X-Ray Crystallography and Free Energy Calculations Reveal the Binding Mechanism of A2A Adenosine Receptor Antagonists**

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Abstract: We present a robust protocol based on iterations of free energy perturbation (FEP) calculations, chemical synthesis, biophysical mapping and X-ray crystallography to reveal the binding mode of an antagonist series to the A2A adenosine receptor (AR). Eight A2A AR binding site mutations from biophysical mapping experiments were initially analyzed with sidechain FEP simulations, performed on alternate binding modes. The results distinctly supported one binding mode, which was subsequently used to design new chromone derivatives. Their affinities for the A2A AR were experimentally determined and investigated through a cycle of ligand-FEP calculations, validating the binding orientation of the different chemical substituents proposed. Subsequent X-ray crystallography of the A2A AR with a low and a high affinity chromone derivative confirmed the predicted binding orientation. The new molecules and structures here reported were driven by free energy calculations, and provide new insights on antagonist binding to the A2A AR, an emerging target in immunology.

Introduction

Computational estimation of shifts in binding free energy, associated with ligand modifications or point mutations in the receptor macromolecule, can provide the missing link between the structure of a protein-ligand complex and a panel of experimental binding affinities. Rigorous free energy perturbation (FEP) methods have been used for decades to understand the structure-affinity relationships (SAR) around a given chemical scaffold, and recent advances now allow the use of this technique routinely in ligand design projects.[1] The same methodology can be used to analyze this problem from a complementary perspective, that is to estimate the gain or loss in binding free energy from site-directed mutagenesis (SDM) data. The idea of in silico mutagenesis, initially introduced almost three decades ago by Kollman to study the binding and catalysis of subtilisin,[2] was recently implemented in computational pipelines that pursue a systematic characterization of the effect on point mutations on for example, ligand-binding or protein stability.[3–5] The combination of both ligand and residue FEP simulations can provide a full energetic landscape of the molecular interactions governing protein-ligand binding, which underlies the design of two complementary protocols in our lab, namely OligFEP[6] and QresFEP,[3] integrated in the molecular dynamics (MD) software package Q.[7–8]

One area where this approach is particularly promising is the design of ligands for G-protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs), a superfamily of seven-transmembrane (7TM) cellular receptors[8] that mediate the therapeutic effects of about 30% of all marketed drugs.[9] There is a large amount of SAR and SDM data available for these receptors, which can be combined with the increasing growth of structural knowledge of many GPCR targets. The first integrated approach of ligand and residue FEP simulations was published by Boukharta et al. to characterize antagonist binding to the Y1 neuropeptide receptor, which we later expanded to other GPCR families, including the related neuropeptide receptor Y2, the orphan receptor GPR139 and several members of the family of adenosine receptors.[14–16]

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the latter, the adenosine A\_2A receptor (A\_2A/AR) was one of the first GPCRs to be crystallized\[17\] and today stands out as one of the better characterized GPCRs from a structural perspective. Several structures of the inactive and active forms of the receptor have been solved within the last decade, and the integration of the available experimental data has strongly aided ligand design programs for this receptor.\[18,19\]

Many A\_2A/AR antagonists have been developed targeting a number of pathologies\[20–22\] including recent clinical candidates in immuno-oncology. A number of these antagonists have been co-crystallized with the A\_2A/AR, providing unique structural information which, in combination with the extensive SDM data available,\[23\] allow envisaging ligand binding mechanisms and structure-based drug design (SBDD) programs of antagonist molecules.\[18\] However, suboptimal properties of traditional scaffolds, such as poor pharmacokinetics and low selectivity profiles, motivate the search of novel chemical entities as A\_2A/AR antagonists,\[24\] frequently through high throughput screening (HTS) campaigns. In these cases, it is not common to obtain a crystal structure of the receptor-ligand complex, which can hamper further hit to lead optimization. Instead, approximate binding modes are often inferred from the experimental data extracted from SAR of ligand series and SDM data,\[23\] which can be complemented by computational models of the protein-ligand complex.\[25\]

