



Next generation computational blood-brain barrier models

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Aims

- Build atomic-detail models of brain endothelial cell membranes
- Calculate transversal permeability
- Calculate transversal free-energies



Searson
(Johns Hopkins)

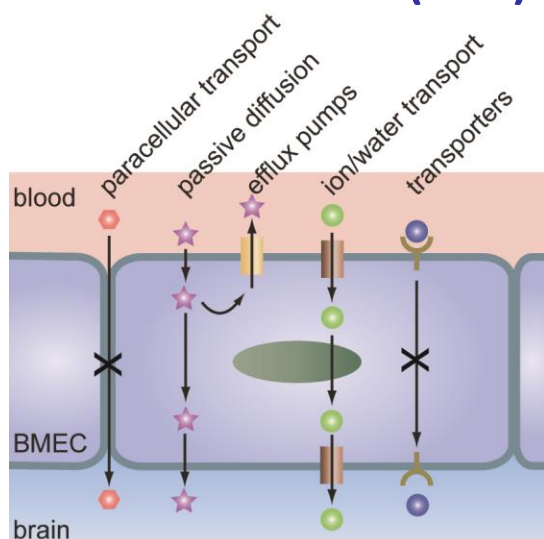


MBU
(KCL)

Computing time: MARCC & Grant PSCA18012P



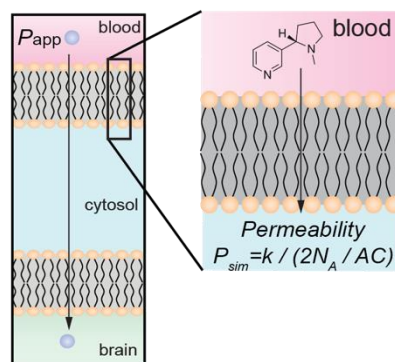
Blood brain barrier (BBB)



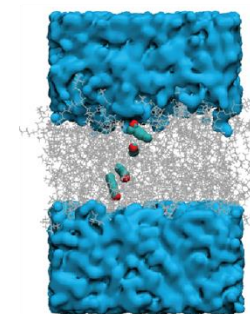
BBB: 98% rejection rate of the drug space (10^{60} molecules)

Human Brain Microvascular Endothelial Cell Models

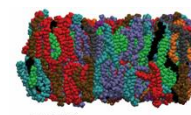
Blood-Brain Barrier CNS drug penetration



in-silico model

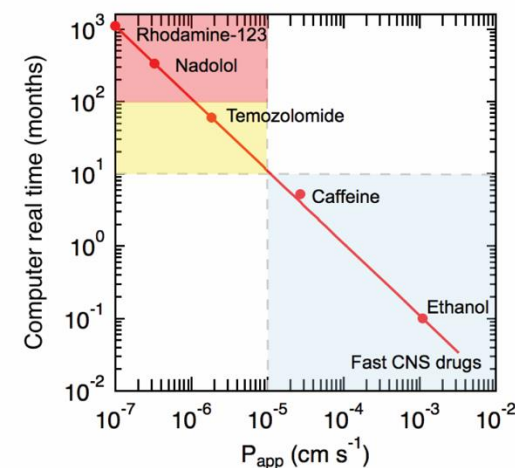


human brain microvascular endothelial cell membrane



BMEC %
 POPC (4.1%)
 OSM (18.8%)
 SAPE (14.5%)
 SAPS (8.3%)
 SAPL (2.0%)
 CHOL (29.1%)
 SAPC (8.3%)
 SOPE (8.3%)
 SLPC (8.3%)

Challenge of calculating CNS passive permeability



Ethanol ($10^{-3} \text{ cm s}^{-1}$)
 Caffeine ($10^{-5} \text{ cm s}^{-1}$)
 Temozolomide ($10^{-6} \text{ cm s}^{-1}$)
 Doxorubicin ($10^{-7} \text{ cm s}^{-1}$)

C. Jorgensen, M. B. Ulmschneider, P. C. Searson, *ACS Omega*, **2022**, 7

Y. Wang, E. Gallagher, C. Jorgensen, E. P. Troendle, D. Hu, P. C. Searson, M. B. Ulmschneider, *Sci. Rep.*, **2019**, 9

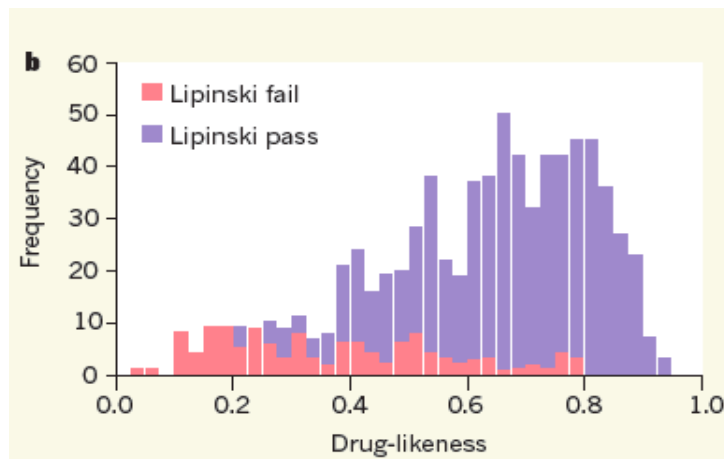
C. Jorgensen, E. P. Troendle, J. P. Ulmschneider, P. C. Searson, M. B. Ulmschneider, *JCAMD*, **2023**, 37

C. Jorgensen, C. et al. *JCIM*, **2025**, 65

1. Lipinski's Rule of Five (Pfizer)

- MW < 500 Da
- Dipole < 5 D
- $\log P_{\text{oct}} < 5$
- HB acceptor < 10
- HB donor < 5

C. A. Lipinski et al., *Adv. Drug Deliv. Rev.* **1997**, 23, 3-25



Liu et al., *Drug Metab. & Disp.*, **2004**, 32, 132-139

Martins et al., *JCIM*, **2012**, 52, 1686-1697

Jorgensen et al. *JCIM*, **2025**, 65

Huang, et al. *Sci. Rep.*, **2024**, 14, 9 (1), 15844.

Jia & Sosso. *JCIM*, **2024**.

2. AI models & Bayesian pass/fail

Bayesian Pass/fail model parameters:

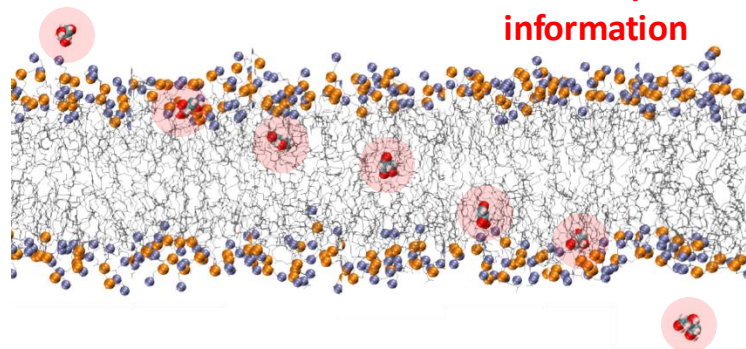
- Partitioning coefficient ($\log P_{\text{ow}}$)
- Van der Waals surface area
- Polar surface area
- Lipinski refinement (more parameters)

Supervised AI ML models for BBB+ / BBB-

BBB+ drugs cross. **BBB-** drugs do not cross

3. MD simulations

Quantitative high-resolution molecule-specific information



Transition-based (flux-based) permeability

Flux equations

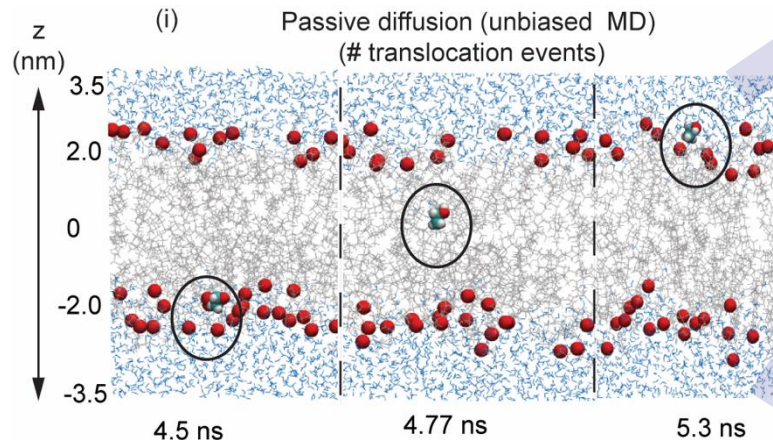
$$J = P \cdot \Delta C$$

$$P = \frac{r}{A C}$$

Flux ($\text{mol m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$): the net number of particles n per unit area diffusing across a membrane with cross-section area A . Can be unidirectional or bidirectional

Permeability (cm s^{-1}): Displacement through membrane per unit time.

