357 |
| hTLR1        | SNMNIKNFT          | V   | SGT | RM      | V | HMLCPS |     |     |    |    |     | 345 |
| <b>LRR13</b> |                    |     |     |         |   |        |     |     |    |    |     |     |
| hTLR2        | HLKSLEYLDLSENLMVEE | Y   | L   | KNSACED |   |        |     |     |    |    |     | 384 |

- Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> binding and destabilizing
- Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> binding but neutral
- No Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> binding but destabilizing
- Neither Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> binding nor destabilizing

**Fig. 2.** TLR2–TLR1 residues subjected to computational mutation binding energy calculations. Sequence alignment of the active site in human TLR2 and TLR1, based on structure. Details of the residues that bind Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> in the 2Z7X crystal structure, and the results obtained from computational alanine scanning are given. Residues with mutation energies > 0.5 kcal·mol<sup>-1</sup> were considered destabilizing.

this study they provided the molecule C13, with minor structural differences, which effectively inhibited TLR2 signaling. Compounds A and B were used to generate the ligand-based models 1 and 2, respectively. Of the 10 pharmacophore models (ranked from 1 to 10) generated with various features from compound A, we chose the first ranking output model with three HBAs and two HYDs for ligand-based model 1, which was more likely to map to active molecules (Fig. 4B). For ligand-based model 2 (Fig. 4C), the third ranking output model was selected because its features (one HBD, two HBAs and two HYDs) in compound B were also present in compound C. Due to structural similarities between compounds B and C, compound C mapped to all five pharmacophore features that were obtained from compound B, in ligand-based model 2. The final selected TLR2 antagonists, C11 and C13, mapped in their respective pharmacophore models, are given in Fig. 5.

**Database similarity search and selection of drug-like compounds**

The receptor–ligand-based model was used to screen our in-house virtual library. The top 2000 molecules that mapped to any of the four pharmacophore features (out of five) were retrieved based on the fit value. The fit value in DISCOVERY STUDIO (DS 4.0; Accelrys Software Inc., San Diego, CA, USA) is calculated from a measure of how good the ligand fits the pharmacophore model. For the ligand-based model search, hits were obtained from both of the ligand-based models, and subjected to shape and atom type similarity matching using the program OPENEYE ROCS (Santa Fe, NM, USA) [32]. Compound A was used as a query, and the best 500 similar molecules were filtered from the 2 312 604 ligand-based model 1 hits. Compound B was used as an input to screen the 1 651 005 ligand-based model 2 hits, and the 500 molecules most similar to compound B were chosen. The 1 651 005 hits obtained through ligand-based model 2 were filtered again by using compound C as a query, and the 500 molecules that closely resemble compound C were retrieved.

The calculation of drug-like properties for the candidate compounds can help avoid the synthesis of unfavorable compounds during the later stages of drug development [33]. The 3500 hit molecules (2000 from the receptor–ligand-based model and 1500 from the ligand-based models) were tested for these properties, with filters such as the Lipinski [34] and Veber [35] rules and absorption, distribution, metabolism, excretion and toxicity (ADMET) [33]. The Lipinski and Veber rules were used to screen for compounds with better oral bioavailability. In addition, calculation of the ADMET descriptors identified the molecules with good absorption, optimal solubility, low blood–brain barrier penetrability, cytochrome P450 2D6 noninhibition, nonhepatotoxic properties and nonplasma protein-binding properties. After discarding inappropriate compounds, we selected 1126 drug-like compounds for further screening.

**Molecular docking and scoring**

In computer-aided drug design, the molecular docking of hit molecules into a target protein is an effective means of identifying leads [36]. In this study, molecular docking was performed with two programs, CDOCKER (CD) [37] and AUTODOCK (AD) Vina [38], to prefilter and select the best docking poses. To isolate the top compounds, we used CD to dock the 1126 drug-like hits into the Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> binding site shown in Fig. 3A. The 100 poses with the most negative CD interaction energy

**Table 1.** *In silico* mutation energy calculations. Values of TLR2–TLR1 residues, subjected to computational alanine scanning.

| Mutation to alanine | Mutation energy (kcal·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | Van der Waals term | Electrostatic term | Entropy term | Nonpolar term |
|---------------------|---|--------------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Leu324              | 1.53                                      | 3.68               | -0.11              | -0.32        | 0             |
| Lys347              | 1.27                                      | 4.41               | -0.62              | -0.78        | 0             |
| Ile314              | 1.23                                      | 1.83               | -0.29              | 0.57         | 0             |
| Phe284              | 1.21                                      | 1.15               | 0.28               | 0.62         | 0             |
| Leu266              | 1.17                                      | 1.64               | -0.06              | 0.48         | 0             |
| Tyr320*             | 1.17                                      | 1.26               | 0.44               | 0.4          | 0             |
| Ile341              | 1.15                                      | 1.84               | -0.08              | 0.34         | 0             |
| Leu355              | 1.15                                      | 1.65               | -0.03              | 0.42         | 0             |
| Asp327              | 1.13                                      | 2.54               | 0.14               | -0.26        | 0             |
| Val339*             | 1.13                                      | 2.18               | -0.1               | 0.11         | 0             |
| Phe295              | 1.05                                      | 1.49               | 0.06               | 0.34         | 0             |
| Val343              | 1.02                                      | 1.84               | 0.08               | 0.08         | 0             |
| Pro352              | 0.98                                      | 1.48               | 0.3                | 0.11         | 0             |
| Leu334              | 0.96                                      | 1.54               | 0.02               | 0.23         | 0             |
| Val351              | 0.83                                      | 1.37               | 0.1                | 0.12         | 0             |
| Ile319              | 0.81                                      | 1.28               | 0.19               | 0.09         | 0             |
| Leu317              | 0.79                                      | 1.01               | 0.11               | 0.29         | 0             |
| Leu282              | 0.75                                      | 1.18               | 0.2                | 0.07         | 0             |
| Val311*             | 0.72                                      | 2.21               | -0.06              | -0.44        | 0             |
| Val348              | 0.7                                       | 1.23               | 0.13               | 0.02         | 0             |
| Phe312*             | 0.63                                      | 0.47               | -0.04              | 0.52         | 0             |
| Val309              | 0.56                                      | 0.91               | 0.01               | 0.13         | 0             |
| Val338              | 0.49                                      | 0.93               | -0.02              | 0.04         | 0             |
| Asn294              | 0.37                                      | 1.07               | 0.22               | -0.34        | 0             |
| Trp258*             | 0.36                                      | 0.13               | 0.15               | 0.27         | 0             |
| Met270              | 0.33                                      | 0.61               | -0.18              | 0.14         | 0             |
| Leu289              | 0.31                                      | 0.6                | -0.13              | 0.09         | 0             |
| Pro315*             | 0.28                                      | 0.5                | 0.09               | -0.02        | 0             |
| Phe323*             | 0.24                                      | 0.03               | -0.01              | 0.29         | 0             |
| Ile319*             | 0.16                                      | 0.06               | 0.07               | 0.12         | 0             |
| Phe314*             | 0.14                                      | 0.1                | 0.17               | 0.01         | 0             |
| Tyr318*             | 0.13                                      | 0.2                | -0.11              | 0.1          | 0             |
| Ile304*             | 0.1                                       | 0.01               | 0.03               | 0.1          | 0             |
| Phe261*             | 0.08                                      | 0.01               | -0.04              | 0.12         | 0             |
| Ile322*             | 0.01                                      | 0.02               | 0.01               | 0            | 0             |
| Val333*             | 0.01                                      | 0.02               | -0.04              | 0.02         | 0             |
| Leu265*             | 0.01                                      | 0                  | 0.01               | 0            | 0             |
| Ser346              | 0.01                                      | -0.07              | 0.09               | 0            | 0             |
| Val307*             | -0.04                                     | 0.01               | -0.21              | 0.07         | 0             |
| Leu283*             | -0.07                                     | -0.01              | -0.17              | 0.02         | 0             |
| Gly313*             | -0.07                                     | -0.27              | -0.06              | 0.12         | 0             |
| Met338*             | -0.13                                     | 0.08               | -0.38              | 0.03         | 0             |
| Thr336*             | -0.27                                     | 0.08               | -0.64              | 0.01         | 0             |

