Full Length Research Paper

Cytotoxic effects on MCF-7 breast cancer cell lines, phenol and flavonoid contents, high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) analysis and antioxidant activity of *Maerua pseudopetalosa* (Gilg and Bened) De Wolf fractions

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*Maerua pseudopetalosa* (Gilg and Bened.) De Wolf tubers which are used traditionally as antitumor agent in Sudan were subjected to separation by column chromatography technique. Eight fractions were obtained for the ethyl acetate extract and twelve for the ethanolic extract. The ethanolic fractions $F_8$, $F_9$, $F_{11}$, and $F_{12}$, with high bioactivity were subjected to further investigations. 3-(4,5-dimethyl-2-thiazolyl)-2,5-diphenyl-2H-tetrazolium bromide (MTT) assay was used for assessment of the cytotoxicity. Remarkable cytotoxicity against Michigan Cancer Foundation-7 (MCF-7) was shown, for the first time. Actually, the results revealed that $F_{12}$ is a very promising one with remarkable activity against MCF-7 cell lines (43.51 µg/g at 72 h), high antioxidant activity (91.3% by 1,1-diphenyl-2-picrylhydrazyl (DPPH) and 97% by ABTS) and flavonoid and phenolic contents (11.75 and 20.72 mg/g). Six compounds were detected in $F_9$ (syringic 11.65 µg/g, sinapic 8 µg/g) and $F_{12}$ (gallic 88.12 µg/g, caffic 11.1 µg/g, sinapic 38.67 µg/g) which were not recorded in any previous work in the available literature by using high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC).

Key words: Michigan Cancer Foundation-7 (MCF-7) breast cancer, *Maerua pseudopetalosa*, phenol and flavonoid contents, high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) analysis, antioxidant activity.

INTRODUCTION

Sudan is rich in countless flora due to the diverse climatic and soil conditions in the different ecological regions. Traditional medicines play a very important role in the health care system in Sudan and a high percentage of

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the nomads still rely on local traditional healers. As in many other countries, biodiversity in Sudan is still maintained in some parts, which are known for the presence of so many species that are characterized for their undisputed cure for a large number of diseases (Ibrahim and EL Nure, 2016).

The use of plants in medicine is not limited or restricted to any region of the world. It is an old practice in various parts of the globe for both preventive and curative purposes. Dependence on herbs as medicine in the treatment of diseases is an adopted practice by a large proportion of the rural population because of its availability and affordability (Sani et al., 2009).

Phenolic compounds are commonly found in both edible and nonedible plants, and they have been reported to have multiple biological effects, including antioxidant activity. Free radicals have been implicated in the development of a number of disorders, including cancer, neuro-degeneration and inflammation (Halliwell, 2006a, b). The presence of antioxidants such as phenolics, flavonoids, tannins and proanthocyanidins in plants may provide protection against a number of diseases; for example, ingestion of natural antioxidants has been inversely associated with morbidity and mortality from degenerative disorders (Gülcin, 2012). Medicinal plants are therefore being investigated for their antioxidant properties, and the demand for natural antioxidants and food preservatives is increasing (Peschel et al., 2006). The importance of the antioxidant constituents of plant materials in the maintenance of health and protection from coronary heart disease and cancer is also raising interest among scientists, food manufacturers, and consumers as the trend of the future is moving toward functional food with specific health effects (Harborne, 1998).

Approximately, one-third of the women with breast cancer developed metastases and ultimately died of the disease. MCF-7 is an estrogen receptor-positive human cancer cell line, derived from a patient with metastatic breast cancer (Parkin et al., 2001). Growth of MCF-7 cells is inhibited by tumor necrosis factor (TNF alpha). Many plants claimed to induce apoptosis in MCF-7 cells such as Antrodia camphorata (Levenson and Jordan, 1997) and Gmelina asiatica. The goal of screening medicinal plants is to search for excellent anticancer agent suitable for human malignancies, therefore, the aim of this study was to screen tuber fractions with respect to their total phenolic and flavonoid content, HPLC analysis, antioxidant activity in order to find new potential sources of natural anticancer drugs. The study is a part of a larger survey with other functional properties of this plant such as their antimicrobial, secondary metabolites, toxicity and GC/MS analysis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Plant

