

Assessment of the toxicity of selected Australian native plant extracts using the *Artemia franciscana* nauplii bioassay

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Citation

I Cock. *Assessment of the toxicity of selected Australian native plant extracts using the Artemia franciscana nauplii bioassay*. The Internet Journal of Toxicology. 2007 Volume 5 Number 2.

Abstract

Thirty nine methanolic extracts from twenty five Australian native plants were investigated for toxicity using the *Artemia franciscana* nauplii lethality bioassay and compared to the reference toxins potassium dichromate and Mevinphos. 7 extracts (18 %) showed marked lethality towards *Artemia franciscana* nauplii at 24 h, 11 extracts (28 %) at 48 h and 19 extracts (49 %) at 72 h. Of the positive controls, only Mevinphos displayed significant lethality at 24 h. Potassium dichromate treatment resulted in only approximately 10 % mortality at 24 h but induced 100% mortality by 48 h. Of the non-toxic extracts, *A. aulacocarpa* leaf, *L. bracteata* leaf, *L. juniperium* leaf and flower, *S. australe* leaf and *B. celsissima* leaf extracts have previously been shown to be good antibacterial agents, confirming their potential for antibiotic usage.

Financial support of this work was provided by the School of Biomolecular and Physical Sciences, Griffith University, Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Plants have long been recognised as a valuable source of medicines for treating a variety of different diseases and complaints. Most, if not all civilisations, have used plants as medicines. The use of plant natural therapeutics in Asia is wide spread, being used in the treatment of numerous disorders including eczema, malaria and respiratory disorders [1]. Africa also has a long history of medicinal plant use. For example, *Phytolacca dodecandra* is used as a molluscicide in the control of schistosomiasis [2]. The antitumour agent's vinblastine and vincristine (derived from *Catharanthus roseus*) are currently used in the treatment of a variety of tumours [3; 4]. Europe and the Americas also have a history of medicinal plant use. Studies demonstrate the myriad of medicinal plant uses by indigenous North and Central Americans [5] and South Americans [6].

Approximately 1500 medicinal plant species are currently in use in Europe [1].

As a result of its isolation, Australia has a variety of unique and distinctive flora not found elsewhere in the world. Australian Aborigines used a variety of plant medicines to help maintain their health prior to European settlement [7; 8].

More than 150 plants from nearly 60 widely varied botanical families were used by Australian Aborigines as antiseptic agents [8]. Although there is enormous potential for the development of medicinal agents from Australian plants, much of our knowledge of the antimicrobial nature of Australian plants is anecdotal. Recent studies [9; 10; 11] have demonstrated the antibacterial and antifungal activity of extracts from a wide variety of Australian plants.

To be medically useful as antimicrobial agents, plant preparations should be non-toxic or of low toxicity to human cells [12]. Limited information is available on the toxicity of antibacterial preparations from Australian plants. Recent studies have reported on the low toxicity of *Backhousia citriodora* essential oils [13] and on the toxicity of extracts from a variety of Australian plants [10] towards human cell lines. A study from this laboratory has indicated the ability of several Australian plants to act as antimicrobial agents [11]. To further assess their potential it is necessary to assess their toxicity. The *Artemia franciscana* nauplii (brine shrimp larvae) lethality bioassay was used in the current study. This assay has been used to examine the toxicity of a wide variety of compounds [14]. It is an efficient, inexpensive and relatively rapid way to detect toxic compounds, requiring only low amounts of sample (<20 mg). This test correlates well with cytotoxic activity of some human tumours and therefore has the potential to detect new antitumour agents