Biophysical Mapping (BPM), is an integrated approach that has been used with success in antagonist design programs on the A\_2A/AR and other GPCRs.\[27–30\] Here, the binding affinity of a ligand series is evaluated via surface plasmon resonance (SPR) on a panel of mutant receptors, each bearing a single-point mutation within the putative binding site.\[27\] The resulting matrix of binding affinity shifts from wild type (WT) affinities combined with SAR data and mapped to a receptor-ligand model provide further insights in the determinants of binding of the scaffold. The first application of this technique was based around the co-crystallized A\_2A/AR antagonist ZM241385 in combination with 8 receptor mutants (see Figure 1 A).\[22\] These mutations involve residues in direct contact with the ligand, such as N253\[29\], L85\[33\], M177\[33\], N181\[5,6\] and I66\[26\] (Ballesteros Weinstein numbering\[30\] in superscript), as well as residues not directly in contact with the ligand, namely S277\[2\], Y271\[3,6\] and L167\[2\] (see Figure 1). This approach was extended for 1,2,4-triazines as A\_2A/AR antagonists,\[32\] and the binding mode was later confirmed by X-ray crystallography (see Figure 1 B).\[29\] In the same HTS campaign, a series of chromones were identified as a novel family of A\_2A/AR antagonists,\[32\] and consecutively optimized to yield the potent and selective Chromone 14 (see Figure 2).\[30\] At that point, the lead-optimization program was successful in improving the affinity of the initial HTS hit, while not focusing on pharmacokinetic optimization (i.e., the most potent compound Chromone 14 contains a metabolically unstable ester group). Interestingly, this structure-based optimization was guided by the interpretation of the BPM data and a computational model of the complex generated by docking. This led to the proposal of two putative binding modes compatible with the BPM data. Even if the SAR of the generated series seemed to favor one of them, the question remained open due to the lack of an X-ray structure with any of these compounds in the original study.\[30,32\]

Here, we initially examine the SPR data available for these A\_2A/AR antagonist families through a recently developed in silico mutagenesis tool based on free energy perturbation (FEP) simulations.\[11,14,15\] The results pointed to a unified binding mode of the chromone series, which is here used as a basis for the design, synthesis and pharmacological evaluation of an extended series of compounds aimed to further explain the underlying SAR of chromones as A\_2A/AR antagonists. Finally, experimental structures of two chromone-A\_2A/AR complexes were solved which confirmed the binding mode hypothesis from the computational studies.

**Results and Discussion**

**Free Energy Perturbation Calculations on Existing BPM Data**

The BPM data obtained for the three chemotypes of A\_2A/AR antagonists were collected from reference [27], and relative binding free energy changes between mutant and WT receptor were calculated from $K_i$ values (see Table 1, $\Delta \Delta G_{\text{mut}}$). Thereafter, relative binding free energies for each ligand were calculated based on 3D models of the receptor-ligand complexes ($\Delta \Delta G_{\text{calc}}$; Table 1). In the case of ZM241385, the model was directly extracted from the high-resolution structure with the A\_2A/AR (see Figure 1), and the curated receptor model (see Supporting Information, Methods) was used throughout this work. The results show excellent agreement with the experimental data, with a mean absolute error (MAE) of 0.41 kcal mol\(^{-1}\) and a correlation coefficient of $R^2 = 0.94$ (Table 1). Next, the same set of BPM mutations was analyzed for triazine 4g. In this case, the starting configuration of the complex was obtained by

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**Figure 1.** Binding mode and chemical structures of antagonists ZM241385 (A, crystal structure 4EIY\[26\]) and triazine 4b (B). The experimental pose of the triazine (cyan) was superimposed on the same crystal structure of the receptor shown in panel A (ribbons). Both compounds had been characterized by BPM (residues labelled and depicted in gray sticks). Receptor-ligand hydrogen bonds are depicted as magenta lines.
aligning the triazine 4g-A2A AR complex (3UZA) to the curated model described before, retaining only the coordinates of the ligand (Figure 1B). The calculated free energies (ΔΔGbind
<sub>calc</sub>) (Table 1) were in general good agreement with the experimental data (MAE = 0.94 kcal mol<sup>−1</sup>; R² = 0.66). In contrast to the previous case, two mutations (Met177<sup>39</sup> and Asn181<sup>42</sup>) show qualitative discrepancy with the experimental data for this ligand. Subsequent analysis of the MD trajectories suggests that this is likely due to a suboptimal representation of the (water mediated) H-bond network upon mutation, which has previously been recognized as a challenging factor for this particular scaffold.[34,35]

