



Computational Docking Studies of Novel Heterocyclic Carboxamides as Potential PI3K α Inhibitors

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Abstract: Drugs comprising a heterocyclic system show widespread therapeutic impact such as antimicrobial, antidepressant, antihypertensive, and anticancer activity. We describe herein computational studies that support the promising biological activity of four new compounds (5, 6, 10 and 13). The wild-type and mutant phosphatidylinositol-4,5-bisphosphate 3-kinase (PI3K α) proteins were used as models to explore the potential interaction of the designed molecules with this important kinase involved in the growth regulation of cancer cells. The results of our studies showed that the verified compounds ought to fit into the kinase domain of wild-type and mutant PI3K α s. It is predicted that they interact with S774, K802, Y836, V851, S854, T856, Q859, and D Δ 33 that are known to be key binding residues for active inhibitors both in wild-type and mutant PI3K α s. Docking scores infer the selectivity of compounds 5, 6 and 10 toward the mutant PI3K α (H1047R), whereas compound 13 displayed a slightly higher affinity to the wild-type protein. The pharmacophore modeling of PI3K α inhibitors showed that the explored compounds shared four out of five pharmacophoric points with such inhibitors. Thus, the recently developed four compounds might be recruited as lead structures for the design of new antitumor drugs targeting PI3K α .

Keywords: Heterocyclic compounds, pharmacophore screening, molecular docking, PI3K α .

INTRODUCTION

Docking is a computational approach in which ligands are placed in the binding site of a receptor [1]. The aim of ligand docking is to predict the intermolecular interactions between the receptors and their ligands. It is one of the major tools of computational drug design used in drug discovery. Docking includes the prediction of possible ligand binding domains on a protein or enzyme and the prediction of ligand/protein complex interactions [2].

The two major problems of using computational docking methods are: 1) the inaccurate prediction of ligand receptor free binding energies (binding affinity) and 2) the flexibilities of ligand and receptor [3]. Many docking programs account for partial or full ligand flexibility, despite the fact that a protein exists in equilibrium of an ensemble of conformational states rather than as one dominant more stable conformation. Thus, protein flexibility is still often disregarded in ligand docking studies [4]. The term flexible docking is referring to the conformational search on the ligands before their docking [5].

The docking protocols are a combination of a search algorithm and a scoring function. The search algorithm covers

the relevant conformational space of the ligands, while the scoring function characterizes the binding affinity between the ligand and the protein in term of free binding energy [5, 6]. A large number of search algorithms and scoring functions are available [6]. However, the key elements in any docking protocol success are still the ligands and the binding site where they should be docked.

Recently, we described the synthesis and cytotoxicity evaluation of new benzofuran/benzothiophene carboxamide derivatives (Fig. 1) [7]. We observed cytotoxic effects of selected compounds on a human cervical carcinoma cell line (HeLa) and 3T3 mouse fibroblasts. One derivative, 13, showed an approximately three times higher cytotoxicity in HeLa cells than in 3T3 cells. We now applied computational methods to evaluate further the potential anticancer activity of the recently synthesized compounds. For this purpose, we have chosen the phosphatidylinositol-4,5-bisphosphate 3-kinase α (PI3K α), a heterodimeric lipid kinase, as a target enzyme for our studies.

PI3 kinases phosphorylate the 3-hydroxy moiety of phosphatidylinositol 4,5-bisphosphate (PIP2), generating phosphatidylinositol 3,4,5-triphosphates (PIP3), an essential second messenger regulating the activity of PI3K downstream effectors AKT and mTOR. The activation of PI3K/AKT signaling cascade stimulates cell proliferation, growth, survival, tumor progression, invasion, angiogenesis, and metastasis. Atypical PI3K/AKT pathway has been characterized in a number of human cancers. [8]

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Letters in Drug Design & Discovery

