



An efficient synthesis of varenicline [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Synthesis of varenicline the antismoking drug has been achieved in six steps with 10% overall yield. A Diels–Alder reaction, oxidative cleavage of an olefin and reductive amination remain as key steps in the synthesis

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Neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) belong to a heterogeneous family of pentameric ligand-gated ion channels which are differently expressed in many regions of the central nervous system (CNS) and peripheral nervous system.^{1,2} Agonists and partial agonists of various subtypes of nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) are being pursued as potential treatments for a variety of central nervous system disorders, such as addiction, pain, depression, schizophrenia, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and alcoholism.^{3–7} Moreover, as the addictive properties of tobacco products are due to the nicotine contained therein, nAChRs also became important targets for the discovery of medicines for use in smoking cessation.⁸ Varenicline **1** an $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChR partial agonist was approved by US FDA as an aid to smoking cessation treatment in May 2006.⁹ Varenicline was discovered through the synthesis of a series of compounds inspired by the natural product (–)-cytisine **2**,¹⁰ which was previously known to have partial agonist activity at the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChR (see Fig. 1).¹¹

We herein, wish to report our efforts¹² on the synthesis of varenicline in an efficient manner by using a Diels–Alder reaction, oxidative cleavage of an olefin and reductive amination as shown retrosynthetically in Scheme 1.

As per the synthetic plan, our synthesis began with the conversion of 2,3-dimethylpyrazine **10** to its known analogue 2,3-bis-(dibromomethyl)pyrazine¹³ **8**. Followed by NaI-mediated Diels–Alder^{13,14} reaction between 2,3-bis-(dibromomethyl)pyrazine **8** and commercially available norbornadiene **9** to furnish the adduct **7**.¹⁵ Olefin **7** was converted¹⁶ to its corresponding diol **6**¹⁷ with OsO₄ in the presence of NMO. Oxidative cleavage¹⁸ of the diol with NaIO₄ provided an intermediate dialdehyde. Subsequent reductive amination with 4-methoxy benzyl amine gave compound PMB-protected varenicline **5**.¹⁹ Finally PMB group was removed by Pd/C in the

presence of ammonium formate in methanol to yield varenicline **1**²⁰ (Scheme 2).

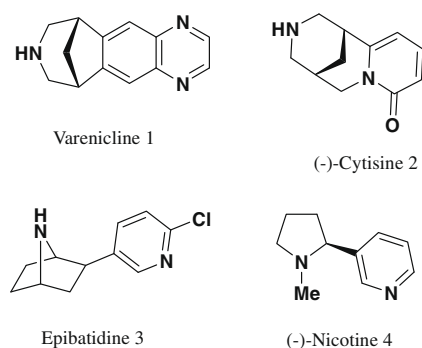
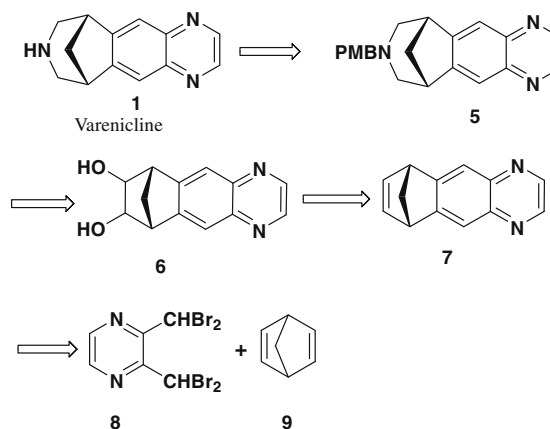


Figure 1. Natural products (**2–4**) and varenicline (**1**), ligands that can act as neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors.