The plant under investigation (M. pseudopetalosa) was collected from the South of Sudan. The plant was authenticated at the
Preparation of crude plant extracts

The plant material was air dried, ground into a coarse powder form and the dried ground tubers (1 kg) of the *M. pseudopetala* were soaked for 3 days in 1500 ml ethyl acetate and ethanol consecutively. Ethyl acetate extract gave 7.1 g while the ethanol extract gave 10.9 g; both with dark brown residue and were subjected to silica gel (230 - 400 mesh) column chromatography separation using stepwise gradient elution of n-hexane to chloroform, and chloroform to ethyl acetate and finally washing with pure methanol. Then, 100 ml portions were collected, concentrated and combined according to their similarity in spectrometric and thin layer chromatography (TLC) separation behaviors using suitable solvent systems. Ethyl acetate gave eight fractions while ethanol gave twelve fractions. Four fractions with bioactive effects were subjected to further investigations.

Total phenolic and flavonoid contents

The total phenolic content of the extract was determined by the Folin-Ciocalteu method (Kaur and Kapoor, 2002). Briefly, 200 L of crude extract (1 mg/mL) was made up to 3 mL with distilled water, mixed thoroughly with 0.5 mL of Folin-Ciocalteu reagent for 3 min, followed by the addition of 2 mL of 20% (w/v) sodium carbonate. The mixture was allowed to stand for a further 60 min in the dark and absorbance was measured at 517 nm. The total phenolic content was calculated from the calibration curve and the results were expressed as mg of gallic acid equivalent per g dry weight.

The total flavonoid content of crude extract was determined by the aluminium chloride colorimetric method (Chang et al., 2002). In brief, 50 L of crude extract (1 mg/mL ethanol) was made up to 1 mL with methanol, mixed with 4 mL of distilled water and then 0.3 mL of 5% NaNO₂ solution; 0.3 mL of 10% AlCl₃ solution was added after 5 min of incubation, and the mixture was allowed to stand for 6 min. Then, 2 mL of 1 mol/L NaOH solution was added, and the final volume of the mixture was brought to 10 mL with double-distilled water. The mixture was allowed to stand for 15 min, and absorbance was measured at 510 nm. The total flavonoid content was calculated from a calibration curve, and the result was expressed as mg rutin equivalent per g dry weight.

Antioxidant properties

1,1-Diphenyl-2-picryl-hydrazyl assay

The antioxidant activity of the extract was determined by 1,1-diphenyl-2-picryl-hydrazyl (DPPH) assay, as described earlier with some modifications (Villaño et al., 2007). Briefly, 200 L of each extract (100-500 g/mL) was mixed with 3.8 mL DPPH solution and incubated in the dark at room temperature for 1 h. The absorbance of the mixture was then measured at 517 nm. Ascorbic acid was used as a positive control. The ability of the sample to scavenge DPPH radical was determined from DPPH scavenging effect = (Control OD – Sample OD / Control OD) x 100.

**ABTS**⁺ free radical-scavenging activity

The determination of ABTS**⁺** radical scavenging activity was carried out as reported by Dorman and Hiltnunen (2004). Briefly, the ABTS**⁺** radical was generated by the reaction of 7 mM ABTS aqueous solution with K₂S₂O₈ (2.45 mM) in the dark for 16 h adjusting the absorbance at 734 nm to 0.700 at room temperature. The samples (10 μL) were added to 1490 μL ABTS++, absorbance at 734 nm was read immediately (A0) and after 6 min (A1). Several concentrations were measured, and the percentage inhibition ([A0 - A1/A0] x 100) was plotted against the phenol content and IC50 was determined (concentration of total phenol able to scavenge 50% of ABTS**⁺** free radical).