[15].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PLANT MATERIAL

COLLECTION OF PLANT SAMPLES

Plant samples were as previously described [11]. Briefly, *Acacia aulacocarpa* (leaves), *Acacia complanta* (leaves and flowers), *Allocasuarina littoralis* (leaves), *Astrotricha longifolia* (leaves and flowers), *Banksia colina* (leaves), *Eucalyptus baileyana* (leaves), *Eucalyptus major* (leaves and flowers), *Jacksonia scoparia* (leaves), *Leptospermum juniperium* (leaves and flowers), *Melaleuca quinquenervia* (leaves) and *Mirbelia oxylobiodes* (leaves and flowers) were collected from Toohey Forest, Brisbane and were identified with reference to a taxonomic key to Toohey Forest plants [16]. *Backhousia citriodora* (leaves), *Grevillea robusta* (leaves and flowers) and *Macadamia integriflora* (leaves and flowers) were collected from verified trees on Logan campus of Griffith University, Australia. *Adansonia gregorii* (leaves and flowers), *Brachychiton acerifolius* (leaves and flowers), *Buckinghamia celsissima* (leaves), *Callistemon citrinus* (leaves and flowers), *Callistemon salignus* (leaves and flowers), *Davidsonia pruriens* var. *jerseyana* (fruit), *Grevillea juncifolia* (leaves and flowers), *Leptospermum bracteata* (leaves and flowers), *Syzygium australe* (leaves), *Syzygium leuhmannii* (leaves) and *Westringia fruticosa* (leaves and flowers) were collected from verified trees in the suburbs of Brisbane, Australia.

PREPARATION OF CRUDE EXTRACTS

Plant samples were dried in a Sunbeam food dehydrator and the dried material was ground to a coarse powder. 1 g of each of the samples of dried plant material was extracted extensively in 50 ml methanol (Ajax, AR grade) for 24 hours at 4 °C with gentle shaking. The extract was filtered through filter paper (Whatman No. 54) under vacuum followed by drying by rotary evaporation in an Eppendorf concentrator 5301. The resultant pellet was dissolved in 15 ml 20 % methanol. The extract was passed through 0.22 µm filter (Sarstedt) and stored at 4 °C.

REFERENCE TOXINS FOR BIOLOGICAL SCREENING

Potassium dichromate ($K_2Cr_2O_7$) (AR grade, Chem-Supply, Australia) was prepared as a 1.6 mg/ml solution in distilled water and was serially diluted in artificial seawater for use in the *Artemia franciscana* nauplii bioassay. Mevinphos (2-methoxycarbonyl-1-methylvinyl dimethyl phosphate) was

obtained from Sigma-Aldrich as a mixture of cis (76.6%) and trans (23.0%) isomers and prepared as a 4 mg/ml stock in distilled water. The stock was serially diluted in artificial seawater for use in the bioassay.

ARTEMIA FRANCISCANA NAUPLII TOXICITY SCREENING

Toxicity was tested using the *Artemia franciscana* nauplii lethality assay developed by Meyer et al [14] for the screening of active plant constituents with the following modifications. *Artemia franciscana* Kellogg cysts were obtained from North American Brine Shrimp, LLC, USA (harvested from the Great Salt Lake, Utah). Synthetic seawater was prepared using Reef Salt, AZOO Co., USA. Seawater solutions at 34 g/l distilled water were prepared prior to use. 2 g of *A. franciscana* cysts were incubated in 1 l synthetic seawater under artificial light at 25°C, 2000 Lux with continuous aeration. Hatching commenced within 16-18 h of incubation. Newly hatched *A. franciscana* (nauplii) were used within 10 h of hatching. Nauplii were separated from the shells and remaining cysts and were concentrated to a suitable density by placing an artificial light at one end of their incubation vessel and the nauplii rich water closest to the light was removed for biological assays. 400 µl of seawater containing approximately 50 (mean 53, n = 268, SD 12) nauplii were added to wells of a 48 well plate and immediately used for bioassay. The plant extracts were diluted to 2 mg/ml in seawater for toxicity testing, resulting in a 1 mg/ml concentration in the bioassay. 400 µl of diluted plant extracts and the reference toxins were transferred to the wells and incubated at 25 ± 1 °C under artificial light (1000 Lux). A negative control (400 µl seawater) was run in at least triplicate for each plate. All treatments were performed in at least triplicate. The wells were checked at regular intervals and the number of dead counted. The nauplii were considered dead if no movement of the appendages was observed within 10 seconds. After 72 h all nauplii were sacrificed and counted to determine the total number per well. The LC_{50} with 95% confidence limits for each treatment was calculated using probit analysis [17].