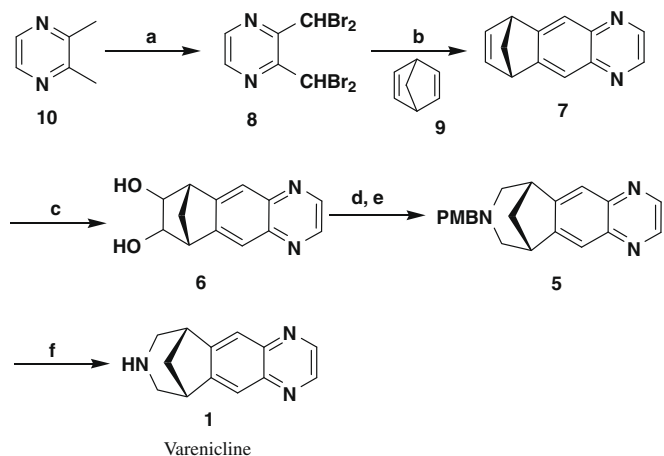


Scheme 1. Retrosynthesis of varenicline, **1**.

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Scheme 2. Reagents and conditions: (a) NBS, CCl_4 , hv, 16 h, 65%; (b) NaI, DMF, 60 °C, 30 min, 46%; (c) NMO, OsO_4 , acetone/water/*t*-BuOH, rt, 16 h, 85%; (d) NaIO_4 , DCM, silica gel, rt, 30 min; (e) PMBNH_2 , $\text{Na}(\text{CN})\text{BH}_3$, methanol, acetic acid, 0 °C to rt, 2 h, 62% for two steps; (f) Pd/C, HCO_2NH_4 , methanol, reflux for 30 min, rt, 24 h, 64%.

In summary, total synthesis of varenicline has been achieved in a total of six steps with 10% overall yield. This procedure can be scaled up for commercial use.