Once the QrsFEP protocol was validated to reproduce the BPM data on experimentally known structures, we moved on to the chromone scaffold, for which there is analogous BPM data, but no crystal structure available. Here, two reasonable binding modes were generated by molecular docking of Chromone 14. The two poses, denoted as A and B (see Figure 2), form at least one hydrogen bond with Asn253<sup>55</sup> (a highly conserved interaction in AR ligand recognition)[29] and are related by a symmetry axis along the bicyclic core of the chromone scaffold. According to the docking score function used, both poses were energetically equivalent (−9.30 vs. −9.17 for pose A and B respectively) making it difficult at this point to discern the correct one, in line with the previous binding hypothesis by Andrews et al.[30,32]

In pose A (Figure 2A), Asn253<sup>55</sup> forms an H-bond with the nitrogen in the 4-methylthiazole group, leaving the carbonyl group potentially exposed to the internal water network stabilized by residues in TM7, as observed in the A2A AR crystal structure with ZM241385<sup>26</sup> (see Supporting Information, Figure S1). Conversely, in pose B (Figure 2B) this carbonyl forms an additional hydrogen bond with N253<sup>55</sup>. We hypothesized that in principle, the symmetry axis would allow exchanging substituents at R<sup>6</sup> and R<sup>7</sup> between the binding poses, something that we would explore later in this work (see below).

Our strategy to select the most reliable binding mode was to compute the effect on ligand binding of the 8 mutations from the BPM panel[27] for each pose, and compare the results with the experimental values. The results (Figure 2C, Table 1 and Supporting Information, Table S1) highlight pose A as the binding mode with the best correlation to experimental data. A MAE of 0.50 kcal mol<sup>−1</sup> was observed for this pose, which is comparable to the results obtained for the co-crystallized antagonist ZM241385. In addition, the correlation coefficient of R² = 0.74 falls between those observed for ZM241385 and triazine 4g. Conversely, the corresponding values calculated on pose B are much higher (MAE = 1.53 kcal mol<sup>−1</sup>) and the correlation is completely lost (R² = 0.03). Additionally, the computed loss of binding affinity upon the N253<sup>55</sup> mutation is closer to experiment in pose A than in pose B, indicating that the additional H-bond between Asn253<sup>55</sup> and the carbonyl in pose B would not contribute to more favorable binding free energies. From the MD simulations, we further observed that the binding modes are not related by a symmetry axis as initially hypothesized, and the substituents at positions R<sup>6</sup> and R<sup>7</sup> are exploring different positions in the binding site, making them no longer readily interchangeable.

Table 1: Comparison between experimental and calculated relative binding free energies (ΔΔGbind in kcal mol<sup>−1</sup>) for A2A AR mutants.

| Mutant<sup>a</sup> | ZM241385 | Triazine 4g |
|------------------|-----------|-------------|
|                  | ΔΔG<sub>exp</sub><sup>b</sup> | ΔΔG<sub>calc</sub><sup>b</sup> | ΔΔG<sub>exp</sub><sup>b</sup> | ΔΔG<sub>calc</sub><sup>b</sup> |
| I66A<sup>c</sup>  | 0.14      | 0.83 ± 0.44 | 0.41      | 1.94 ± 0.34 |
| L85A<sup>c</sup>  | 2.45      | 3.30 ± 0.41 | 1.09      | 1.65 ± 0.37 |
| L167A<sup>c</sup> | 0.00      | 0.60 ± 0.31 | −0.14     | −0.39 ± 0.36 |
| M177A<sup>c</sup> | 0.14      | −0.09 ± 0.44| −0.27     | 1.66 ± 0.49 |
| N181A<sup>c</sup>| 1.23      | 1.47 ± 0.57 | 0.82      | −0.63 ± 0.55 |
| N253A<sup>c</sup> | 5.86<sup>d</sup> | 5.81 ± 0.57 | ≥4.36<sup>d</sup> | 5.64 ± 0.56 |
| Y271A<sup>c</sup>| 1.09      | 0.84 ± 0.74 | 0.41      | −0.1 ± 0.68 |

<sup>a</sup> Data for the mutant receptor constructs reported in reference [27].
<sup>b</sup> Experimental relative binding free energies were calculated from K<sub>app</sub> values as ΔΔG<sub>exp</sub> = RT ln [K<sub>mut</sub> / K<sub>app</sub>], with experimental errors in all cases reported as approximately 0.1 pK<sub>B</sub> unit, that is, less than 0.1 kcal mol<sup>−1</sup>[27].
<sup>c</sup> Binding affinity of the ligand to the (mutant) receptor was lower than the experimental threshold (pK<sub>B</sub> < 5 in all cases). Errors are standard error of the mean (s.e.m.) over a total of 10 replicates.