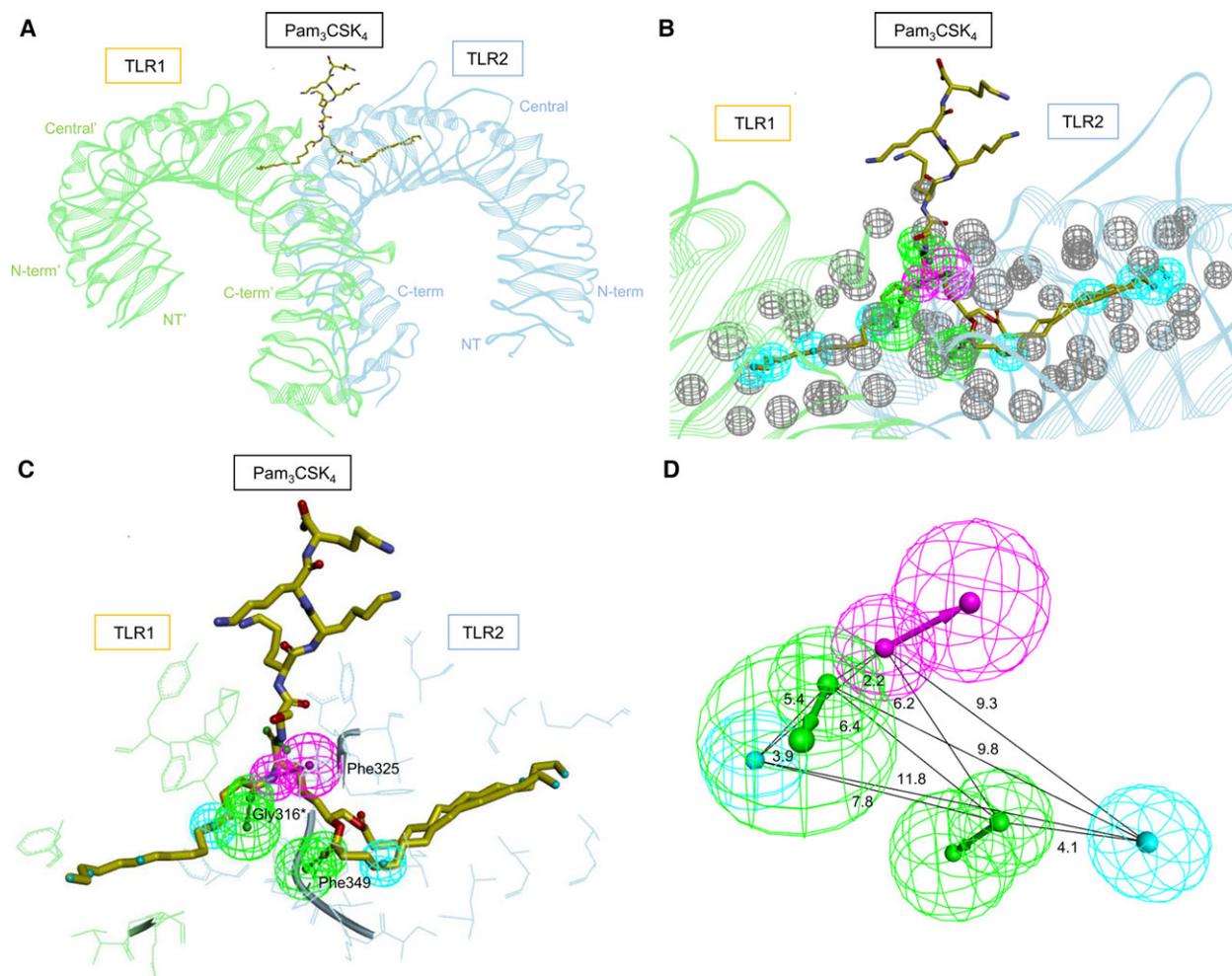
Asterisks represent TLR1 residues.

were redocked with AD Vina. Although 34 binding sites were available in this crystal structure, the cavity size of TLR2 (~ 1600 Å<sup>3</sup>) and TLR1 (~ 400 Å<sup>3</sup>) in the triacyl lipopeptide site highly favored ligand interactions with both TLR2 and TLR1 [18]. Moreover, our target was to obtain compounds that compete with agonists and bind to the residues that agonists interact with. Hence, we used the dimeric TLR2–TLR1 structure for molecular docking. The best 18 poses of 16 molecules were selected based on ligand interactions with experimentally

established key residues and listed with their AD binding energy and CD interaction energy in Table 2. The molecular docking results for the final two molecules, C11 and C13, are shown in Fig. 6.

### Interaction energy calculations to rescore docking complexes

The interaction energy provides insights into the driving forces of protein–ligand interactions.

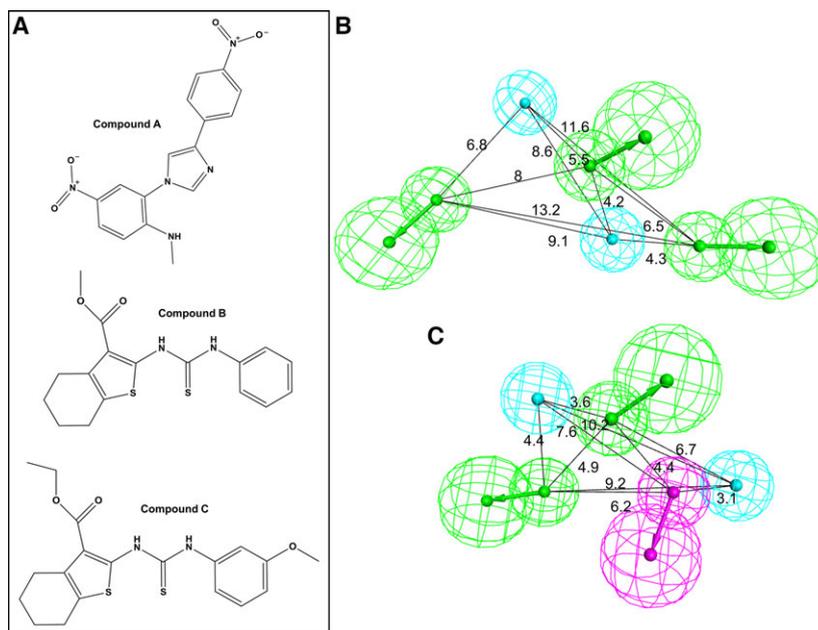


**Fig. 3.** Receptor–ligand-based pharmacophore model. (A) Crystal structure of TLR2–TLR1–Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> (PDB ID: 2Z7X). (B) All pharmacophore features generated from Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> bound to TLR2–TLR1. (C) The five selected pharmacophore features for the receptor–ligand-based model and the residues around the features are labeled. Asterisks indicate TLR1 residues. The green, magenta and cyan spheres indicate HBA, HBD and HYD, respectively. The gray exclusion spheres indicate the spaces used by the proteins. (D) Receptor–ligand-based pharmacophore model, showing only features and geometric constraints. The distances between two features are given in angstroms (Å).

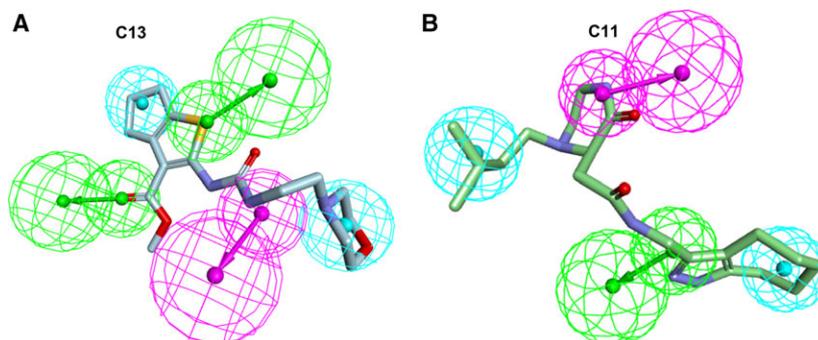
Therefore, 1 ns MD simulations were carried out for the 18 docking complexes identified above and were reordered according to molecular mechanics/Poisson–Boltzmann surface area (MM/PBSA) binding free energy calculations. They were calculated with 50 snapshots obtained at 20-ps intervals throughout a 1-ns MD simulation. The average binding energy scores were calculated for the 18 complexes from several energy components and are listed in Table 2. The TLR2–TLR1–Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> complex was included as a control. The values of the various energy components that compose binding free energy are helpful for understanding the complex binding process.

### *In vitro* binding of virtual hits

The computationally predicted 16 compounds given in Table 2 were purchased for *in vitro* testing from ChemBridge (San Diego, CA, USA), Enamine (Kyiv, Ukraine) and VitasM (Champaign, IL, USA). To validate the binding of virtual hits with TLR2 and TLR1, SPR analysis on a ProteOn GLH sensor chip was performed with 200 and 100 μM of molecules and the results indicated the substantial direct binding of the molecules C1, C7, C11, C13 and C16 to TLR2, and C11, C13 and C16 to TLR1 (Table 3). The molecules (C1, C7, C11, C13, C14, C15 and C16) selected in the primary screening experiments, including SPR, were



**Fig. 4.** Ligand-based pharmacophore models with their geometric constraints. (A) Compounds used to generate ligand-based pharmacophore models. (B) Ligand-based model 1, generated with compound A. (C) Ligand-based model 2, generated with compound B, which has pharmacophore features that also mapped well with compound C.



**Fig. 5.** Identified compounds, mapped in their respective pharmacophore models. (A) C13 mapped in ligand-based model 2. (B) C11 mapping features in receptor–ligand-based pharmacophore model.

further tested on a ProteOn GLH sensor chip with several concentrations (0, 50, 100, 200 and 400  $\mu\text{M}$ ), and their dose-dependent binding signals [in response units (RU)] are given in Table 4. To validate SPR analysis, the experiment was performed for CU-CPT22 for the same concentrations used for the identified compounds (Table 4). The final compounds C11 and C13 bound to TLR2 with  $K_D$  values of  $8.7 \times 10^{-4}$  and  $3.72 \times 10^{-3}$  M, respectively (Table 5) and to TLR1 with  $K_D$  values of  $4.43 \times 10^{-4}$  and  $1.04 \times 10^{-3}$  M, respectively (Table 5). The sensogram curves and graphical representations of the dose-dependent analysis results for the compounds C11 and C13 are given with their 2D

structures in Fig. 7. Next, we examined the direct interaction of CU-CPT22, C11 or C13 and TLR2, TLR4–MD2 complex or TLR3 using SPR analysis on a ProteOn GLM sensor chip. The sensograms and 2D structures of the molecules are shown in Fig. 8. The concentrations used were 0, 5, 10, 25, 50 and 100  $\mu\text{M}$ , and the RUs are presented in Table 6. CU-CPT22, C11 and C13 bound to TLR2 better than TLR4–MD2 and TLR3 (Fig. 8A). The  $K_D$  values of CU-CPT22, C13 and C11 when they bound to TLR2 were  $1.28 \times 10^{-5}$ ,  $1.94 \times 10^{-4}$  and  $1.51 \times 10^{-3}$  M (Table 7). The binding patterns of CU-CPT22, C11 and C13 in the GLM chip were same as with the GLH chip.

