Antimicrobial activity of *Blumea balsamifera* (Lin.) DC. extracts and essential oil

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(Received 17 October 2009; final version received 12 April 2010)

Leaves of *Blumea balsamifera* (Lin.) DC. are used in traditional Thai and Chinese medicine for the treatment of septic wounds and other infections. In this study, the essential oil, hexane, dichloromethane and methanol extracts of these leaves were evaluated for antibacterial and antifungal activities using the disc diffusion assay and agar microdilution method. The essential oil was the most potent, with a minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of 150 \(\mu\)g mL\(^{-1}\) against *Bacillus cereus* and an MIC of 1.2 mg mL\(^{-1}\) against *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Candida albicans*. Activity was also detected from the hexane extract against *Enterobacter cloacae* and *S. aureus*. Minimum bactericidal and fungicidal concentrations were typically equal to or two-fold higher than the MICs for both extracts, indicating microbicidal activity. The present data show that *B. balsamifera* extracts have activity against various infectious and toxin-producing microorganisms. This plant’s active constituents could potentially be developed for use in the treatment and/or prevention of microbial disease.

**Keywords:** *Blumea balsamifera*; essential oil; antibacterial; antifungal; microbicidal

1. Introduction

Antimicrobial resistance is a major global problem, with resistant strains of *Staphylococcus aureus* (Lee, Chen, Huang, & Lin, 2009), *Salmonella enterica* serovar Typhi (WHO, 2009), *Candida albicans* (Cannon et al., 2007) and other microorganisms being responsible for much morbidity and mortality. Given that it takes between 12 and 15 years to develop new drugs (Watkins, 2002), urgent research and development is required to replenish our existing suite of anti-infective medicines before they are completely ineffective. In addition to the difficulties that antimicrobial resistance presents to the healthcare sector and pharmaceutical industry, recent

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reports of antibiotic resistance among foodborne bacteria such as *Bacillus cereus* (Park et al., 2009) mean that the food and drink industry is increasingly involved in the search for interventions to reduce pathogens in foods and protect consumers.

People have been using plants to treat infectious disease for thousands of years (Atta-ur-Rahman, 2008), and it was recently estimated by the WHO that 25% of modern medicines are derived from plants that were first used in traditional medicine (WHO, 2003). Potential applications for phytochemicals include the use as antibacterial (Kumarasamy, Nahar, Byres, Delazar, & Sarker, 2005; Süzgeç, Meriçli, Houghton, & Çubukçu, 2005), antifungal (Boonphong et al., 2007) and antibiotic resistance modulating agents (Fujita et al., 2005). In recent years, it has also been proposed that phytochemicals such as orange oil (Nannapaneni et al., 2009), oregano oil (Friedman, Henika, Levin, & Mandrell, 2006) and green tea extracts (Friedman, 2007) could be used to enhance microbial food safety.

*Blumea balsamifera* (Lin.) DC. (Compositae) is a half-woody, evergreen shrub that grows widely throughout east and southeast Asia. This plant has numerous uses in traditional Thai and Chinese medicine, including the treatment of septic wounds (Ruangrungsi, Tantivatana, Tappayuthpijarn, Borris, & Cordell, 1985), respiratory infections and stomach pains (ICRAF, 2009). Preparation of the plant involves pounding the leaves for use in poultices, drying the leaves for smoking, or boiling the leaves so that the infusion may be used for bathing, inhalation or drinking (ICRAF, 2009; Ruangrungsi et al., 1985). The objective of this study was to assess the potential for *B. balsamifera* components to be used in modern medicine and/or food safety by determining the spectrum, potency and nature of activity of various extracts of the plant.

### 2. Results and discussion

When different extracts of *B. balsamifera* were screened for activity using the disc diffusion method, it was the essential oil which was identified as having the most potent antimicrobial activity (Table 1). The essential oil was responsible for 19 and 12 mm zones of inhibition in agar plates inoculated with clinical isolates of the Gram-positive bacteria *S. aureus* and *B. cereus*. This extract was also found to have activity against the pathogenic fungus *C. albicans*. Of the four plant extracts examined, it was the hexane extract which appeared to have the broadest spectrum of activity though (Table 1), inhibiting two strains of *S. aureus* and two strains of the Gram-negative bacterium *E. cloacae*. Although this does not compare favourably with the spectrum of activity of the antibiotics tested (Table 1), it is worth noting that the bacteria against which the hexane extract is effective are very problematic species. Infections caused by *S. aureus*, in particular, are being seen with increasing prevalence in both the hospital (Rubinstein, 2008) and community (Moellering, 2006), and there is evidence to suggest that this species is becoming increasingly pathogenic (Otto, 2009) and decreasingly susceptible to the drug of last resort, vancomycin (Gould, 2008). With regard to the dichloromethane extract, this was found to have a similar level of inhibitory activity against *E. cloacae* as the hexane extract, but no activity was detected against *S. aureus*. No activity
Table 1. Antimicrobial activity of *B. balsamifera* extracts and essential oil as determined by the disc diffusion assay.