1. Passive diffusion



Direction of flux

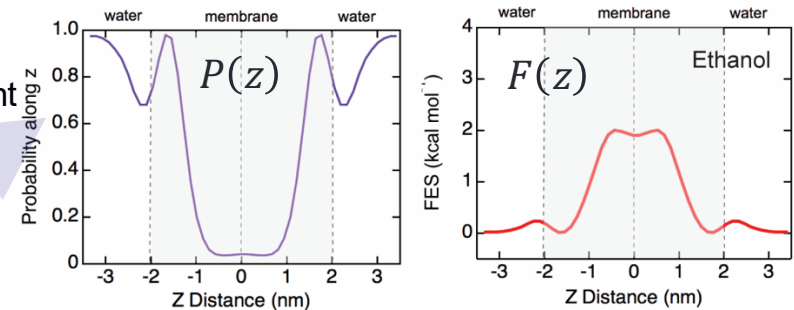
- Simulations capture a bidirectional flux
 $\#_{\text{tot}} = \#_{\text{up}} + \#_{\text{down}}$
- Experimental transwell assays capture unidirectional flux
- Total flux from simulation is divided by 2 to compare to experiment
- We assume that the transport via the cytosol is fast compared to transport across the cell membrane and negligible

Challenges:

- ❖ Timescale renders this inaccessible for all but fastest molecules

2. Energetics

$$F(z) = -kT \log (P(z))$$

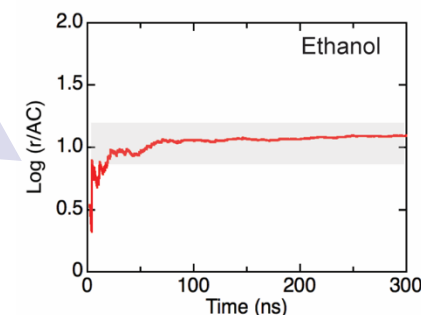


3. Transport kinetics

Rapid permeability screening of toxins and antidotes

(ii) Establish steady-state

(iii) Calculate permeability

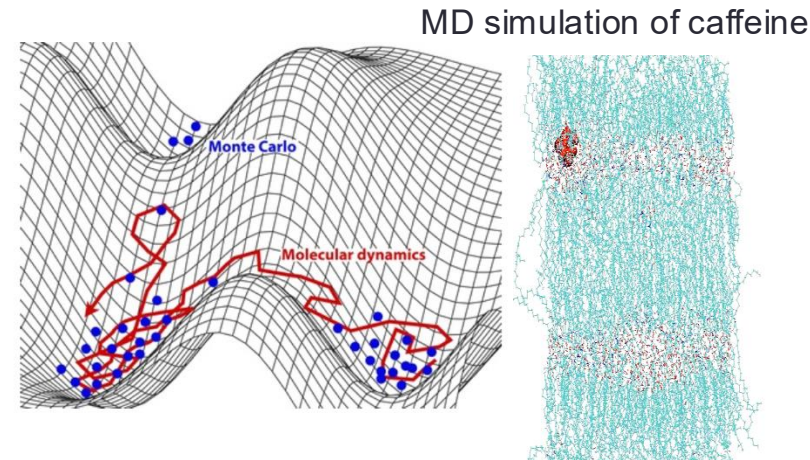


$$r = \frac{k}{N_A} = \frac{\#}{t \cdot N_A} \quad (1)$$

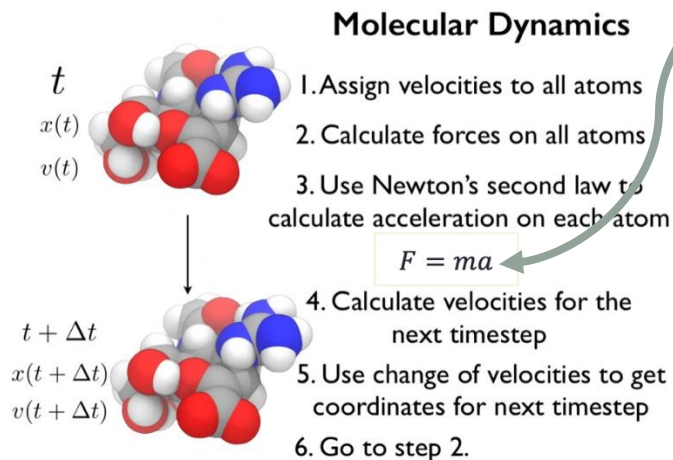
$$P_{\text{sim}} = \frac{r}{2AC} \quad (2)$$

#: number of permeation events
 k : rate constant (ns^{-1})
 r : molar rate constant (mol ns^{-1})
 A : Area of lipid patch (nm^2)
 C : Concentration solute (mol dm^{-3})
 P : permeability (cm s^{-1})

- We can model atoms as hard spheres connected by springs (Lewitt, Warshell 1975) together with electrostatic/dispersion components.
- This turned out to be much more accurate than we thought.
- **MD simulations** generate trajectories of a system via forward time propagation of Newton's 2nd law.



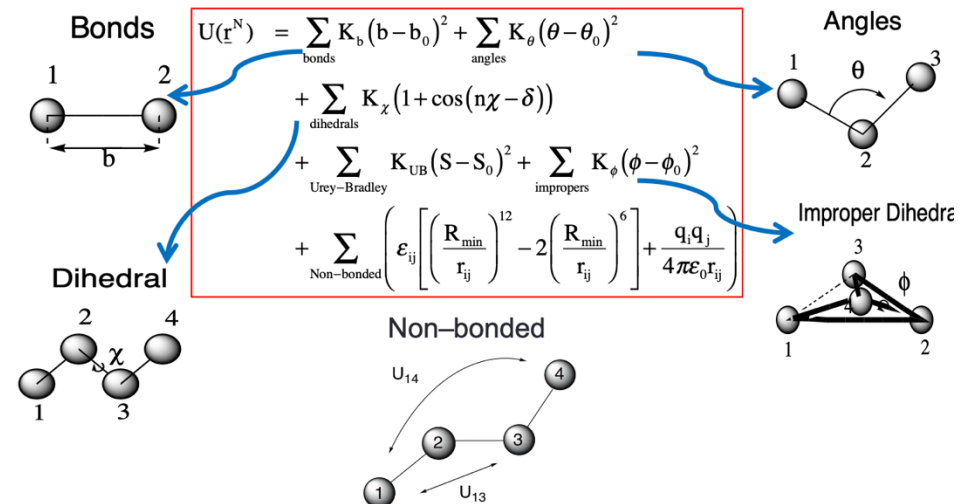
1. Workflow

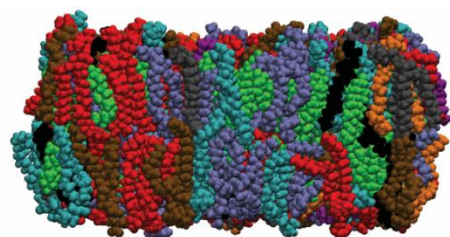


2. Force field

$$F = -dU/dr$$

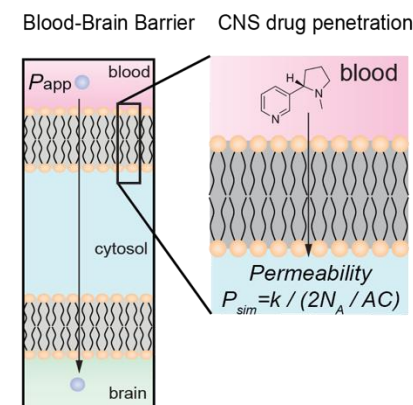
Input the force into Newton's second law to update positions and velocities by generating the system potential energy from **bonded** and **nonbonded** contributions





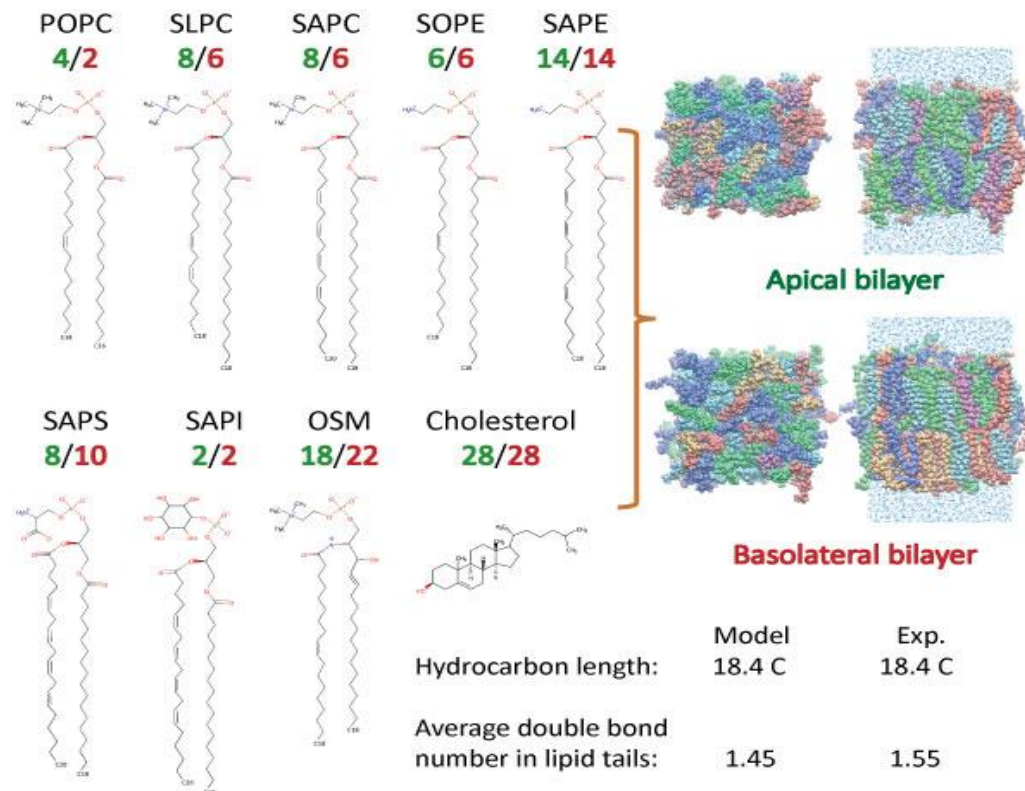
hBMEC (BBB)

hBMEC	%		
POPC	(4.1%)	CHOL	(29.1%)
OSM	(18.8%)	SAPC	(8.3%)
SAPE	(14.5%)	SOPE	(6.3%)
SAPS	(8.3%)	SLPC	(8.3%)
SAPI	(2.0%)		



