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Optimization of the Mobile Phase for HPLC Separation of S-Alk(en)yl-L-Cysteine Derivatives and Their Corresponding Sulfoxide Isomers

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# OPTIMIZATION OF THE MOBILE PHASE FOR HPLC SEPARATION OF S-ALK(EN)YL-L-CYSTEINE DERIVATIVES AND THEIR CORRESPONDING SULFOXIDE ISOMERS

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#### ABSTRACT

Using the "PRISMA" optimization model, a total of 15 S-alk(en)yl-L-cysteine derivatives, including five thioethers and their corresponding sulfoxide isomers, could be separated following pre-column derivatization with o-phthaldialdehyde/tert.-butylthiol. Optimal isocratic separation of the sulfoxides was achieved with a limited number of experiments using a quaternary solvent system consisting of tetrahydrofuran, 1,4-dioxane, acetonitrile, and aqueous phosphate buffer of pH 7.15. Using a selective multisolvent gradient elution (SMGE) technique, which involves a simultaneous change in selectivity and solvent strength of the mobile phase, the full range of the examined sulfur amino acids (most of them are found in various Allium species) could be resolved in a single chromatographic run. Development and realization of the chromatographic optimization is shown and discussed. A simple computer program (written in Microsoft Basic) for the calculation of the actual mobile phase composition is added.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Separation development is still considered the most difficult, and sometimes most frustrating job in HPLC. In recent years much progress has been made in developing systematic procedures for chromatographic optimization, especially optimization of the mobile phase. Numerous papers, several reviews (1, 2) and books (3-5) have been published, presenting different approaches and strategies.

The "PRISMA" model, a geometrical design for solvent optimization, was recently developed. First used with HPLC (6), the method has been extended to other chromatographic methods such as thin-layer chromatography (TLC) (7), overpressured layer chromatography (OPLC) (8), and centrifugal layer chromatography (CLC) (9). The procedure has been successfully applied to a variety of analytical and preparative separation problems in the chromatographic analysis of naturally occurring compounds (10, 11). Gradient possibilities in HPLC have also been demonstrated with the separation of 12 tobacco alkaloids which possessed closely related structures (12).

In this paper, we first describe optimization of the isocratic separation of five pairs of L-cysteine sulfoxide isomers achieved using the "PRISMA" model. In a second section, we demonstrate the efficiency of selective multisolvent gradient elution (SMGE) in separating the sulfoxides together with the more lipophilic thioether derivatives in a single chromatographic run. Most of these sulfur amino acids have been reported to occur in various *Allium* species (e.g., garlic or onion).

## Application of the "PRISMA" Model

The theory of the "PRISMA" model and some gradient possibilities have been discussed elsewhere (6, 12). In this paper we would like to focus on some important features of the model which are necessary for the understanding of the following. "PRISMA" is a solvent optimization model applicable to a given chromatographic system (defined column, temperature, pH, flow). It has a three-dimensional design which correlates solvent strength (S) with the selectivity of mobile phases. As many as five solvents may be included in the system. In the case of reversed-phase (RP) chromatography, there are generally three organic solvents (A, B, C); the fourth solvent is water and serves as solvent strength regulator (S = 0), and a fifth may be a modifier such as acetic or phosphoric acid. The total solvent strength (S<sub>T</sub>) is represented by the height of the prism and may be calculated as follows:

$$S_{T} = \sum_{i=1}^{n} S_{i}Y_{i}$$

S<sub>1</sub> : Solvent strength of the different components Y<sub>1</sub> : Volume fraction

At a constant  $S_T$  value in the regular prism - similar to the upper part of the model - the combination of solvents A, B, C may be characterized with selectivity points (P<sub>S</sub>) and designated by a three-digit number or, if necessary, by three two-digit numbers. The concept of using selectivity points for the characterization of four-solvent systems as well as the procedure for calculating the actual mobile phase composition were described in detail in (13).

A simple computer program written in Microsoft Basic was developed to facilitate calculations. The self-explanatory program listing is given in Appendix I.