**Table 2.** Computational binding values of the virtual hits. The energy values calculated to obtain the MM/PBSA binding energy, CD interaction energy and the AD binding energy of all 18 docking complexes, chosen after visual inspection. The structure of 2Z7X complexed with Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> was added as a control.

| Compound name                     | Van der Waals energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | Electrostatic energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | Polar solvation energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | SASA energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | SAV energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | WCA energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | MM/PBSA binding energy (kJ·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | AD binding energy (kcal·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) | CD interaction energy (kcal·mol <sup>-1</sup> ) |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| C7                                | -229.142                                     | -903.310                                     | 245.344  | -24.879                             | -268.883                           | 83.874                             | -1096.996                                      | -11.622                                     | -58.9132  |
| C15                               | -245.747                                     | -811.725                                     | 227.765  | -24.287                             | -249.815                           | 86.074                             | -1017.736                                      | -11.13                                      | -63.5574  |
| C3                                | -141.993                                     | -984.124                                     | 281.512  | -20.085                             | -215.393                           | 69.732                             | -1010.352                                      | -8.296                                      | -58.0539  |
| C16                               | -246.337                                     | -781.112                                     | 224.124  | -24.547                             | -265.807                           | 89.533                             | -1004.145                                      | -9.427                                      | -63.244   |
| C13                               | -186.422                                     | -841.548                                     | 219.218  | -20.341                             | -215.359                           | 69.897                             | -974.554                                       | -8.357                                      | -58.0981  |
| C8                                | -143.428                                     | -796.057                                     | 133.866  | -16.771                             | -167.924                           | 79.734                             | -910.581                                       | 9.894                                       | 64.4827   |
| C2                                | -161.663                                     | -718.391                                     | 169.642  | -19.184                             | -208.633                           | 67.879                             | -870.349                                       | -8.485                                      | -58.1906  |
| C9                                | -28.261                                      | -689.736                                     | -47.112  | -5.594                              | -66.314                            | 61.890                             | -775.126                                       | -9.325                                      | -60.4863  |
| C5                                | -32.318                                      | -728.836                                     | -17.082  | -5.192                              | -46.689                            | 68.736                             | -761.382                                       | -10.088                                     | -58.7772  |
| C10                               | -30.821                                      | -647.060                                     | -16.111  | -5.199                              | -101.245                           | 64.670                             | -735.766                                       | -8.379                                      | -58.3077  |
| C11                               | -155.492                                     | -445.508                                     | 123.638  | -17.954                             | -180.452                           | 74.762                             | -601.006                                       | -9.862                                      | -58.2775  |
| C11                               | -27.195                                      | -397.705                                     | -41.165  | -6.468                              | -117.839                           | 74.607                             | -515.766                                       | -11.288                                     | -58.1155  |
| C4                                | -207.316                                     | -144.311                                     | 120.990  | -22.996                             | -246.643                           | 75.405                             | -424.870                                       | -8.741                                      | -59.1087  |
| C6                                | -38.280                                      | -304.739                                     | -46.897  | -6.916                              | -99.760                            | 85.727                             | -410.864                                       | -10.002                                     | -58.7992  |
| C1                                | -223.114                                     | -68.654                                      | 93.952   | -24.302                             | -268.474                           | 84.860                             | -405.733                                       | -9.232                                      | -59.2525  |
| C7                                | -245.948                                     | -43.055                                      | 100.432  | -24.876                             | -258.714                           | 83.121                             | -389.040                                       | -10.5590                                    | -60.0077  |
| C14                               | -45.596                                      | -47.185                                      | -42.740  | -8.114                              | -114.042                           | 81.761                             | -175.916                                       | -10.752                                     | -58.8057  |
| C12                               | -67.798                                      | 14.551                                       | 6.016  | -9.804                              | -190.832                           | 86.491                             | -161.374                                       | -10.668                                     | -60.6824  |
| Pam <sub>3</sub> CSK <sub>4</sub> | -583.956                                     | -623.005                                     | 374.013  | -64.348                             | -681.373                           | 281.650                            | -3297.019                                      | *   | *   |

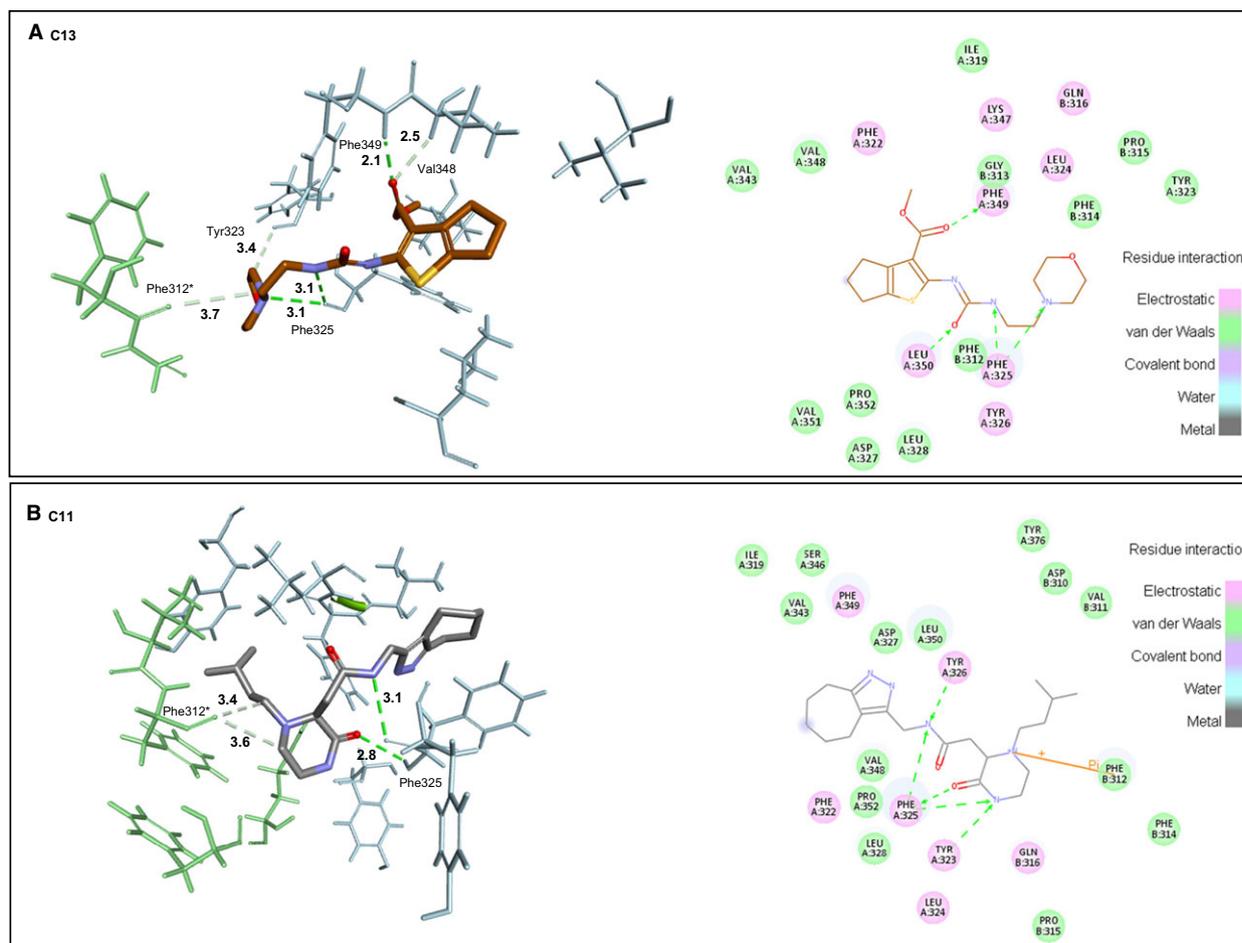
\*Because the crystal structure was used, molecular docking was not performed for Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>. SASA, solvent accessible surface area; SAV, solvent accessible volume; WCA, Weeks-Chandler-Andersen theory.

### Cytokine and cell viability assays

To assess the antagonistic activity of the 16 compounds on TLR2, HEK293-hTLR2 cells were first incubated with the compounds (at 1 and 5  $\mu\text{M}$ ) for 1 h, followed by treatment with 50 nM of Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>. After 24 h, IL-8 levels in the cell culture supernatant were quantified using ELISA. The results showed that a few molecules, including C11 and C13, that earlier displayed effective binding in SPR analysis, significantly reduced the Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-triggered IL-8 production, as shown in Fig. 9. We considered the results from the above experiments, and only seven molecules (C1, C7, C11, C12, C13, C14 and C16) were selected for further dose-dependent analyses. We tested these seven selected molecules (at the concentrations of 1, 5 and 10  $\mu\text{M}$ ), in addition to 10  $\mu\text{M}$  of CU-CPT22, a known TLR2–TLR1 antagonist (Fig. 10A). Compared with the lower concentrations, all the seven compounds highly reduced IL-8 secretion at 10  $\mu\text{M}$ . In particular, C13 and C11 led to the greatest reduction in the production of IL-8. To determine if the seven chosen compounds had cytotoxic properties, we performed a 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-5-(3-carboxymethoxyphenyl)-2-(4-sulphophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium (MTS) assay in HEK293-hTLR2 cells. As shown in Fig. 10B, the MTS assay confirmed that

none of the compounds caused cellular cytotoxicity, at any of the concentrations (1, 5 and 10  $\mu\text{M}$ ) tested.

Further, when we tested CU-CPT22, C11 and C13 in both HEK293-hTLR2 and HEK293-Null cells, 10  $\mu\text{M}$  of the three molecules reduced Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced IL-8 secretion only in HEK293-hTLR2 cells (Fig. 11A). As expected, HEK293-Null cells did not express TLR2 and thereby no Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced IL-8 production in these cells. The TLRs and species specificities of C11 and C13 were further verified *in vitro*. Mouse macrophage-like RAW 264.7 cells were treated with CU-CPT22 or C11 or C13 in combination with a few TLR agonists, and the resulting TNF- $\alpha$  level was measured (Fig. 11B). Interestingly, CU-CPT22, C11 and C13 significantly repressed only Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced TLR2–TLR1 activated TNF- $\alpha$  production. In other words, CU-CPT22, C11 and C13 were not seem to inhibit TNF- $\alpha$  when cells were treated with Poly (I : C) (TLR3) or lipopolysaccharide (LPS; TLR4), the other TLR activators (Fig. 11B). C13 can also slightly inhibit TLR2–TLR6 heterodimer; however, this inhibition should be better explored in future studies. These results exhibit that C11 and C13 are specific inhibitors of TLR2 and not TLR3 or TLR4.