| Microorganism       | Hexane (384 µg disc⁻¹) | Dichloromethane (384 µg disc⁻¹) | Essential oil (384 µg disc⁻¹) | Penicillin (10 U disc⁻¹) | Chloramphenicol (30 µg disc⁻¹) | Tetracycline (30 µg disc⁻¹) | Gentamycin (10 µg disc⁻¹) |
|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| **Gram-positive bacteria** |                        |                                 |                                 |                          |                               |                             |                           |
| *B. cereus* ATCC 11778 | –                      | –                               | –                               | 12                       | 23                            | 29                          | 22                        |
| *B. cereus* MSH 001   | –                      | –                               | 12                              | 12                       | 24                            | 32                          | 22                        |
| *S. aureus* ATCC 25923 | 8                      | –                               | –                               | 12                       | 21                            | 22                          | 20                        |
| *S. aureus* MSH 002   | 6.5                    | –                               | 19                              | 11                       | 22                            | 28                          | 21                        |
| **Gram-negative bacteria** |                        |                                 |                                 |                          |                               |                             |                           |
| *E. cloacae* DMST 17206 | 7                      | 8                               | –                               | 14                       | 7                             | 7                           | 10                        |
| *E. cloacae* MSH 003   | 6.5                    | 7                               | –                               | 12                       | 11                            | 7                           | 7                         |
| *E. coli* ATCC 25922  | –                      | –                               | –                               | 13                       | 26                            | 23                          | 15                        |
| *E. coli* MSH 004     | –                      | –                               | –                               | 12                       | 24                            | 21                          | 18                        |
| *K. pneumoniae* MSH 005 | –                      | –                               | –                               | 13                       | 22                            | 21                          | 14                        |
| *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853 | –                      | –                               | –                               | –                        | 23                            | 24                          | 24                        |
| *P. aeruginosa* MSH 006 | –                      | –                               | –                               | –                        | 26                            | 15                          | 20                        |
| *S. enterica* DMST 5784 | –                      | –                               | –                               | 19                       | 26                            | 20                          | 14                        |
| *S. enterica* MSH 007  | –                      | –                               | –                               | 27                       | 26                            | 26                          | 18                        |
| **Fungi**             |                        |                                 |                                 |                          |                               |                             |                           |
| *C. albicans* ATCC 10231 | –                      | –                               | 9                               | –                        | 9                             | 8                           | 8                         |

Notes: Zones of inhibition were measured after 24 h incubation for bacteria and 48 h for *C. albicans*; no inhibitory activity was detected from the methanol extract against any of the microbial spp.; –, no zone of inhibition.
whatsoever was detected from the methanol extract and work with this extract was discontinued.

Data from subsequent assays where the inhibitory and microbicidal activity of the extracts was measured (Table 2) correlates well with results from the screening work (Table 1). As mentioned previously, the essential oil was found to be the most potent of the extracts, with an MIC of just 150 $\mu$g mL$^{-1}$ against *B. cereus* and an MIC of 1.2 mg mL$^{-1}$ against *S. aureus* and *C. albicans*. In addition to having inhibitory activity against Gram-positive bacteria and the fungal pathogen *C. albicans*, results from the MBC and MFC assays suggest that *B. balsamifera* essential oil has microbicidal activity. Characterisation of plant extracts as microbiostatic or microbicidal has become a complicated matter in recent years (Cushnie, Hamilton, Chapman, Taylor, & Lamb, 2007). However, the method used to determine MBC and MFC values in this study involved transferring all (as opposed to just a sample) of the original inoculum onto agar. This means that the observed results can be attributed to bacterial cell death, rather than cell aggregation. Antimicrobial agents with MBC and MFC values not higher than two to four times the MIC are considered microbicidal (Prescott, Harley, & Klein, 1999), and this was the case for the essential oil.

