

# Discovery of Nanomolar-Affinity Pharmacological Chaperones Stabilizing the Oncogenic p53 Mutant Y220C

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## ABSTRACT

The tumor suppressor protein p53 is inactivated in the majority of human cancers and remains a prime target for developing new drugs reactivating its tumor suppressing activity for anticancer therapies. The oncogenic p53 mutant Y220C accounts for approximately 125,000 new cancer cases per annum and is one of the most prevalent p53 mutants overall. It harbors a narrow, mutationally-induced pocket at the surface of the DNA-binding domain (DBD) that destabilizes p53, leading to its rapid denaturation and aggregation. Here, we present the structure-guided development of high-affinity small molecules stabilizing p53-Y220C *in vitro*, along with the synthetic routes developed in the process, *in vitro* SAR data, and confirmation of their binding mode by protein X-ray crystallography. We disclose two new chemical probes displaying sub-micromolar binding affinity *in vitro*, marking an important milestone since the discovery of the first small-molecule ligand of Y220C in 2008. New chemical probe JC744 displayed a  $K_d = 320$  nM, along with potent *in vitro* protein stabilization. This study, therefore, represents a significant advance towards high-affinity Y220C ligands for clinical evaluation.

**KEYWORDS:** mutant p53, small molecule, pharmacological chaperoning, structure-based drug design, anticancer therapy.

## INTRODUCTION

The tumor suppressor p53, also referred to as the “guardian of the genome”, is a tetrameric transcription factor central to the human anticancer response through its regulation of critical gene networks controlling apoptosis, senescence and DNA repair.<sup>1-4</sup> Impaired p53 signaling is a hallmark of the estimated 20 million new cancer cases reported yearly worldwide,<sup>5</sup> and the p53 protein is directly inactivated by mutation in approximately 50% of these, with the majority of point mutations arising

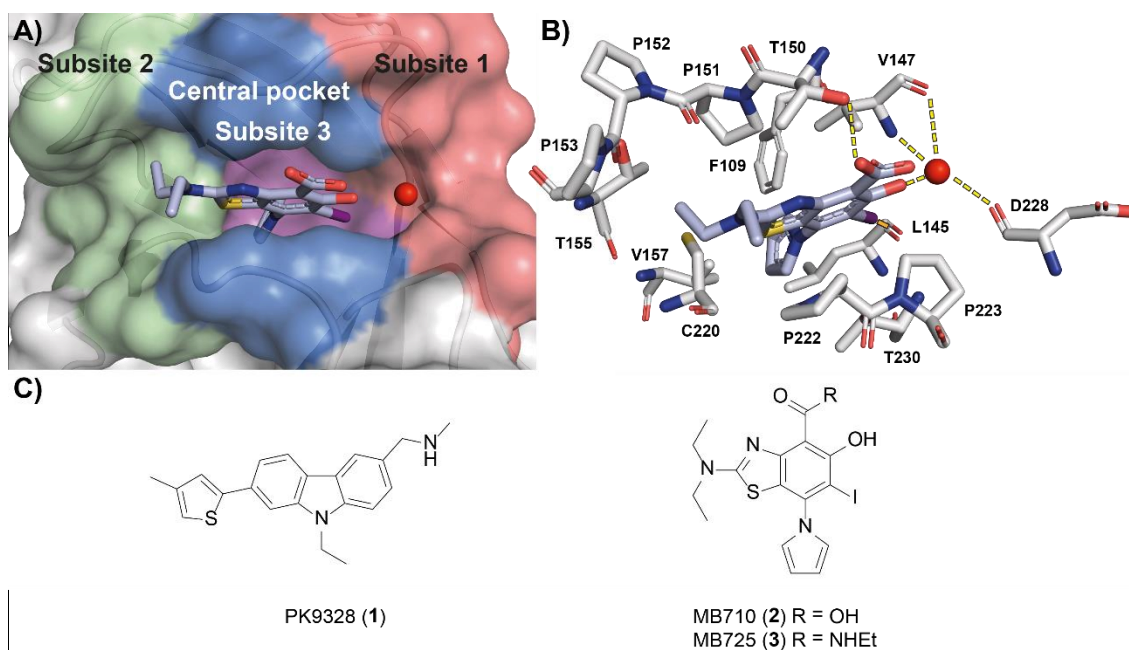
in its DNA-binding domain (DBD, aa 94-292).<sup>6-10</sup> Its crucial role in tumor suppression makes p53 a high-profile target in oncology. Not only does expression of mutant p53 lead to impaired signaling, but p53 mutants can also exert a dominant-negative effect on remaining copies of the wild-type (WT) protein by heterotetramerization or coaggregation, and also inactivate the paralogous tumor suppressors p63 and p73 by coaggregation.<sup>11-13</sup> Many cancers acquire further proliferative advantages by retaining only the mutated p53 allele, exhibiting an oncogenic gain-of-function that is associated with increased cell growth, drug resistance and metastatic potential.<sup>13-16</sup>

Most p53 single-nucleotide variants are missense mutations and can be classified into “contact” mutations that cause the obstruction or loss of essential DNA-binding contacts, and “structural” mutations that inactivate the protein through mutational reduction of thermostability.<sup>4, 9-11</sup> An estimated one third of common p53 cancer mutants are temperature-sensitive structural mutants and undergo loss of function through rapid denaturation under physiological conditions.<sup>17-18</sup> Remarkably, some unstable structural mutants display WT-like conformation and residual transcriptional activity at sub-physiological temperatures, leading to the hypothesis that they may be reactivated through modulation of thermal stability.<sup>19-21</sup> Surface-exposed tyrosine Y220 is the seventh most frequently mutated p53 residue in human cancers, accounting for *ca.* 1.6% of all mutations and 143,000 new cancer cases per annum worldwide, with the cysteine variant Y220C alone accounting for 125,000 of those cases.<sup>11, 22-23</sup> The Y220C mutation destabilizes the DBD by *ca.* 4 kcal/mol and reduces its melting temperature from 45 °C (WT) by approximately 8-9 °C, leading to rapid unfolding at body temperature.<sup>7, 18, 24</sup> In addition, this large-to-small residue mutation creates a well-defined, narrow surface pocket in the p53 DBD.<sup>25</sup> This pocket is conveniently located distant from the interfaces involved in DNA-binding and protein-protein interactions, presenting an opportunity for intervention using small molecules stabilizing the DBD functional fold.

Molecular chaperoning is a technique whereby the correct folding of primary protein sequences into their active conformation is assisted using stabilizing partners such as heat-shock proteins (Hsp).<sup>26</sup> Hsp-mediated stabilization is a highly effective strategy employed by nature and has demonstrated efficacy towards stabilization of thermolabile p53 mutants.<sup>27-28</sup> The effectiveness of this strategy for protein reactivation reveals an opportunity to achieve a similar effect using synthetic additives (pharmacological chaperoning). Despite recent successes in the development of small-molecule drug candidates that operate through p53 reactivation, many suffer key drawbacks like high toxicity (Nutlins, COTI-2, arsenic trioxide), nonspecific oxidative damage (APR-246, ZMC1, PK11007), or PAIN motifs (ZMC1, COTI-2).<sup>29-41</sup> The so-called “Holy Grail” of p53 drug discovery, a nontoxic cancer-selective reactivator of transcription, thus remains a prime target, and research into Y220C stabilizers

paves the way towards generic chaperones that may be applicable to the 2-3 million annual cancer cases related to unstable mutant p53.<sup>10</sup>