**Fig. 6.** Molecular docking results of identified TLR2 antagonists. The TLR2 and TLR1 residues are shown in blue and green, respectively. The dark green dotted lines represent stronger hydrogen bonds, and the light green dotted lines represent weaker hydrogen bonds. The hydrogen bond distances in angstroms are written next to the dotted lines. Asterisks indicate TLR1 residues. The green dashed arrow shows the hydrogen bond interactions of the ligand with the main chains of amino acids. The orange line indicates the Pi interactions. (A) C13. (B) C11.

## Discussion

An uncontrolled TLR2 response may lead to several inflammatory and autoimmune diseases, and therefore inhibitors that control TLR2 signaling are required [39]. The currently known TLR2 modulators mainly comprise lipopeptides that contain long fatty acyl chains [29]. These high molecular mass molecules are unsuitable as drugs. Likewise, the microbial components that modulate TLR2 signaling are unsafe as drugs, due to their toxic nature [40]. Hence, there is a need for an effective drug-like compound that inhibits TLR2 signaling. The development of analogs for existing high molecular mass structures may yield compounds with poor pharmacokinetic properties. Thus, to identify effective TLR2 antagonists, we can screen chemical libraries with the receptor [15]. In addition,

we can look for molecules that are structurally similar to known TLR nonpeptide agonists, but with the opposite activity. However, the identification of TLR2 small-molecule modulators through computational methods is one of the most challenging tasks in drug discovery, due to the expansive TLR2–TLR1/TLR6 interfaces. Nevertheless, in our previous studies, we used the molecular docking approach for TLR2 subfamily members, to successfully predict their high molecular mass TLR2 agonists and their binding modes [20,41]. In this study, we adopted a VS method that integrates protein–ligand-based and ligand-based pharmacophore approaches to identify TLR2 antagonists. Among the computationally predicted molecules, C11 and C13 (Fig. 7A) were confirmed through SPR biosensor analysis, IL-8 ELISA and cell viability assays as novel, effective and nontoxic TLR2

**Table 3.** SPR biosensor experiment of 16 virtual hits. Results from SPR analysis of the molecules, when tested for binding with TLR2 and TLR1 at 200 and 100  $\mu\text{M}$ . RUs of the compounds are given.

| Compound | 200 $\mu\text{M}$      |                       | 100 $\mu\text{M}$      |                       |
|----------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
|          | TLR2                   | TLR1                  | TLR2                   | TLR1                  |
| C1       | 19.79                  | 7.15                  | 6.56                   | 3.9                   |
| C2       | -7.58                  | -4.73                 | $-9.53 \times 10^{-1}$ | $3.73 \times 10^{-1}$ |
| C3       | $3.70 \times 10^{-1}$  | 1.04                  | 1.09                   | $8.90 \times 10^{-1}$ |
| C4       | 1.58                   | 4.59                  | -1.01                  | $9.19 \times 10^{-1}$ |
| C5       | $-3.26 \times 10^{-1}$ | -1.86                 | -1.6                   | -1.8                  |
| C6       | 1.06                   | 1.77                  | 1                      | $7.36 \times 10^{-1}$ |
| C7       | 23.96                  | -10.37                | 3.21                   | $7.96 \times 10^{-1}$ |
| C8       | -6.49                  | -3.86                 | -1.91                  | -1.97                 |
| C9       | -15.42                 | -11.44                | -5.36                  | -3.7                  |
| C10      | -1.2                   | $4.87 \times 10^{-2}$ | 2.14                   | $3.65 \times 10^{-1}$ |
| C11      | 43.84                  | 11.68                 | 10.25                  | 4.19                  |
| C12      | 12.65                  | 2.74                  | $-6.39 \times 10^{-1}$ | -1.32                 |
| C13      | 33.53                  | 15.16                 | 9.87                   | 7.55                  |
| C14      | 11.51                  | 4.9                   | 5.67                   | 2.74                  |
| C15      | 3.77                   | 3.3                   | 1.03                   | 1.09                  |
| C16      | 16.38                  | 11.62                 | 6.52                   | 5.25                  |
| DMSO     | -3.1                   | -2.81                 | -3.57                  | -3.53                 |

**Table 4.** Dose-dependent SPR analysis of the compounds selected during primary screening. RUs of the compounds are given.

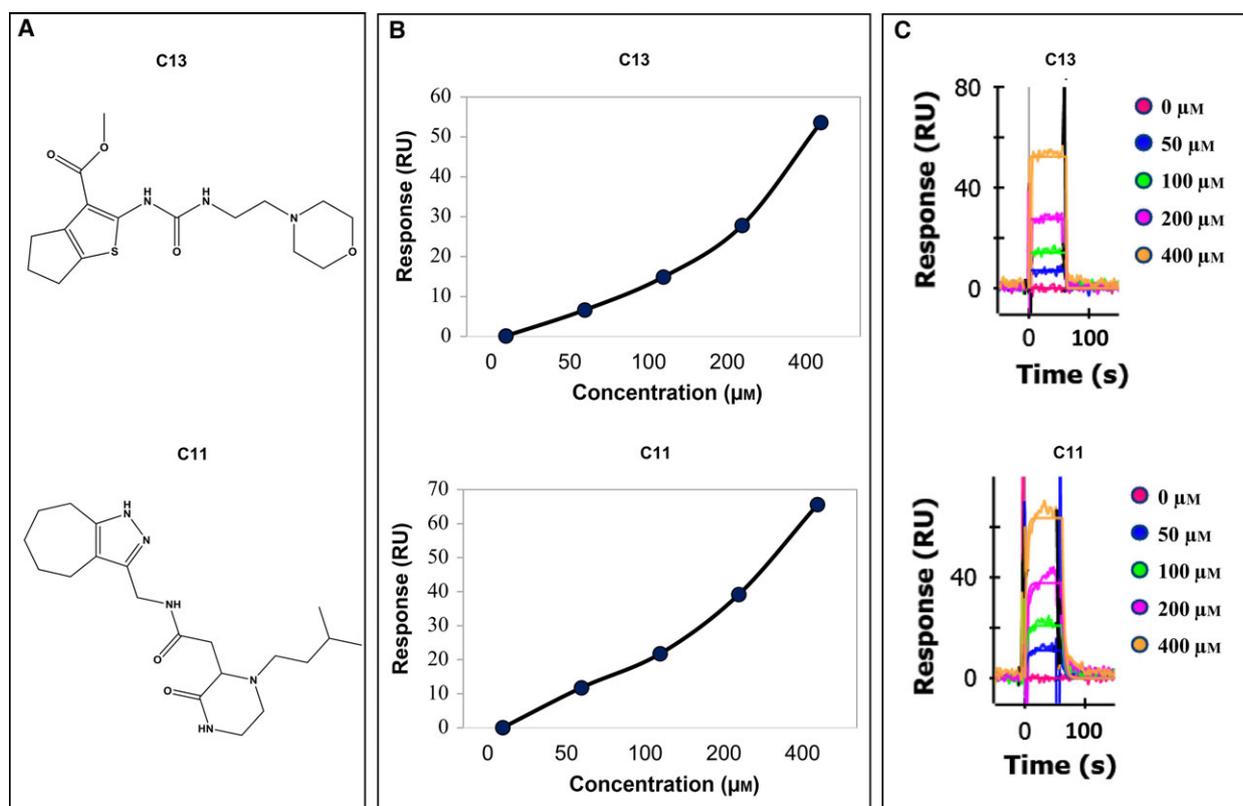
| Target | Dose ( $\mu\text{M}$ ) | Target                |                        |                        |                        |                       |                       |                        |          |
|--------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------|
|        |                        | C1                    | C7                     | C11                    | C13                    | C14                   | C15                   | C16                    | CU-CPT22 |
| TLR2   | 0                      | $2.83 \times 10^{-1}$ | $-7.74 \times 10^{-2}$ | $-3.56 \times 10^{-2}$ | $1.33 \times 10^{-1}$  | $4.33 \times 10^{-1}$ | $9.64 \times 10^{-1}$ | 2.07                   | 3.19     |
|        | 50                     | 3.78                  | 9.54                   | 11.78                  | 6.63                   | 3.3                   | 1.02                  | 4                      | 33.09    |
|        | 100                    | 13.13                 | 23.04                  | 21.76                  | 14.89                  | 7.91                  | 1.2                   | 6.77                   | 33.32    |
|        | 200                    | 23.06                 | 42.42                  | 39.19                  | 27.83                  | 12.3                  | 5.45                  | 14.12                  | 40.81    |
|        | 400                    | 17.24                 | 71.23                  | 65.59                  | 53.59                  | 22.73                 | 8.76                  | 21.03                  | 59.1     |
| TLR1   | 0                      | $6.12 \times 10^{-1}$ | $1.43 \times 10^{-1}$  | $-3.45 \times 10^{-1}$ | $-5.97 \times 10^{-1}$ | $2.51 \times 10^{-1}$ | 1.22                  | 2                      | 14.83    |
|        | 50                     | $7.15 \times 10^{-1}$ | $-5.57 \times 10^{-1}$ | $2.41 \times 10^{-1}$  | 1.24                   | $5.83 \times 10^{-1}$ | -0.456                | $-8.81 \times 10^{-1}$ | 3.78     |
|        | 100                    | 2.22                  | 4.58                   | 4.11                   | 7.52                   | 2.75                  | $9.05 \times 10^{-1}$ | 1.09                   | 117.83   |
|        | 200                    | 5.19                  | 9.86                   | 7.24                   | 12.94                  | 5.93                  | 4.75                  | 8.9                    | 11.48    |
|        | 400                    | 4.1                   | 16.5                   | 8.9                    | 20.49                  | 8.94                  | 4.35                  | 7.52                   | 12.91    |

**Table 5.** SPR binding affinities of the compounds selected during primary screening. The association rate ( $K_a$ ), dissociation rate ( $K_d$ ) and binding affinity constant ( $K_D$ ) of the compounds are given.