Using a four-solvent system, Kirkland and Glajch (14) described different types of gradients: I. *Isoselective multi-solvent gradient elution* (IMGE), which means a change in solvent strength while holding the selectivity constant, and II. *selective multisolvent gradient elution* (SMGE) involving a change in both solvent strength and selectivity of the mobile



**FIGURE 1.** The "PRISMA" optimization model showing three basic possibilities for multisolvent gradient elution. I: IMGE II: SMGE III: ICMGE

phase. IMGE (corresponding to a vertical shift in the prism) may be compared to gradient schemes of so-called linear solvent strength (LSS) as discussed by Snyder et al. (15). A third possibility (III) is called *isocratic multisolvent gradient elution* (ICMGE) (12). This term stands for a horizontal shift in the prism varying only the selectivity of the mobile phase at a constant  $S_T$ . All these three gradient elution techniques between selectivity points are possible using the "PRISMA" model as depicted in Figure 1.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### **Chemicals**

Reference substances were prepared by basic alkylation of L-cysteine; the (±)-sulfoxide isomers were obtained by oxidation of the corresponding thioethers with hydrogen peroxide. Table I shows the chemical structures and abbreviations of all the synthesized compounds. The different substances were crystallized either from water/acetone or water/ethanol mixtures. (+)-ACSO ("alliin") could be separated from the (-)-form by fractional crystallization. Structural elucidation was done by elemental analysis and mass spectroscopy and partly by IR and NMR spectroscopy. Detailed procedures and structural data will be presented elsewhere.

#### TABLE 1

Chemical structures of the S-alk(en)yl-L-cysteines and their corresponding sulfoxides used in this study.

Cysteine	R					
derivatives	СН <sub>3</sub>	C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>5</sub>	CH <sub>2</sub> -CH=CH <sub>2</sub>	С <sub>3</sub> Н <sub>7</sub>	C₄H <sub>9</sub>	
О NH <sub>3</sub> <sup>+</sup> ↑ I						
<b>R</b> -S-CH <sub>2</sub> -CH-COO <sup>-</sup>	MCSO	ECSO	ACSO	PCSO	BCSO	
Peak numbers (-/+ isomers)	P1/2	P3/4	P5/6	P7/8	P9/10	
NH3 <sup>+</sup>						
<b>п</b> -s-сн <sub>2</sub> -сн-соо <sup>-</sup>	MCS	ECS	ACS	PCS	BCS	
Peak numbers	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	

Methanol (MeOH), acetonitrile (ACN), tetrahydrofuran (THF), and 1,4-dioxane were of HPLC quality and were purchased from Romil Chemicals Ltd. (Shepshed, Leics, England). Pure water was obtained from a NANOpure Cartridge System (SKAN, Basel-Allschwil, Switzerland). Aqueous buffer solutions used for mobile phases were prepared with sodium dihydrogen phosphate dihydrate (0.045 M), adjusted to the desired pH value with sodium hydroxide, and finally membrane-filtered. Both chemicals, as well as o-phthaldialdehyde (OPA), *tert.*-butylthiol, and disodium hydrogen phosphate dihydrate were of analytical grade and obtained from Fluka (Buchs, Switzerland).

#### Apparatus

Two different chromatographic systems were employed in this work: (A) a programmable four-solvent delivery system (Model LC 41 including a LC 21 autosampler) from Bruker-Franzen Analytik (Bremen, F.R.G), and (B) a liquid chromatograph consisting of a Model 6000 A pump (Waters Assoc., Milford, MA, U.S.A), a low pressure gradient system Model 111 OPG/S (Autochrom Inc., Milford, MA, U.S.A), and a WISP 712 autosampler (Waters). Column temperatures were controlled using a PCRS Model 520 heater system (Kratos, Ramsey, NJ, U.S.A). Mobile phases were deaerated by purging with helium. The effluent was monitored either by a HP 1040 diode-array detector (Hewlett-Packard, Freiburg, F.R.G), pilot signal set at 337 nm, or by a HP 1046A fluorescence detector (excitation at 230 nm, emission recorded at 420 nm, cut-off filter 370 nm) (16).

Separations described in this work were carried out using Knauer (Berlin, F.R.G) column cartridges (100 x 4 mm i.d.) filled with Spherisorb ODS II (3  $\mu$ m) RP material. Mobile phases were delivered at a flow rate of 1.2 ml/min. Column temperatures were usually held at 30 °C.

#### **Methods**

#### Preparation of the OPA/tert.-Butylthiol Buffered Reagent

The OPA/thiol reagent was made as follows: 140 mg of OPA was dissolved in 5 ml of methanol. This solution mixed with 100  $\mu$ l of *tert.*-butylthiol was then diluted to 50 ml with pH 9.5 sodium phosphate buffer (0.05 M). This reagent was stored at room temperature and could be used for several weeks, although *tert.*-butylthiol had to be added from time to time to maintain its potency.

#### Standard Solutions

The sulfur amino acids were dissolved in 50% methanol/50% distilled water for a final concentration of about 0.5 mg/ml. Dilutions were made as necessary with methanol/water.