To date, several small-molecule drug discovery campaigns have targeted p53-Y220C, culminating in the development of a small number of chemical probes that selectively bind and stabilize the mutant DBD.<sup>24, 42</sup> Carbazole PK9328 (**1**) binds to the Y220C pocket with high affinity ( $K_d = 2 \mu\text{M}$ ) and induces a thermal shift ( $\Delta T_m$ ) to the protein melting temperature of over 3 °C (250  $\mu\text{M}$  [ligand]).<sup>24</sup> **1** also reduces p53 aggregation *in vitro* and induces selective cell viability reduction of cancer cell lines HUH-7 (p53-Y220C) and NUGC-3 (p53-Y220C) *versus* controls HUH7-F1 (engineered p53-Y220C KO) and NUGC-4 (p53-WT), although only within a narrow concentration range.<sup>24</sup> We recently reported the early optimization of iodophenol fragments, which led to the discovery of aminobenzothiazole derivatives **2-3**.<sup>42</sup> Leads MB710 (**2**) and MB725 (**3**) stabilize p53-Y220C *in vitro* in a concentration-dependent manner (DSF) and bind potently to the Y220C pocket ( $K_d = 4 \mu\text{M}$ , ITC). Crucially, cell-permeable analogue **3** induces selective cell viability reduction of p53-Y220C cancer cell lines HUH-7 (liver), BXPC-3 (pancreas) and NUGC-3 (stomach), while maintaining comparatively low toxicity in the same concentration range in representative cancer lines NUGC-4 (stomach, p53 WT), SW1088 (brain, p53-R273C), WI38 (human fibroblasts, p53-WT), along with in house CRISPR-engineered HUH-7 p53-Y220C KO cells. It further reduces NUGC-3 viability (<10% at 10  $\mu\text{M}$  MB725 (**3**)), correlating with enhanced and selective transcription of p53 target genes *PUMA*, *p21*, *BTG2*, *FAS*, *TNF* and *TNFRSF10B*, which promote apoptosis or cell cycle arrest, suggesting ligand-mediated transcriptional activation of p53-Y220C (qPCR study of 84 genes under p53 control).<sup>42</sup> The correlation between *in vitro* thermal shift, selective viability reduction and upregulation of p53 signaling in Y220C cell lines represents an important milestone towards first-in-class anticancer drugs that rescue p53-Y220C function.<sup>24, 42</sup> However, it has also become clear that more potent ligands/stabilizers with enhanced properties will be required to develop a viable treatment in the future.



**Figure 1.** **A)** Crystal structure of **2** (blue sticks) in complex with p53-Y220C (PDB: 5O1I, surface representation)<sup>42</sup> with subsites referred to throughout the text color-coded: subsite 1 = red, subsite 2 = green, buried subsite 3 = purple, central pocket = blue. A structural water molecule interacting with **2** is shown as a red sphere; **B)** Zoom in: crystal structure of **2** (blue sticks) in complex with p53-Y220C with interacting residues shown (PDB: 5O1I, grey sticks).<sup>42</sup> The halogen bond to L145 (dashed orange line) and the hydrogen bond network between the salicylate moiety and the protein are shown (dashed yellow lines); **C)** Chemical structures of representative iodophenol and carbazole lead molecules **1-3**.

The Y220C pocket is divided into three subsites that interact with different parts of the ligand (**Figure 1**). The benzothiazole core of **2** occupies the central region of the pocket and engages in extensive hydrophobic and CH- $\pi$  contacts with surrounding residues V147, P151, P222, and P223. The carboxylic acid is solvent-exposed and hydrogen bonds to T150 while conferring aqueous solubility to the molecule. The hydroxyl forms an H-bond to a conserved structural water molecule tri-coordinated by V147 and D228 in subsite 1, and the iodine engages in hydrophobic interactions with L145 and V147, and a key halogen bond with the L145 carbonyl. Oxygen-halogen bonding is highly directional and is critical to binding of this series; modification to lighter halogens reduces binding affinity approximately 20-fold (I  $\rightarrow$  Cl).<sup>43</sup> The diethylamino group extends to access subsite 2 and forms contacts with a hydrophobic hotspot, formed by P151, P152, P153, T155, and P222. The pyrrole is buried at the bottom of the pocket in subsite 3, engaging in extensive hydrophobic interactions with F109, L145, V147, P151, V157, C220, and L257 sidechains in addition to CH- $\pi$  interactions with polarized C220  $\beta$ -hydrogens. Incorporation of a pyrrole at this position was shown to boost affinity by *ca.* 40-fold

compared with an unsubstituted iodophenol. Comparatively, H-bonding of the phenol and carboxylate modulate *in vitro* binding affinity by less than 10-fold.<sup>42, 44</sup>

Affinity optimization on aminobenzothiazole and carbazole scaffolds to date have focused on subsite 2, while subsite 1 modifications moderately improved affinity (*ca.* 10-fold).<sup>24, 42-43</sup> Conversely, subsite 3 modification has remained relatively untapped beyond initial incorporation of the pyrrole, presenting an opportunity for further optimization towards higher-affinity leads. Here, we report the structure-based design, chemical synthesis, biophysical and structural characterization of libraries of MB710/725 analogues carrying diverse substitution patterns targeting subsite 3. Critically, this involved developing new synthetic routes that circumvent the limited scalability of routes we previously reported. In-depth *in vitro* SAR studies identified two fluorinated derivatives displaying nanomolar binding affinity *in vitro*, with protein-fluorine contacts unambiguously characterized by protein X-ray crystallography.

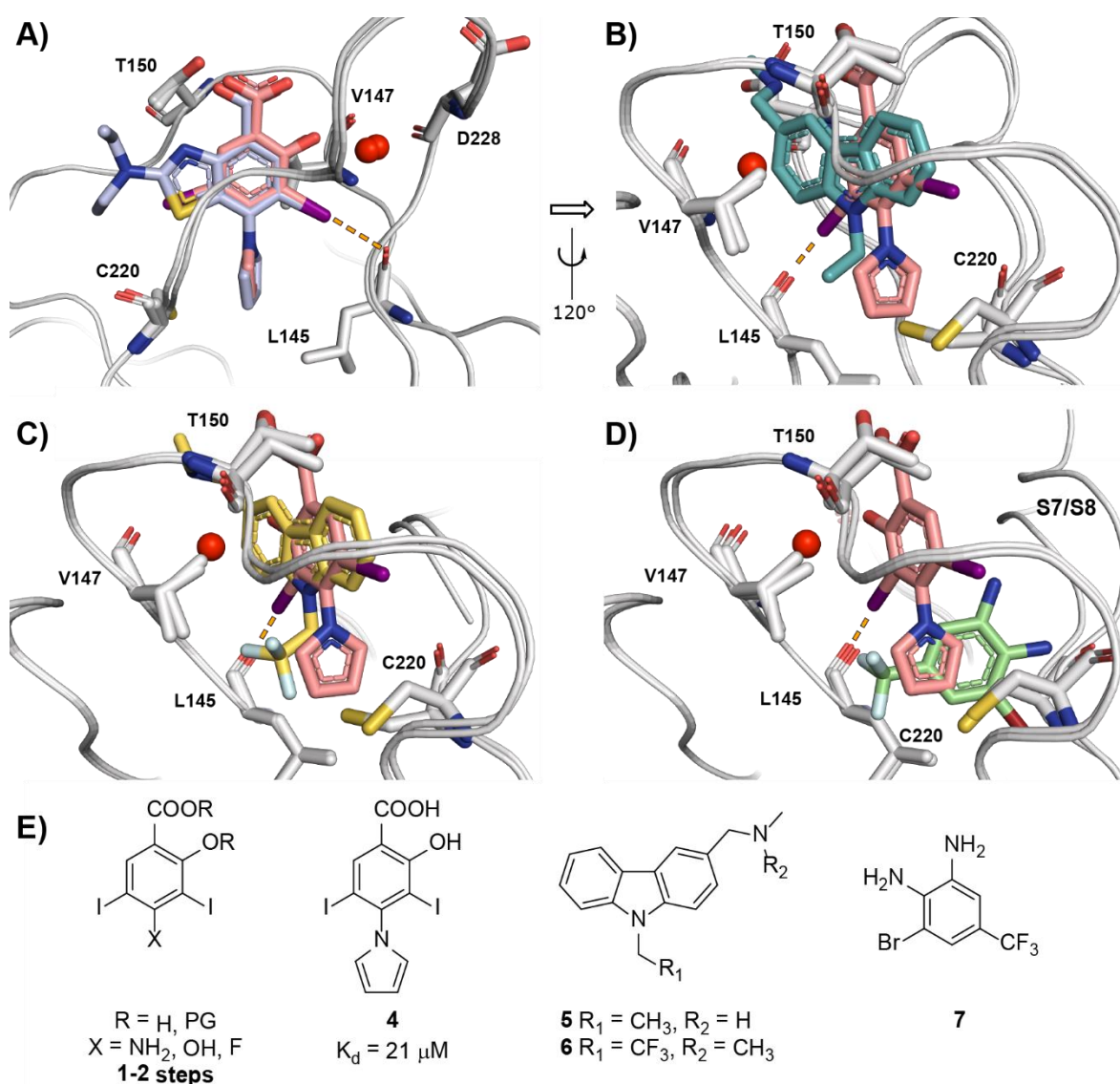
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Modeling and library design