| Compound | TLR2                       |                           | TLR1                  |                            |                           |                       |
|----------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
|          | $K_a$ ( $\text{Ms}^{-1}$ ) | $K_d$ ( $\text{s}^{-1}$ ) | $K_D$ (M)             | $K_a$ ( $\text{Ms}^{-1}$ ) | $K_d$ ( $\text{s}^{-1}$ ) | $K_D$ (M)             |
| C1       | $3.48 \times 10^4$         | 3.90                      | $1.12 \times 10^{-4}$ | $2.07 \times 10^4$         | 3.42                      | $1.65 \times 10^{-4}$ |
| C7       | $2.24 \times 10^7$         | $2.63 \times 10^4$        | $1.17 \times 10^{-3}$ | $2.44 \times 10^{-2}$      | $6.05 \times 10^{-1}$     | 24.83                 |
| C11      | $3.34 \times 10^2$         | $2.90 \times 10^{-1}$     | $8.70 \times 10^{-4}$ | $5.95 \times 10^2$         | $2.64 \times 10^{-1}$     | $4.43 \times 10^{-4}$ |
| C13      | $8.90 \times 10^2$         | 3.31                      | $3.72 \times 10^{-3}$ | $7.82 \times 10^2$         | $8.09 \times 10^{-1}$     | $1.04 \times 10^{-3}$ |
| C14      | $2.78 \times 10^3$         | 2.83                      | $1.02 \times 10^{-3}$ | $1.86 \times 10^5$         | $1.65 \times 10^2$        | $8.83 \times 10^{-4}$ |
| C15      | $1.26 \times 10^4$         | $1.87 \times 10^2$        | $1.49 \times 10^{-2}$ | $3.73 \times 10^4$         | $2.19 \times 10^1$        | $5.88 \times 10^{-4}$ |
| C16      | $4.08 \times 10^3$         | 2.65                      | $6.50 \times 10^{-4}$ | $4.16 \times 10^2$         | $2.31 \times 10^{-1}$     | $5.56 \times 10^{-4}$ |
| CU-CPT22 | $2.05 \times 10^3$         | $1.20 \times 10^{-2}$     | $5.83 \times 10^{-6}$ | $1.65 \times 10^3$         | $8.15 \times 10^{-6}$     | $4.93 \times 10^{-9}$ |

antagonists. We identified C13 using the ligand-based model 2 obtained from compounds B and C. The minor structural differences of C13 when compared

with compound B and compound C are as follows. Compounds B and C are derivatives of thiourea, and substituted by thiophene and benzene rings. However,

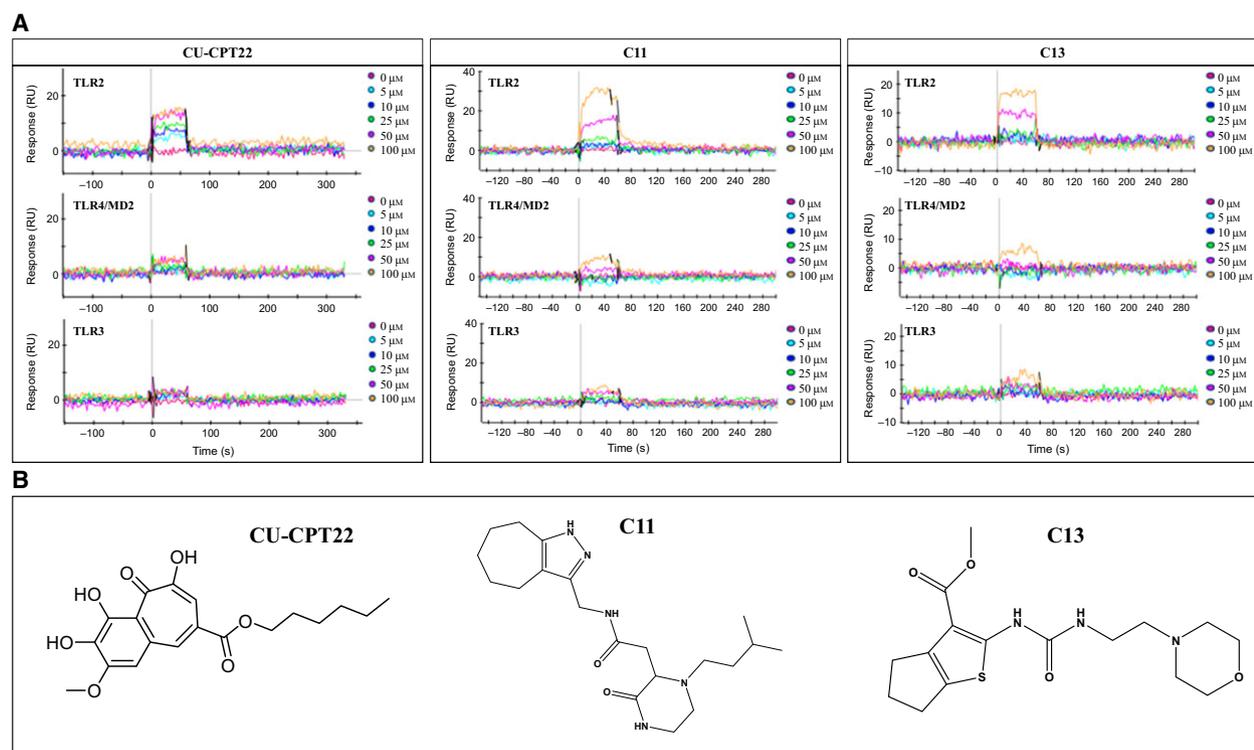


**Fig. 7.** The identified TLR2–TLR1 antagonists, and the results of SPR analysis performed on the GLH sensor chip. (A) Two-dimensional structures of the two nonpeptide TLR2–TLR1 antagonists. (B) The binding kinetics of the compounds with TLR2, measured through SPR. The binding signals were captured between TLR2 and different concentrations of the compounds. (C) Sensograms show the association and dissociation of varying concentrations of the compounds with TLR2.

compound C13 is a derivative of urea, substituted by thiophene and morpholine rings (Fig. 12). The two-dimensional structures of the compounds other than C11 and C13 that were included in the experiments are shown in Fig. 13.

The primary event for TLR2-mediated proinflammatory responses is pathogen recognition by ECDs of the TLR2 subfamily. Hence, discovering molecules that may prevent TLR2 activators from binding with ECDs of TLR2 may hinder the dimerization of ECDs. Subsequently, dimerization of the TIR domains will be obstructed, and thus TLR2 cannot employ MyD88 to initiate the TLR2 signaling pathway. Consequently, after screening, we used molecular docking and binding free energy calculations to select 16 molecules that may possibly bind to the ECDs of the TLR2–TLR1 dimer. To confirm the direct binding of these 16 compounds with TLR2 and TLR1 ECDs at the molecular level, SPR analysis was performed, and C11 and C13 were among the best binders (Figs 7 and 8, and Tables 3–7). The ProteOn GLH sensor chip (Fig. 7) is used for general amine coupling and has a highly

extended mixed polymer layer, with a maximum binding capacity for the highest analyte response. The capacity of this sensor chip is close to that of the CM7 from Biacore. The ProteOn GLM sensor chip (Fig. 8) is designed for general amine coupling and has an extended polymer matrix with an intermediate binding capacity for a high analyte response. The capacity of the GLM sensor chip is comparable to that of the CM5 chip from Biacore. The differences between the GLH and GLM sensor chips lie only in their binding capacity. In addition, the SPR assay includes several variable factors, such as the concentration of immobilized proteins, the flow of analytes, flow rate, dissociation time, association time and the type of buffer used. In our first experiment using the GLH chip, we immobilized the proteins based on their concentration ( $\mu\text{g}\cdot\text{mL}^{-1}$ ), which does not consider the number of molecules on the microchip. Conversely, for the second SPR analysis using the GLM chip, we immobilized the proteins based on molarity ( $140\ \mu\text{M}$ ). Thus, these immobilized recombinant proteins used on the two different sensor chips had different molecular masses.



**Fig. 8.** The identified TLR2–TLR1 antagonists, and the results of SPR analysis performed on the GLM sensor chip. (A) Sensograms show the association and dissociation of varying concentrations of the compounds with TLR2, TLR4–MD2 and TLR3. (B) Two-dimensional structures of CU-CPT22, C11 and C13.

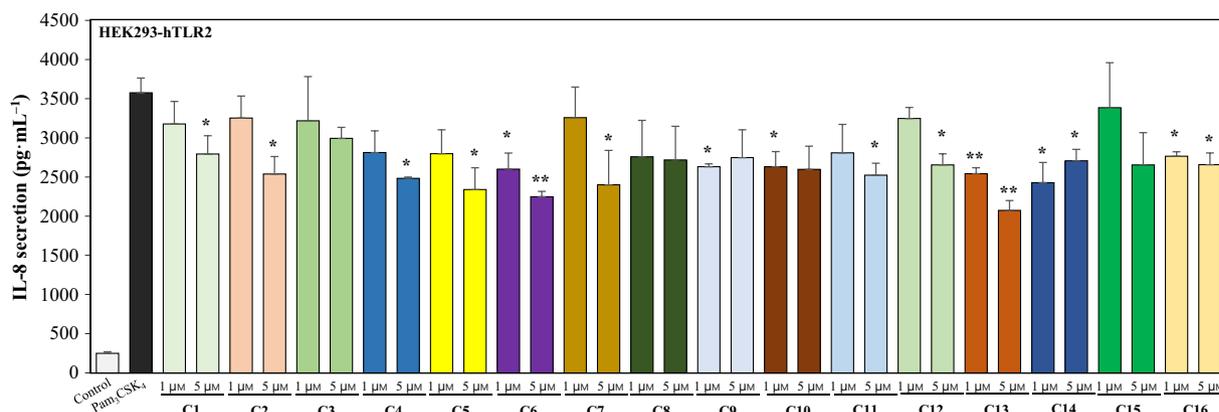
**Table 6.** Dose-dependent SPR analysis of C11 and C13, and the positive control, CU-CPT22, on the GLM sensor chip. RUs of the compounds are given.