#### Derivatization Procedure

A volume of 180  $\mu$ l of the reagent was added to 20  $\mu$ l of sample solution in a autosampler micro vial and thoroughly mixed using a syringe. After a reaction time of at least 2 min, an aliquot (5-10  $\mu$ l) was injected into the chromatographic system.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### Isocratic Separation of the Sulfoxide Isomers

The optimization procedure was started with the adjustment of the solvent strength, as described in (6), using a quaternary solvent system. Mobile phases consisted of THF ( $S_{THF} = 4.5$ ), ACN ( $S_{ACN} = 3.2$ ), and MeOH ( $S_{MeOH} = 2.6$ ) representing the organic solvents which were most often employed for RP-HPLC, and aqueous phosphate buffer ( $S_{H_2O} = "0"$ ) (solvent strength weighing factors from Ref. 18). The pH of the buffer solution had

to be adjusted to a neutral pH in order to achieve good peak shapes. Mobile phases of acidic pH values gave tailing peaks which impaired resolution.

The four basic experiments using mobile phases of  $S_T = 1.0$ and selectivity points 333, 811, 181, and 118 failed to resolve the full range of the sulfoxides (Figure 2). The major problem was the occurrence of fusing peaks of (+)-ACSO [P6] and (-)-PCSO [P7] which was more pronounced with higher proportions of ACN and MeOH (in addition, the extreme long elution time in selectivity point 118 is remarkable). On the other hand, large amounts of THF impaired the separation of (+)-MCSO [P2] and (-)-ECSO [P3]. Based on these findings, the organic modifier with the least selectivity - MeOH - was replaced. As expected, substitution with other aliphatic alcohols as ethanol or isopropanol resulted in little or no improvement; however, changing to other solvent classes is impeded by at least three factors:

- 1) HPLC requires mobile phases of high purity:
- 2) the solvents must not interfere with the detectors employed; and
- RP chromatography needs organic solvents which are miscible with water.

The alternative was found when dioxane resulted in satisfactory separation of (+)-ACSO [P6] and (-)-PCSO [P7]. Subsequently, a new prism was "constructed" with THF, dioxane, and ACN as organic modifiers. The solvent strength of the dioxane was defined as 3.5 in accordance with (15). After adjusting the mobile phase of  $P_S = 333$  to solvent strength 1.05, yielding a total elution time of about 14 min, the optimization procedure was continued with mobile phases represented by selectivity points  $P_S = 811$ , 181, and 118. Figure 3 depicts these four basic chromatograms. Best resolution of the sulfoxide mixture was obtained with the mobile phase described by  $P_S = 181$ . Using this mobile phase composition the more lipophilic









BCSO isomers [P9, P10] eluted after more than 20 min and were, therefore, favorably chromatographed using a gradient system as described later in this paper.

Further optimization was hindered by two factors which interfered with one another: separation of (+)-ACSO [P6] and (-)-PCSO [P7] required rather large proportions of 1,4-dioxane which coincidently impaired resolution of (+)-MCSO [P2] and (-)-ECSO [P3]. On the other hand, ACN exhibited good selectivity in separating the latter two sulfoxides, while (+)-ACSO [P6] and (-)-PCSO [P7] appeared as fusing peaks. These facts consequently determined the final optimization steps. A compromise was then found in selectivity point 06-83-11 with a reduced solvent strength of  $S_T = 0.95$  (Figure 4). In fact, a further reduction slightly improved the resolution but resulted in impractically long elution times. The use of a ternary solvent system consisting only of 1,4-dioxane, ACN, and aqueous phosphate buffer, and leaving out THF, resulted in a slightly impaired separation.

The typical elution profile of a garlic sample is depicted in Figure 5 and will be discussed elsewhere (17). The main sulfur amino acid of interest (+)-ACSO (= alliin) was well separated and easily quantified.

#### Isocratic Separation of the Thioether Derivatives

Separation of the thioether homologues resulted in no problems. As compared with the sulfoxides, the more lipophilic character of the thioether derivatives required mobile phases of increased solvent strengths. In accordance with the theory, the elution order was correlated with the size and nature of the thioether side chain. Figure 6 shows a typical chromatogram obtained at  $S_T = 1.41$  and  $P_S = 333$  upon.



**FIGURE 4.** Optimized isocratic separation of the (±)-sulfoxide isomers. The mobile phase employed was defined by  $P_S = 06-83-11$  and  $S_T = 0.95$ . (1.3% THF, 22.5% 1,4-dioxane, 3.3% ACN, and 72.9% aqueous phosphate buffer (0.045 M, pH 7.15)).