We selected the diiodosalicylic acid derivative **4** for initial library design and SAR development (**Figure 2A**). Diiodination of commercial and cheap salicylate precursors provided high-yielding and scalable access to diiodosalicylate precursors with diverse functionalizable handles at the 4-position (*vide infra*) (**Figure 2E**). Furthermore, we have previously reported high resolution (1.4 Å) X-ray crystal structures of **2** and **4** bound to Y220C and shown that they display virtually identical binding modes and positioning of the pyrrole unit in the pocket (**Figure 2A**). Hence, we envisaged that SAR and fruitful modifications emerging from derivatization of the pyrrole unit in **4** would be transposable onto more potent benzothiazole analogues to yield optimized ligands.

Alignment of bound structures of **4** with representative carbazoles **5** and **6** highlighted short chain aliphatic groups that could be incorporated into the iodophenol scaffold by pyrrole substitution or linked by a tractable *N*- or *O*- handle (**Figure 2B-C**). We reasoned that introducing diverse methylation patterns on the pyrrole ring to perform a “methyl scan” would allow probing for new hydrophobic hotspots within subsite 3. We previously reported on the structural dynamics of the Y220C binding pocket using X-ray crystallography and molecular dynamics simulations that highlighted the flexibility of the binding pocket in the subsite 3 region in the immediate environment of C220. This suggested that, while seemingly narrow in most bound crystal structures, subsite 3 may display some degree of flexibility in solution and be able to accommodate short hydrophobic groups protruding from main

lead scaffolds.<sup>44</sup> This is further supported by the partial opening/rearrangement of the pocket, involving the S7/S8 loop, upon binding of certain fragments, including trifluoromethylated dianiline **7**. Alignment of bound crystal structures of **4** with dianiline **7** suggested merging the pyrrole with the benzene ring of **7** towards a 1-arylidole, potentially conferring significant growth into subsite 3 (**Figure 2D**). Evaluation of such analogues may shed light on whether flexibility of the S7/S8 loop is tolerated with our ligand series, or whether its movement perturbs binding of the iodophenol scaffold. Alignment of **4** with **6** and **7** (**Figure 2C-D**) further identified fluorinated motifs that may be accommodated in subsite 3 such as fluoro-/trifluoromethyl-pyrroles and fluoroalkyl groups. Introduction of fluorine to subsite 3 groups has been shown to enhance the binding affinity of non-fluorinated parent **5** by up to 4-fold by invoking multipolar interactions with receptor carbonyls and the C220 sulfhydryl group.<sup>45</sup> Manipulation of fluorination patterns also has the potential to allow for modulation of key physical properties (LogD/P, solubility, metabolic stability).<sup>46</sup> Modification of pyrrole electronics is of particular interest as the heterocycle is electron-rich (aromaticity 61-68% of PhH) and thought to be readily oxidized by cytochrome P450 enzymes.<sup>47-49</sup> Difluorination of 1*H*-pyrrole was estimated to reduce its p*K*<sub>a</sub> by *ca.* 4.7 units (50,000-fold, in THF), suggesting that incorporation of electron-withdrawing substituents is highly effective for modulating pyrrole ring electronics and may confer improved metabolic stability to our ligands.<sup>50</sup>



**Figure 2.** **A)** Overlay of bound **2** and **4**; **B)** Overlay of bound **4** and **5**; **C)** Overlay of bound **4** and **6**; **D)** Overlay of bound **4** and **7**; **E)** Structures of iodophenol precursors and Y220C fragment ligands **4-7**. Color coding: **2** light blue (PDB: 5O1I);<sup>42</sup> **4** pink sticks (PDB: 5AOJ);<sup>44</sup> **5** grey sticks (PDB: 2VUK);<sup>51</sup> **6** yellow sticks (PDB: 5G4O);<sup>45</sup> **7** green sticks (PDB: 5AOL).<sup>44</sup> The halogen bond to L145 is shown as dashed orange lines.

The rational design was further supported by Glide (Schrödinger) docking studies.<sup>52</sup> All derivatives performed well during *in silico* studies, attaining consistent docking scores in a similar range as the positive controls **2** and **4**. The best-scoring analogues were selected for synthesis and SAR evaluation. Conservation of key interactions (halogen/H-bonds) and binding mode were used as additional informant to prioritize compounds selected for synthesis (examples in **Figure S1**).

## Synthetic chemistry

The synthesis of *N*-heterocyclic subsite 3 analogues hinged on manipulation of commercial *N*-TIPS-pyrrole and coupling to an activated 4-fluorosalicylic acid-derived partner *via* nucleophilic aromatic substitution ( $S_NAr$ , **Scheme 1**). Transition metal-based Ullman and Buchwald protocols were incompatible with the reducible 3,5-diiodo motif, and iodination had to precede introduction of the electron-rich 5-membered heterocycles. Therefore, an  $S_NAr$  strategy was devised using 4-fluorobenzoic acids **9-10**. This convergent synthetic route provided access to a range of new derivatives functionalized with substituted pyrrole and other *N*-heterocyclic units not accessible by the dicarbonyl condensation chemistry we previously reported.<sup>42</sup>