Model reproduces experimental features:

- Hydrocarbon length
- Average double bond number in lipid tails

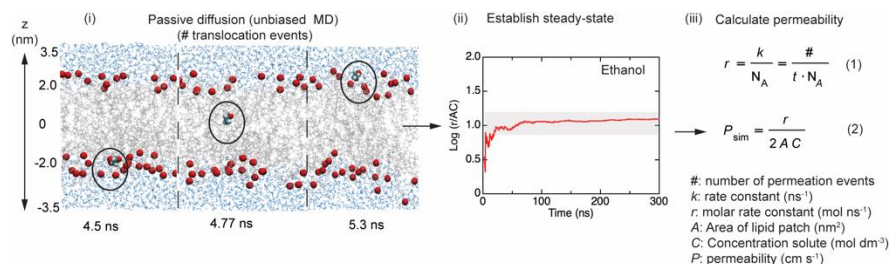


Lipid composition: Bénistant et al. *J. Lipid Res.*, **1995**, 36

Y. Wang, E. Gallagher, C. Jorgensen, E. P. Troendle, D. Hu, P. C. Searson, M. B. Ulmschneider, *Sci. Rep.*, **2019**, 9

C. Jorgensen, M. B. Ulmschneider, P. C. Searson, *ACS Omega*, **2022**, 7

1. Flux-based permeabilities workflow



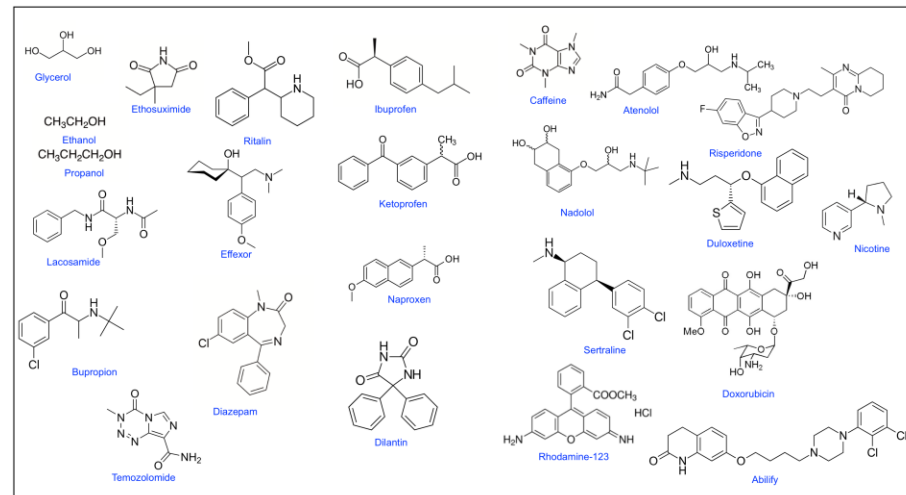
Library spans experimental permeability $10^{-7} \text{ cm s}^{-1}$ to $10^{-3} \text{ cm s}^{-1}$

Slow

Fast

Experimental benchmark data ($N = 24$)

2. Representative CNS drug library

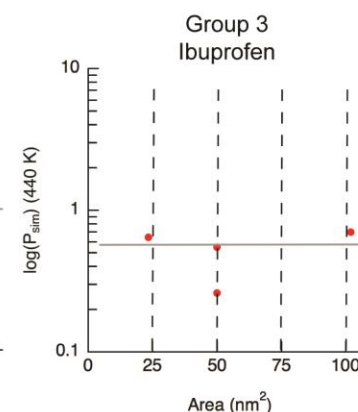
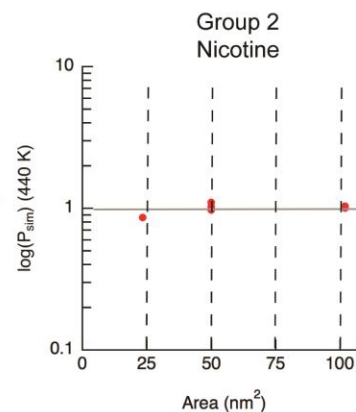
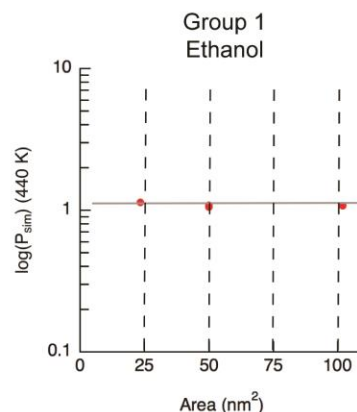
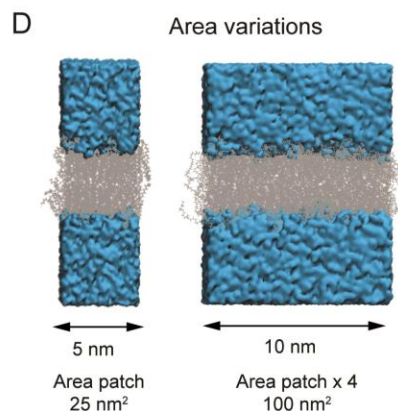
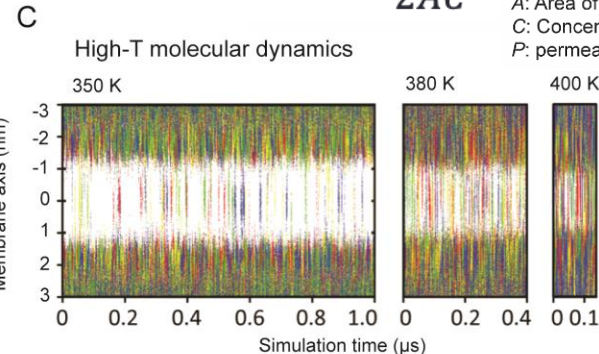
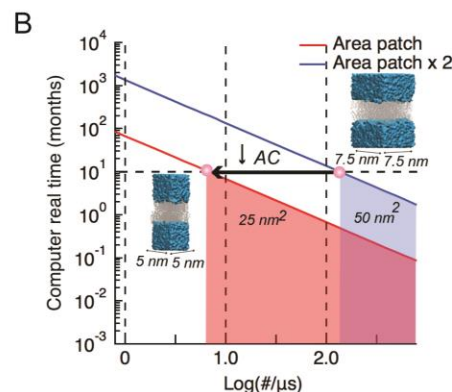
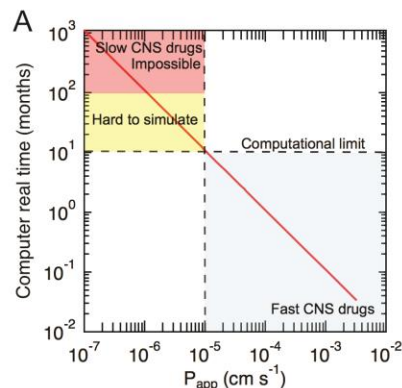