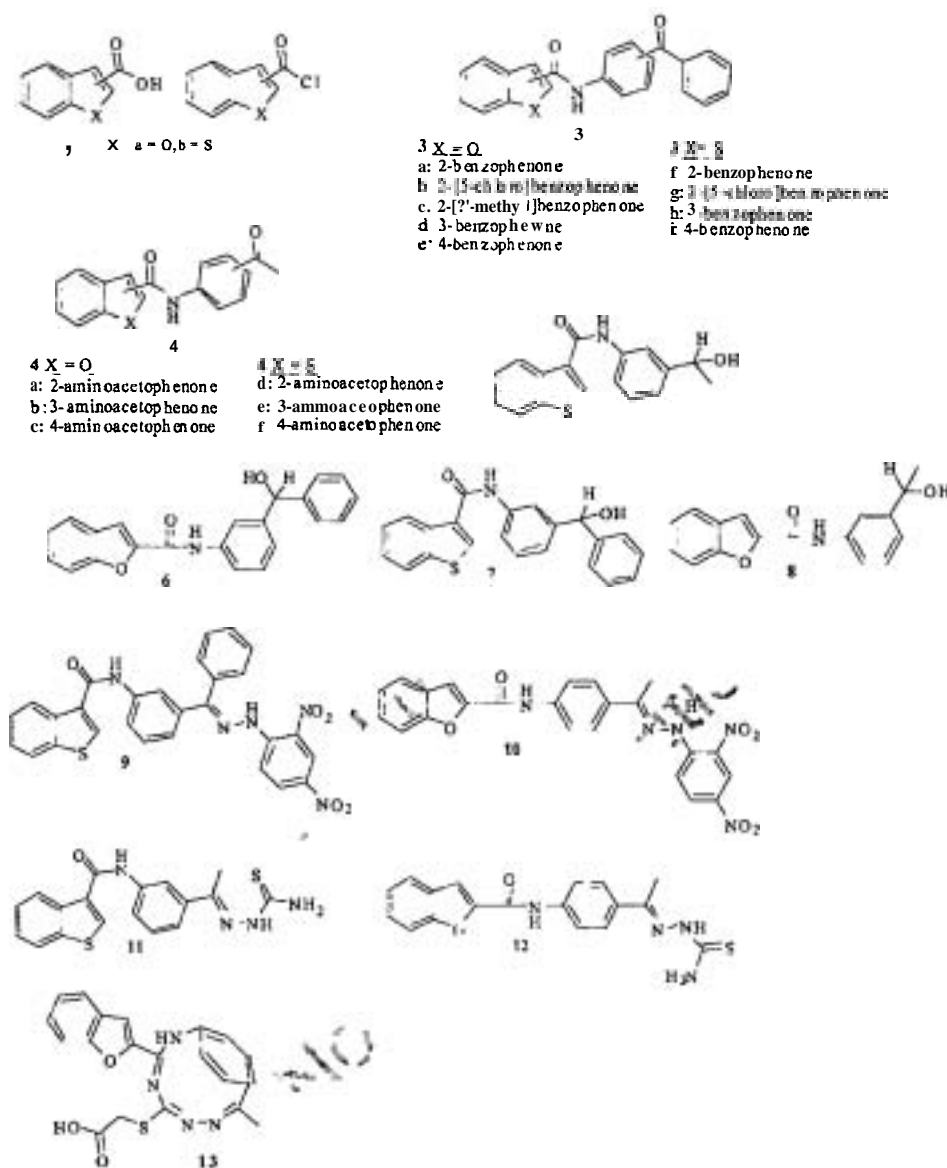


Fig. (1). Synthesized benzofuran/benzothiophene carboxamide derivatives used for the computational docking studies.

The PI3K α subunit p110 α coding gene (PIK3CA) is mutated, amplified and overexpressed in numerous human cancers. Somatic mutations in PIK3CA cluster in the helical (E542K, E545K) and kinase (H1047R) domains of PI3K α increase the lipid kinase activity and stimulate the AKT signaling pathway. These mutations were observed in \approx 30% of prostate, cervix, and endometrium tumors (Catalog of Somatic Mutations in Cancer, www.sanger.ac.uk/genetics/CGP/cosmic) [9]. In addition, PI3K α activity has been shown to be amplified in tumor samples of cervical carcinomas and cervical carcinoma cell lines (HeLa) [10], whereas

its activity is comparably low in 3T3 cells [11]. The activation of PI3K pathway is negatively regulated by the lipid phosphatase and tensin homolog (PTEN), and mutations in PTEN or irregularity of PTEN function or expression exists in human cancers [12]. The oncogenic potential of PI3K α and its regulator (PTEN) makes PI3K α a promising target for anticancer drug design.

In continuation of our former work, we report herein the computational studies to evaluate the potential of the new benzofuran/benzothiophene carboxamide derivatives as specific PI3K α inhibitors.