RESULTS

Thirty nine samples from twenty five Australian native plant species were extracted in methanol and dried as previously described [11]. The weight of the dried extracted material is recorded in table 1. The weight of dried extractable material varied across samples, ranging from 83 mg (*L. juniperium* flowers) extracted per 1 g starting plant material up to 567 g

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(*C. citrinus* flowers) from the original 1 g of ground dried plant material. All extracts were resuspended in 15 ml of 20 % methanol, resulting in the crude test extract concentrations reported in table 1.

Figure 1

Table 1: Botanical names of plant species extracted, weight of dried extractable material and the concentrations of each extract.

Plant species	Plant part extracted	Dried extract (mg)	Extract conc. (mg/ml)
<i>Acacia aulacocarpa</i>	leaves	212	14.1
<i>Acacia complanta</i>	leaves	234	15.6
<i>Acacia complanta</i>	flowers	374	24.9
<i>Adansonia gregorii</i>	leaves	99	6.6
<i>Adansonia gregorii</i>	flowers	115	7.7
<i>Allocasuarina littoralis</i>	leaves	376	25.1
<i>Astrotricha longifolia</i>	leaves	223	14.9
<i>Astrotricha longifolia</i>	flowers	384	25.6
<i>Bacchousia citriodora</i>	leaves	235	15.7
<i>Banksia collina</i>	leaves	299	19.9
<i>Brachychiton acerifolius</i>	leaves	409	27.3
<i>Brachychiton acerifolius</i>	flowers	105	7.0
<i>Buckinghamia celsissima</i>	leaves	395	26.3
<i>Callistemon citrinus</i>	leaves	561	37.4
<i>Callistemon citrinus</i>	flowers	567	37.8
<i>Callistemon salignus</i>	leaves	539	35.9
<i>Callistemon salignus</i>	flowers	525	35
<i>Davidsonia pruriens</i> var. <i>jerseyana</i>	fruit	362	24.1
<i>Eucalyptus baileyana</i>	leaves	218	14.5
<i>Eucalyptus major</i>	leaves	427	28.5
<i>Eucalyptus major</i>	flowers	533	35.5
<i>Grevillea juncea</i>	leaves	164	10.9
<i>Grevillea juncea</i>	flowers	334	22.3
<i>Grevillea robusta</i>	leaves	378	25.2
<i>Grevillea robusta</i>	flowers	312	20.8
<i>Jacksonia scoparia</i>	leaves	442	29.5
<i>Leptospermum bracteata</i>	leaves	192	12.8
<i>Leptospermum bracteata</i>	flowers	274	18.3
<i>Leptospermum juniperium</i>	leaves	246	16.4
<i>Leptospermum juniperium</i>	flowers	83	5.5
<i>Macadamia integriflora</i>	leaves	151	10.1
<i>Macadamia integriflora</i>	flowers	183	12.2
<i>Melaleuca quinquenervia</i>	leaves	355	23.7
<i>Mirbella oxlobiodes</i>	leaves	306	20.4
<i>Mirbella oxlobiodes</i>	flowers	314	20.9
<i>Syzygium australe</i>	leaves	402	26.8
<i>Syzygium leuhamnii</i>	leaves	122	8.1
<i>Westringia fruticosa</i>	leaves	418	27.9
<i>Westringia fruticosa</i>	flowers	425	28.3