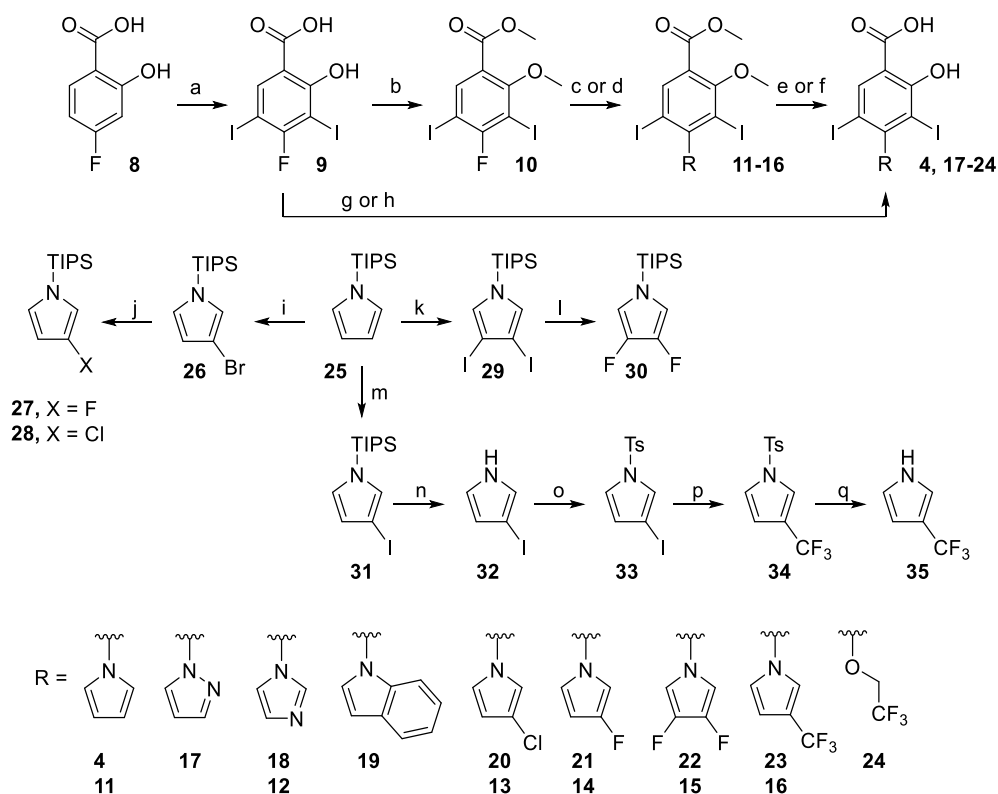
3-fluoropyrrole **27** was prepared as reported, *via* bromination of *N*-TIPS-pyrrole **25** followed by halogen-lithium exchange and quenching the aryllithium with NFSI.<sup>53</sup> 3-chloropyrrole **28** was accessed similarly by reacting the lithiopyrrole intermediate with NCS.<sup>54</sup> 3,4-difluoropyrrole **30** was prepared using similar chemistry but utilizing 3,4-diiodopyrrole **29**, which can be formed in higher yield than the dibromo equivalent and was expected to lithiate more efficiently.<sup>55-56</sup> A new, scalable and regioselective route to 3-trifluoromethylpyrrole was devised by sterically-controlled mono-iodination of **25** at the 3-position, protecting group exchange and gram-scale trifluoromethylation using methyl fluorosulfonyl-2,2-difluoroacetate. Subsequent mild desulfonation using magnesium in methanol afforded 3-(trifluoromethyl)-1*H*-pyrrole **35** in 98% yield as a ~1:1 mixture (NMR) with Et<sub>2</sub>O, however, due to its volatility (bp ~ 168-170 °C) the isolated (dry) yield was reduced to 73%.<sup>57</sup> This preparation afforded iodinated intermediate **33** in 84% yield over 3 steps and 3-(trifluoromethyl)-1*H*-pyrrole **35** in 51% contained yield (38% isolated) over 5 steps. Importantly, this route circumvented the requirement for high temperatures (>200 °C), long reaction times (> 5 days) and particularly 2- vs 3-selectivity issues encountered in past syntheses of **35** because separation of the isomers is challenging.<sup>57-60</sup>

4-fluorosalicylic acid **8** was readily iodinated to coupling partner **9** in 86% yield.  $S_NAr$  reactions using **9** proceeded in 55-58% yields to afford salicylate derivatives in 2 steps, precluding the use of protecting groups. For heterocycles that were unstable under these conditions (150 °C), a protection strategy was employed that permitted the use of milder conditions. **9** was dimethylated using dimethyl sulfate and subsequent  $S_NAr$  proceeded in moderate yields at 70 °C (45-68%).

One-pot deprotection of *N*-TIPS-pyrroles **27**, **28**, **30** and  $S_NAr$  by treatment with KF/Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> and the aryl fluoride **10** afforded methoxy protected analogues **13-16** in 73-80% yields (**Scheme 1**). Interestingly, either omission of Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> from the reaction conditions or replacement of KF/Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> with CsF led to drastic reduction in conversion to the *N*-arylpyrrole. Cs<sup>+</sup> has been proposed to accelerate nucleophilic substitution reactions by exergonic formation of cesium halide salts, rationalizing this observation.<sup>61</sup>



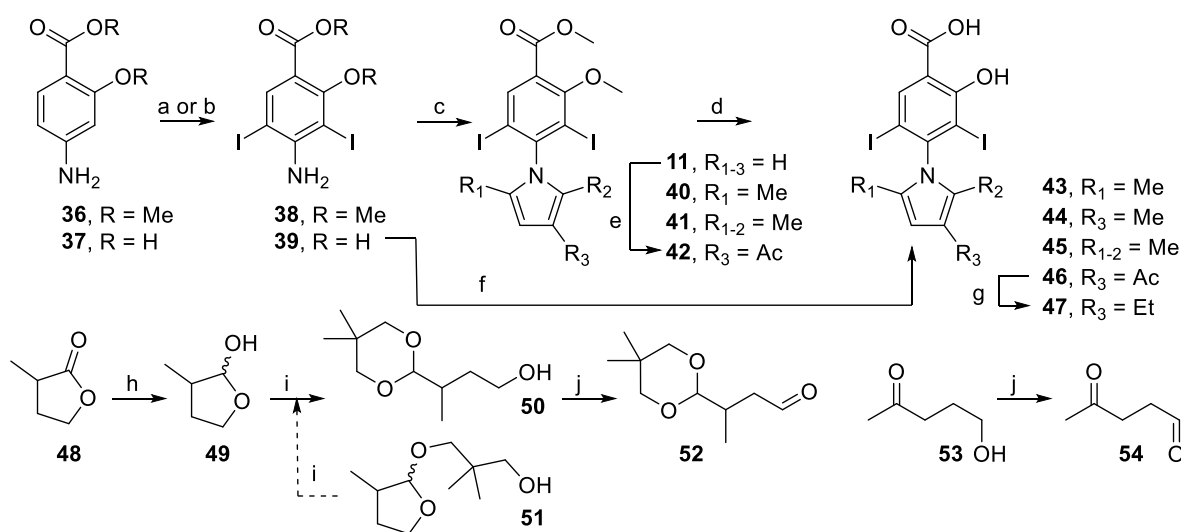
Demethylation using  $\text{BBr}_3$  or TMSI furnished deprotected salicylates **4** and **17-23**. 2,2,2-trifluoroethoxy analogue **24** was prepared using a modified  $\text{S}_{\text{N}}\text{Ar}$  procedure because the chemistries used for the oxyether library were unsuccessful (*vide infra*).



**Scheme 1.**  $\text{S}_{\text{N}}\text{Ar}$  chemistry towards subsite 3 iodophenol analogues. Conditions: (a) NIS, AcOH, 25 °C, 6 h 86%; (b)  $\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3$ ,  $\text{Me}_2\text{SO}_4$ , NMP, 80 °C, 1 h, 68%; (c) heterocycle,  $\text{Cs}_2\text{CO}_3$ , DMSO, 70 °C, 1 h, 45-68%; (d) KF, 1-TIPS-pyrrole derivative,  $\text{Cs}_2\text{CO}_3$ , DMSO, 70 °C, 1 h, 73-80%; (e)  $\text{BBr}_3$ ,  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ , 0 to 25 °C, 24 h, 27-62%; (f) TMSI,  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ , 50 °C, sealed tube, 24 h, 31%; (g)  $\text{Cs}_2\text{CO}_3$ , heterocycle, DMSO, 150 °C, 2 h, 55-58%; (h)  $\text{CF}_3\text{CH}_2\text{OH}$ , NaH, DMF, 0 to 150 °C, 20 h, 22%; (i) NBS, THF, -78 to 25 °C, 3 h, 89%; (j) *n*BuLi, NFSI or NCS, THF, -78 to 25 °C, 1.5 h, 48-50%; (k)  $\text{I}_2$ ,  $\text{H}_5\text{IO}_6$ ,  $\text{Et}_2\text{O}$ , 25 °C, 1 h, 86%; (l) *n*BuLi, NFSI, THF, -78 to 25 °C, then *n*BuLi, NFSI, THF, -78 to 25 °C, 1 h, 32%; (m) NIS, acetone, -78 to 25 °C, 5 h; (n) TBAF, THF, 25 °C, 1 h; (o) NaH, TsCl, THF, 0 to 25 °C, 1 h, 84% over 3 steps; (p)  $\text{FSO}_2\text{CF}_2\text{COOCH}_3$ , CuI, HMPA, DMF, 80 °C, 16 h, 62%; (q) Mg, MeOH, 25 °C, 0.5 h, 73%.