Chromatography

HPLC instrument employed in the study was Make Waters Analytical system (USA) with alliance 2690 pump, automatic injector, UV-dual lambda observance detector and empower-2 software. The stationary phase used is C18 column. Calibration of the system was done by accurately weighing 0.01 g of standard solution (Merck, Germany) dissolved in 100 ml of HPLC grade water. 20 μl of different concentrations mode from the standard stock solutions and samples were injected through a C18 Column. The mobile phase consisting of water: methanol (70:30 v/v) was degassed before use. Detection of stalk solution was done at 273 nm and flow rate was maintained at 1 ml/min. All the chemicals used are HPLC grade (99.8% pure). The methanol was obtained from Merck and Tri fluoro acetic acid from Finar. De-ionized water was obtained from Milli-Q (millipore, USA). The samples were run for minutes. All chromatographic data were recorded and processed using Autochro-300 software.

Anticancer activity

**Cell cultures and treatments**

Human breast cancer cell line (MCF-7) was obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (Rockville, MD, USA). Cells were grown in RPMI-1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 1% MEM non-essential amino acid solution, and 1% penicillin streptomycin solution (10,000 units of penicillin and 10 mg of streptomycin in 0.9% NaCl) in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO₂, 95% air at 35°C. The passage number range for cell lines was maintained between 20 and 25. The cells were cultured in 75 cm² cell culture flasks. For experimental purposes, cells were cultured in 96 well plates (0.2 ml of cell solution/well). The optimum cell concentration as determined by the growth profile of the cell line was 2x10⁵ cells/ml (Cells were allowed to attach for 24 h before treatment with tested extracts). The stock solution was filtered with Minisart Filters (0.22 µm). Working 2 fold serially diluted test materials were prepared. Cell monolayers were washed with PBS and the addition serially diluted materials were dispensed to the pre-cultured plates for determination of test materials toxicity (Romero et al., 2003).

**3-(4,5-dimethyl-2-thiazolyl)-2,5-diphenyl-2H-tetrazolium bromide (MTT) assay**

The MTT assay is based on the protocol described for the first time by Mossmann (1983). The assay was optimized for the cell lines used in the experiments. Briefly, for the purposes of the experiments at the end of the incubation time, cells were incubated for 4 h with 0.8 mg/ml of MTT, dissolved in serum free medium. Washing with phosphate buffer saline (PBS 1 ml) was followed by the addition of DMSO (1 ml), gentle shaking for 10 min so that complete dissolution was achieved. Aliquots (200 µl) of the resulting
Table 1. Total phenol and flavonoid contents.

| Sample   | Total flavonoid (mg/g) | Total phenol (mg/g) |
|----------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Fraction8 | 7.18 ± 0.32<sup>b</sup> | 9.99 ± 1.2<sup>c</sup> |
| Fraction9 | 0.24 ± 0.01<sup>d</sup> | 9.51 ± 1.2<sup>d</sup> |
| Fraction11 | 0.49 ± 0.01<sup>c</sup> | 11.18 ± 1.3<sup>b</sup> |
| Fraction12 | 11.75 ± 0.66<sup>a</sup> | 20.72 ± 1.9<sup>a</sup> |

Values are means of three replications ± SD; Means with the different letter in each column are significantly different (p < 0.05).

Table 2. Antioxidant activity by DPPH assay.

| Sample | Concentrations (%) |
|--------|--------------------|
|        | 20     | 40     | 60     | 80     | 100    |
| 8      | 13.1   | 22.7   | 34.6   | 51.4   | 70.8   |
| 9      | 13.9   | 26.0   | 39.9   | 60.2   | 74.1   |
| 11     | 19.8   | 38.9   | 68.2   | 77.7   | 82.7   |
| 12     | 27.4   | 41.9   | 73.6   | 88.2   | 91.3   |

Antioxidant activity

Test for antioxidant activity represented strong activity in fraction 12 at a concentration of 100 mg/ml when we used DPPH and ABTS (91.3 and 97%) (Tables 2 and 3). Also F8, F9 and F11 showed high antioxidant activity with DPPH method at a high concentration (100 mg/ml), the values were 70.8, 74.1 and 82%, respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Total phenolic and flavonoids contents