| Target                       | Dose ( $\mu\text{M}$ ) | RU       |       |       |
|------------------------------|------------------------|----------|-------|-------|
|                              |                        | CU-CPT22 | C11   | C13   |
| Recombinant TLR2             | 0                      | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 5                      | 4.89     | 2.56  | 1.12  |
|                              | 10                     | 6.01     | 2.96  | 1.97  |
|                              | 25                     | 8.58     | 6.14  | 3.56  |
|                              | 100                    | 13.06    | 29.71 | 17.48 |
| Recombinant TLR4–MD2 complex | 0                      | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 5                      | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 10                     | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 25                     | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 100                    | 3.43     | 3.82  | 3.48  |
| Recombinant TLR3             | 0                      | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 5                      | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 10                     | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 25                     | 0        | 0     | 0     |
|                              | 100                    | 3.7      | 2.68  | 3.42  |
|                              | 100                    | 3.44     | 4.06  | 3.52  |

**Table 7.** Langmuir-kinetic analysis for TLR2. SPR binding affinities of C11 and C13, along with the positive control, CU-CPT22, on the GLM sensor chip. The association rate ( $K_a$ ), dissociation rate ( $K_d$ ) and binding affinity constant ( $K_D$ ) of the compounds when tested with TLR2 are given.

| Analyte  | $K_a$ ( $\text{M s}^{-1}$ ) | $K_d$ ( $\text{s}^{-1}$ ) | $K_D$ (M)             |
|----------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| CU-CPT22 | $1.27 \times 10^5$          | 1.63                      | $1.28 \times 10^{-5}$ |
| C11      | $1.53 \times 10^2$          | $2.31 \times 10^{-1}$     | $1.51 \times 10^{-3}$ |
| C13      | $4.13 \times 10^3$          | $8.03 \times 10^{-1}$     | $1.94 \times 10^{-4}$ |

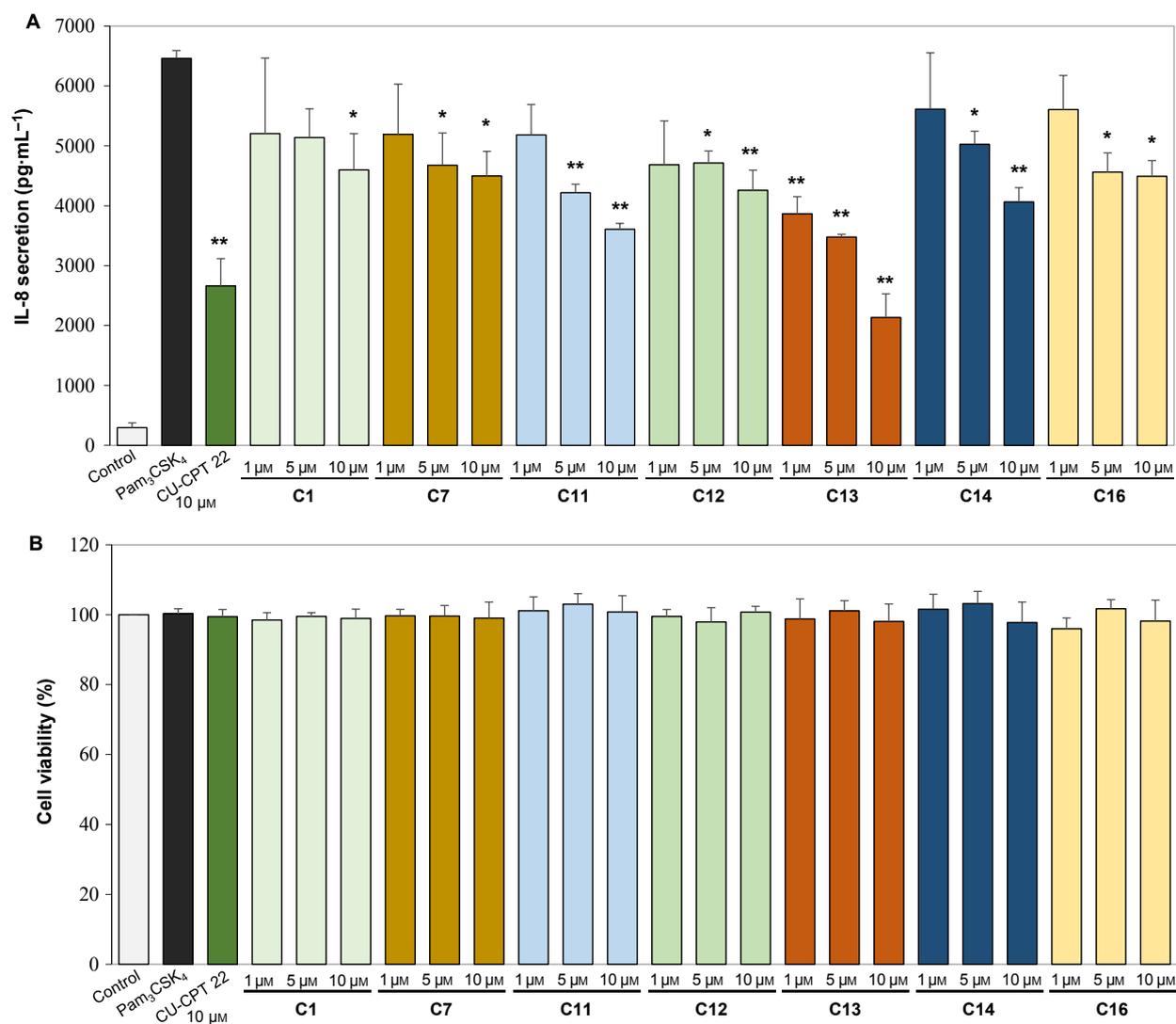
Therefore, the differences in  $K_D$  values obtained using these two sensor chips might be due to differences in the immobilized proteins. The SPR results supported the possibility that C11 and C13 disrupt TLR2–TLR1 heterodimerization, and their molecular docking poses suggested the same. As seen in Fig. 6A, C13 forms strong hydrogen bonds with the backbones of Phe349 and Phe325 of TLR2. Similarly, C11 also forms strong hydrogen bonds with the backbone of Phe325 (Fig. 6B). As discussed above, Phe349 and Phe325 of TLR2 are important for Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced TLR2–TLR1 heterodimerization.



**Fig. 9.** Initial screening of compounds for TLR2-induced cytokine response. HEK293-hTLR2 cells were co-treated with Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> (50 nM) and the compounds (at 1 and 5 μM) for 24 h. IL-8 secretion was detected by ELISA. All data shown represent the mean ± SEM of three independent experiments (\**P* < 0.05, \*\**P* < 0.01).

During the Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced TLR2 activation, one of the main proinflammatory cytokines to be secreted is IL-8. Accordingly, we measured the level of IL-8 inhibition by each of the 16 compounds in HEK293-hTLR2 cells. C11 and C13 were two of the compounds that reasonably reduced IL-8 release (Figs 9 and 10A). As a control for HEK293-hTLR2 cells, HEK293-Null cells were also used to estimate the Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced IL-8 secretion (Fig. 11A). As expected, no TLR2-activated IL-8 production in HEK293-Null cells was observed. The compounds C11 and C13 have passed the tests for exhibiting drug-like properties in computational screening, and these molecules were also confirmed to be nontoxic in MTS assay (Fig. 10B). TLR inhibitors can be TLR-specific or species-specific. Thus, to evaluate the specificity of C11 and C13, we tested them in mouse macrophage-like RAW 264.7 cells also with the presence of TLR2–TLR6 (FSL-1), TLR3 [Poly (I : C)] and TLR4 (LPS) agonists (Fig. 11B). Surprisingly, C11 and C13 effectively reduced the production of Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced TNF-α in RAW 264.7 cells (Fig. 11B). Moreover, C11 and C13 did not suppress TNF-α induced by TLR4 and TLR3. C13 seems to reduce the level of TNF-α activated by FSL-1, but not effectively. Similarly, C11 almost did not inhibit the TNF-α induced by FSL-1. Hence, C11 and C13 are potent TLR2–TLR1 antagonists and are active against both human and mouse cells. At present, low molecular mass TLR2 antagonists such as CU-CPT22, compound 2 and compound 1 are believed to target the ECDs of TLR2–TLR1 [42–44]. However, to our knowledge, none of them have been clinically approved as a drug.

The TLR2–TLR1 inhibitory activities of C11 and C13 are comparable to the previously known molecules (Fig. 12). Our results showed that the TNF-α reduction in RAW 264.7 cells by 10 μM of the molecules C13, CU-CPT22 and C11 was 56%, 73% and 48%, respectively (Fig. 11B). Likewise, at 10 μM, IL-8 suppression by the compounds C13, CU-CPT22 and C11 in HEK293-hTLR2 cells was 47%, 52% and 33%, respectively (Fig. 11A). At 15 μM, the already known TLR2–TLR1 inhibitor compound 2 reduced only 16.46% of TLR2–TLR1-dependent nuclear factor-κB activity [43]. However, the IC<sub>50</sub> value of compound 2 was around 3.3 μM, when it decreased the TNF-α production in human monocytes [43]. The other known TLR2–TLR1 antagonist, a natural product-like compound 1, inhibits around half of the Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>-induced TNF-α and IL-6 secretion at 4 μM in RAW 264.7 cells [44]. As seen in Fig. 12, the structures of C11 and C13 vary considerably from those of already reported TLR2–TLR1 antagonists. C13 is a derivative of urea substituted by thiophene and morpholine rings, and C11 has a pyrazole ring connected to piperazin-2-one through an amide linkage. However, compound 1 has two indole rings connected by an amide linkage, and compound 2 is the derivative of urea substituted with naphthol and benzene rings, whereas CU-CPT22 is an anti-aromatic compound with hydroxyl, carbonyl and ester functional groups on the ring. Overall, this study has identified two potential TLR2 antagonists, C11 and C13, that are required at micromolar concentrations to effectively inhibit TLR2 signaling. These structurally distinct nonpeptide molecules may be valuable therapeutics or may assist in the design of an effective drug to treat TLR2-related inflammatory diseases.