A range of alkylpyrrole analogues were accessible through Paal-Knorr chemistry with commercial and synthesized 1,4-dicarbonyl compounds (**Scheme 2**).  $\alpha$ -methyl- $\gamma$ -butyrolactone **48** was reduced in high yield to the lactol **49**, which was ring-opened under acetalization conditions to give **50** in 46% yield. Conveniently, the by-product **51** could be recycled to yield a second crop of **50** by exposure to the same reaction conditions. Final Parikh-Doering oxidation of **50** and commercially available  $\gamma$ -hydroxyketone **53** afforded the condensation partners **52** and **54**, respectively.

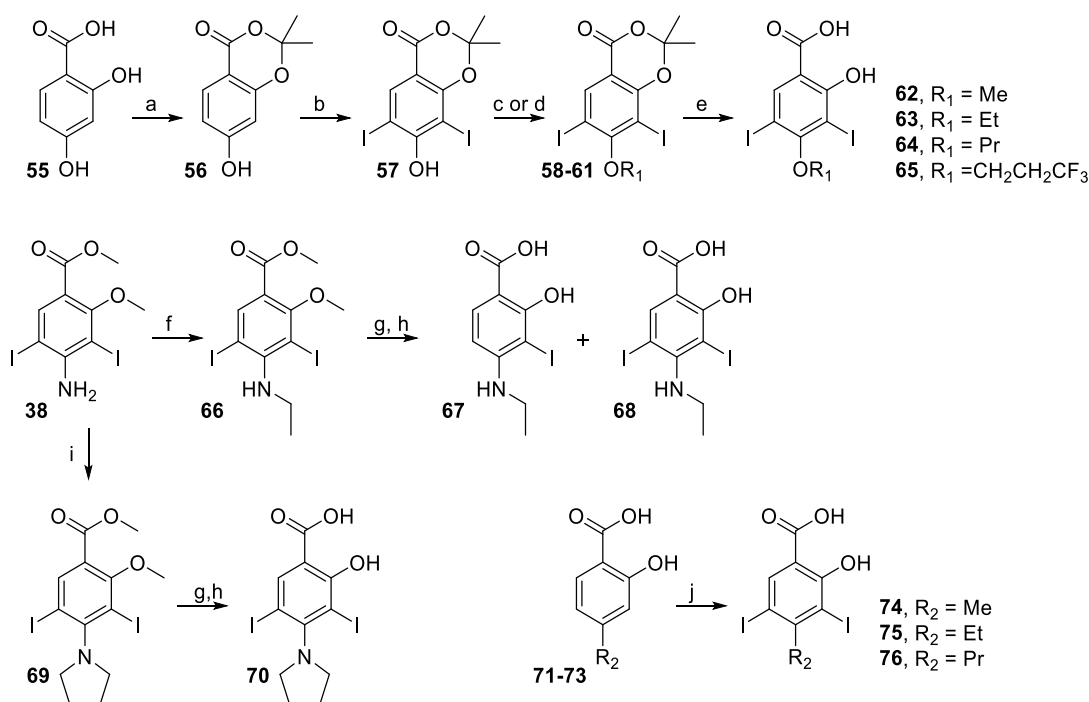
Aniline precursors **38-39** were prepared by iodination of commercial salicylic acids **36-37**. Paal-Knorr condensation of 1,4-dicarbonyl precursors with **38** or **39** followed by demethylation using  $\text{BBr}_3$ , afforded methylated pyrrole derivatives **43-45** (**Scheme 2**). Although **39** was reactive to masked dialdehyde **52**, ketones did not react under the same conditions and required protected analogue **38**. The reason behind this observation is unclear, although it is possible that **38** benefits from greater amine nucleophilicity due to reduced conjugation of the ester with the aniline ring as a result of sterics ( $\text{OMe--MeO}$ ). Exploiting the bulky iodine atoms for steric deactivation of the pyrrole 2-position, acetylation of **11** produced the electronically-disfavored 3-acetylpyrrole **42** in good yield. Subsequent methoxy deprotection and reduction with triethylsilane afforded the 3-ethylpyrrole **47**.



**Scheme 2.** Carbonyl condensation chemistry towards subsite 3 iodophenol analogues. R<sub>1-3</sub> = H unless defined. Conditions: (a) NIS, AcOH, 25 °C, 1 h, 98%; (b) NIS, MeCN, 25 °C, 0.5 h, quant.; (c) Dicarbonyl, conc. aq. HCl (cat.), EtOH, reflux, 18 h, 22-35%; (d)  $\text{BBr}_3$ ,  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ , 0 to 25 °C, 24 h, 27-59%; (e)  $\text{Ac}_2\text{O}$ ,  $\text{BF}_3 \cdot \text{OEt}_2$ ,  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ , 0 to 25 °C, 2 h, 57%; (f) **52**, AcOH, 100 °C, 6 h, 26%; (g)  $\text{Et}_3\text{SiH}$ , TFA, 50 °C, 1 h, 48%; (h) DIBAL-H,  $\text{Et}_2\text{O}$ , -78 °C, 30 min, 81%; (i) Neopentyl glycol,  $\text{TsOH} \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$ , PhMe, 100 °C, 2 h, 46-50% **50**, 19-28% **51**; (j)  $\text{SO}_3 \cdot \text{py}$ ,  $\text{Et}_3\text{N}$ , DMSO,  $\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2$ , 0 to 25 °C, 15 h, 69%-quant.

Protected diiodosalicylic acid derivative **57** was prepared in 2 steps from resorcylic acid **55** by acetalization, then iodination. Oxyether analogues were accessible in high yield by either alkylation or Mitsunobu coupling with phenol **57** followed by ester hydrolysis (**Scheme 3**). **57** was unreactive towards 1,1,1-trifluoro-2-haloethane electrophiles, and 2,2,2-trifluoroethanol is typically unreactive under Mitsunobu conditions.<sup>62</sup> As an alternative, the 2,2,2-trifluoroethyl analogue **24** was prepared by full deprotonation and treatment to  $\text{S}_{\text{N}}\text{Ar}$  conditions similar to those used for heterocycles (*vide supra*) (**Scheme 1**). **38** was readily alkylated to *N*-ethylaniline **66** using ethyl iodide. Despite extensive optimization attempts, **68** (and methyl and propyl analogues, data not shown) underwent partial *in*

*situ* degradation during methoxy deprotection to the corresponding monoiodo by-product **67**, although this was not observed for the pyrrolidine analogue **70**. **68** was thus tested as a mixture (9:1 diiodo:monoiodo) and the calculated (NMR) yield reported. *N*-methyl and propyl analogues had worse profiles of deiodination and were deemed too low purity to give meaningful biophysical data. Commercial 4-alkylsalicylic acids **71-73** were iodinated using standard conditions in high yield to give analogues **74-76**.

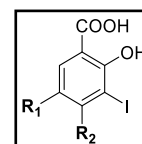


**Scheme 3.** Synthetic routes towards subsite 3 iodophenol analogues bearing alkyl chains. Conditions: (a) Acetone, TFAA, TFA, 0 to 25 °C, 24 h, 45%; (b) NIS, THF, 0 °C, 1 h, 73%; (c) R<sub>1</sub>OH, DIAD, PPh<sub>3</sub>, THF, 0 °C, 2.5 h, 63-68%; (d) EtI, Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, DMF, 25 °C, 20 h, 57%; (e) 1N aq. NaOH, THF, 25 °C, 1 h, 77-88%; (f) R-I Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, DMF, 80 °C, 2-4 h, 57-72%; (g) BCl<sub>3</sub>, CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, 0 to 25 °C, 30 minutes; (h) 1N NaOH (aq.), MeOH, THF, 25 °C, 2-5 days, 33-64% over 2 steps, (i) I(CH<sub>2</sub>)<sub>4</sub>I, Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, DMF, 80 °C, 2.5 h, 34%; (j) NIS, AcOH, 25 °C, 1 h, 88-98%.