Phenolic compounds are one of the major chemical classes of plants’ secondary metabolites. They play an important role in the defense of plants against pathogens, diseases, parasites, and predators (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014). Moreover, they involve in a number of physiological mechanisms such as antioxidant activity. They also play an important role in stabilizing lipid peroxidation (Wei and Shiow, 2001). The total phenolic contents in the examined tuber fraction extracts using the Folin-Ciocalteu reagent is expressed in term of gallic acid equivalent. The values obtained for the concentration of total phenols are expressed as mg of GA/g of extract (Table 1). The highest concentration of phenols was measured for fraction 12 (20.72±1.9 mg/m) and this may increase anticancer activity of this fraction since flavonoids and phenolic compounds have been suggested to play a preventive role in the development of cancer and heart disease. Also fraction 11 represented concentration of 11.18±1.3 mg/ml, while fractions 8 and 9 exhibited low concentrations. On the other hand, the values of flavonoids content represented high concentration with fraction 12 (11.75 ± 0.660), while fraction 8 showed 7.18 ± 0.32 mg/g. The lowest flavonoid content was measured in fractions 11 and 9.

High performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) analysis

HPLC analysis can be used for classification of herbs based upon secondary metabolites. Extract yield at optimum condition was then analyzed by HPLC for

solutions were transferred in 96-well plates and absorbance was recorded at 560 nm using the microplate spectrophotometer system (Spectra max190-Molecular Devices). Results were analyzed with the Soft max pro software (version 2.2.1) and are presented as percentage of the control value. The relation between surviving fraction and extract concentration is plotted to get the survival curve for cell line after the specified time. The concentration required for 50% inhibition of cell viability (IC50) was calculated (Mossmann, 1983).
quantifying bioactive compound.

The HPLC analysis of tuber fractions showed some interesting results (Table 4). Fraction 12, which proved to be the highest cytotoxic fraction, has got 3 compounds as revealed by the HPLC analysis. One of the compounds present in fraction 12 is a gallic acid which belongs to phenolic compounds. This compound might be considered as the cause of the high anticancer activity of the fraction; since gallic acid potent high antioxidant activity is linked to anticancer agent as reported by Lölliger (1991).

Fraction 12 represented high concentration of gallic acid with a value of 88.121 µg/ml. Gallic acid (3,4,5 trihydroxybenzoic acid) is a phenolic compound present in most plants. This metabolite is known to exhibit a range of bioactivities including antioxidant, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, and anticancer (Felipe and Salgado 2016). However, this molecule attracts the interest of researchers mainly for its antioxidant capacity (Kim, 2007). Other pharmacological activities described in the literature are anticancer (Chia et al., 2010). Also, sinapic acid (3,5 dimethoxy-4-hydroxycinnamic acid) which belongs to the class of phenolic acid, exhibited 38.674 µg/ml. It has been tested and reported against various pathological conditions such as cancer inflammation, diabetes and oxidative stress (Kikuzaki et al., 2002). The less concentration is shown by caffeic acid (3,4 dihydroxycinnamic acid 11.106 µg/ml). Caffeic acid is present in several medications of popular use, mainly based on propolis; moreover, it is acting as a carcinogenic inhibitor (Greenwald, 2004). On the other hand, fraction 9 (Table 5) reflected less concentration of syrnic and sinapic with values of 11.65 and 8 µg/ml, respectively.

### Anticancer activity

Tuber fractions were evaluated in-vitro for their anticancer activity against MCF-7 cell lines using MTT assay. 5-fluorouracil is one of the most commonly used drugs to treat cancer (positive control) and the plant extracts were used at different concentrations for 24, 48 and 72 h. The MTT assay is a sensitive, quantitative and reliable colorimetric assay that measure cell viability. The assay is based on the capacity of the cellular mitochondrial dehydrogenase enzyme in living cells to reduce the yellow water-soluble substrate 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyl tetrazolium bromide (MTT) into a dark blue/purple formazan product which is

### Table 3. Antioxidant activity by ABTS assay.

| Sample | Concentrations (%) |
|--------|---------------------|
|        | 20                  | 40      | 60      | 80      | 100     |
| 8      | 41.6                | 58.4    | 70.1    | 75.3    | 80.2    |
| 9      | 51.8                | 66.0    | 73.4    | 82.8    | 90.3    |
| 11     | 50.1                | 56.8    | 69.3    | 75.4    | 88.9    |
| 12     | 56.9                | 68.6    | 80.1    | 88.3    | 97.0    |