Molecule	MW (g mol^{-1})	H_{donor}	H_{accept}	Log P	DP (debye)	P_{app} (cm s^{-1})	P_{app} Reference	Cell line (2D) or method (3D)
Glycerol	92.09	3	3	-1.8	2.62	9.50×10^{-6}	⁸⁷ [Shah 1989]	BMEC
Temozolomide	194.1	1	5	0.4	6.10	1.86×10^{-6}	⁸⁸ [Avdeef 2012]	Brain perf (3D)
Caffeine	194.2	0	3	-0.07	3.64	2.10×10^{-5}	IH	MDCK
Ethanol	46.1	1	1	-0.31	1.69	1.10×10^{-3}	⁵³ [Brahm 1983]	RBC
Propanol	60.1	1	1	0.05	1.68	3.30×10^{-3}	⁵³ [Brahm 1983]	RBC
Doxorubicin	543.5	6	12	1.27	9.12	1.00×10^{-7}	⁸⁹ [Hellinger 2012]	Caco-2 / MDCK
Ethosuximide	141.2	1	2	0.38	1.72	9.00×10^{-6}	⁹⁰ [Summerfield 2007]	MDCK
Atenolol	266.3	3	4	0.16	5.00	1.30×10^{-6}	⁹¹ [Adson 1995]	Caco-2
Diazepam	284.7	0	2	2.82	2.65	4.60×10^{-5}	⁹⁰ [Summerfield 2007]	MDCK
Nadolol	309.4	4	5	0.81	5.10	3.30×10^{-7}	⁹² [Yamashita 2000]	Caco-2
Lacosamide	250.3	2	3	0.73	1.90	1.60×10^{-5}	⁹³ [Zhang 2013]	Caco-2
Risperdal	410.4	0	6	3.49	5.45	3.00×10^{-5}	⁹⁰ [Summerfield 2007]	MDCK
Rhodamine123	380.8	2	5	1.06	6.11	0.80×10^{-7}	⁹⁴ [Katt 2019]	iPSC
Dilantin	252.3	2	2	2.47	2.73	2.70×10^{-5}	⁹⁰ [Summerfield 2007]	MDCK
Ketoprofen	254.3	1	3	3.12	4.44	8.00×10^{-5}	⁹⁵ [Sun 2002]	Caco-2
Naproxen	230.3	1	3	3.18	2.25	3.90×10^{-5}	⁹⁶ [Pade 1998]	Caco-2
Nicotine	162.2	0	2	1.17	1.64	1.78×10^{-4}	⁹⁷ [Garberg 2005]	Caco-2 / MDCK
Ibuprofen	206.3	1	2	3.97	1.64	2.70×10^{-5}	IH	MDCK
Effexor	277.0	1	3	3.2	3.33	6.00×10^{-5}	⁸⁹ [Hellinger 2012]	Caco-2 / MDCK
Ritalin	233.1	1	3	2.25	2.13	2.47×10^{-5}	⁹⁸ [Yang 2016]	MDCK
Sertraline	306.2	1	1	5.10	3.86	2.1×10^{-6}	⁹⁰ [Summerfield 2007]	MDCK
Duloxetine	297.4	1	3	4.00	2.18	1.66×10^{-5}	⁸⁹ [Hellinger 2012]	Caco-2 / MDCK
Bupropion	239.7	2	4	3.60	1.15	4.75×10^{-5}	⁹⁰ [Summerfield 2007]	MDCK

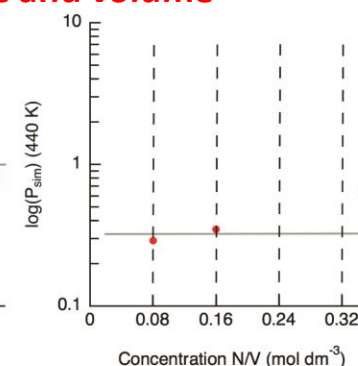
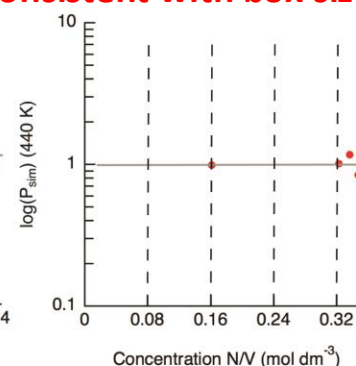
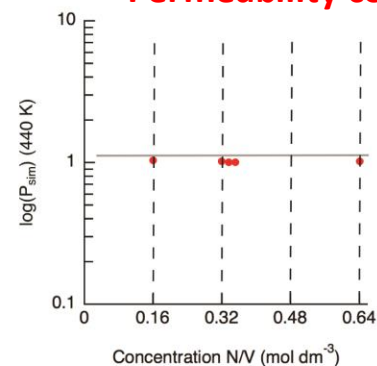
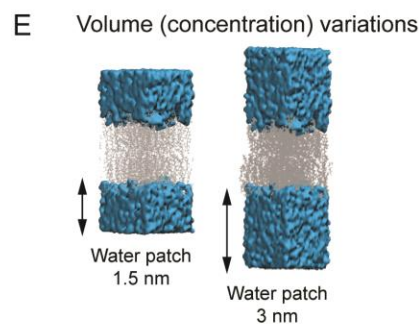
Permeability invariant to simulation box choices (should be!)

$$P_{sim} = \frac{r}{2AC}$$

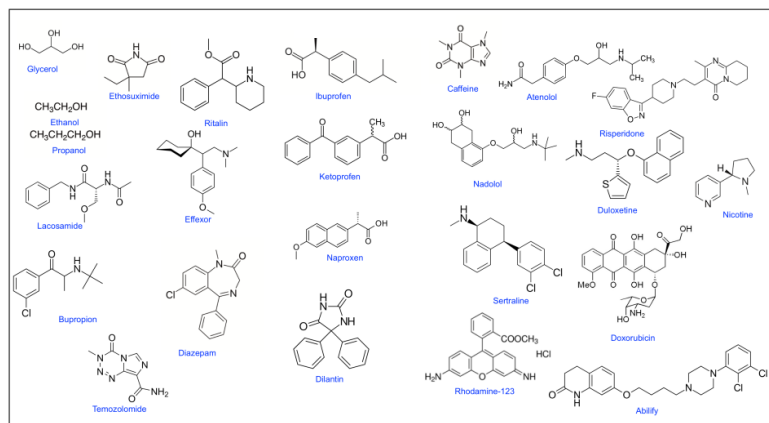
#: number of permeation events
 k : rate constant (ns⁻¹)
 r : molar rate constant (mol ns⁻¹)
 A : Area of lipid patch (nm²)
 C : Concentration solute (mol dm⁻³)
 P : permeability (cm s⁻¹)



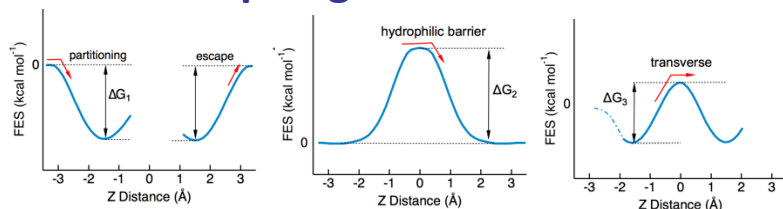
Permeability consistent with box size and volume



Representative CNS drug library

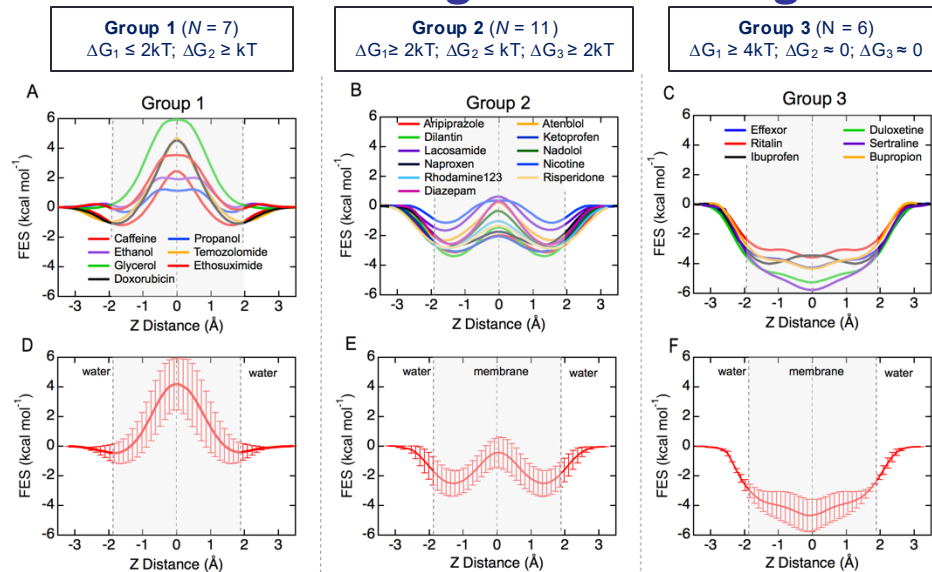


Barrier topologies

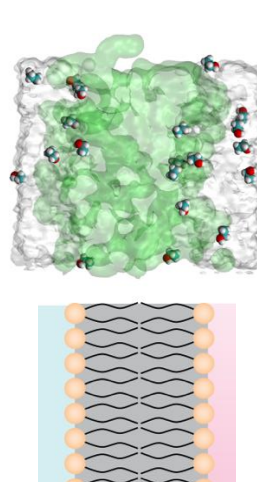


- We introduce terminology to classify distinct types of free-energy barriers
- ΔG_1 : an escape free-energy barrier associated with partitioning into the membrane center
- ΔG_2 : barrier associated with polar, hydrophilic molecules crossing the BBB
- ΔG_3 : barrier from a double-well, transverse free-energy surface

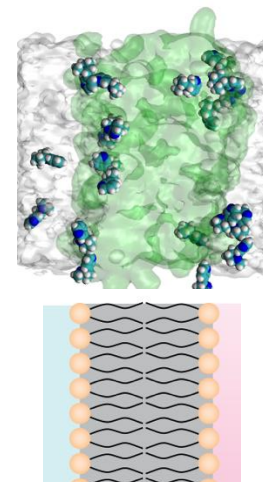
Free-energies of an $N = 24$ compound library clustered according to barrier heights



