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A stable fish reporter cell line to study estrogen receptor transactivation by environmental (xeno)estrogens

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8 Abstract: Cross-species differences between human and fish estrogen receptor (ER) binding by 9 environmental chemicals have been reported. To study ER transactivation in a fish cellular 10 context, we stably co-transfected the PLHC-1 fish hepatoma cell line with a rainbow trout 11 estrogen receptor (rtER) and the luciferase reporter gene driven by an estrogen response element 12 (ERE). This new cell model, called PELN-rtER (for PLHC-1-ERE-Luciferase-Neomycin), 13 responded to 17β -estradiol (E2) in a both concentration- and temperature-dependent manner, as 14 well as to environmental ER ligands from different chemical classes: natural and synthetic 15 estrogens, zearalenone metabolites, genistein, alkyphenoles and benzophenone derivatives. The 16 comparison with other in vitro models, i.e. human reporter cell lines (HELN-rtER, MELN) and 17 vitellogenin induction in primary cultures of rainbow trout hepatocytes, showed an overall higher 18 sensitivity of the human cells for a majority of ligands, except for benzophenone derivatives 19 which were active at similar or lower concentrations in fish cells, suggesting species-specificity 20 for these substances. Correlation analyses suggest that the fish cell line is closer to the trout 21 hepatocyte than to the human cell context, and could serve as a relevant mechanistic tool to study 22 ER activation in fish hepatic cellular context.

23

24 Introduction

25 The widespread presence of endocrine disrupter compounds (EDCs) in the aquatic environment 26 has become a very important issue of environmental concern over the past few decades, as these 27 natural or man-made chemicals may cause adverse effects on wildlife (Sumpter, 2005). Given 28 the complexity of the endocrine system as well as the diversity of chemicals and their modes of 29 action, tiered approaches have been proposed for the screening (Tier 1) and testing (Tier 2) of 30 EDCs (reviewed by Hotchkiss et al., 2008). Tier 1 includes both in vitro and short term in vivo 31 assays. In this context, the evaluation of non mammalian in vitro screening assays has been 32 clearly identified as an important need to be addressed in EDC testing strategies (Hotchkiss et 33 al., 2008). However, compared to mammalian species, fewer non mammalian *in vitro* screening 34 assays have been developed. The lack of species specific screening assay may represent an important gap in risk assessment of EDCs for aquatic organisms, and for fish in particular, since 35 36 cross-species differences have been identified with regard to the molecular mode of hormone 37 action (i.e. receptor binding affinities) or xenobiotic metabolism (Matthews et al., 2000; Wilson 38 et al., 2007; Hotchkiss et al., 2008).

39 One important mechanism in EDC action is mediated by the modulation of estrogen receptor 40 (ER) activation. Different assays exist to assess estrogenic activity of chemicals in fish. Among 41 them, the most widely used is based on vitellogenin (VTG) induction in isolated fish hepatocytes 42 (e.g. Pelissero et al., 1993, Smeet et al., 1999). Such in vitro assay is toxicologically relevant 43 because it measures natural gene response in cultured cells derived from a main target organ of 44 EDC (i.e. liver) and because it retains metabolic properties close to the *in vivo* situation. 45 However, it has also some limitations for screening purpose since it is relatively time-consuming 46 and may be the subject of inter-assay variability (reviewed by Navas and Segner, 2006). On the

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other hand, the use of receptor mediated expression of stable reporter gene system using
established cell lines serves as rapid, reproducible and specific assay. However to our
knowledge, only few stable reporter gene assays using fish cell lines have been described
(Ackermann et al., 2002), and none in hepatic cell context.

51 In this study, we describe the development of a new stable reporter gene assay for the assessment 52 of ER activation by chemicals in fish cellular context, by using the PLHC-1 hepatoma fish cell 53 line (Ryan and Hightower, 1994). In this model, kinetics of luciferase transactivation by estradiol 54 as function of exposure duration and temperature were determined, as well as its activation by 55 various ER ligands representative of different chemical classes. Finally, the comparison of this 56 new in vitro model with other well established assays for estrogenicity assessment, namely VTG 57 induction in isolated rainbow trout hepatocytes and human reporter cell lines derived from HeLa 58 (HELN-rtER) and MCF-7 (MELN) cells, highlighted some response specificity, possibly linked 59 to the fish receptor and/or fish cell context.