Fig. (2). The kinase domains of 2RW (grey colored) and 3HMM (yellow colored) harboring the explored compounds embedded with some of key binding residues (for clarity purpose). The compounds and residues are depicted in stick model. H-atoms are hidden for clarity purpose.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to identify the structural basis of binding for the synthesized molecules with the binding clefts of wild-type (wt) and mutant (mut) PI3K α , we carried out docking studies of our experimentally tested compounds. A Glide docking approach [13] was applied to wt PI3K α (PDB ID 2RD0) [14] and mutant PI3K α (H1047R) (PDB ID 3HHM) [15], as well as the generated mutants E542K, E545K, and the doubly mutated E542K/E545K PI3K α (mutations in the helical region of PI3K α outside of the catalytic domain). The binding affinity of the PI3Ks/ligand complex was expressed in terms of binding free energy (kJ/mol), docking scores (kcal/mol). The more negative the docking score, the better the binding and the more favorable the complex. A docking score of -2 kcal/mol as well as a difference of 2 kcal/mol were considered significant.

Our Glide docking results of the synthesized molecules against the wt (2RD0) and mutant PI3K α proteins (H1047R, E542K, E545K, E542K/E545K) showed that all compounds bind to the PI3K α kinase catalytic domain (Fig. 2). Most of the tested compounds formed hydrogen bonds (H-bonds) with D933, N920, S919, Q859, S854, V851 (via backbone NH), E849, Y836, D810, K802, A775, and 5774 (Tables 1 and 2).

Compound 13 showed a relative high docking score for wt PI3K α (-6.40 kcal/mol) indicating a good affinity to the binding cleft of the kinase (Table 1). However, its binding to the mut PI3K α (H1047R) seemed to be slightly less effective. In contrast, compounds 6 and 10 displayed a relative low docking score for the wt PI3K α , but a significantly better docking score for the mut PI3K α (H1047R) (Table 1). These computational data deduced that these compounds might have a preferential selectivity against the H1047R PI3K α . Notably compounds 3b and 3c showed considerable affinity towards mutant H1047R PI3K α whereas 11 favored native PI3K α . Therefore, the docking scores suggest that their backbone could be optimized to get better cytotoxic activity.

Recent experimental [14] and computational data [16-17] confirmed the importance of binding of the tested compounds to these residues, in particular of the binding to Asp933 [18]. Sabbah et al. [19] identified the structural differences between wt and mutant H1047R PI3K α ; particularly residues Q859, S854, Y836, and S774 could be exploited to design active PI3K α inhibitors. Moreover, H-bond interactions with the scaffolds of S774, S854, and Q859 might be targets for selective inhibition of mutant H1047R PI3K α [20].

It is worth noting that H-bonding of compounds 5, 6 and 10 to S774, S854, and Q859 could explain their preferential affinity against mutant H1047R (Figs. 3 and 4). Fig. (3) shows that compound 10 adopts different binding conformations in wt and mutant H1047R PI3K α and forms H-bonds with Q859 (NH amide side chain) and T856 (OH) of wt PI3K α . Contrarily, its U-shaped conformation in mutant H1047R favors H-bond with S774 (OH), V851 (NH backbone), and Q859 (NH amide side chain).

The binding mode of compounds 5 and 6 in PI3Ks binding clefts showed that these compounds miss H-bond interactions with the scaffolds of key binding residues and thus explains their lower affinity to the wt PI3K α . Interestingly, their H-bonds with S854-(OH) of H1047R increased their binding affinity. Moreover, the binding domain of PI3K α was enclosed with hydrophobic residues (W780, I800, I848, V850, V851, Y832, and M922) which explained the binding patterns of compounds 5 and 6 in PI3Ks. The adopted binding mode of compound 13 in PI3Ks showed that it formed H-bond with K802 (NH₂) of wt PI3K α and S774 (OH) of the mutant H1047R protein (Fig. 4).

However, comparing the docking scores of the synthesized molecules against the generated mutant proteins (E542K, E545K, and double E542K/E545K PI3K α) showed that these compounds have comparable affinities to these helical mutants as to that of the wt PI3K α (Table 2). This was due to the position of these residues relative to the kinase domain. The PI3K α catalytic kinase domain resides in residues region (699-1094). The mutant H1047R was embedded in this region and therefore displays better differences in affinity compared to the wt PI3K α . On the other hand, the considerable distance of the helical mutant from the kinase domain weakens the influence of these mutants on the binding affinity and consequently shows comparable affinity to that of the wt PI3K α .

