Introduction

Death Receptor 5 (DR5) is a good target for drug delivery due to its overexpression on cancer cells. A cyclic ligand that was previously found to bind DR5 was modified for this study into a linear ligand, and both the cyclic and linear variants were attached to a dimeric species of DiHydrololate reductase (DHFR-DHFR), forming two types of fusion proteins. Each type of fusion protein was constructed through attachment of the DR5 peptide to either the C-terminus or N-terminus of the DHFR-DHFR protein (Figure 1). The fusion proteins were manipulated to form either dimeric or octameric nanorings upon the addition of methotrexate, a toxic drug (Figure 2). The rings were further manipulated to release the methotrexate after cellular internalization, leading to enhanced cell killing (Figure 3).

Methods

1. Protein Preparation and Purification: Mutagenesis was performed on a previously constructed plasmid to modify the ligand. The plasmids were expressed in E. coli and the protein was collected from the cell lysate and purified with methotrexate and DEAE columns.

2. In vivo cytotoxicity: 2500 cells (prostate and pancreatic) were plated in triplicate under conditions of varying drug concentration. Trimethoprim was added after 2 hours to disassemble the nanorings, unless otherwise noted. After 72 hours, cell viability was determined using a dye measuring cell metabolism. Percent Cell Viability was calculated relative to cells that received no treatment.

3. Visualization of drug delivery with confocal microscopy. The protein drug was stained with a fluorescent dye and incubated with cells for 2 hours. Cells were then fixed and stained with a dye that bound to nucleic DNA. An Olympus FV1000 confocal microscope measured the fluorescence of cells through a depth scan.

Results

Cytotoxicity:

- **Figure 4.** IC50 trends for drugs with cyclic ligands in pancreatic and prostate cancer cell lines.

Table 1. Comparison of the IC50 of drugs with cyclic ligands and linear ligands, and the role of disassembly. An IC50 was deemed inconclusive if the minimum cell viability did not reach 50% at the maximum concentration of drug tested.

- **Figure 5.** A representative dose-response curve. The shape of the curve for the dimer of the C-term linear ligand protein (red squares) was similar to that of the other linear ligand proteins and non-disassembled octamers, with a inconclusive IC50. The dimer of the C-term cyclic ligand protein (black triangles) had a shape representative of the cyclic ligand proteins.

Confocal Results:

- **Figure 6.** Internalization study with pancreatic cancer cells. Cells were stained blue and each drug was stained green. Monomeric drugs, including the C-term cyclic ligand drug (a), N-term cyclic ligand drug (b), and C-term linear ligand drug (c), contained a different fluorescent tag than the oligomeric drugs: the octameric N-term cyclic ligand drug (d), dimeric N-term cyclic ligand drug (e), and octameric N-term linear ligand drug (f). Scale bars are 50 µm long. Internalization is indicated by the small dots of green.

Discussion

Overall, the octameric N-term cyclic ligand protein performed the best, showing the highest cytotoxicity and internalization. Since the original ligand modified for testing was N-term cyclic, this was expected. The C-term proteins with cyclic ligands were less toxic than the N-term proteins with cyclic ligands (Figure 4). Drugs with linear ligands, and drugs whose nanorings were not disassembled, showed IC50's higher than the maximum concentration of the assay, much higher than the IC50's of the cyclic ligand drugs. It appeared that the mechanism for cell killing was dependent on the methotrexate, since toxicity increased when oligomers were disassembled in cells, releasing the methotrexate. Confocal microscopy experiments showed qualitatively that in monomeric form, the N-term proteins with cyclic ligands were internalized well, whereas the C-term proteins with cyclic ligands were internalized to a lesser extent. Internalization of the monomeric protein with linear ligands was quite low and could not be readily discerned from the background noise, seen as faint green in Figure 4e. Octameric proteins were internalized better than dimeric proteins, regardless of the ligand type, though this may be due to different steric interactions with the fluorescently tagged methotrexate linker.

Conclusions

Due to the moderately high degree of cell killing and internalization seen by the octameric N-term fusion protein, it is a good candidate for further delivery studies. Since cytotoxicity was greatly increased upon disassembly of the oligomeric proteins, the mechanism for cell killing is presumed to be through the delivery of methotrexate, and not by the binding of the fusion protein to DR5, and the subsequent activation of the death receptor’s apoptosis pathway.

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by the University of Minnesota Undergraduate Research Opportunities program (UROP) and the University of Minnesota Endowment. Access to the confocal microscope was provided by the University Imaging Centers at the University of Minnesota.