60 Materials and methods

61 *Chemicals, materials and reagents*

62 17β-estradiol (E2, CAS#50-28-2), 17α-Ethinylestradiol (EE2, CAS#57-63-6), Estrone (E1, 63 CAS#53-16-7), Estriol (E3, CAS#50-27-1), 2,4-dihydroxybenzophenone (BP1, CAS#131-56-6), 64 2,2',4,4'-tetrahydroxybenzophenone (BP2, CAS#131-55-5), 2-hydroxy-4-methoxybenzophenone 65 2,4,4'-trihydroxybenzophenone (BP3. CAS#131-57-7), (THB, CAS#1470-79-7), 66 diethylstilbestrol (DES, CAS#56-53-1), Hexestrol (Hex, CAS#84-16-2), genistein (Gen, CAS#446-72-0), 4-tert-octylphenol (4OP, CAS#140-66-9), 4-nonylphenol (4NP, CAS#54181-67 68 64-5), bisphenol A (BPA, CAS#80-05-7), α-zearalenol (α-ZEE, CAS#36455-72-8), β-zearalenol (β -ZEE, CAS#71030-11-0) and α -zearalanol (α -ZEA, CAS#26538-44-3) were purchased from 69

Sigma-Aldrich (France). All compounds were of purity higher than 98 %. Stock solutions of chemicals were prepared in dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) at 10 mM and stored at -20°C. Fresh dilutions of test chemicals were prepared before each experiment. Culture medium and additives were purchased from Gibco (France), fetal calf serum (FCS) and D-luciferin from Sigma-Aldrich (Quentin Fallavier, France). Cell culture plastics were obtained from BD Bioscience (France), except 96-well plates which were purchased from Greiner (France).

76 <u>Plasmids</u>

The construction of ERE- β Glob-Luc-SVNeo and pSG₅-rtER_s-puro plasmids that encode respectively for the luciferase reporter gene and the rainbow trout estrogen receptor short form (rtER α), has been described previously by Balaguer et al. (1999) and Molina-Molina et al. (2008), respectively.

81 <u>PLHC-1 cell line : culture conditions and stable transfection</u>

82 The PLHC-1 cell line, obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC CRL 2406), 83 is derived from the hepatocellular carcinoma of the topminnow *Poeciliopsis lucida* (Ryan and 84 Hightower, 1994). PLHC-1 cells were routinely cultured at 30°C in minimum essential medium 85 with Earle's salts (E-MEM) supplemented with 10% v/v decomplemented fetal calf serum (FCS), 1% v/v non-essential amino acids, 1% v/v of sodium pyruvate, 50 U/ml of penicillin and 86 87 streptomycin antibiotics in a 5% CO2 humidified atmosphere. For stable transfection 88 experiments, PLHC-1 cells were plated onto 100 mm diameter Petri dishes in complete E-MEM 89 without antibiotics. Twenty four hours after plating, confluent cells were co-transfected with the two plasmids described above by using the Lipofectamine 2000TM reagent (Gibco, France), 90 91 according to the manufacturer's instructions. After three hours, transfection reagent was removed 92 and cells were allowed to recover for 24 hours before addition of 3 mg/ml G418 and 0.5 µg/ml

93 puromycin as selecting agents. Medium was renewed every two days during one month before 94 first clones were isolated and amplified. Only few resistant clones (about forty clones in three 95 transfection dishes) were developed on the plates after one month of selection treatment with 96 antibiotics. Nevertheless twenty clones could be isolated and tested for luciferase induction by 97 E2. Among them, the clone 1.1 showed the highest induction of luciferase activity by E2. This 98 clone was chosen for further experiments and called PELN-rtER for <u>PLHC-1 ERE-L</u>uciferase 99 <u>Neomycin-rtER</u>.