Figure 2. Putative binding modes A (green) and B (magenta) of Chromone 14 to the A<sub>2A</sub> AR (H-bonds in magenta). C) Experimental and calculated changes in binding free energies for each mutation in the BPM. The error bars correspond to the s.e.m. of the replica calculations for the calculated values, or are adjusted to the reported value of 0.1 pK<sub>B</sub> unit in the case of experimental data.[27]
Design, Synthesis and Pharmacological Evaluation of Chromone Derivatives

On the basis of the binding mode hypothesis assessed by the FEP calculations, we designed a small collection of chromone derivatives (Scheme 1), aiming to systematically explore two different variables on A2AR affinity: methylation at position 2 (series 5) and the aforementioned effect of switching the oxygenated function (–OH or –OCOMe) from the original position 7 (series 4) to position 6 (series 8), swapping the alkyl substitution (Pr/H) accordingly. A collection of 11 molecules was prepared as depicted in synthetic Scheme 1. Structure and synthetic pathways employed to assembly chromones 4, 5 and 8.

Scheme 1. Structure and synthetic pathways employed to assembly chromones 4, 5 and 8.
Scheme 1. Briefly, the key 2-hydroxyphenyl ketones 3 were obtained by either the Hoesch method[38] or Claisen condensation,[39] employing phenols 1 or esters 6 and thiazole derivatives 2a and 2b as reactive precursors, respectively. Treatment of ketones 3 with orthoesters (formate or acetate) enabled the efficient chromone core formation,[37] thus defining the substituent pattern at position 2 (H or Me). Finally, the required acetates were prepared by reaction of the corresponding phenols with acetyl chloride. The full synthetic methodology is provided in the Supporting Information.

The affinity of these compounds for the WT A2A AR was then evaluated with the same SPR assay used to generate the BPM data, using the A2A AR-STAR2 construct (see Supporting Information, Methods).[27] The data confirmed that methylation at position 2 (compounds 5a-d) is generally unfavorable for binding, compared to the parent series (compounds 4a-d). This is in agreement with previous work by Andrews et al.,[30] where methylation of the low affinity compound 4a (corresponding to chromone 8 as reported by Andrews et al.[30] with pK_i = 5.7) resulted in a relative decrease in affinity of 0.6 log units (Chromone 12, pK_i = 5.1). We observe a similar difference for this pair of compounds (Table 2, ΔpK_i = 0.85), while this effect is amplified in the case of the high affinity precursor (see 4d as compared to 5d, ΔpK_i = 2.7). More surprising was the observation of a similar effect when the substituents between R^1 and R^2 are swapped (compounds 8a-d), which again was most pronounced for the high affinity compound 4d (see Table 2), with a drop of affinity of 2.7 log units for the corresponding methylated derivative 8d.

**Table 2:** SPR affinity data for the series of Chromone derivatives synthesized in this work.

| Compound | Substituents | pK_i [H] |
|----------|--------------|----------|
| 4a       | H H H H     | 5.95     |
| 4b       | H H C_6H_5 H | 6.20     |
| 4c       | H CH_3 H H  | 5.80     |
| 4d       | H H C_6H_5 COCH_3 | 6.60 |
| 5a       | CH_3 H H H | 5.10     |
| 5b       | CH_3 H C_6H_5 H | 5.42 |
| 5c       | CH_3 CH_3 H H | 5.36 |
| 5d       | CH_3 H C_6H_5 COCH_3 | 5.90 |
| 8a       | H H H H     | 5.50     |
| 8b       | H H H C_6H_5 | 5.70     |
| 8d       | H H COCH_3 C_6H_5 | 5.90 |

[a] Experimental errors in all cases reported as approximately 0.1 pK_i unit, that is, less than 0.1 kcal mol^{-1}. [b] Compounds previously reported in ref.[30].