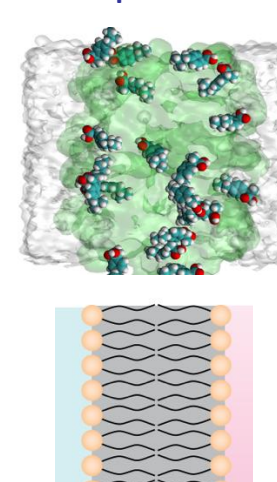
Ethanol



Nicotine



Ibuprofen



Validating that the groups are statistically significant

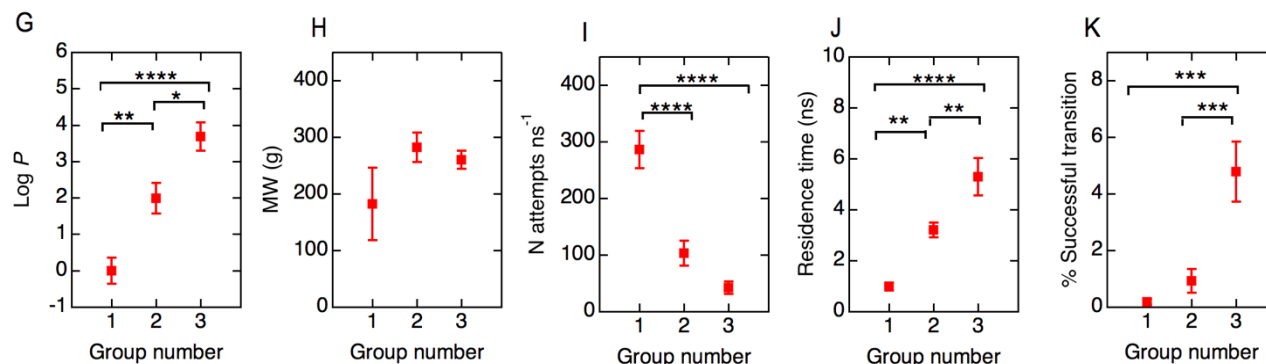
Input parameters
(chemical)

- **LogP**: n-octanol and water partition coefficient
- **MW**: Molecular weight (g)
- **PSA**: Polar surface area
- **DP**: Total dipole moment (Debye)
- **HB donors**: h-bond donors in a molecule
- **HB acceptor**: h-bond acceptors in a molecule
- **Six membered rings**: Number of 6-memb rings
- **Five membered rings**: Number of 5-memb rings

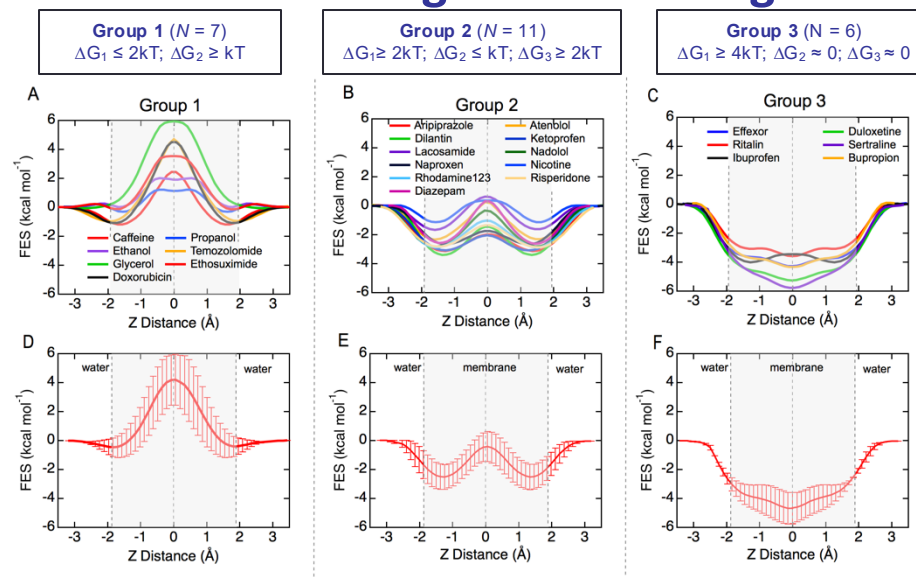
Input parameters
(simulation)

- **Residence time**: Average time inside bilayer
- **Attempt time**: Average time inside bilayer for failed trans
- **# Successful transitions**: Number of transitions
- **# Attempts**: Number of failed transitions
- **k Rate constant**: # Transitions / simulation time (1/ns)
- **Permeability**: (cm/s) at 440 K
- ΔG_1 : Lipophilic escape barrier
- ΔG_2 : Polar drug crossing barrier
- ΔG_3 : Transversal crossing barrier

Parameter output



Free-energies of an $N = 24$ compound library clustered according to barrier heights



Advantage of workflow: ~ 1 day on a single NVIDIA GPU → possible to screen ~100 compounds per month for a typical cluster

Take-home findings

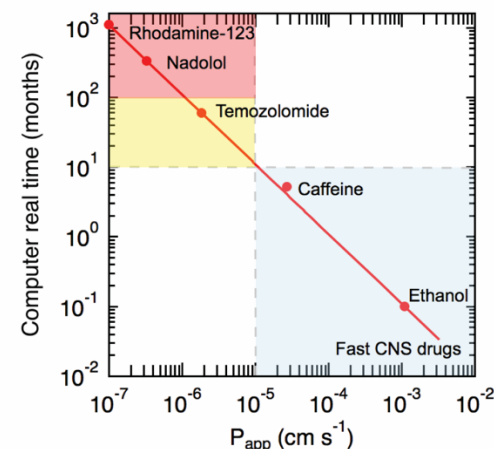
- LogP discretizes across the three groups
- MW is not a good descriptor
- (as per Lipinski's rule) for CNS penetration

Experimental permeability

- **Not generally routine**
- Requires either *in vitro* proxy assays such as Caco-2 or PAMPA for BBB permeation. Sometime even from red blood cells (not ideal)
- In-house BBB model permeability with fluorescence tracking (JHU)

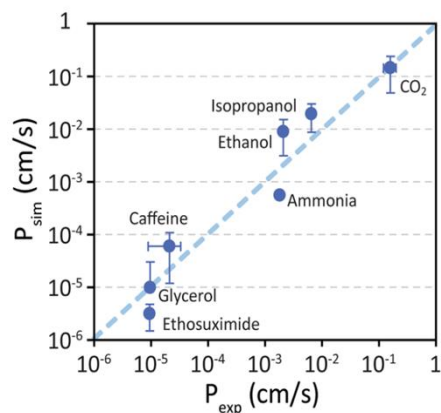
In silico permeability

- **Not routine for the BBB**
- Can use unbiased simulations for drugs with $P_{app} > 10^{-4}$ cm/s.
- For $P_{app} < 10^{-5}$ cm/s we need enhanced sampling techniques as unbiased MD takes between **10^2 - 10^3 months** on a single GPU.



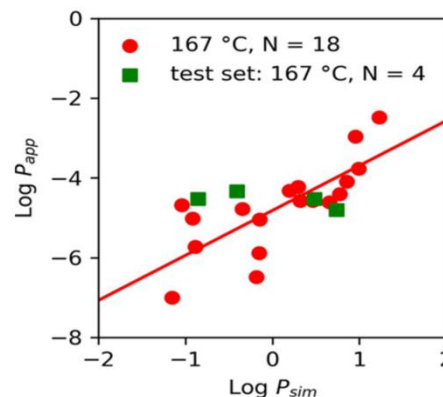
Proposed development: Enhanced sampling approaches for BBB permeability

- 1. Kramers-based Arrhenius model** Arrhenius extrapolation to 310 K with a correction in non-linear regime. Not routine.



Wang et al. *Sci. Rep.*, 2019

- 2. Regression based models** Regression with high-T data. Accuracy to ~ 1 - ~ 2 OM on one GPU. Routine ranking of $> 10^1$ molecules is now routine



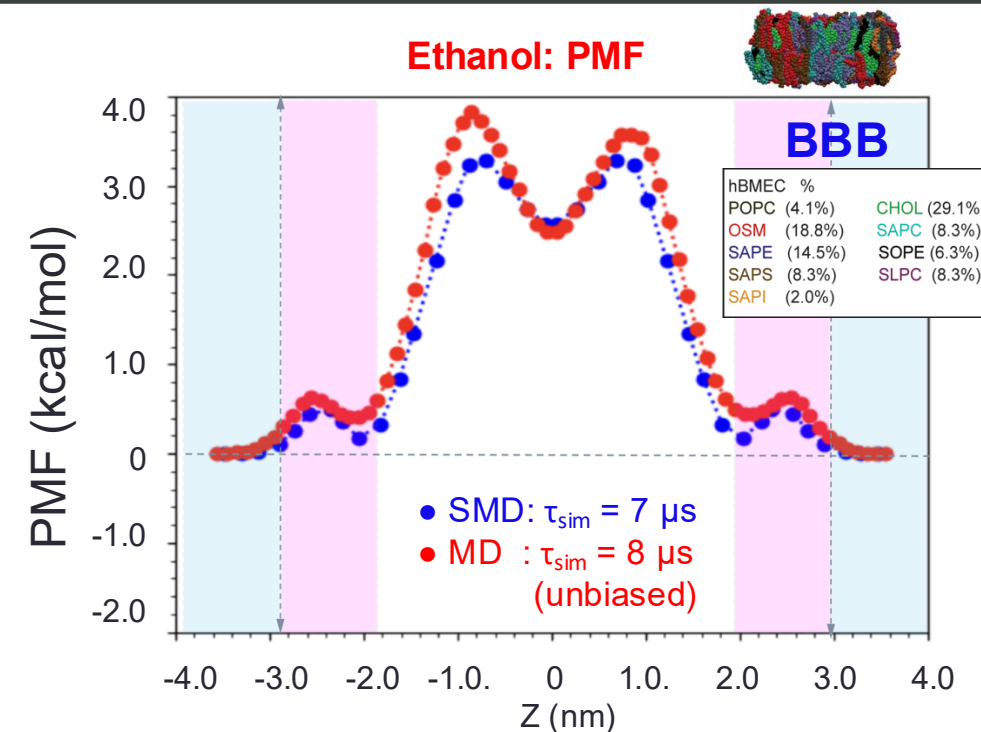
Jorgensen et al. *JCAMD*, 2023
Jorgensen et al. *ACS Omega*, 2022