**FIGURE 5.** Typical isocratic elution profile of a derivatized garlic sample. The UV spectrum of the isoindole derivative of (+)-alliin, depicted in the right upper edge, was taken on-line during the chromatographic run. Mobile phase as in Fig. 3. UV detection at 337 nm. Other chromatographic conditions as described in the experimental section.

# Selective Multisolvent Gradient Elution (SMGE) for the Separation of all the 15 Cysteine Derivatives

In a attempt to rapidly resolve both the sulfoxide and the thioether derivatives in a single chromatographic run, a suitable gradient system was developed. Two of three gradient techniques were possible: (1) Isoselective multisolvent gradient elution (IMGE) or (2) selective multisolvent gradient elution (SMGE). IMGE may be started with a mobile phase composition as was found for the isocratic separation of the sulfoxides. An increase in solvent strength will then rapidly elute the more lipophilic thioethers. Using a one step gradient, the separation may be made with a single HPLC pump. Considering the specific problems we experienced in separating the sulfoxides, a gradient system involving a change in selectivity seems more favorable. As described above, ACN showed good selectivity in resolving (+)-MCSO [P2] and (-)-ECSO [P3], while the separation of (-)-PCSO [P7] and (+)-ACSO [P6] required a large proportion of 1,4-dioxane in the mobile phase. Based on these observations, a strategy for the determination of selective gradient elution was conceived:

- A) Start the gradient run using a mobile phase with sufficient ACN to resolve peaks 2 and 3.
- B) Increase in the relative amount of dioxane while coincidently reducing the volume fraction of ACN to favor the separation of (-)-PCSO [P7] and (+)-ACSO [P6]
- C) Increase the solvent strength in order to ensure rapid elution of the thioethers.

Preliminary experiments employing linear gradients started with mobile phases similar to the one which exhibited optimal selectivity for the isocratic separation of the sulfoxides ( $S_T =$ 0.95,  $P_S = 06-83-11$ ). They were programmed to run within about 30 min to  $P_S = 00-100-00$  with  $S_T = 1.75$  (= 50% dioxane). The resulting chromatograms fit with the strategy



**FIGURE 6.** Isocratic separation of L-cysteine thioether homologues. The mobile phase was defined by  $P_S = 333$  and  $S_T = 1.41$  (10.3% THF, 13.7% dioxane, 14.5% ACN, 61.4% aqueous phosphate buffer (pH 7.15)). Fluorescence detection (ex 230 nm, em 420 nm). Other parameters as described in text.

outlined above and were easily optimized. The relative amounts of organic solvents in the mobile phase at the end of the gradient were limited to about 50% due to progressive precipitation of the buffer clogging the chromatographic system. The column temperature was increased to 30 °C in order to reduce high back pressures during gradient runs. It was found that the volume fraction of ACN could be lowered somewhat while coincidently reducing the solvent strength ( $S_T = 0.95 \rightarrow$  $S_T = 0.75$ ). This did not result in considerable loss of resolution between (-)-MCSO [P2] and (+)-ECSO [P3]. On the other side, the amount of dioxane could slightly be increased improving in combination with the programmed decrease in ACN (gradient end: 0% ACN) the separation of (+)-ACSO [P6] and (-)-PCSO [P7]. The last optimization step involved the resolution of fusing peaks of (+)-BCSO [P10] and ECS [P12]. Selective response was found when varying the relative amount of THF. Satisfactory separation was obtained by slightly increasing the proportion of THF in the mobile phase (gradient from 1.5% to 2.9% THF). In summary, the final conditions for the optimized separation of the 15 test substances, as shown in Figure 7, were as follows: linear gradient starting with a mobile phase of  $S_T = 0.75$  and  $P_S$ = 09-87-04 and running within 32 min to  $S_T$  = 1.89 and  $P_S$  = 07-93-00.

### CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to rapidly develop a procedure for the HPLC separation of a total of 15 cysteine derivatives. At an early stage of the work, it became apparent that the evolution of an isocratic separation of the  $(\pm)$ -sulfoxide isomers was going to be difficult and could only be satisfactorily resolved by using a suitable optimization strategy. The "PRISMA" solvent optimization model, which takes advantage of the broad selectivity of a four-solvent system, proved to be an efficient tool enabling the

![](_page_17_Figure_1.jpeg)

**FIGURE 7.** Optimized separation of all 15 sulfur amino acids by selective multisolvent gradient elution (SMGE). Using a mixture of THF, 1,4-dioxane, ACN, and aqueous phosphate buffer of pH 7.15 the gradient was started with  $S_T = 0.75$  at  $P_S = 09-87-04$  and programmed to run linearly within 32 min to  $P_S = 07-93-00$  and  $S_T = 1.89$ . Fluorescence detection (ex at 230 nm, em at 420 nm). Other chromatographic conditions as described in text.