In order to get further details about the functionalities which are responsible for activity of the synthesized compounds 5, 6, 10 and 13, we screened them against an adopted pharmacophore model of PI3K α inhibitors [19]. We found that these compounds match four out of five pharmacophoric points (Fig. 5). As shown in Fig. (5D), the structurally different compound 13 harbors one aromatic ring (F1), one aromatic or H-bond acceptor (F2), one aromatic or hydrophobic or H-bond acceptor (F3), and one H-bond acceptor (F4). In contrast, compounds 5, 6 and 10 contained the H-bond acceptor function F5 instead of F4. This describes the affinity of all four compounds toward PI3Ks kinase domain. Furthermore, the accommodation of 5, 6 and 13 in the kinase binding site could explain their cytotoxic effect.

Table 1. Docking scores (kcal/mol) and H-bond interactions between compounds and PI3K α s (WT and MUT H1047R).

MUT PI3K α (H1047R)		WT PI3K α (2RD0)		Compound
Binding Residues	Docking Score	Binding Residues	Docking Score	
D933	-6.84	V851	-6.60	1a
Q859	-7.27	V851	6.78	1b
NA	-6.71	NA	-7.04	2a
M811	-6.94	V851	-7.61	2b
NA	-6.18	NA	-6.98	3a
Q859	-6.38	Q859	-4.33	3b
V851,Q859	-6.8	V851, Q859	-5.05	3c
NA	-6.63	NA	-5.96	3d
NA	-3.68	K802	-3.89	3e
NA	4.40	NA	-5.53	3f
Q859	-5.25	NA	-5.30	3g
V851	-6.37	NA	-6.10	3h
D933	4.97	K802	-4.27	3i
V851,Q859	-7.15	V851	-6.91	4a
V851	-5.82	NA	4.00	4b
V851	-4.80	K802	-4.32	4c
NA	-6.01	NA	-6.60	4d
NA	-5.38	NA	4.14	4e
NA	-5.75	NA	-6.89	4f
S854	-6.69	NA	-5.91	5
V851,S854	-7.25	NA	4.82	6
E849	-6.18	D933	-7.55	7
V851	-7.50	D933	-6.37	8
NA	-4.87	S909	-3.70	9
V850,Q859,S774	-	Q859, Y836	-3.67	10
NA	-4.11	D933	-7.19	11
V851	-6.26	D933, Y836	-5.44	12
S774	-5.40	K802	-6.40	13

NA: not available; no H-bond interaction.

Table 2. Docking scores (kcal/mol) and H-bond interactions between compounds and mutant (E541K, E545K, E542K/E545K) PI3K α s.

Compound	MUT (E542K/E545K) PI3K α		MUT (E542K) PI3K α		MUT (E545K) PI3K α	
	Docking Score	H-Bond	Docking Score	H-Bond	Docking Score	H-Bond
1a	-7.38	D810, Y836, D933	-7.39	D810, Y836, D933	-7.40	D810, Y836, D933
1b	-7.94	E849, V851	-7.87	E849, V851	-7.88	E849, V851

Table 2. contd...

MUT(E542K/E545K) PI3K α			MUT(E542K)PI3K α		MUT(E545K) PI3K α	
Compound	Docking Score	H-Bond	Docking Score	H-Bond	Docking Score	H-Bond
2a	-6.96	NA	-5.87	D933, Y836	-5.95	NA
2b	-7.71	V851	-7.75	V851	-7.65	V851
3a	-5.20	NA	-5.27	V851	-5.68	NA
3b	-6.02	NA	-5.45	NA	-5.64	NA
3c	-6.12	NA	4.53	NA	4.55	NA
3d	-5.53	NA	-5.47		-5.4	NA
3e	-7.11	K802	-5.67	D933, S774	-5.49	K802
3f	-7.05	NA	-4.937	NA	-4.76	NA
3g	4.64	Q859	4.96	NA	-5.12	NA
3h	-5.83	NA	-5.67	NA	6.14	NA
3i	-3.54	NA	4.14	K802	-2.50	NA
4a	-6.73	NA	-6.15	V851	-6.09	S854
4b	-5.89	NA	4.57		5.14	NA
4c	-4.21	NA	-3.38	D933, Y836	-3.40	Y836
4d	-6.49	NA	-5.63		-6.35	V851, S854
4e	-5.62	NA	-5.71	S773	-5.72	S773
4f	4.56	K802	4.68	K802	4.71	K802
5	-4.89	NA	-5.67	NA	-5.56	NA
6	-5.47	D933	-5.32	NA	-5.11	NA
7	-7.03	Y836	-6.99	D933	-7.18	D933
8	-5.65	D933	-4.73	D933	-6.49	N851, V851
9	-1.96	Y836, D933	-0.47	NA	-1.28	Y836
10	-4.29	D933	-3.88	V851, Y836	-3.92	Y836
11	-7.61	D933, N917	-5.75	S919, N920	-6.06	N920, S919
12	-6.63	D933	-5.94	D933	-4.62	NA
13	-6.41	NA	-5.89	D933	-6.04	D933