- 3. Permeability via the Green-Kubo equations with steered MD**

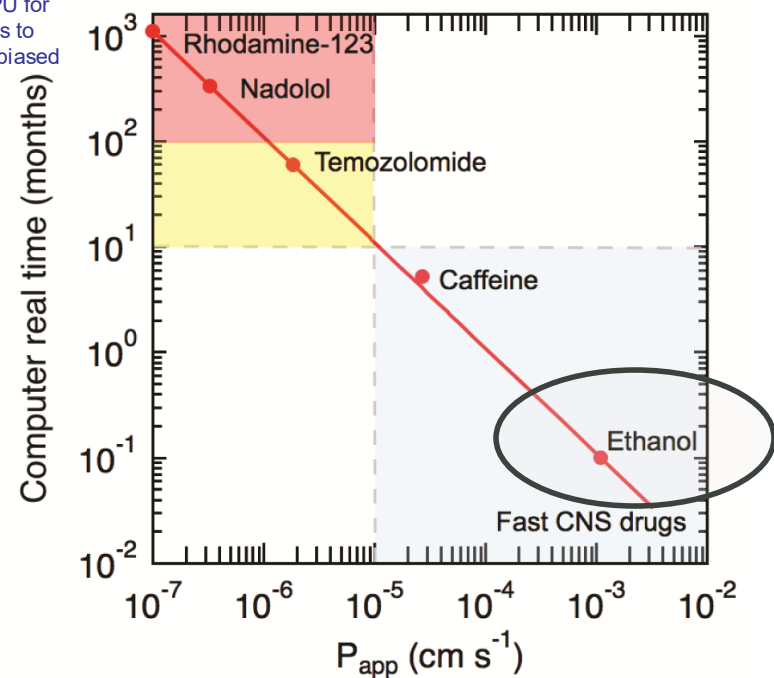
$$\frac{1}{P} = \int_{-d}^d \frac{\exp(\beta \Delta G(z))}{D_z(z)} dz$$

$$D_z(z) = \frac{(RT)^2}{\int_0^\infty dt \langle \Delta F_z(z, t) \Delta F_z(z, 0) \rangle}$$

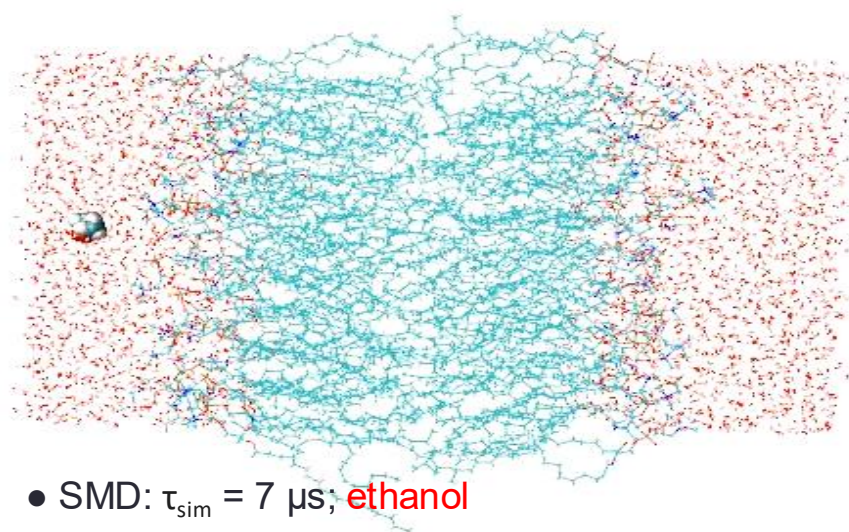
Jorgensen et al. *JCIM*, 2025



Time on a GPU for
100 transitions to
occur with unbiased
MD

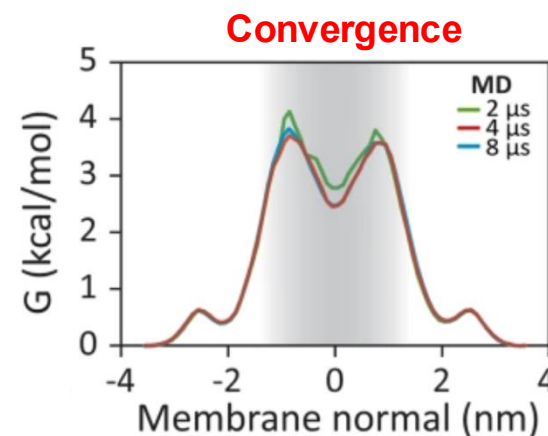


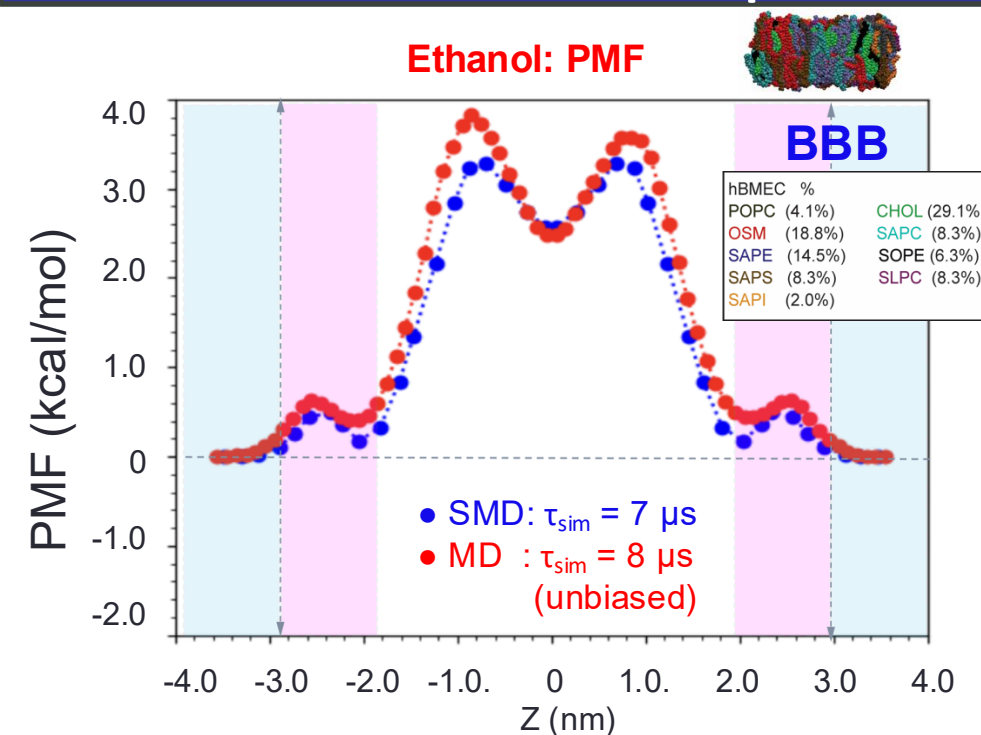
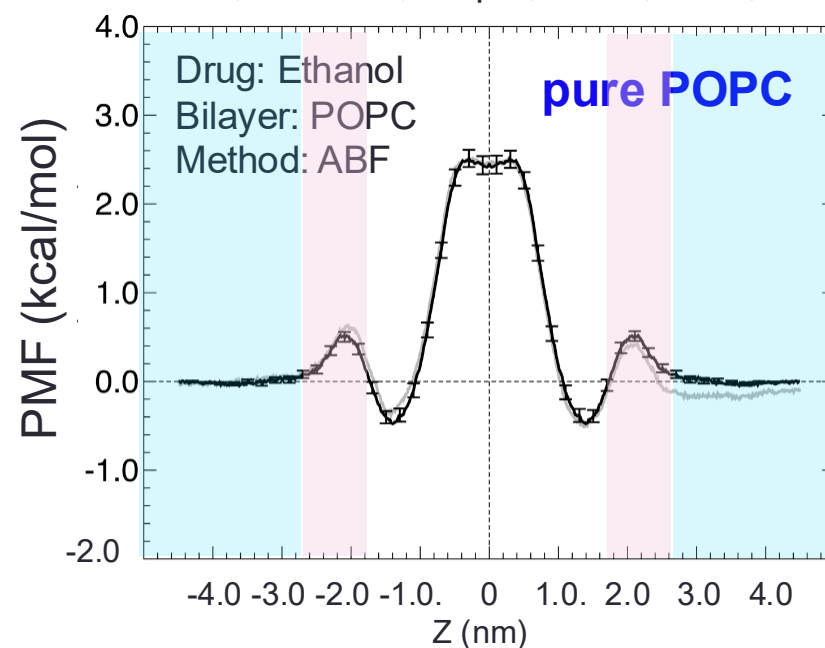
Pure POPC bilayer thickness: $\sim 3.75 \text{ nm}$
 Mammalian bilayer thickness: $\sim 4.70 \text{ nm}$