All extracts were diluted to 2000 µg/ml in artificial seawater for toxicity testing, resulting in a 1000 µg/ml concentration in the *Artemia franciscana* lethality bioassay. The results of *A. franciscana* bioassay screening of the Australian plant methanolic extracts are shown in table 2. Previous reports [18; 19] express LC₅₀ values of toxins following 24 h of exposure. Of the 39 extracts tested, 7 (18 %) showed greater than 50 % mortality at 24 h. Of these, *A. complanta* flowers, *A. littoralis* leaves, *E. baileyana* leaves and *E. major* flowers have been previously shown to have significant antibacterial

activity [11]. Of the positive controls, only Mevinphos displayed significant mortality at 24 h. Potassium dichromate treatment resulted in only approximately 10 % mortality at 24 h. Therefore, mortality at later times (48 and 72 h) are also reported here.

An extra four extracts showed greater than 50 % mortality at 48 h compared to 24 h (*B. acerifolius* leaves, *E. major* leaves, *G. juncea* flowers and *G. robusta* leaves). This equates to approximately 28% of the tested extracts showing toxicity at 48 h. Of these, only *E. major* flowers have been previously shown to have significant antibacterial activity [11]. At 72 h, 8 further extracts (compared to 48 h) induced greater than 50 % mortality. Of these, *B. citriodora*, *C. citrinus* leaves, *C. salignus* leaves and flowers, *L. bracteata* flowers, and *S. leuhamnii* leaves have been previously shown to have significant antibacterial activity [11].

Figure 2

Table 2: Toxicity of Australian plant extracts (1 mg/ml) to *A. franciscana*. Numbers indicate the mean % mortality of at least triplicate experiments ± standard deviation.

Plant species	Plant part extracted	24 h	48 h	72 h
<i>Acacia aulacocarpa</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	1.3 ± 2.2	23.4 ± 7.6
<i>Acacia complanta</i>	leaves	1.0 ± 1.7	3.2 ± 3.0	6.5 ± 5.6
<i>Acacia complanta</i>	flowers	89.2 ± 10.7	87.4 ± 15.8	89.9 ± 17.5
<i>Adansonia gregorii</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	6.5 ± 5.7	26.9 ± 8.3
<i>Adansonia gregorii</i>	flowers	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	1.6 ± 2.7
<i>Allocasuarina littoralis</i>	leaves	68.4 ± 12.3	97.8 ± 2.2	100.0 ± 0
<i>Astrotricha longifolia</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	2.2 ± 1.9	7.7 ± 6.8
<i>Astrotricha longifolia</i>	flowers	0 ± 0	0.8 ± 1.4	6.1 ± 3.3
<i>Bacchousia citriodora</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	85.8 ± 6.4