NA: not available; or H-bond interaction.



Fig. (3). The binding modes of 10 in PI3K α s kinase catalytic domain. (A) The binding conformation of 10 in wt PI3K α shows H-bonds with T856 and Q859. (B) The U-shaped conformation in mutant H1047R forms H-bond with Q859, V851, and S774. Compound 10 and the key binding residues are represented in stick model. The C atoms are depicted in grey; O in red; N in blue color. Hydrogen atoms are hidden for clarity purpose. H-bond is represented in blue dotted line.

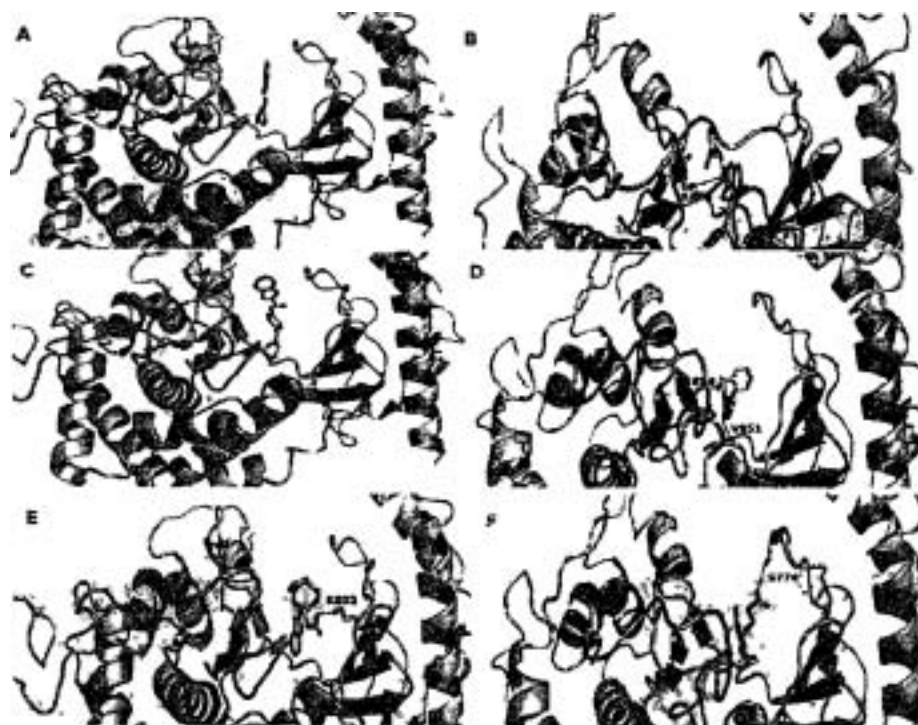


Fig. (4). The protein/ligand interactions of 5, 6 and 13 in the kinase domain of wt and mutant H1047R PI3Kα. (A) and (B) binding conformations of 5 in wt and H1047R PI3Kα; (C) and (D) binding conformations of 6 in wt and H1047R PI3Kα; (E) and (F) binding conformations of 13 in wt and H1047R PI3Kα. Hydrogen atoms are hidden for clarity purpose. H-bonds are represented in blue dotted line.