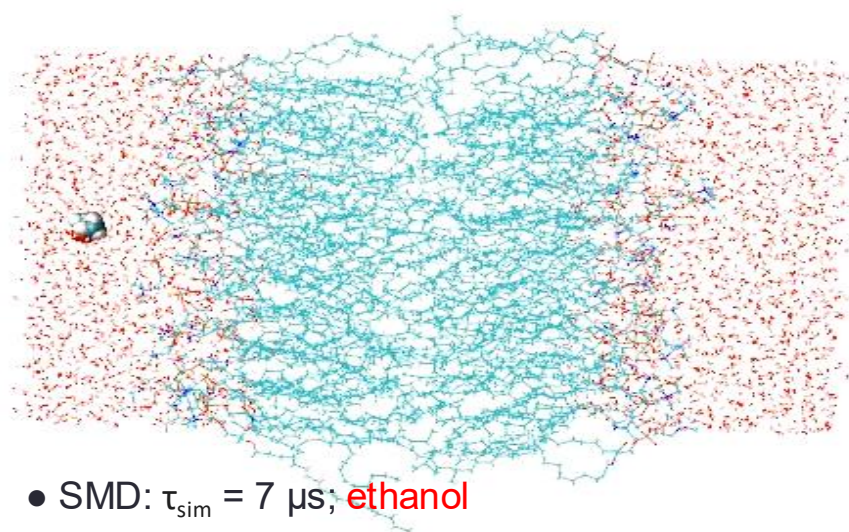
SMD data unpublished

Unbiased MD from Wang *et al. Sci. Rep.*, 2019

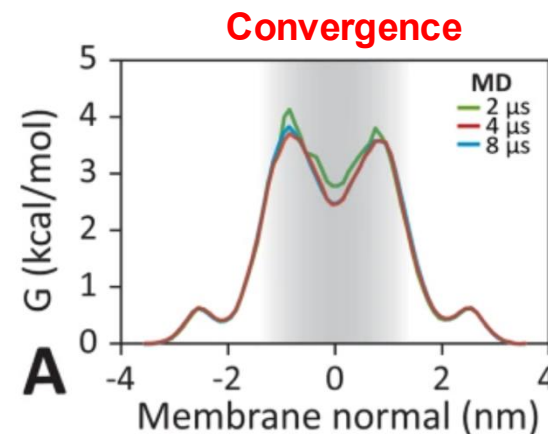


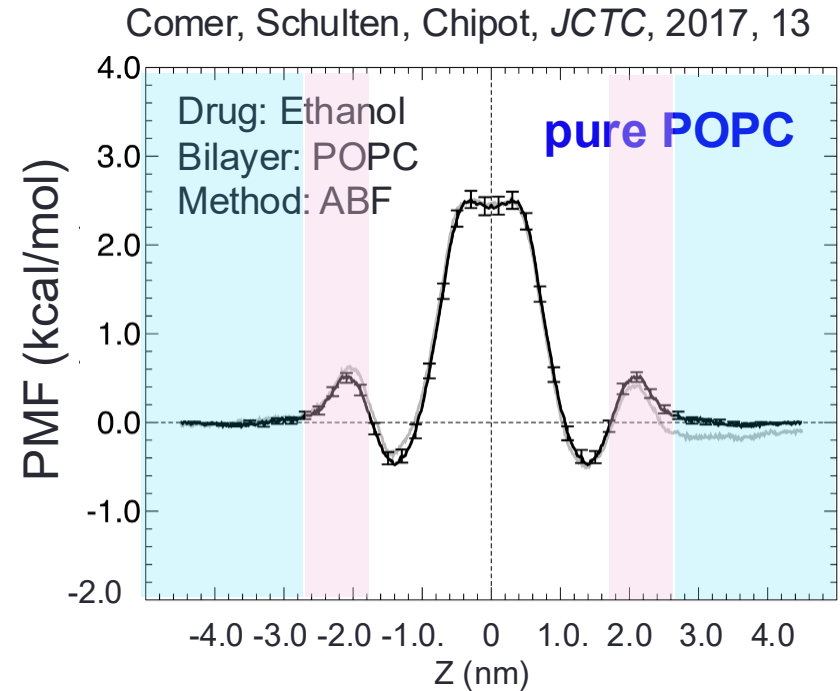
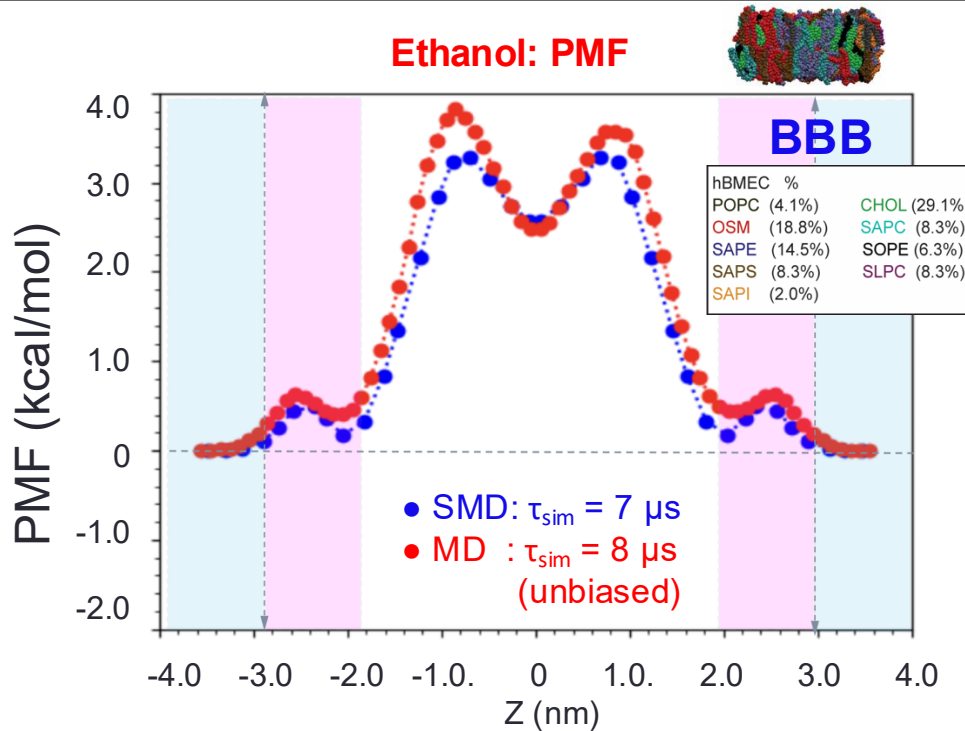
Comer, Schulten, Chipot, *JCTC*, 2017, 13