As observed in the screening data, the hexane extract was found to have inhibitory activity against both Gram-positive *S. aureus* and Gram-negative *E. cloacae*, with MICs of 9.6 and 4.8 mg mL$^{-1}$, respectively (Table 2). Though these values are quite high, it should be borne in mind that the active constituent(s) of the extract may be present in small quantities. MBC data indicates that the hexane extract has bactericidal activity against *E. cloacae*. This finding is encouraging, as Gram-negative bacteria have notoriously low susceptibility to antibacterial agents due to the low permeability of their cell envelope (Delcour, 2009). Indeed, there is considerable concern among experts about the lack of drugs that are effective against Gram-negative bacteria (Vergidis & Falagas, 2008). The dichloromethane extract of

### Table 2. Antimicrobial activity of *B. balsamifera* extracts and essential oil as determined by MIC, MBC and MFC assays.

| Microorganism          | Hexane | Dichloromethane | Essential oil |
|------------------------|--------|----------------|--------------|
|                        | MIC    | MBC/MFC        | MIC          | MBC/MFC     | MIC    | MBC/MFC     |
|                        | (mg mL$^{-1}$) | (mg mL$^{-1}$) | (mg mL$^{-1}$) | (mg mL$^{-1}$) | (mg mL$^{-1}$) | (mg mL$^{-1}$) |
| Gram-positive bacteria  |        |                |              |              |        |              |
| *B. cereus* ATCC 11778 | –      | NT             | –            | NT          | 0.15   | 0.15        |
| *S. aureus* ATCC 25923 | 9.6    | –              | –            | NT          | 1.2    | 1.2         |
| Gram-negative bacteria  |        |                |              |              |        |              |
| *E. cloacae* DMST 17206 | 4.8    | 9.6            | 9.6          | –           | –      | NT          |
| Fungi                  |        |                |              |              |        |              |
| *C. albicans* ATCC 10231 | –     | NT             | –            | NT          | 1.2    | 1.2         |

Notes: Results were recorded after 24 h incubation for bacteria and 48 h for *C. albicans*. MIC, minimum inhibitory concentration; MBC, minimum bactericidal concentration; MFC, minimum fungicidal concentration; –, no activity detected; NT, not tested due to insufficient level of activity in MIC assay.
B. balsamifera, in comparison to the hexane extract, was found to have quite weak inhibitory activity and no detectable bactericidal activity.

When the data from Tables 1 and 2 are viewed together, it is clear that the hexane extract and the essential oil of B. balsamifera are effective against different classes of microorganisms. This indicates that different constituents are likely to be responsible for the activity of these two extracts. At the present time, the identity of these constituents remains to be elucidated, but there has been a previous report of an antifungal compound, ichthyothereol acetate, being isolated from B. balsamifera (Ragasa, Co, & Rideout, 2005). Several flavonoids (Ali, Wong, & Lim, 2005; Hasegawa et al., 2006) and sesquiterpenoids (Osaki et al., 2005) have also been isolated from B. balsamifera. Though none of these compounds have been tested for antibacterial or antifungal activities, certain flavonoids and sesquiterpenoids are known to be antimicrobial (Cushnie & Lamb, 2005; Rabe & van Staden, 2000), and it is conceivable that these constituents are contributing to the activity of this plant.

In summary, the data presented here show that B. balsamifera has antimicrobial activity, a finding which may explain the herb’s use in traditional medicine. Of the various extracts of the plant examined, it was the essential oil and hexane extract which had the greatest activity in terms of potency and spectrum. Through further research, it may be possible to isolate and develop the compounds responsible for this activity. Data from this study suggest that these agents could be useful against S. aureus, E. cloacae and C. albicans infections, especially if administered topically, where clinically effective doses would be more readily achievable. In addition, the compounds could potentially be developed as food additives for the prevention of foodborne diseases caused by S. aureus and B. cereus.

3. Experimental

3.1. Plant material

Blumea balsamifera (Lin.) DC. was collected from Roi-Et Province in northeast Thailand at the end of the cool season (2 February 2004). A voucher specimen (herbarium number WRBI 305) was deposited with the Walai Rukhavej Botanical Research Institute (Mahasarakham University, Thailand). The plant material was air-dried in the shade at room temperature for 10 days.