### Biophysical evaluation and SAR studies

Our iodophenol library was assessed for thermal stabilization of p53-Y220C using differential scanning fluorimetry (DSF), and affinities ( $K_d$ s) of selected analogues with the highest thermal shifts ( $\Delta T_m$ ) were then determined by isothermal titration calorimetry (ITC) (**Table 1**). Affinity ( $pK_d$ ) and  $\Delta T_m$  showed generally good correlation, in line with our previous reports (**Figure S3**).<sup>42</sup>

**Table 1.** Thermal stabilization ( $\Delta T_m$ ) and binding affinities of subsite 3 targeting analogues against p53-Y220C, determined by DSF and ITC, respectively. Previously reported analogues **4** and **77** were included as positive controls.



ID	R <sub>1</sub>	R <sub>2</sub>	$\Delta T_m$ (°C) <sup>a</sup> [L] = 200 $\mu$ M	SD	$K_d$ ( $\mu$ M) <sup>b</sup>	SD	LE (kcal/mol/NHA)
<b>4</b>	I		1.8 <sup>c</sup>	0.06	22 <sup>c,d</sup>	3.6	0.37
<b>77</b>	OPr		2.1	0.31	22 <sup>f</sup>	n/a	0.32
<b>74</b>		Me	0.3	0.30	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>75</b>		Et	1.5	0.31	26	1.7	0.45
<b>76</b>		Pr	0.9	0.31	40	8.1	0.40
<b>62</b>		OMe	1.5	0.31	120	30	0.38
<b>63</b>		OEt	1.5	0.31	86	2.2	0.37
<b>64</b>		OPr	1.1	0.24	100	31	0.34
<b>24</b>			0.3	0.37	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>65</b>			0.5	0.33	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>70</b>			0.3	0.26	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>67</b>		NHEt <sup>e</sup>	1.5	0.31	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>43</b>			1.5	0.31	200	11	0.28
<b>44</b>			1.5	0.37	160	2.9	0.29
<b>45</b>	I		1.1	0.26	77	6.7	0.30
<b>47</b>			0.5	0.24	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>17</b>			0.7	0.11	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>18</b>			1.0	0.22	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>19</b>			-0.3	0.30	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>20</b>			1.5	0.30	38	3.0	0.33
<b>21</b>			1.9	0.04	15	1.1	0.37
<b>22</b>			1.9	0.11	25	2.4	0.33
<b>23</b>			0.5	0.32	100	4.4	0.26

<sup>a</sup> Measured by DSF using 8  $\mu$ M protein and 10x SYPRO Orange.  $\Delta T_m$  values were calculated as the average of at least three independent measurements. <sup>b</sup> Measured by ITC ([prot] = 50  $\mu$ M).  $K_d$  values

were calculated as the average of at least three independent measurements. <sup>c</sup> Consistent with literature values  $\Delta T_m = 1.8$  °C ([L] = 250  $\mu$ M),  $K_d = 21$   $\mu$ M<sup>44</sup>. <sup>d</sup> Average of two repeats. <sup>e</sup> Tested as a 90% pure mixture with monoiodinated analogue.  $K_d$  not recorded for mixture. <sup>f</sup> Literature value.<sup>42</sup> SD: standard deviation. LE: ligand efficiency. NHA: number of heavy (non-hydrogen) atoms.

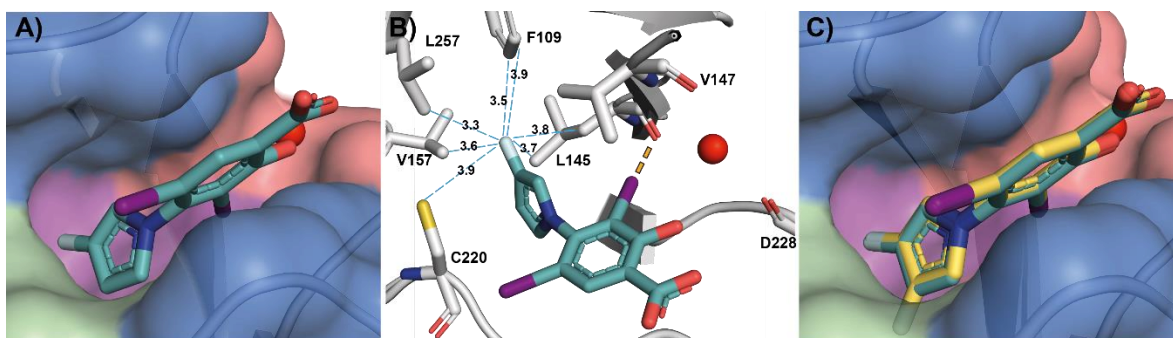
**Short alkyl chains.** Saturated pyrrolidine analogue **70** did not exhibit measurable binding nor thermal stabilization, possibly suggesting unfavorable steric constraints imposed by the 3D conformation of the pyrrolidine ring. Conversely, more flexible short alkyl groups linked by a C-, N- or O- atom were widely tolerated. This is consistent with the over 10-fold affinity gain from addition of the 9-ethyl group to previously reported carbazole series.<sup>51</sup> 2- and 3-atom chains gave the best affinities/thermal shifts (**62**, **63**, **67**, **75**, **76**), after which point a cut-off and a marked reduction in affinity/stabilization was observed (**64**, **75** vs **76**). Curiously, and despite the known fluorophilicity of the subsite 3 pocket, terminal trifluoromethylation of O-alkyl substituents abrogated affinity almost entirely in each case. This may be a result of conformational preorganization of the ether chain imparted by trifluoromethylation, contributing to an entropic penalty of binding, or steric clashes. The reduced affinity of oxyethers **62-64** compared with alkyl derivatives **75-76** can be ascribed to mesomeric donation of the ether oxygen onto the aromatic ring. Increasing electron density on the iodinated carbon is likely to impact the Lewis acidity of the C-I bond and therefore halogen bonding strength, which is closely related to affinity.<sup>63</sup> Overall, all alkyl-based motifs investigated resulted in at least 4-fold decreased potency, with the exception of ethyl derivative **75** ( $K_d = 26$   $\mu$ M) that was similarly potent as the parent pyrrole derivative **4**.

**Alkylpyrroles and other N-heteroaromatics.** A methyl scan of the pyrrole moiety revealed that substitution was tolerated at the 2- and 3- positions, in addition to disubstitution at the 2- and 5- positions, although all resulting in reduced affinity and thermal stabilization compared with the unsubstituted pyrrole reference **4**. 2- and 3-methylpyrrole derivatives afforded 1.5 °C stabilization and bound approximately 7-9 times more weakly than **4** ( $K_d = 150$ -200  $\mu$ M), while dimethylated **45** afforded weaker stabilization and 3-fold affinity reduction. These data likely indicate steric clashes between the ligand and the narrow subsite 3 pocket, and suggest a size limit for substituents at this position. 2-position substitution is predicted to impart a high degree of control over the dihedral angle between the pyrrole and phenyl groups, which may contribute to reduced shape complementarity between the ligand and the protein. This is further supported by results from bulkier 3-ethylpyrrole and indole derivatives **47** and **19**, which induced virtually no stabilization. The bulky indole group may be too sterically encumbered to fit in subsite 3, despite showing good shape complementarity in docking and crystal structure overlays (**Figure 2D**, **Figure S1**). The crystal structure of dianiline **7** suggests that accommodation of a benzene ring at this site requires rearrangement of the S7/S8 loop,

which may disturb key contacts made by the iodophenol unit, including the key halogen bond to the L145 backbone carbonyl. Exchanging the pyrrole heterocycle with a pyrazole (**17**) or imidazole (**18**) also resulted in significantly lower affinity and stabilization, further highlighting the pyrrole as the heterocycle of choice towards subsite 3. This may be explained by the relatively hydrophobic nature of the subsite 3 pocket, which is well-known to bind non-polar moieties like ethyl and pyrrole groups, leading to unfavorable interactions with the more polar pyrazole and imidazole groups.<sup>44</sup>