### Table 4. Retention time, peak area and concentration of compounds present in F₁₂ as revealed by HPLC analysis.

| Compound | Retention time | Peak area | Concentration (mg/ml) |
|----------|----------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Gallic   | 5.7            | 237.432   | 88.828                |
| Caffic   | 21.4           | 78.225    | 11.106                |
| Sinapic  | 23.8           | 295.678   | 38.674                |

### Table 5. Retention time, peak area and concentration of compounds present in F₉ as revealed by HPLC analysis.

| Compound | Retention time | Peak area | Concentration (mg/ml) |
|----------|----------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Syrnic   | 23             | 51.408    | 11.65                 |
| Sinapic  | 33.8           | 78.225    | 8.00                  |
insoluble in water. The amount of formazan produced is directly proportional to the cell number in a range of cell lines (Riss et al., 2016; Gerlier and Thomasset, 1986). Also, it is accurate because of its ability to describe the relationship between the amount of active cells with absorbance obtained from measuring its 50% inhibition concentration value (IC$_{50}$) (Behera et al., 2003). The lesser the IC$_{50}$ value, the higher the potential of the tested extract to inhibit cell proliferation. The principle of the MTT assay is to measure the activity of mitochondrial dehydrogenase in converting MTT into formazan. The concentration of formazan, which has a blue color, can be determined with a visible spectrophotometer and it has positive correlation with the number of living cells because the reduction event only exists when the mitochondrial reductase is produced (mitochondria is still active and this indicates that the cell is alive) (Chapdelaine, 2001).

As a matter of fact, the results revealed that F12 (43.15 μg/ml) is a very promising one with remarkable IC$_{50}$ against MCF-7 breast cancer cell when compared with 5-fluorouracil (51.22 μg/ml) used as standard drug at 72 h (Figure 3A). The other fractions F11, F9 and F8 showed IC$_{50}$ equal to 66.98, 48.11 and 60.45 μg/ml, respectively (Figure 3A). As the cell viability decreases the inhibition increase and that led to more potent drug, this is clearly shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3B.

Phytochemicals isolated from herbs have emerged as a new and promising source of anticancer remedies, or as adjuvants for chemotherapeutic drugs, to enhance their efficacy and decrease side effects (De Vita et al., 2000).

Gallic acid is a possible cause of the anticancer activity observed for fractions (F12); since Felipe and Salgado (2016) reported that the gallic acid was known to display some anticancer and antioxidant activity. Moreover, the presence of gallic acid is restricted to this fraction. This compound might be considered as the cause of the high toxicity of the fraction; since gallic acid was found to inhibit the growth of breast cancer cell MCF-7 as reported by Wang et al. (2014). He suggested it as a possible application in breast cancer therapy. However, Zheng et al. (2001) also referred to the potent antioxidant of the cinnamic acid which may provide another explanation to increase antioxidant and anticancer effects of this fraction.

Furthermore, the presence of caffeic acid in fraction 12 might also be taken as another proof for the increased anticancer activity of the fraction compared to fraction 9.
which lacks this acid in spite of its high IC$_{50}$ value (48.11 µg/ml).

Surprisingly, *M. pseudopetalosa* tubers were used in the folkloric medicine of the natives of the South Blue Nile State in Sudan for the treatment of breast cancer growth without any knowledge of their chemical constituents (Ibrahim and EL Nure, 2015).

**Conclusion**

This study indicated that the tuber fractions contained high amounts of phenolic compounds and exhibited strong antioxidant activities. Gallic acid, cinapic acid, and caffeic acid are concentrated largely in fraction 12 in comparison with the other fractions and also represented
anticancer effect more than 5-flourouracil which is used as an anticancer chemo therapeutic drug. Hence, the plant tubers may be used as a new and promising source of breast cancer remedies, or as adjuvants for chemotherapeutic drugs to decrease side effects.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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