100 *Luciferase induction assay*

101 PELN-rtER cells were seeded on 96 well plates (50 000 cells per well) in phenol red free 102 medium supplemented with 3 % dextran-coated charcoal treated FCS to remove serum steroids 103 (DCC medium) and left to incubate for 24 h before chemical exposure. This medium was used to 104 avoid interference due to estrogenic activity of phenol red and serum steroids in the assay. 105 Solvent (DMSO) content did not exceed 0.1 % v/v in the culture medium. Cells were exposed to 106 test chemicals for 48 hours at 25°C. Luciferase activity was then determined in living cells as 107 follows. The culture medium was removed and replaced by 50 µl of D-luciferin 0.3 mM in DCC 108 medium. After 5 min allowing a stabilisation of the luminescent signal, luminescence counts 109 were determined in a microplate luminometer (µBeta, Wallac). Results were expressed as 110 percentage of maximal luciferase induced by E2, the reference ligand.

111 <u>Vitellogenin assay in primary culture of rainbow trout hepatocytes (PRTH)</u>

Adult male rainbow trout (*Onchorynchus mykiss*) were obtained from a local hatchery (INRA, Gournay-sur-Aronde, France). Fish were kept in tanks with aerated charcoal filtered tap-water at a temperature of 15 °C. Rainbow trout were fed with commercial fish food and acclimatized to laboratory conditions for a minimum of 2 weeks before use in the experiments. Hepatocytes

were isolated as previously described (Laville et al., 2004) and seeded in 96 well PrimariaTM 116 microplates at a density of 5×10^5 cells per well and cultured at 15 °C in phenol red free 117 118 Leibovitz-15 medium (L-15) supplemented with 5% DCC serum, penicillin and streptomycin (50 119 U/mL each) and 10 mM HEPES. Cells were left to incubate for 24 h before exposure to 120 chemicals for 96 hours. Solvent content (DMSO) did not exceed 0.1 % v/v in the culture medium 121 and half of the medium was renewed after two days with fresh medium containing the test 122 chemical at the desired concentration. VTG quantification in extracellular culture medium was 123 performed using a competitive enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) according to the 124 method of Brion et al. (2002), using the AA-1 anti-salmon vitellogenin polyclonal antibodies 125 (Biosense, Norway) and home-made standard VTG purified from E2-induced male rainbow trout 126 (Brion et al., 2002).

127 *Data analysis*

A range of concentrations of chemical (0.01 nM to 1 μ M for estrogens and zearalenone metabolites and 1 nM to 10 μ M for the other chemicals) were tested in triplicate in each independent experiment. Data were expressed as mean value of relative luminescence units (RLU) ± standard deviation (SD). Dose–response curves were modeled by using the Regtox 7.5 Microsoft ExcelTM macro (available at http://eric.vindimian.9online.fr/), which uses the Hill equation model and allows calculation of EC₅₀. Relative estrogenic potencies (REP) were determined as the ratio of 17β-estradiol EC₅₀ to EC₅₀ of the test chemical.

135 **Results**

136 *Influence of temperature and exposure duration on luciferase induction by 17β-E2*

The stable PELN reporter cell line was first examined for its ability to respond to the reference
ER ligand E2 under different assay conditions. Since the functionality of rtERα has been shown

139 to be sensitive to temperature (Matthews et al., 2002), we first tested effect of E2 at different 140 temperatures. As seen in Fig. 1a, the EC₅₀ value of E2 was slightly lower at 22 and 25 °C (5 nM) 141 than that observed at 30°C (7 nM) or 37°C (12 nM). In terms of fold induction, the luciferase 142 signal was also affected by the temperature as luciferase appeared to be less inducible at 22° C, 143 and to a lesser extent at 25°C, than at higher temperatures. Hence, by considering both the 144 affinity of E2 to the rtERa and fold induction of luciferase, we chose to perform assays at 25°C 145 in our experiments. Induction of luciferase was also dependent on exposure duration (Fig. 1b). In 146 our experiments, we thus determined that a 48 h exposure was appropriate to detect maximal 147 luciferase induction without affecting the EC_{50} of E2.