**Halogenated pyrroles.** Pleasingly, halogenated pyrroles **20-22** bound with affinities in the low micromolar range (15-38  $\mu\text{M}$ ) and displayed strong stabilization of the mutant. Notably, 3-fluoropyrrole derivative **21** reproducibly displayed the highest protein stabilization and affinity from our library ( $\Delta T_m = 1.9\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ,  $K_d = 15\text{ }\mu\text{M}$ ) and represents a moderate improvement on the unsubstituted parent **4**. Difluoropyrrole **22** induced similar stabilization and affinity to monofluoropyrrole **21**. This is consistent with previous reports by us and colleagues on the fluorophilicity of the subsite 3.<sup>45</sup> Terminal trifluoromethylation enhanced the binding affinity of previously reported carbazole lead series by approximately 5-fold, *via* interactions with residues C220 (S--F), L145 ((O)C--F) and W146 ((O)C--F) (**Figure 2B-C**). Conversely, trifluoromethylpyrrole analogue **23** showed significantly lower stabilization and approximately 5-fold reduction in binding affinity compared with unsubstituted reference **4**, possibly again reflecting a size limit for substituents targeting subsite 3. It is likely that the dihedral angle ( $\text{C-N}_{\text{pyrrole}} - \text{C-C}_{\text{Ph}}$ ,  $\theta > 80^\circ$ ) imposed by the biaryl scaffold prevents the pyrrole accessing a suitable orientation for the trifluoromethyl group to engage these residues.

We determined high-resolution ( $\leq 1.5\text{ \AA}$ ) crystal structures of Y220C with bound mono and difluorinated derivatives **21** and **22** (**Figure 3A-C**; PDB: 8A31, 8A32). These experimental structures unambiguously confirmed that their binding mode was virtually identical to that of unsubstituted parent compound **4**, consistent with the computationally predicted structures (**Figure S1**, **Figure S4**). Interestingly, a preferential orientation of the 1-aryl-3-fluoropyrrole in the pocket as the *aR* atropisomer was observed. In this preferred axially chiral conformation, the fluorine engages in hydrophobic contacts with F109, L145, V157 and L257. C220 adopts a 'flipped' conformation with the sulfur atom 3.9  $\text{\AA}$  from the fluorine, probably precluding fluorine-sulfur contacts due to the positioning of the biaryl scaffold. The *aR* conformer was the only one observable in chain B of the asymmetric unit, with the *aS* conformer only detected as a minor conformation in the electron density in chain A at *ca.* 25% occupancy (**Figure S5**). There was clear electron density for both fluorine atoms of **22** in the bound structure, and they occupied almost identical positions as observed for monofluorinated **21**.



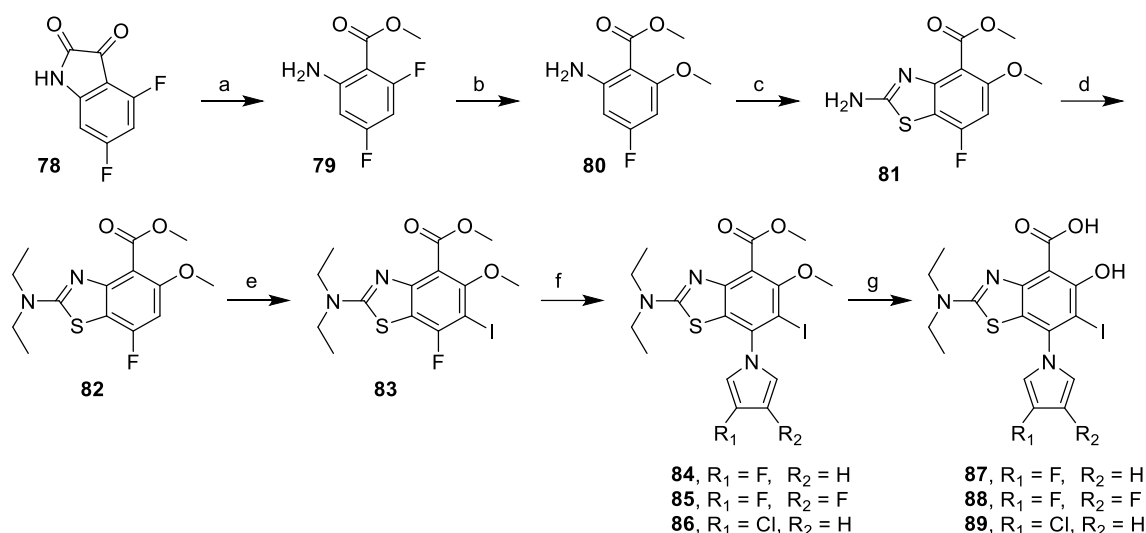
**Figure 3.** **A)** Bound structure of **21** (turquoise sticks, PDB: 8A31 with p53-Y220C (surface representation); **B)** Key subsite 3 residues and S--F and C--F distances (Å) are shown (blue dashes). The halogen bond to L145 is shown in orange; **C)** Overlaid co-crystal structures of **21** (turquoise sticks) and difluorinated **22** (yellow sticks, PDB: 8A32 chain B) with p53-Y220C (surface representation).

### Lead optimization: SAR transfer to aminobenzothiazole leads

Fluorination of the 3-position of the pyrrole provided a modest, although reproducible enhancement of Y220C thermal stabilization. We sought to introduce this optimized motif to the more potent benzothiazole scaffold along with 3-chloro and 3,4-difluoro analogues for comparison.

The synthetic route towards the target aminobenzothiazole derivatives is shown in **Scheme 4**. To access subsite 3 analogues of chemical probe MB710 (**2**), we devised a new route that allowed mild, late-stage derivatization at the benzothiazole 7-position using the  $S_NAr$  protocol optimized on the diiodo library (*vide supra*). The critical aryl fluoride intermediate **83** could be accessed from anthranillic ester building block **80**, which was prepared in 2 steps from commercial isatin **78**.

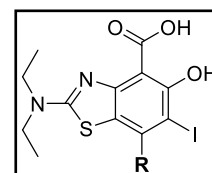
Oxidative ring-opening of isatin **78** with TBHP in methanol afforded ester **79** in good yield, which was converted to **80** by regioselective  $S_NAr$  using NaOMe in dioxane.<sup>64-65</sup> Subsequent treatment with bromine/KSCN gave protected aminobenzothiazole **81** in 61% yield. Alkylation of intermediate **81** with bromoethane followed by ring iodination afforded precursor **83** for subsite 3 derivatization. Late-stage installation of substituted pyrroles was effected by *in situ* desilylation and  $S_NAr$  using 1-TIPS-pyrroles, affording analogues **84-86** in yields ranging from 50-73%. Finally, protected aminobenzothiazoles **84-86** could be converted to their corresponding salicylic acid derivatives **87-89** by demethylation with  $BBr_3$ . Critically, our new route offers convergent access to late-stage derivatized subsite 3 analogues of MB710 in up to 10% overall yield, marking a significant improvement to the linear route to **2** (1% overall yield).



**Scheme 4.** Synthetic route towards novel subsite 3 aminobenzothiazole derivatives. Conditions: (a) *t*BuOOH, Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, MeOH, 20-30 °C, 2 h, 81%; (b) NaOMe, MeOH, 1,4-dioxane, 80 °C, 2 h, 70%; (c) KSCN, Br<sub>2</sub>, AcOH, 10 to 65 °C, 2.5 h, 61%; (d) CH<sub>3</sub>CH<sub>2</sub>Br, Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, DMF, 60 °C, 4 h, 57%; (e) NIS, AcOH, 25 °C, 1 h, 96%; (f) *N*-TIPS-pyrrole derivative (**27**, **28**, **30**), KF, Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, DMSO, 70 °C, 1 h, 50-73%; (g) BBr<sub>3</sub>, CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>, 0 to 25 °C, 24 h, 73-79%.