3.2. Extraction

Three aliquots of the dried leaves of B. balsamifera (3 × 300 g) were extracted with hexane, dichloromethane and methanol. Each of the different extractions was performed at room temperature a total of three times (3 × 800 mL), 48 h each time. All extracts were evaporated in vacuo and stored in the dark at 4°C until required. A fourth aliquot of the air-dried leaves of B. balsamifera (300 g) was subjected to hydrodistillation for 3 h using a Clevenger-type apparatus. The oil was dried over anhydrous sodium sulphate and stored in a sealed vial in the dark at 4°C until required.
3.3. Preparation of test solutions and discs
Test solutions containing 19.2 mg mL\(^{-1}\) extract in 5% (v/v) aqueous dimethyl sulphoxide (DMSO) were prepared. Whatman No. 1 sterile filter paper discs (6 mm) were impregnated with 20 \(\mu\)L of extract (corresponding to 384 \(\mu\)g extract) and allowed to dry at room temperature.

3.4. Microorganisms
The standard reference strains of the bacteria used in the study were \textit{B. cereus} ATCC 11778, \textit{S. aureus} ATCC 25923, \textit{Enterobacter cloacae} DMST 17206, \textit{Escherichia coli} ATCC 25922, \textit{Pseudomonas aeruginosa} ATCC 27853 and \textit{Salmonella enterica} DMST 5784. The fungal strain \textit{C. albicans} ATCC 10231 was also used. All of them were obtained from the Department of Medical Sciences, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand. In addition, clinical isolates of \textit{B. cereus}, \textit{S. aureus}, \textit{E. cloacae}, \textit{E. coli}, \textit{Klebsiella pneumoniae}, \textit{P. aeruginosa} and \textit{S. enterica} (strains MSH 001–007) were obtained from Mahasarakham Hospital, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand. Prior to the experiments, bacteria were cultured on nutrient agar for 24 h at 37°C, while \textit{C. albicans} was cultured on potato dextrose agar for 48 h at 25°C. Inocula were prepared by suspending colonies of the above-mentioned microorganisms in 0.9% (w/v) sodium chloride solution, and adjusting these to achieve turbidity equivalent to a 0.5 McFarland standard.

3.5. Screening for antibacterial and antifungal activities
Antimicrobial screening was performed using the disc diffusion method. This involved preparing agar plates containing 10 mL nutrient agar (for antibacterial testing) or potato dextrose agar (for antifungal testing), inoculating the surface of these with 0.1 mL of \(\approx 1 \times 10^6\) cfu mL\(^{-1}\) bacteria or \textit{C. albicans}, allowing this to dry, and applying discs of the plant extracts. Discs containing penicillin, chloramphenicol, tetracycline and gentamycin were also tested for comparison. Agar plates of bacteria were then incubated at 37°C for 24 h, while agar plates of \textit{C. albicans} were incubated at 25°C for 48 h. Inhibition zones were measured from the edge of the disc to the inner margin of the surrounding pathogens. Experiments were repeated to verify the reproducibility of the results.

3.6. Determination of minimum inhibitory concentrations
Minimum inhibitory concentrations (MICs) were determined for the plant extracts using the method of Chandrasekaran and Venkatesalu (2004). This entailed preparing a dilution series of the different plant extracts in nutrient or potato dextrose agar and inoculating these with 50 \(\mu\)L of \(\approx 1 \times 10^6\) cfu mL\(^{-1}\) bacteria or fungi. Control tubes containing solvent but no plant extract were also tested. The final volume in each tube was 1 mL, and the highest concentration of each plant extract tested was 9.6 mg mL\(^{-1}\). Tubes inoculated with bacteria were incubated at 37°C for 24 h, while those inoculated with \textit{C. albicans} were incubated at 25°C for 48 h. MICs were determined by identifying the lowest concentration of plant extract which completely inhibited microbial growth.
3.7. **Determination of minimum bactericidal and minimum fungicidal concentrations**

Minimum bactericidal concentration and minimum fungicidal concentration (MBC and MFC) values were also determined according to the method described previously (Chandrasekaran & Venkatesalu, 2004). In brief, this involved identifying tubes from the MIC assay which did not show any growth, resuspending the microorganisms in nutrient or potato dextrose broth and subculturing this onto the surface of nutrient or potato dextrose agar. As mentioned above, plates inoculated with bacteria were incubated at 37°C for 24 h, while those inoculated with *C. albicans* were incubated at 25°C for 48 h. MBC and MFC values were determined by identifying the lowest concentration of extract that did not permit any visible growth.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors are very grateful to Prof. Armandodoriano Bianco and the anonymous reviewers of *Natural Product Research* for their constructive comments and suggestions. This study was supported by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) Research Fellowship TRG4680 and PERCH-CIC.

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