<i>Banksia collina</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	5.5 ± 4.9
<i>Brachychiton acerifolius</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	5.6 ± 6.3	89.3 ± 2.4
<i>Brachychiton acerifolius</i>	flowers	29.8 ± 13.1	90.7 ± 1.1	100.0 ± 0
<i>Buckinghamia celsissima</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	4.0 ± 3.9	12.1 ± 6.2
<i>Callistemon citrinus</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	59.4 ± 5.5
<i>Callistemon citrinus</i>	flowers	0 ± 0	4.2 ± 4.6	26.7 ± 5.0
<i>Callistemon salignus</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	3.5 ± 3.7	84.8 ± 7.8
<i>Callistemon salignus</i>	flowers	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	98.8 ± 3.3
<i>Davidsonia pruriens</i> var. <i>jerseyana</i>	fruit	8.2 ± 4.3	45.3 ± 6.4	92.5 ± 6.7
<i>Eucalyptus baileyana</i>	leaves	100.0 ± 0	100.0 ± 0	100.0 ± 0
<i>Eucalyptus major</i>	leaves	13.9 ± 6.5	78.5 ± 8.6	98.9 ± 1.9
<i>Eucalyptus major</i>	flowers	86.9 ± 10.5	100.0 ± 0	100.0 ± 0
<i>Grevillea juncea</i>	leaves	75.2 ± 12.4	100.0 ± 0	100.0 ± 0
<i>Grevillea juncea</i>	flowers	12.1 ± 5.6	98.1 ± 3.2	100.0 ± 0
<i>Grevillea robusta</i>	leaves	13.6 ± 7.7	98.4 ± 2.7	100.0 ± 0
<i>Grevillea robusta</i>	flowers	1.9 ± 3.2	1.9 ± 3.2	1.9 ± 3.2
<i>Jacksonia scoparia</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	9.6 ± 4.2
<i>Leptospermum bracteata</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	14.0 ± 2.8
<i>Leptospermum bracteata</i>	flowers	0 ± 0	1.8 ± 3.0	97.0 ± 2.6
<i>Leptospermum juniperium</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	3.5 ± 3.1	17.6 ± 5.1
<i>Leptospermum juniperium</i>	flowers	0 ± 0	1.0 ± 1.8	4.4 ± 4.7
<i>Macadamia integriflora</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	0 ± 0
<i>Macadamia integriflora</i>	flowers	83.3 ± 4.4	98.6 ± 2.5	100.0 ± 0
<i>Melaleuca quinquenervia</i>	leaves	57.9 ± 4.8	90.2 ± 4.1	95.3 ± 1.8
<i>Mirbella oxlobiodes</i>	leaves	3.0 ± 2.6	6.1 ± 10.5	31.3 ± 16.3
<i>Mirbella oxlobiodes</i>	flowers	3.6 ± 3.5	9.1 ± 6.1	34.2 ± 12.4
<i>Syzygium australe</i>	leaves	2.0 ± 3.4	8.5 ± 3.9	13.0 ± 5.5
<i>Syzygium leuhamnii</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	11.0 ± 5.1	56.8 ± 8.2
<i>Westringia fruticosa</i>	leaves	0 ± 0	6.4 ± 5.7	9.1 ± 4.3
<i>Westringia fruticosa</i>	flowers	0 ± 0	0 ± 0	2.7 ± 2.4
Potassium dichromate		10.2 ± 1.3	100.0 ± 0	100.0 ± 0
Mevinphos		90.1 ± 4.8	98.3 ± 0.1	100.0 ± 0
seawater control		0 ± 0	0 ± 0	0 ± 0