The new aminobenzothiazoles stabilized the Y220C mutant by over 2.0 °C at 200 μM concentration in DSF measurements (**Table 2**). In line with the SAR gathered in **Table 1**, 3-chloro analogue **89** displayed slightly weaker (*ca.* 2-fold) binding affinity and stabilization compared with parent compound MB710 (**2**). Pleasingly, 3-fluoro derivative **87** displayed an approximately 4-fold improvement in affinity (*K*<sub>d</sub> = 320 nM) compared with parent **2**, while maintaining a comparable ligand efficiency. Difluorinated analogue **88** was similarly potent, showing a consistent effect of pyrrole fluorination on *in vitro* potency. Overall, **87-88** are the first ligands reported in the scientific literature binding to the Y220C pocket with sub-micromolar *in vitro* affinity, marking an important milestone in the search of drug candidates targeting p53-Y220C in cancer.

**Table 2.** Thermal shift and ITC data for aminobenzothiazole analogues **2,87-89** against p53-Y220C.



ID	R	$\Delta T_m$ (°C) <sup>a</sup> [L] = 200 μM	<i>K</i> <sub>d</sub> (nM) <sup>b</sup>	LE (kcal/mol/NHA)
<b>2</b>		2.3 <sup>c</sup>	1200 <sup>d</sup>	0.34
<b>89</b>		2.0	1900	0.31



<b>87</b> <b>(JC744)</b>		2.7	320	0.35
<b>88</b>		1.8	390	0.34

<sup>a</sup> Measured by DSF using 8  $\mu\text{M}$  protein and 10x SYPRO Orange. <sup>b</sup> Measured by ITC (reverse titrations) using 4-15  $\mu\text{M}$  ligand, 100-147  $\mu\text{M}$  protein.  $\Delta T_m$  and  $K_d$  values were calculated as the average of at least three independent measurements. <sup>c</sup> Consistent with literature value  $\Delta T_m = 2.0$   $^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $[L] = 250$   $\mu\text{M}$ ).

<sup>d</sup> *lit.*  $K_d = 4.1$   $\mu\text{M}$ .<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

We report the SAR evaluation of libraries of small-molecule stabilizers of the p53 cancer mutant Y220C and new convergent synthetic routes to access MB710 (**2**) analogues targeting the subsite 3 sub-pocket. This subsite has remained relatively unexplored in terms of lead optimization, notably due to the lack of suitable synthetic routes to derivatize existing lead compounds. SAR development using a diiodinated salicylate model system identified several halogenated pyrrole motifs as promising substructures to target the buried subsite 3 in the Y220C pocket. This was supported by high-resolution X-ray crystal structures of fluoropyrrole derivatives, highlighting fluorine-protein contacts in subsite 3. Incorporation into the more potent aminobenzothiazole scaffold and biophysical evaluation identified two fluorinated derivatives displaying sub-micromolar binding affinity. In particular, new chemical probe JC744 (**87**) potently stabilizes Y220C *in vitro* and displays  $\Delta T_m = 2.7$   $^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $K_d = 320$  nM (ITC), around 4 times more potent than the non-fluorinated analogue MB710. To our knowledge, this is the first example of a nanomolar ligand of p53-Y220C in the scientific literature, and this represents an important step towards novel, potent classes of Y220C ligands for clinical evaluation in oncology. Noteworthy, the  $S_NAr$  chemistry we describe led to significant improvements to the scalability, tractability (convergence) and yield (7 steps,  $\sim 10\%$  overall yield) compared with previous routes towards MB710 (9 steps,  $< 1\%$  overall yield). Furthermore, this new chemistry also promises to unlock access to new derivatives to target other Y220 mutants, including Y220S and Y220N, which together account for another 10,000 - 20,000 new cancer cases per year worldwide.<sup>22</sup> Overall, this study validates two new chemical probes for the prominent p53 cancer mutant Y220C with nanomolar *in vitro* binding affinity, and opens exciting opportunities for chemically addressing a range of p53-Y220X mutants for which high affinity ligands currently do not exist.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

**Supporting Information.** The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/xxx>

Synthetic procedures and compound characterization data, protocols for recombinant protein production, protocols for docking studies, protocols for biophysical studies, ITC titrations of small molecules, X-ray crystallographic data, and representative HPLC traces (PDF).

Molecular formula strings (CSV).

**Accession codes.** The atomic coordinates and structure factors of the Y220C mutant in complex with **21** and **22** have been deposited in the Protein Data Bank (PDB) under accession codes 8A31 and 8A32, respectively.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This work was supported by awards to M.B. from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (grant EP/N509747/1, project reference 1940843) and the Royal Society (grant IEC\R2\181097). Nuclear magnetic resonance and mass spectrometry facilities in Southampton are supported by EPSRC core capability award (EP/K039466/1). L.R.D. and P.J.D. were supported by Cancer Research UK (CRUK grant C34999/A18087). A.C.J. was supported by German Research Foundation (DFG) grant JO 1473/1-3. D.-I.B. was supported by a Buchmann fellowship. The Structural Genomics Consortium is a registered charity (no. 1097737) that receives funds from Bayer AG, Boehringer Ingelheim, Bristol Myers Squibb, Genentech, Genome Canada through Ontario Genomics Institute [OGI-196], EU/EFPIA/OICR/McGill/KTH/Diamond Innovative Medicines Initiative 2 Joint Undertaking [EUbOPEN grant 875510], Janssen, Merck KGaA (aka EMD in Canada and US), Pfizer and Takeda. We thank the staff at beamline X06SA of the Swiss Light Source for assistance during data collection. E.B. was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (RSF) grant 19-74-10022. R.K. was supported by the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program (Priority-2030).

## **MATERIAL TRANSFER**

Milligram quantities of the small molecules described in this manuscript are available upon request to M.B. ([m.baud@soton.ac.uk](mailto:m.baud@soton.ac.uk))

## **ABBREVIATIONS USED**

$\mu\text{M}$ , micromolar; DBD, DNA-binding domain; DSF, differential scanning fluorimetry; ITC, isothermal titration calorimetry; kcal, kilocalorie;  $K_d$ , dissociation constant; LE, ligand efficiency; nM, nanomolar; NHA, non-hydrogen atom; SD, standard deviation;  $S_N\text{Ar}$ , nucleophilic aromatic substitution;  $T_m$ , protein melting temperature.

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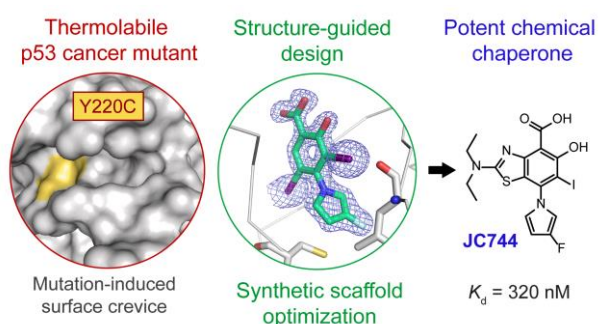
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## Table of Contents Graphic



## Discovery of Nanomolar-Affinity Pharmacological Chaperones Stabilizing the Oncogenic p53 Mutant Y220C

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### ABSTRACT

The tumor suppressor protein p53 is inactivated in the majority of human cancers and remains a prime target for developing new drugs reactivating its tumor suppressing activity for anticancer therapies. The oncogenic p53 mutant Y220C accounts for approximately 125,000 new cancer cases per annum and is one of the most prevalent p53 mutants overall. It harbors a narrow, mutationally-induced pocket at the surface of the DNA-binding domain (DBD) that destabilizes p53, leading to its rapid denaturation and aggregation. Here, we present the structure-guided development of high-affinity small molecules stabilizing p53-Y220C *in vitro*, along with the synthetic routes developed in the process, *in vitro* SAR data, and confirmation of their binding mode by protein X-ray crystallography. We disclose two new chemical probes displaying sub-micromolar binding affinity *in vitro*, marking an important milestone since the discovery of the first small-molecule ligand of Y220C in 2008. New chemical probe JC744 displayed a  $K_d = 320 \text{ nM}$ , along with potent *in vitro* protein stabilization. This study, therefore, represents a significant advance towards high-affinity Y220C ligands for clinical evaluation.