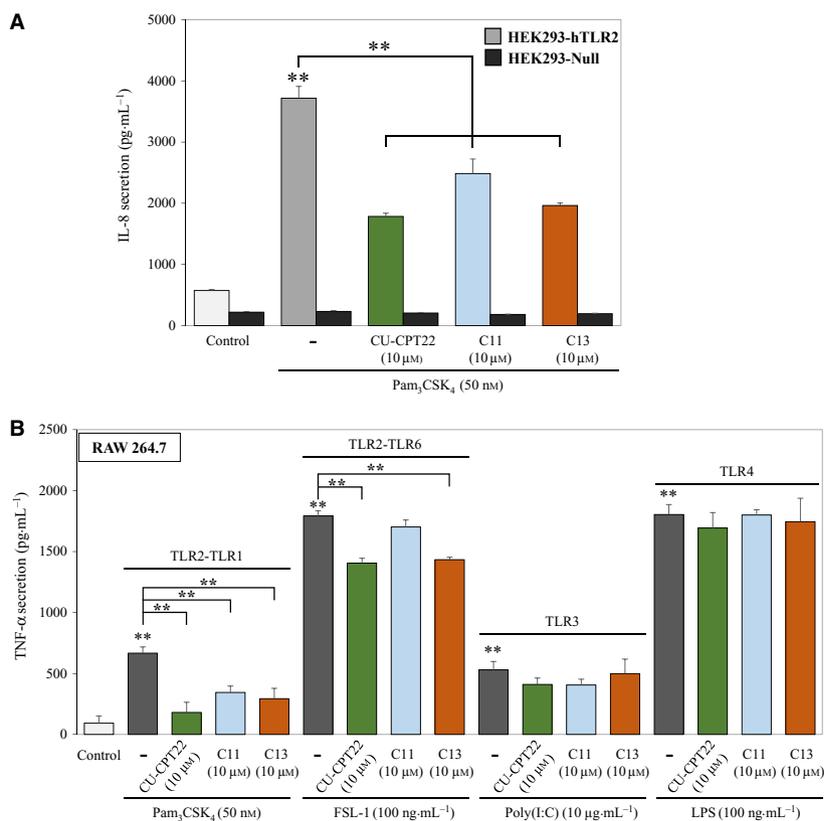
**Fig. 10.** Dose-dependent TLR2 inhibitory effects and cytotoxic properties of the identified TLR2–TLR1 antagonists. HEK293-hTLR2 cells were first treated with the compounds at three different concentrations (1, 5 and 10  $\mu\text{M}$ ) for 1 h, and then with 50 nM of Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>. (A) After 24 h, culture supernatants were collected and IL-8 secretion was measured with an ELISA kit. The experiments were conducted independently ( $n = 3$ ) and are shown as mean  $\pm$  SD ( $n = 1$ , \* $P < 0.05$  or \*\* $P < 0.01$ ). (B) After 24 h, cell viability was determined by measuring the optical density at 490 nm with CellTiter 96 AQueous One Solution Cell Proliferation Assay (MTS). The percentage of cell viability compared with control is presented in the bar graph; data are shown as the mean  $\pm$  SEM of independent experiments ( $n = 3$ ).

## Materials and methods

### Computational mutation scanning and pharmacophore modeling

The 2Z7X (TLR2–TLR1–Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>) structure was obtained from PDB. The co-crystallized ligands, except Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> and water molecules, were removed, and hydrogen atoms were added to the structure [45]. The module Calculate Mutation Energy (Binding) in Accelrys DS 4.0 software (Accelrys Software Inc.) was used to assess the effect of single-point mutations in the Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> binding

site of 2Z7X. Mutation energies were calculated as a total of scaled van der Waals, electrostatic, entropic and nonpolar terms. To create a receptor–ligand-based model, we used the Receptor–ligand Pharmacophore Generation protocol to create pharmacophore features, by targeting the lipopeptide binding site of 2Z7X with the default parameters. Because key residues were known from previous studies, all matching features from the resulting pharmacophore models based on genetic function approximations [46] were edited, and five significant features were selected to build the receptor–ligand-based model (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 11.** Cytokine inhibitory effects of C11 and C13 in human and mouse cells. (A) HEK293-hTLR2 and HEK293-Null cells were pretreated with 10 μM of CU-CPT22, C11 and C13 for 1 h, and then with 50 nM of Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>. After 24 h, culture supernatants were collected and IL-8 secretion was measured with an ELISA kit. (B) The expression level of TNF-α secretion was measured by ELISA assay when the compounds CU-CPT22, C11 and C13 were co-treated with TLR2/TLR1 (Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub>), TLR2/6 (FSL-1), TLR3 [Poly(I:C)] or TLR4 (LPS) agonists in RAW 264.7 cells. CU-CPT22 was used as a positive control. The data shown represent at least three independent experiments ( $n \geq 3$ ), and bars represent means  $\pm$  SEM (\*\* $P < 0.01$ ).

The two ligand-based pharmacophore models were created based on the structures of three known small-molecule TLR2 agonists [26]. The two-dimensional structures of these small molecules were drawn with CHEMBIODRAW ULTRA (CambridgeSoft, Cambridge, MA, USA), and converted into three-dimensional structures. The energy was minimized with the CHARMM [47] force field using default parameters in DS 4.0. We looked for HBD, HBA and HYD features, with the Common Feature Pharmacophore Generation protocol, and generated ligand-based models 1 and 2 with compounds A and B, respectively (Fig. 4). The pharmacophore models were created with features considered extremely selective, based on genetic function approximations.

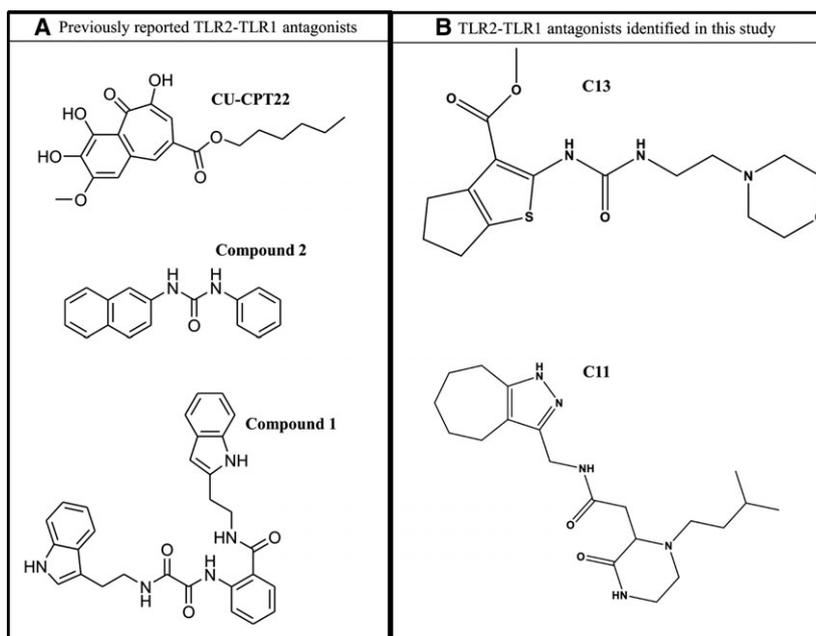
### Pharmacophore-based database search and isolation of drug-like molecules

The Search 3D Database segment in DS 4.0 was used to retrieve hits from our in-house virtual library, of approximately seven million commercially available molecules. A

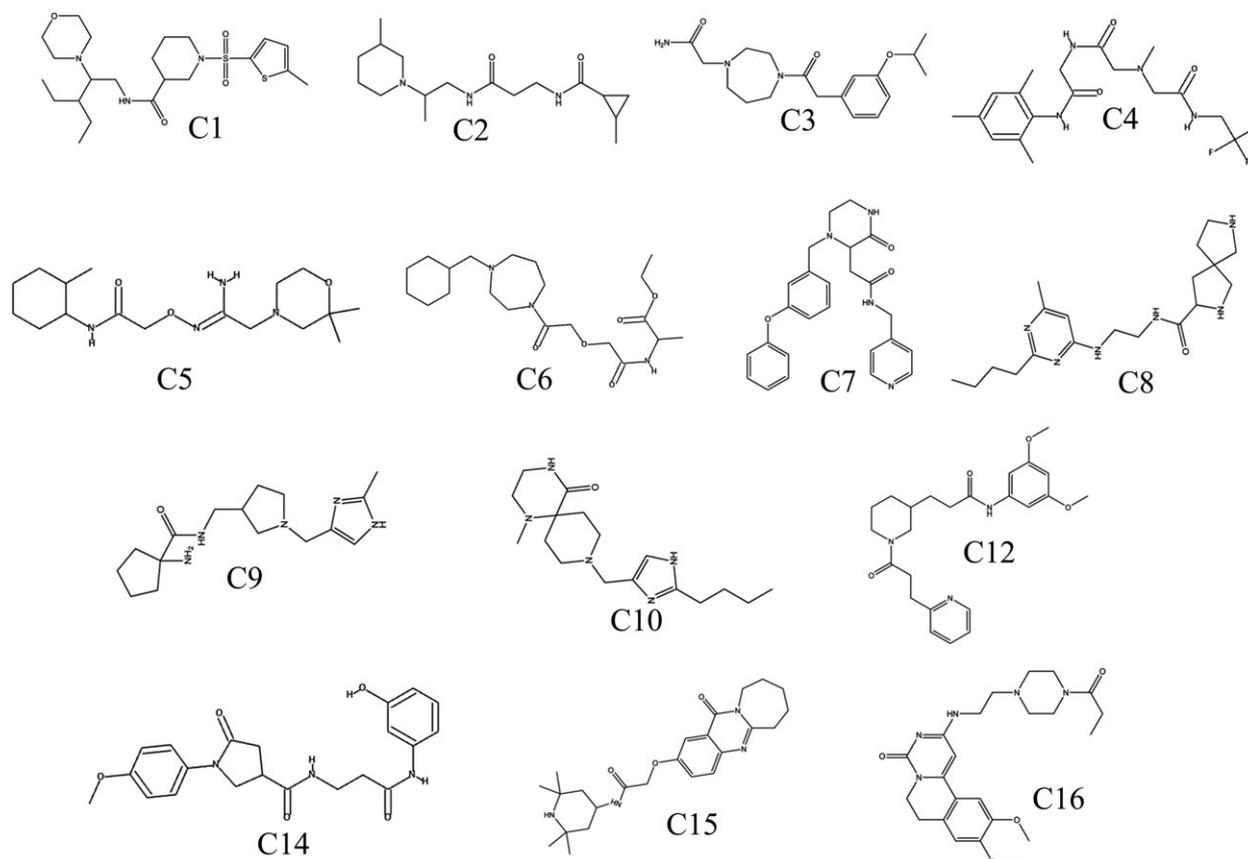
receptor–ligand-based model and two ligand-based pharmacophore models were used as inputs. The hits that mapped to at least four features for receptor–ligand-based model and hits that mapped to all five features for the ligand-based models were obtained through the Best Search method, with one conformation of each ligand as output. The resulting hits from the ligand-based models were further ranked according to the similarity of their molecular shape and atom types to those of the query molecule, with the ROCS\_Tanimoto-Combo scoring function [32] and default settings. To test the drug-like properties of the resulting 3500 hit molecules, we applied filters such as Lipinski [34] and Veber [35] rules, and ADMET [33] properties, with the Filter Ligands and Calculate Molecular Properties protocols in DS 4.0.