**Computational Evaluation of the Proposed Binding Modes**

From the pharmacological data on the expanded series of chromones and the initial MD simulations, it appears that the two binding poses differ more than just purely on the rotation axis of the chromone scaffold.

The following step was then to investigate whether all compounds in the series would adopt the preferred binding mode A, or if binding mode B is accessible by some of the compounds, depending on the pattern of substitutions. Such a hypothesis was experimentally observed for caffeine, which in contrast to other xanthine derivatives presents a dual binding mode to the A2A AR (see Figure 3A). Indeed, an isoenergetic dual binding mode for caffeine was previously hypothesized on the basis of free energy calculations,[38] before experimental observation of dual-occupancy crystal structures in complex with the A2A AR.[39,40] Conversely, the X-ray structure of the N^7-demethylated analogue theophylline shows that this molecule adopts only one of these binding modes, where the acidic hydrogen at position N7 makes an additional H-bond contact with N253[39–35] (Figure 3). We thus evaluated whether our recently developed dual-topology protocol QligFEP was suitable to capture this different behavior, by a direct estimation of relative binding free energies between the two poses, in analogy to the efficiency of this protocol to compare topologically unrelated ligands (e.g., scaffold hopping).[40] The results for the A2A-xanthine system shown in Table 3 show that this is the case: the negligible calculated free energy difference between the two poses for caffeine is in line with the equally populated dual binding mode in the crystal structure with the A2A AR (PDB code 5MZP, Figure 3A). In contrast, the single binding mode observed in the crystal structure of theophylline (blue color in Figure 3A) is energetically favored by 1.6 kcal mol^{-1}. Subsequent application of the same strategy in the generated chromone series showed a similar energy gap between the two binding poses considered for the simplest chromone in our series (4a, Figure 3B), with pose A being 1.7 kcal mol^{-1} more favorable than pose B. Notably, this energy gap increases significantly for the highest affinity compound 4d, suggestive

![Figure 3](image-url)

Figure 3: A) Dual binding mode of caffeine, as extracted from the A2A AR crystal structure with the A2A AR (PDB code 5MZP). Colour code is green (binding mode A) and magenta (binding mode B). B) modelled binding modes of Chromone 4a, following the same colouring Scheme as in panel A.
of an optimal anchoring of the R² acetate and R³ n-propyl substituents in pose A (Table 3).

We consequently retained the selected binding pose for each scaffold (i.e., xanthine and chromone) and computed the affinity shifts observed upon methylation. The calculations reproduced the experimental decrease in affinity observed for caffeine, as compared to the N₁ demethylated analogue theophylline (Table 3). Similarly, the corresponding FEP calculations capture the experimentally observed negative effect on an A₁₃, affinity due to methylation on R² in the original chromones series 4 (see series 5, see Table 2).[30] The two pair comparisons performed (4a → 5a and 4d → 5d, see Table 3) qualitatively capture this effect, which is experimentally more pronounced in the last case. Notably, a comparison of the endpoint configurations of the 4d → 5d FEP transformation provide the structural reason of this effect: to avoid the induced steric hindrance of the new methyl group with Asn253[32], the core scaffold of 5d moved approximately 1.5 Å away from the original pose A of 4d while maintaining the interaction between the nitrogen in the 4-methylthiazole group and the key asparagine residue.