148 Ability of different ER ligands to induce luciferase mediated by rtERα in PELN-rtER cells

149 The figure 2 presents the ability of known ER ligands from different chemicals classes to induce 150 luciferase in PELN-rtER cells. Overall, all examined compounds were able to induce luciferase 151 with various transactivation profiles, in terms of both EC_{50} values (Table 1) and maximum 152 luciferase response achieved at the highest dose examined (Fig. 2). The natural steroid estrogens 153 E1 and E3 (Fig. 2a), as wells as the synthetic estrogen EE2 (Fig. 2b) behave as total agonists as 154 they elicited maximal transactivation relative to E2. By contrast, partial transactivation curves 155 were observed with the mycoestrogen α -ZEA, the phytoestrogen genistein (Fig. 2a) and the 156 pharmaceuticals DES and hexestrol (Fig. 2b), as maximum transactivation was 60-70 %.

The industrial chemicals presented also different profiles in their potency and efficacy. The alkylphenols 4-OP and 4-NP (Fig. 2c) were weakly estrogenic in this system, as 45 % of transactivation was achieved at the highest tested concentration (10 μ M). Bisphenol A behaved as a partial ER agonist. It significantly induced luciferase at a relatively low concentration (0.3 μ M) but this induction was limited as it reached a maximum response of 35 % relative to E2. 162 Interestingly, among the different xeno-estrogens tested, benzophenone derivatives most 163 efficiently induced luciferase in PELN-rtER cells (Fig. 2d), especially BP2 and THB that 164 behaved as total agonists for the rtER α , while BP1 induced partial activation of luciferase at 10 165 µM and BP3 was found to be non active.

166 <u>VTG induction by ER ligands in isolated trout hepatocytes</u>

167 In order to compare our results with PELN-rtER with a well recognised *in vitro* fish system in 168 our laboratory conditions, some chemicals were tested for their ability to induced vitellogenin in 169 isolated rainbow trout hepatocytes (PRTH). As expected, the results summarised in Table 1 170 indicate that all tested compounds induced Vtg in a dose-response manner allowing EC₅₀ 171 determination and were ranked: EE2<E2<\alpha-ZEA<DES<Hexestrol<Genistein<BP2<4-172 OP<THB<BP1.

173 Discussion

174 The stable fish reporter system (PELN-rtER) responded to a diversity of estrogenic compounds 175 with different transactivation potency and efficacy (Fig. 2). In order to determine how this cell 176 model compares with other established in vitro systems, the EC_{50} and relative estrogenic 177 potencies (REP) were compared to values previously published using two other stable reporter 178 gene systems, namely the HELN-rtER (for HeLa-ERE-Luc-Neo transfected with the rtER) 179 (Pillon, 2005, Molina-Molina et al., 2008) and MELN (for MCF-7-ERE-Luc-Neo) cell lines 180 (Balaguer et al., 1999, Pillon et al., 2005) (Table 1). These two models consist of human cell 181 lines (HeLa and MCF-7 cells) that stably express the luciferase reporter gene under the control of 182 the rtER α and the human ER α (hER), respectively. In addition, the ability of chemicals to induce 183 VTG synthesis in primary cultures of rainbow trout hepatocytes (PRTH) has been evaluated and 184 is also reported in Table 1. Overall, the absolute sensitivity to E2 and a majority of the tested

compounds varied among the different assays, and were ranked: PRTH<PELN-rtER<HELNrtER<MELN. The relative estrogenic potency (REP) values allowed ranking of chemicals that was fairly similar in all assays. Nevertheless, Pearson's correlation analyses showed that the fish cell line was better correlated to HELN-rtER ($r^2=0.91$, n=9) and PRTH ($r^2=0.90$, n=9) than to MELN ($r^2=0.80$, n=9), suggesting a good adequacy between the different fish-based assays.