chromatographer to minimize the experimentation time required to search for an optimal mobile phase. It is easy to use and does not require highly sophisticated instrumentation or computers (although an automated four-solvent HPLC system is, of course, advantageous). Four-solvent systems used in RP-HPLC generally work with THF, ACN, and MeOH as organic solvents. According to the Snyder selectivity triangle (19), each represents a different group of solvents of similar properties. A change has to be considered when no satisfactory separation can be achieved with the initial optimization steps. This approach was used successfully in this study by substituting MeOH for dioxane. It is noteworthy that both dioxane and ACN are classified in the same solvent group (VI) and were expected to provide similar chromatographic selectivity. In fact, the two solvents may be subdivided into subclasses (a, b) but there seemed to be no practical advantage to do so (19). However, the choice of a suitable substitute was empirical and was restricted to a limited number of solvents as described previously.

The efficiency of SMGE was first demonstrated by making a further improvement in the optimized isocratic separation of the (±)-sulfoxide isomers by designing a suitable change in selectivity and, secondly, in the rapid elution of the more lipophilic thioethers by increasing the solvent strength. This procedure offers the possibility to rapidly analyse the full range of the sulfur amino acids in a single chromatographic run. Further improvement of the visual approach for SMGE "optimization" by estimating more precisely optimum solvent compositions seems possible. This, however, requires adequate - and generally applicable - mathematical models and statistical algorithms for computer calculations, which to date are only partly available. On the other side, it should be emphasized that total automation of a four solvent system needs LC hardware with high composition accuracy and precision to convert theoretical optimization concepts or computer-simulated separations into practical results.

Both the isocratic and gradient procedures have successfully been applied for the analysis of garlic samples, including the quantitative determination of (+)-ACSO (= alliin). Details and characterization of the analytical procedure (extraction, sample pretreatment, calibration), as well as results of various analyses of plant extracts, will be presented in a subsequent paper (20).

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## Appendix I

In the following a computer program listing is given for the calculation of the actual composition of the mobile phase defined by  $P_S$  and  $S_T$  in the regular part of the prism as described in (6). Mixtures of water ( $S_{H_2O} = 0$ ) with up to 3 organic solvents may be calculated. The choice is made from a total of 7 organic solvents commonly used in RP-HPLC (solvent strength values are added in parentheses):

MeOH (2.6) / ACN (3.2) / THF (4.5) (values from Ref. 18) ethanol (3.6) / acetone (3.4) / 1,4-dioxane (3.5) / isopropanol (4.2) (values from Ref. 15)

The program, written in Microsoft Basic 80 under CP/M 2.0B, is self-explanatory and can easily be adapted for use with other microcomputer systems. The printer subroutine (program statements 1010-1250) is optional and was written for use with a Panasonic KX-P1090 printer.

The data input for the volume fractions of the 3 selected organic solvents for a given selectivity point is shown for 2 examples:

Selectivity point (P <sub>S</sub> )	Input of v	volume frac	tions ( $\Sigma$ =1.0)
18-70-12	0.18	0.70	0.12
811	0.80	0.10	0.10

#### Program listing

```
10 REM PRIGMA: CALCULATING THE COMPOSITION OF MOBILE PHASES

20 REM PROGRAM HENTTER BY STEPHAM. ZIELES, IN MAY BY

21 REM PRIVENE PRIVATE SETURATION OF THE MOBILE PHASES

20 REM ON A ICH-2001 COMPUTER, ICH. TAIPEL,TAIWAN

20 REM

21 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

20 REM

21 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

22 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

23 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

24 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

25 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

26 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

27 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

28 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

29 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

20 PRIVATER: PANASONIC KX-P1090

20 PRIVATE: PANASONIC KX-P1090
                10 REM PRISMA: CALCULATING THE COMPOSITION OF MOBILE PHASES
20 REM PROGRAM WRITTEN BY STEPHAN J. ZIEGLER IN MAY 87
30 REM IN MICROSOFT BASIC 80, VERSION 5.0,
40 REM UNDER CP/H, VERSION 2.08
50 REM ON A ICM-2001 COMPUTER, ICM, TAIPEI,TAIWAN
60 REM
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      INPUT":NORMAL:PRINT:PRINT:P
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Program listing (cont.)

Program listing (cont.)

Beo PRINT USING "\*\*\*\*\* al ";VOL(1),VOL(2),VOL(3),HOH

Second Se