Ten plant extracts induced greater than 50% mortality by 48 h (*A. complanta* leaves, *A. littoralis* leaves, *Brachychiton acerifolius* flowers, *Eucalyptus baileyana* leaves, *Eucalyptus*

major leaves and flowers, *Grevillea juncifolia* leaves and flowers, *Macadamia integriflora* flowers and *Melaleuca quinquenervia* leaves). These were considered sufficiently toxic to warrant further investigation to determine the dependence of toxicity on the concentration of the extract the *A. franciscana* is exposed to. Table 3 shows the LC₅₀ values of these extracts towards *A. franciscana*. *E. baileyana* leaf extract was the most toxic of the plant extracts tested with 24, 48 and 72 h LC₅₀ values of 216 µg/ml (± 22). *Macadamia integriflora*, whilst taking longer to induce mortality, proved to be similarly toxic with 48 h and 72 h LC₅₀ values almost identical to those of *E. baileyana* leaf extract.

Figure 3

Table 3: LC (95% confidence interval) for brine shrimp nauplii exposed to Australian plant extracts and the reference toxins Mevinphos and potassium dichromate.

Plant species	Plant part extracted	LC50 value in µg/ml		
		24 h	48 h	72 h
<i>Acacia complanta</i>	leaves	795 ± 80	785 ± 71	375 ± 41
<i>Allocasuarina littoralis</i>	leaves	892 ± 112	591 ± 71	580 ± 76
<i>Brachychiton acerifolius</i>	flowers	-	757 ± 85	716 ± 81
<i>Eucalyptus baileyana</i>	leaves	216 ± 22	216 ± 22	216 ± 22
<i>Eucalyptus major</i>	leaves	-	858 ± 124	724 ± 106
<i>Eucalyptus major</i>	flowers	762 ± 98	386 ± 49	375 ± 52
<i>Grevillea juncifolia</i>	leaves	845 ± 87	739 ± 88	716 ± 93
<i>Grevillea juncifolia</i>	flowers	-	716 ± 98	671 ± 83
<i>Macadamia integriflora</i>	flowers	809 ± 72	219 ± 33	218 ± 23
<i>Melaleuca quinquenervia</i>	leaves	940 ± 141	739 ± 93	705 ± 97
Mevinphos		1418 ± 172	546 ± 45	123 ± 18
Potassium Dichromate		-	82 ± 4	79 ± 5

- indicates that LC₅₀ values were unable to be obtained as no increase in mortality above seawater controls was evident.

DISCUSSION

A previous study from this laboratory [11] has reported on the antibacterial activity of methanolic extracts from some Australian native plants. That study indicated that *A. aulacocarpa*, *B. citriodora*, *B. celsissima*, *A. littoralis*, as well as members of the *Callistemon*, *Eucalyptus*, *Leptospermum* and *Syzygium* genres are particularly promising as antimicrobial agents. The current study reports on the toxicity of these and other Australian plant extracts. *A. aulacocarpa* leaf extract was previously reported to be a good antimicrobial agent [11], being capable of inhibiting the growth of both Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria. The current studies indicate this extract has low toxicity towards *A. franciscana*. The *Artemia franciscana* bioassay has been reported to be a good indication of toxicity towards human cells [14]. These results indicate that *A. aulacocarpa* leaf extract has potential for medicinal use as an antibiotic agent.

Likewise, studies within this laboratory [11] have also shown *L. bracteata* leaves, *L. juniperium* leaves and flowers and *S. australe* leaves to be versatile antibacterial agents towards Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria. *B. celsissima* leaves were also good antibacterial agents, preferentially inhibiting Gram-positive bacteria. All of these extracts showed low toxicity in the *Artemia* bioassay, indicating their potential as antibiotic agents.

B. citriodora, *A. littoralis*, *C. citrinus*, *C. salignus*, *E. baileyana* and *E. major* extracts have all also been reported to have good antibacterial activity [11]. The current study shows that all of these extracts were toxic towards *A. franciscana*. The *B. citriodora* toxicity results contrast with the low toxicity previously reported [10]. However, it is worth noting that the current study examined the toxicity of higher extract concentrations (1000 µg/ml) compared to the Setzer et al [10] report (250 µg/ml), which studied the toxicity of *B. citriodora* extracts towards human cell lines as well as towards brine shrimp. Similarly, it is worth noting that toxicity was only seen in the current studies following 72 h of exposure of *A. franciscana* to *B. citriodora* extract. No mention of *Artemia* exposure time is made in the previous study of *B. citriodora* toxicity [10]. However, 24 h and 48 h LC₅₀'s have been reported for other plant extracts in many previous studies [14; 15]. It is therefore likely that these authors recorded mortality following a shorter exposure time than reported here. These differences highlight the necessity to further evaluate the toxicity of these extracts against human cell lines. Extracts that show toxicity towards *A. franciscana* at the concentrations tested, may have low toxicity towards human cell lines and therefore may have potential as antibiotic agents. Even if this is not the case, these extracts still have potential value as antiseptic and cleaning agents.

Toxicity towards *A. franciscana* could also indicate other potential medicinal uses for these plant extracts. The *A. franciscana* bioassay has previously been shown to be a good indicator of antitumour activity [15]. Therefore, extracts toxic towards *A. franciscana* should also be tested for toxicity towards human tumour cell lines. Whilst the extracts examined in this report appear promising as antimicrobial agents and possibly as anti-tumour agents, further studies using human cell lines are needed to determine the suitability of these extracts for these purposes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial support for this work was provided by the School of Biomolecular and Physical Sciences, Griffith University, Australia.

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