190 The higher sensitivity of the human MELN assay can be partly attributed to the known lower 191 binding affinity of E2 for the rtER than for the hER (LeDréan et al., 1995, Matthews et al., 2000, 192 Molina-Molina et al., 2008), due to divergences in the amino acid sequences of the ligand 193 binding domain of these receptors (Pakdel et al., 2000). However, this loss of sensitivity is not 194 systematically found as certain xeno-estrogens, like polychlorobiphenyls (Matthews et al., 2000), 195 some alkylphenols (Olsen et al., 2005) or zearalenone and its derivatives (Le Guevel and Pakdel, 196 2001), have been shown to bind to and activate rtER at equal or lower concentrations than those 197 required to active hER.

198 In the present study, the most significant inter-assay difference concerns the estrogenic activity 199 benzophenone (BP) derivatives, which were almost equipotent in PELN-rtER and HELN-rtER 200 cells, and much less active in the human MELN cells. The good estrogenic potency of BPs 201 towards rtER has been already reported in mammalian cell or yeast-based assays (Kunz et al., 202 2006, Molina-Molina et al., 2008). Here, we report that in a fish cell line, these compounds still 203 have a high estrogenic potency that is in the same order as that of natural ER ligands such as 204 estriol (Table 1). Our results strengthen the recent view that such emerging aquatic pollutants 205 present significant hazard to fish (Kunz et al., 2006) and present further evidence to support the 206 use of appropriate species-related assays to investigate hormonal activity.

207 In addition, the different metabolic capacities of the cells may also have some influence on the 208 sensitivity of the assays to detect estrogenic activity (Olsen et al., 2005, Bursztyka et al., 2008). 209 HELN-rtER cells are derived from HeLa cells, which are poorly metabolically competent as 210 compared to PLHC-1 cells. The latter have retained significant metabolic capacities including 211 phase I and II biotransformation and efflux transporter proteins (Zaja et al., 2007), which may 212 contribute to reduce the intracellular availability of chemicals for the receptors. In trout 213 hepatocytes, which maintain substantial metabolic capacities in culture, the different tested 214 chemicals were generally active at significantly higher concentrations than in cell lines, although 215 the use of different endpoints (i.e. luciferase activation versus VTG detection) likely influenced 216 the sensitivity of the response. Nevertheless, the observation that EC_{50} values in PELN-rtER 217 were generally closer to PRTH than to HELN-rtER, could reflect, at least in part, different 218 metabolic capacities in the assays and again a good agreement between the two fish cell models. 219 In summary, the establishment of a reporter cell line that stably expresses rtER-mediated 220 luciferase within a fish hepatoma-derived cell context is reported for the first time. It is proposed 221 that such tool is useful to identify species-specific responses, as shown with benzophenone 222 derivatives. However, the lower sensitivity of the response to a majority of chemicals than in 223 similar human-derived reporter cell lines could lead one to conclude that these cells have 224 limitations for a chemical screening purpose since false negative may occur when assessing 225 weak estrogenic compounds. Nevertheless, correlation with the well-recognised vitellogenin 226 assay in PRTH cells supports the use of PELN-rtER cells to investigate estrogenicity in fish 227 hepatic cell context. Furthermore, the metabolic capacities and in particular the high expression 228 of functional aryl hydrocarbon receptor (AhR) in PLHC-1 cells make the PELN-rtER cell line a

- 229 relevant mechanistic tool to study ER/AhR interaction on receptor transactivation by
- environmental chemicals in a fish cellular context (Aït-Aïssa et al., in preparation).

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316 Figure legends

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319Figure 1. (a) Influence of temperature on rtER transactivation (expressed as percentage of320maximal luciferase induction) by 17β-estradiol (E2) in PELN-rtER cells after 24 h of321exposure. (b) Kinetics of luciferase induction (expressed as relative luminescence units or322RLU) by 17β-estradiol in PELN-rtER cells at 25°C. Values are means ± SD of triplicates.