### Structure preparation and molecular docking

The TLR2–TLR1 structure, prepared for mutational binding energy calculations, was used for molecular docking,



**Fig. 12.** Two-dimensional structures of the already reported and identified TLR2-TLR1 antagonists.



**Fig. 13.** Two-dimensional structures of the compounds, aside from C11 and C13, that were included in the experiments.

and ligands were prepared with the Prepare Ligand module in DS 4.0. The lipopeptide binding site was chosen for docking, as shown in Fig. 3A. Duplicates were removed from the selected 1126 hit molecules, and isomers and tautomers were enumerated. The 3703 conformers were docked into the defined binding site with CD [37] implemented in DS 4.0 using the default settings, but with one top pose per ligand. CD is a grid-based molecular docking method that generates random ligand conformations that are later refined through MD simulated annealing using the CHARMM force field.

The top 100 poses for ~60 compounds were chosen based on the CD interaction energy. The compounds were redocked with AD Vina [38] implemented in YASARA STRUCTURE [48]. The 2Z7X structure was used after the water molecules and ligands were removed. The entire lipopeptide binding site was set as a grid in the receptor, and saved in SCE format, whereas the ligands were converted into PDB format and saved. The dock\_runscreening protocol was applied in YASARA STRUCTURE. Each ligand was given 25 docking runs; using the dock\_play protocol, we retrieved the best-docked conformation for each ligand molecule, based on the AD affinity energy value. All images were generated using the program DS 4.0.

### MD simulations and binding free energy calculations

MD simulations were performed using the GROMACS program version 4.6 [49] for the selected 18 protein–ligand docking complexes. The SwissParam online server [50] was used to determine the CHARMM27 force field [51] for the ligand molecules. The proteins and ligands were solvated with the SPC216 water model, periodic boundary conditions were applied in all directions, and the total charge of the system was neutralized. The energy minimization steps were carried out with a steepest descent and conjugate gradient algorithm with a tolerance of  $1000 \text{ kJ}\cdot\text{mol}^{-1}\cdot\text{nm}^{-1}$  (maximum of 100 runs with 0.01 nm as the energy step size). For long-range interactions, the particle mesh Ewald method [52] was used with a 1.2 nm cutoff, and a Fourier spacing of 0.16 nm. The electrostatic cutoff was set to 1.0 nm, and the van der Waals cutoff was set to 1.4 nm. The solvated and minimized systems were visualized and inspected before further simulation steps. The bond angles and water molecules were restrained with the LINCS and SETTLE algorithms [53], respectively. The Parrinello–Rahman method was used to set the pressure (1 atm) of the system, and the V-rescale weak coupling method was used to regulate the temperature (310 K). The position restraints in the MD simulations for NVT and NPT were carried out for 100 ps, with a production run of 1 ns for each protein–ligand complex, and a time step of 2 fs. The structural coordinates were saved for every 2 ps, and final snapshots of the complexes were extracted with the GROMACS analysis

tool. To quantify the thermodynamic interaction of the complexes of TLR2–TLR1 and small molecules, we used the MM/PBSA method [54] with the G\_MMPBSA tool [55] to compute the ligand–protein intermolecular energy without strain entropy based on the MD structure ensemble.

### Surface plasmon resonance analysis

Surface plasmon resonance experiments were performed on a ProteOn XPR36 instrument (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Inc., Hercules, CA, USA) with ProteOn GLH and GLM sensor chips. Phosphate-buffered saline supplemented with 0.1% Tween 20 (PBST containing 2% DMSO) was used as running buffer, and 10 mM HCl or PBST 0.1% for regeneration. Human recombinant proteins TLR2, TLR1, TLR4–MD2 complex and TLR3 (R&D systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA) were immobilized by amine coupling onto surfaces of a GLH or/and GLM sensor chips. We immobilized 140  $\mu\text{M}$  of recombinant TLR2, TLR1, TLR4–MD2 complex and TLR3 proteins on a GLM sensor chip. On a ProteOn GLH or GLM sensor chip, up to six proteins can be immobilized at a time in separate regions. In our study, all the recombinant proteins were immobilized on one sensor chip at the same time. Varying concentrations of the molecules were injected into the chip, to check their binding with the immobilized proteins. Running buffer was injected into the empty channel as a reference. On the ProteOn GLH sensor chip, the dissociation was monitored for 5 min, and the chip was regenerated for the second round. The experiments were performed in duplicate using freshly prepared reagents. The ProteOn manager software (version 2.0) was used to analyze the data. The binding curves were processed for the starting injection alignment and for the baseline. A reference-subtracted sensogram was fitted globally to the curves describing a homogeneous 1:1 Langmuir bimolecular reaction model. The data from the four protein surfaces were grouped together to fit the kinetic rate constants ( $K_a$  and  $K_d$ ). The binding constant,  $K_D$ , was calculated using the following equation:  $K_D = K_d/K_a$ . We performed the SPR experiments for C11 and C13 on a ProteOn GLH sensor chip and the concentrations were 100  $\mu\text{M}$ , 200  $\mu\text{M}$ , and varying concentrations (0, 50, 100, 200 and 400  $\mu\text{M}$ ). For C11 and C13 on the ProteOn GLM sensor chip, the concentrations were 0, 5, 10, 25, 50 and 100  $\mu\text{M}$ . The conditions followed when using the GLM sensor chip were 100  $\mu\text{L}$  injection volume, 100  $\mu\text{L}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$  flow rate, 200-s dissociation, 20-s flow stabilization and 60-s duration.

### Cell culture and treatments

HEK293-hTLR2, HEK293-Null (Invivogen, San Diego, CA, USA) and RAW 264.7 (Korean Cell Line Bank, Seoul, Korea) cell lines were cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) with low glucose, and DMEM

growth medium containing 10% fetal bovine serum and 1% penicillin/streptomycin (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA), respectively. Cells were incubated at 37 °C in an atmosphere of 5% CO<sub>2</sub> (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The compounds were dissolved in dimethyl sulfoxide (Sigma-Aldrich, St Louis, MO, USA) in brown tubes and stored at a concentration of 10 mM.

### IL-8 and TNF- $\alpha$ secretion assays

The concentrations of IL-8 and TNF- $\alpha$  in the supernatants of the culture media were determined using commercially available ELISA kits (eBioscience, San Diego, CA, USA). First, HEK293-hTLR2, HEK293-Null and RAW 264.7 cells were dispensed into 96-well plates, and treated with control CU-CPT22 (10  $\mu$ M) and the compounds (1, 5 and 10  $\mu$ M) for 1 h, and then were stimulated with Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> (50 nM), FSL-1 (100 ng·mL<sup>-1</sup>), Poly (I : C) (10  $\mu$ g·mL<sup>-1</sup>) and LPS (100 ng·mL<sup>-1</sup>) for 24 h. Cell culture supernatants were collected and added to an antibody-coated microplate, to capture human IL-8 and mouse TNF- $\alpha$ . The plates were then maintained at room temperature for 2 h. Next, the plates were washed five times, a biotin-conjugated detecting antibody was added to each well, and the plates were further incubated at room temperature for 1 h. After incubation, the plates were washed five times and incubated with avidin-horse-radish peroxidase for 30 min. Finally, detection was carried out with 3,3',5,5'-tetramethylbenzidine solution, by measuring absorbance at 450 nm with an ELISA reader, and analyzed using SOFTMAX PRO 5.3 software (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, CA, USA).

### Cell viability assay

The CellTiter 96 AQueous One Solution Cell Proliferation Assay (MTS; Promega Corp., Madison, WI, USA) was used to determine cell viability. HEK293-hTLR2 cells were seeded into 96-well plates (BD Biosciences, San Diego, CA, USA), grown overnight, and treated with 50 nM Pam<sub>3</sub>CSK<sub>4</sub> (Invivogen), 10  $\mu$ M CU-CPT22 (Tocris, Bristol, UK), and the 16 compounds (at 1, 5 and 10  $\mu$ M) for 24 h. Next, the treated and untreated HEK293-hTLR2 cells were incubated with the MTS solution (10  $\mu$ L per well) for 3 h in a humidified atmosphere containing 5% CO<sub>2</sub> at 37 °C. Then, cell viability was measured using a microplate spectrophotometer system (Molecular Devices) at a wavelength of 490 nm.

### Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses were performed by one-way ANOVA using SIGMAPLOT software, version 12.0 (Systat Software Inc., San Jose, CA, USA). For multiple comparisons, Turkey's test was applied. All experiments were repeated independently at least three times. Statistical

significance was defined as a *P*-value of \**P* < 0.05 and \*\**P* < 0.01.

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### Author contributions

PD and SC planned the experiments. PD, H-JS, AA, H-KK, RGG, SP, DY and JC performed the experiments. PD and RGG analyzed the data. KTN and SC contributed reagents. PD and SC wrote the manuscript.

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