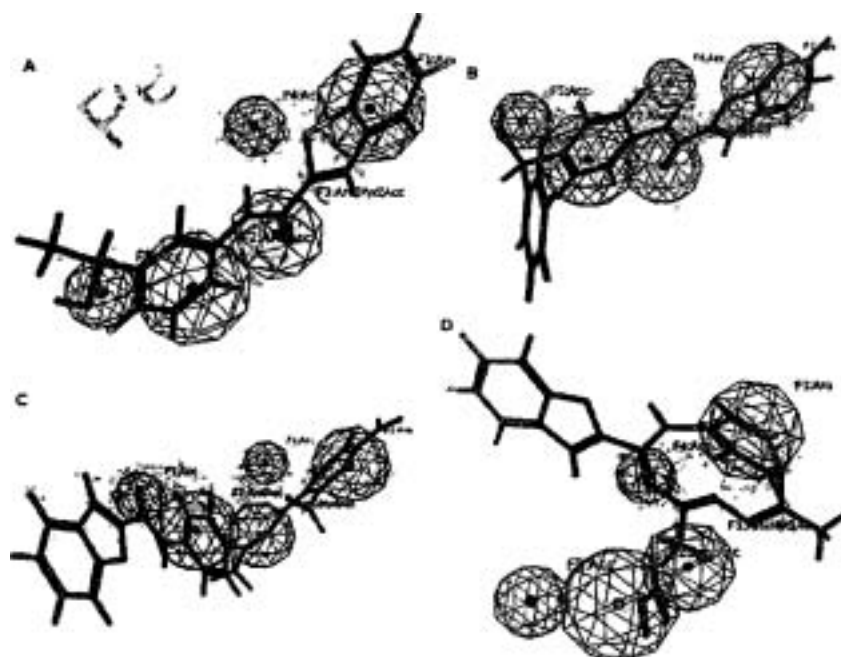


Fig. (5). PI3Kα pharmacophore model with 5A (EC_{50} 340 nM [7]), 6B (EC_{50} not determinable [7]), 10C (not determinable [7]), and 13D (EC_{50} 10 nM [7]). Aro stands for aromatic rings; Acc for H-bond acceptor, and Hyd for hydrophobic groups.

CONCLUSION

We recently developed various heterocyclic carboxamide compounds that displayed promising biological activity [7]. Compounds 5, 6 and 13 shown here, inhibited the growth of immortalized embryonic mouse fibroblast cells (3T3) and human cervical cancer cells (HeLa) *in vitro*. It is of note that compound 13 exerted a selective cytotoxic activity against HeLa cells.

Our computational study displayed that PI3K α , a kinase overexpressed in cervical cancer cells such as HeLa, represents a cellular target for these synthesized compounds. The Glide docking approaches suggested that these compounds reside in the kinase catalytic domain of wt and mutant PI3Ks. Compounds 5, 6 and 10 seemed to have a preferential affinity to the mutant H1047R PI3K α . Their ability to form H-bond particularly with Ser774, Ser854, and Gln859 might explain this behavior. In contrast, the cyclic amidine derivative 13 showed a better binding affinity to wt PI3K α and an only slightly lower affinity to the mutant PI3K α . All four compounds shared four out of five pharmacophoric points with typical PI3K α inhibitors. However, compound 13 also differed in this characteristic from the other compounds by providing a different H-bond acceptor function.

Our data indicate that compound 13 might be a good candidate for further optimization toward a specific antitumor drug and inhibitor of wt PI3K α . Heterocyclic carboxamides such as 5, 6 and 10, on the other hand, might represent starting points to develop potentially selective inhibitors of the prevalent mutant H1047R PI3K α .

EXPERIMENTAL

Computational Preparation of Ligand Structures

The tested compounds (ligands) were built based on the coordinates of wortmannin in 3HHM [14] using MAESTRO BUILD module in Schrödinger software [15] and energetically minimized by MacroModel wizard using the OPLS2005 force field.

Computational Preparation of PI3K α Isoforms

X-ray crystal structures of Apo PI3K α WT (PDB ID 2RD0) [13] and mutant H1047R PI3K α (PDB ID 3HHM) [14] were retrieved from the RSCB Protein Data Bank. The homology modeling generated structures of 2RD0 and 3HHM were adopted for this experiment [17]. The coordinates of wortmannin in 3HHM were adopted to 2RD0 and used as the ligand to generate the grid files for docking protocols. The mutants E542K and E545K as well as the double mutants (E542K / E545K) PI3K α were prepared using the MUTATE module in MOE [20]. Then, the protein structures were prepared using the Protein Preparation tool in Schrödinger to maximize the H-bond interactions between residues.

Glide Docking Studies

Five grid files for 2RD0, 3HHM, E542K, E545K, and double E542K/E545K PI3K α were generated using the Glide

Grid Generation protocol using the bound ligands as centroids. The scaling factor for van der Waals receptor for the non-polar atoms was calibrated to 0.8 to furnish some flexibility. All other parameters were used as defaults [15].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that this article content has no conflict of interest.

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