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324 Figure 2. Typical dose response curves of luciferase induction (expressed as percentage of 325 luciferase induction by E2 1 µM) in PELN-rtER by (A) natural (xeno)estrogens: 17β-326 estradiol (E2), estrone (E1), estriol (E3), α -zearalanol (α -ZEA), genistein (Gen), (**B**) 327 pharmaceutical compounds: diethylstilbestrol (DES), hexestrol (Hex), 17α-328 ethynylestradiol (EE2), (C) alkylphenols: 4-nonylphenol (4-NP), 4-t-octylphenol (4-OP), 329 bisphenol A (BPA) and (D) benzophenone derivates: 2,4-dihydroxybenzophenone 330 (benzophenone 1 or BP1), 2,2',4,4'-tetrahydroxybenzophenone (benzophenone 2 or 331 BP2), 2-hydroxy-4-methoxybenzophenone (benzophenone 3 or BP3), 2,4,4'-332 trihydroxybenzophenone (THB). Cells were exposed for 48 hours at 25°C; values are 333 means \pm SD of triplicates.

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Table 1: Effective concentrations (EC₅₀) and relative estrogenic potencies (REP) of various ER ligands in fish (PELN-rtER, PRTH) and human (HELN-rtER, MELN) cell-based *in vitro* assays.

a: Except for benzophenone derivatives, HELN-rtER and MELN data were taken from Pillon (2005) and Pillon et al. (2005), respectively. Effect of benzophenone derivatives in MELN, HELN-rtER and PRTH were from Molina-Molina et al. (2008); *b*: PRTH data were obtained as described in the Materials and Method section.

n.d.: not determined ; n.a.: not active ; -: not applicable; *n*: number of independent experiments; SEM: standard error of the mean.

	PELN-rtER (fish PLHC-1 cells, rainbow trout receptor)				HELN-rtER ^{<i>a</i>} (human HeLa cells, rainbow trout receptor)		MELN ^{<i>a</i>} (human MCF-7 cells, endogenous receptor)		PRTH ^b (isolated rainbow trout hepatocytes, endogenous receptor)	
Chemicals	EC50 (nM)	SEM	п	REP	EC50 (nM)	REP	EC50 (nM)	REP	EC50 (nM)	REP
17β-estradiol (E2)	5.5	1.5	9	1	0.25	1	0.018	1	22	1
Estrone (E1)	130	25	3	0.04	12	0.02	0.69	0.03	n.d.	-
Estriol (E3)	176	58	3	0.03	7.8	0.03	0.10	0.18	n.d.	-
17α -ethynylestradiol (EE2)	3.6	0.4	3	1.54	0.18	1.39	0.01	2.56	12	1.94
Hexestrol (Hex)	11	5	5	0.50	0.2	1.25	n.d.	-	206	0.11
Diethylstilbestrol (DES)	23	10	5	0.24	0.8	0.31	0.18	0.10	130	0.18
α -zearalanol (α -ZEA)	26	14	5	0.22	0.12	2.08	0.14	0.13	41	0.56
α - zearalenol (α -ZEE)	47	-	2	0.12	0.25	1.0	n.d.	-	n.d.	-
β- zearalenol ($β$ -ZEA)	504	-	2	0.011	2.5	0.1	n.d.	-	n.d.	-
Genistein (Gen)	498	-	1	0.010	220	1.1E-03	27	6.7E-04	1702	0.013
Bisphenol A (BPA)	352	83	3	0.016	400	6.3E-04	96	1.9E-04	n.d.	-
4-octylphenol (4-OP)	1938	-	2	2.9E-03	300	8.3E-04	54	3.3E-04	36271	6.3E-04
4-nonylphenol (4-NP)	23028	-	1	2.4E-04	600	4.2E-04	339	5.3E-05	n.d.	-
Benzophenone 1 (BP1)	3507	2515	3	1.6E-03	3477	7.2E-05	9192	1.9E-06	100000	2.3E-04
Benzophenone 2 (BP2)	384	142	4	0.014	161	1.6E-03	3284	5.5E-06	30000	7.6E-04
Benzophenone 3 (BP3)	n.a.	-	3	-	18426	1.4E-05	20315	8.8E-07	n.d.	-
Trihydroxybenzophenone (THB)	620	460	3	0.009	578	4.3E-04	4012	4.5E-06	60000	3.8E-04