**X-Ray Crystallography**

In an effort to unequivocally reveal the binding mode of the chromone scaffold, the A₁₃AR-STAR2 construct[27] was crystallized with compound 4d (PDB code: 6ZDR) and its 2-methyl analogue 5d (PDB code: 6ZDV). The structures were obtained following the in meso soaking approach (see Supporting Information, Methods), and could be refined down to a resolution of 1.92 and 2.13 Å respectively. Statistics for data collection and refinement are given in the Supporting Information, Table S2. The overall structure of the A₁₃AR receptor is highly similar to previously solved structures with other antagonists (see Figure 4A), with an RMSD of 0.46 Å for the Cα trace as compared to the ZM241385 structure (PDB 4EIY, calculated using PyMOL[28]). The two structures show clear positive omit density at 1σ for the presence of the chromone compounds in the orthosteric binding site (Figure 4B and C), in both cases adopting binding mode A (Figure 4D and E). All residues in the binding site show a conserved rotameric state between the two structures and the A₁₃AR-ZM241385 complex. The only exception is Y277[36], which slightly rotates outward served to accommodate the alky tail of the chromone at R² (see Supporting Information, Figure S2A), an induced-fit effect that was previously observed for other A₁₃AR ligands.[33] The structure with the high affinity ligand 4d shows outstanding agreement with the computational model (see Figure 5A) with an RMSD of 0.67 Å between the docked and experimental poses, and is indeed highly similarly to previously reported binding modes of the compound.[36,32] The core of the scaffold is anchored by an H-bond between the nitrogen in the 4-methylthiazole ring (coplanar with the chromone scaffold) and N253[35], and complemented by a π-π stacking with F168EL[2], in line with the binding pattern observed for many other A₁₃AR antagonists.[20] The eter at position R² is stabilizing the Glu169[30]–His264[72] ionic pair, which closes the EL2-EL3 interface, while the propyl at R³ makes contacts with Tyr271[55] and Met270[52]. Given the good resolution of the structure, we could observe a well-defined water network of the interface between the carbonyl moiety of the chromone core and the receptor (Figure 4D). While most water positions are conserved as compared to the A₁₃AR-ZM241385 complex, ligand 4d displaces a number of water molecules observed in the first hydration shell around that ligand (see Supporting Information, Figure 2B). Some of these waters were previously associated to a high-energy or “unhappy” state[33] which could partially explain the high affinity of this particular compound.

The A₁₃AR-5b complex (Figure 4E) further shows that methylation at position R² displaces the chromone core by 1.79 Å, in accordance with observations from the FEP simulations (Table 3 and Figure 5B, RMSD = 1.24 Å between docked and experimental ligand configuration). The 4-methylthiazole ring of compound 5d remains almost coplanar with the chromone scaffold (torsional angle of 16 degrees), and the H-bond interaction between the nitrogen in this ring and Asn253[35] is maintained. Indeed, the methyl group does not disrupt the position of Asn253[35], which remains linked to Glu169[30] via a conserved water molecule. Similarly, the water molecule deeper in the binding crevice remains, mediating a common anchoring point between the carbonyl group of the two ligands and His276[45]. However, the relative displacement of the chromone core on 5d situates the substituents at R³ and R² in sub-optimal pockets (Figure 4D), displacing two of the water molecules described for compound 4d, while a new water molecule in the 5d complex replaces the role of the acetate in 4d (see Figure 5D) in the stabilization of the Glu169[30]–His264[72] ionic pair. This could explain why the inclusion of an acetyl moiety in compound 5d could not recover the affinity of the parent 5b (ΔΔG⁰ = 0.48, Table 2) as much as it was observed for the 4b/4d pair.
Finally, the crystal structures offered the opportunity to revise the $4d \rightarrow 5d$ FEP transformation, which was somewhat underestimated (see Table 3). However, the calculated value using the starting pose from the experimental coordinates did not change significantly, ($\Delta \Delta G_{\text{calc}} = 1.54 \pm 1.22 \text{ kcalmol}^{-1}$) indicating that the docking pose was an accurate enough starting point for the FEP calculations.

Conclusion

We describe a robust workflow to iteratively improve receptor-ligand binding models, based on mapping of available experimental data onto structural information via free energy calculations. We applied this protocol to provide new insights in the binding mode of a recent series of $A_{2A}$AR antagonists. An initial binding mode hypothesis was generated based on the exploration of BPM and SAR data of the original chromone series using FEP. This constituted the basis for the design, synthesis and evaluation of an expanded series of chromone derivatives. The experimental results were conveniently interpreted with the aid of a second iteration of FEP calculations, which reinforced the binding hypothesis. Finally, X-ray crystallography experimentally confirmed this binding mode, supporting the rational design of these compounds. These structures, combined with the FEP calculations, provide structural and energetic insights in the determinants of high affinity binding of the chromone scaffold series. We expect the presented workflow to be of general applicability in structure-based drug design, particularly in the case of GPCRs where structures of receptor-ligand complexes are increasingly available.
Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Keywords: adenosine receptors - biophysical mapping (BPM) - free energy perturbation (FEP) - G protein-coupled receptor (GPCR)