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- Experimental procedure and spectral data for 7:** Sodium iodide was added in small portions over a period of 2 min to a solution of the 2,3-bis(bromomethyl)pyrazine **8** (2.0 g, 4.71 mmol) and norbornadiene **9** (2.16 g, 23.58 mmol) in dry DMF (23 mL) at 60 °C. The mixture was stirred for further 30 min. The reaction mixture was cooled to rt, diluted with EtOAc (46 mL), and passed through a small pad of Celite. The filtrate was washed with 10% sodium thiosulfate (3 × 20 mL), water (2 × 20 mL), and brine (1 × 20 mL). The organic layer was dried (MgSO_4) and concentrated in vacuo and the residue was purified by flash column chromatography (silica gel, EtOAc–hexane, 10:90) to give 420 mg (46%) of **7** as a white solid. Mp: 120–123 °C; IR (KBr, cm^{-1}): 2519, 1708, 1649, 1215, 1182; ^1H NMR (400 MHz; $\text{DMSO}-d_6$): δ = 8.70 (s, 2H), 7.78 (s, 2H), 6.78 (t, J = 1.7 Hz, 2H), 4.08 (t, J = 1.7 Hz, 2H), 2.45–2.43 (m, 1H), 2.32–2.30 (m, 1H); ^{13}C NMR (50 MHz; CDCl_3): δ = 153.5, 143.2, 142.5, 142.1, 120.3, 66.3, 49.6; Mass (ESI): 195 $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$; HRMS(ESI): calcd for $\text{C}_{13}\text{H}_{11}\text{N}_2$ $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$ 195.0922, found 195.0931.
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- Spectral data of 6:** Mp: 143–145 °C; IR (KBr, cm^{-1}): 3491, 3124, 2980, 1483, 1359, 1074, 956; ^1H NMR (400 MHz; $\text{DMSO}-d_6$): δ = 8.28 (s, 2H), 7.85 (s, 2H), 5.11 (s, 2H), 3.7 (s, 2H), 3.36 (s, 2H), 2.33 (d, J = 9.4 Hz, 1H), 1.85 (d, J = 9.4 Hz, 1H); ^{13}C NMR (50 MHz; $\text{DMSO}-d_6$): δ = 148.5, 144.1, 142.3, 120.9, 70.5, 50.3, 41.8; Mass (ESI): 229 $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$; HRMS(ESI): calcd for $\text{C}_{13}\text{H}_{13}\text{N}_2\text{O}_2$ $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$ 229.0977, found 229.0986.
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- Experimental procedure and spectral data for 5:** A 0.65 M aq soln of NaIO_4 (3.5 mL, 2.14 mmol) was added drop-wise to a vigorously stirred suspension of chromatography-grade silica gel (3.5 g) in DCM (59 mL). After addition of **6** (350 mg, 1.53 mmol) in DCM (78 mL) to the resulting flaky soln, stirring was continued for another 30 min and then the mixture was passed through a filter pad onto a small amount of Na_2SO_4 . The retained silica gel was washed with DCM (20 mL) and the washings were pooled with filtrate. Removal of the solvent left the dialdehyde as a solid reddish residue, which was dissolved in methanol (8 mL). PMB amine (210 mg, 1.53 mmol) in methanol (3 mL) followed by AcOH (9 μL , 0.15 mmol) was added to the above-mentioned soln at 0 °C and after stirring at rt for 10 min, $\text{Na}(\text{CN})\text{BH}_3$ (145 mg, 2.3 mmol) was added at 0 °C and stirred at rt for 2 h. Methanol was evaporated and the residue was dissolved in water (15 mL) and extracted with EtOAc (3 × 15 mL). The combined organic layers were washed with water (2 × 15 mL) and brine (1 × 15 mL), dried (anhyd MgSO_4), and concentrated under reduced pressure. The crude product was purified by flash chromatography (Silica gel, EtOAc–hexane, 15:85) to give 315 mg (62%) of **5** as a brown-colored thick liquid. IR (Neat, cm^{-1}): 2947, 2789, 1512, 1244, 1031; ^1H NMR (400 MHz; CDCl_3): δ = 8.76 (s, 2H), 7.77 (s, 2H), 6.76 (d, J = 8.8 Hz, 2H), 6.65 (d, J = 8.8 Hz, 2H), 3.72 (s, 3H), 3.41 (s, 2H), 3.35 (br s, 2H), 2.80 (d, J = 10.7 Hz, 2H), 2.54 (d, J = 10.3 Hz, 2H), 2.34–2.30 (m, 1H), 1.85 (d, J = 10.7 Hz, 1H); ^{13}C NMR (50 MHz; CDCl_3): δ = 158.4, 150.9, 143.4, 143.3, 130.0, 129.4, 120.4, 113.4, 60.9, 57.2, 55.1, 43.1, 41.2; Mass (ESI): 332 $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$; HRMS(ESI): calcd for $\text{C}_{21}\text{H}_{22}\text{N}_3\text{O}$ $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$ 332.1763, found 332.1775.
- Experimental procedure and spectral data for 1:** To a solution of **5** (50 mg, 0.15 mmol) in methanol (2 mL) was added 10% Pd/C (125 mg, 2.5 equiv, wt/wt), followed by HCO_2NH_4 (100 mg, 2 equiv, wt/wt), and heated to reflux for 30 min. The reaction mixture was cooled to rt, and allowed to stand for 24 h. It was filtered through a small pad of Celite and was washed with methanol (10 mL). The filtrate was evaporated under reduced pressure and purified by flash chromatography (Silica gel, MeOH– CHCl_3 , 2:98) to give 20 mg (64%) of **1** as a cream-colored solid. Mp: 137–139 °C; IR (KBr, cm^{-1}): 3342, 2949, 2924, 2852, 1473, 1354; ^1H NMR (400 MHz; CDCl_3): δ = 8.75 (s, 2H), 7.83 (s, 2H), 3.25 (br s, 2H), 3.15 (d, J = 13.0 Hz, 2H), 2.92 (d, J = 13.0 Hz, 2H), 2.48 (m, 1H), 2.09 (d, J = 8.8 Hz, 1H), 1.82 (br s, 1H); ^{13}C NMR (50 MHz; CDCl_3): δ = 149.6, 143.5, 143.6, 121.7, 50.5, 43.1, 42.2; Mass (ESI): 212 $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$; HRMS(ESI): calcd for $\text{C}_{13}\text{H}_{14}\text{N}_3$ $[\text{M}+\text{H}]^+$ 212.1188, found 212.1196.