Pure POPC bilayer thickness: ~3.75 nm
 Mammalian bilayer thickness: ~4.70 nm



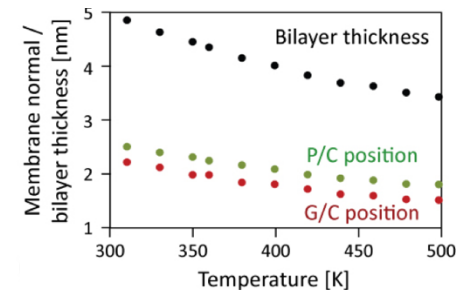
SMD data unpublished

Unbiased MD from Wang *et al. Sci. Rep.*, 2019



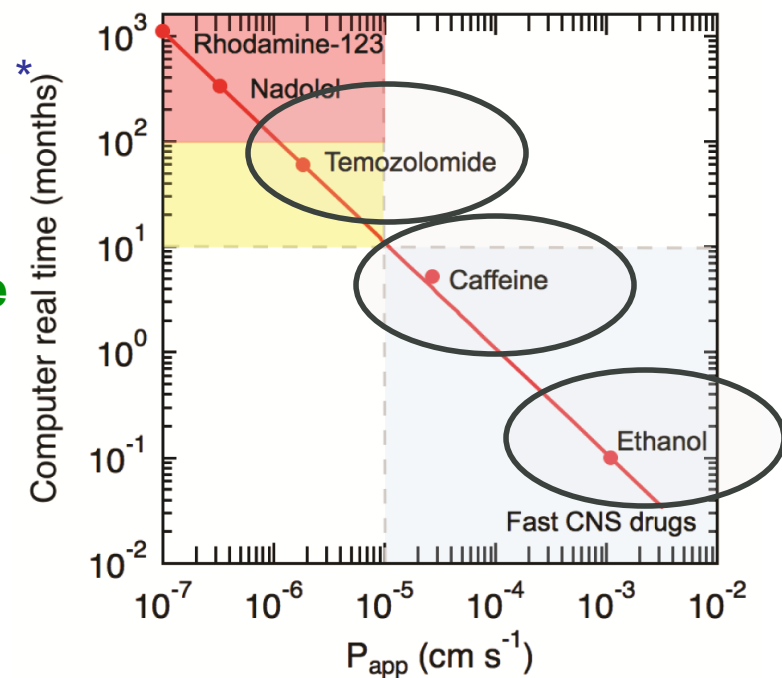
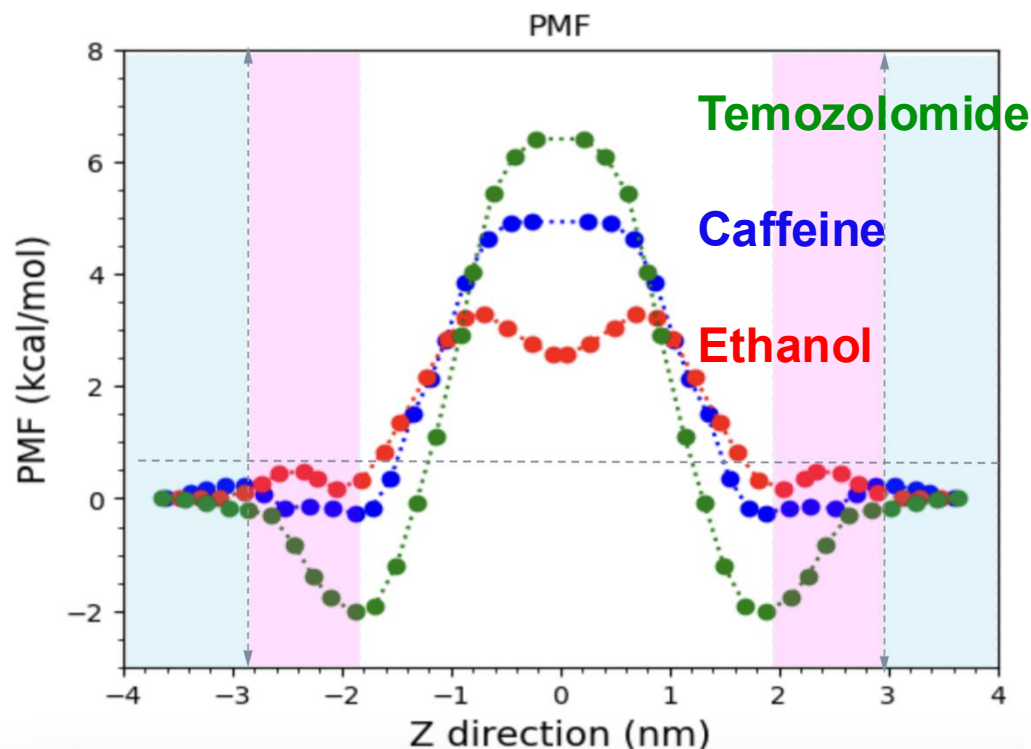
Pure POPC bilayer thickness: ~3.7 nm [1] to ~3.8 nm [2, 3, 5]
Mammalian bilayer thickness: ~4.70 nm [2]
BBB bilayer thickness: ~4.75 nm [6]

The mammalian lipid bilayer reaches maximal bilayer thickness due to the condensation effect by the predominance of cholesterol [4]

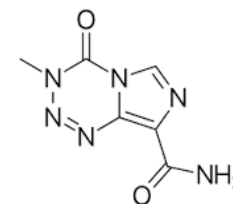


- [1] Gullingsrud, J., Schulten, K., *Biophysical journal*, **2004**, 86 (6)
 [2] Kucerka, N., Tristram-Nagle, S., Nagle, J.F., *J Membr Biol*, **2005**, 208 (3)
 [3] Skjevik, A., Madej, B.D., Dickson C.J., Teigen K., Walker R.C., Gould I.R. *Chem Commun*, **2015**, 51(21)
 [4] Shahane, G., *et al. Journal of molecular modeling*, **2019**, 25
 [5] Pöhl, M., Trollmann, M. F., & Böckmann, R. A. *Nat. Comms*, **2023**, 14(1)
 [6] Y. Wang, E. Gallagher, C. Jorgensen, E. P. Troendle, D. Hu, P. C. Searson, M. B. Ulmschneider, *Sci. Rep.*, **2019**, 9

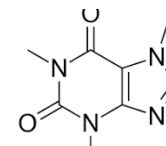
- ❖ 3 SMD simulations
- ❖ $\tau_{\text{sim}} = 7 \mu\text{s}$ each



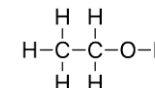
Temozolomide
 $\text{Log}P_{\text{ow}} = -0.21$



Caffeine
 $\text{Log}P_{\text{ow}} = -0.07$



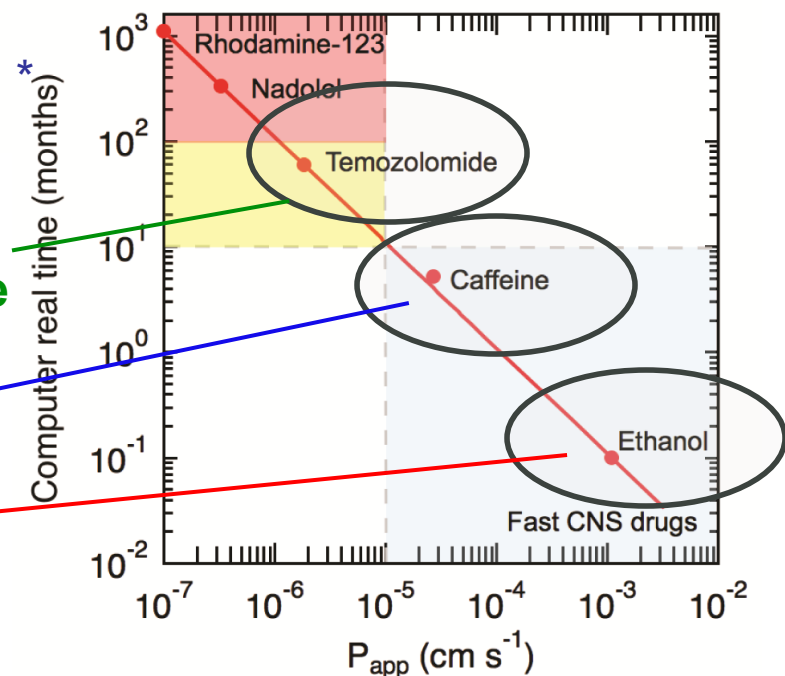
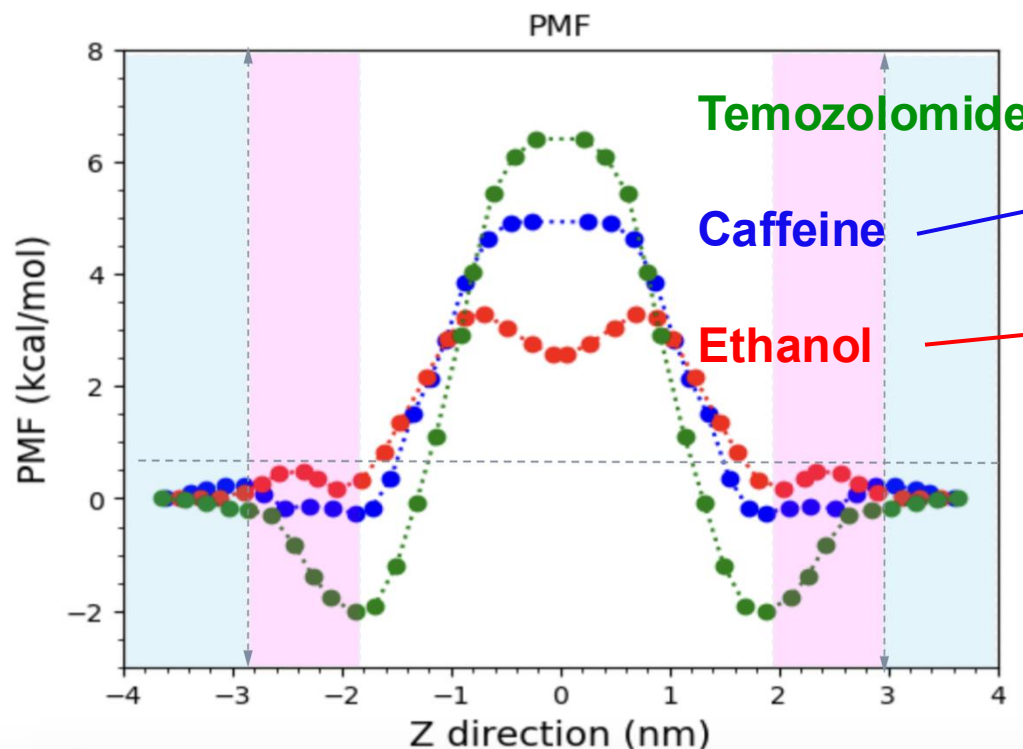
Ethanol
 $\text{Log}P_{\text{ow}} = -0.31$



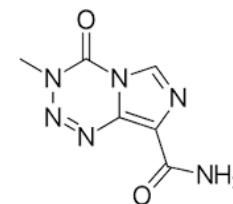
*Time on a GPU for 100 transitions to occur with unbiased MD

In press

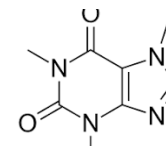
- ❖ 3 SMD simulations
- ❖ $\tau_{\text{sim}} = 7 \mu\text{s}$ each



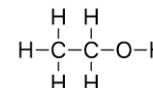
Temozolomide
 $\text{Log}P_{\text{ow}} = -0.21$



Caffeine
 $\text{Log}P_{\text{ow}} = -0.07$



Ethanol
 $\text{Log}P_{\text{ow}} = -0.31$



*Time on a GPU for 100 transitions to occur with unbiased MD

In press

Motivation

- P-glycoprotein is a protective pump that keeps out exogenous chemicals from the brain. It is the leading cause of multidrug resistance to chemotherapeutics crossing the BBB
- P-gp is non-specific (over 300 known substrates). But WHY?



Searson



Schjøtt

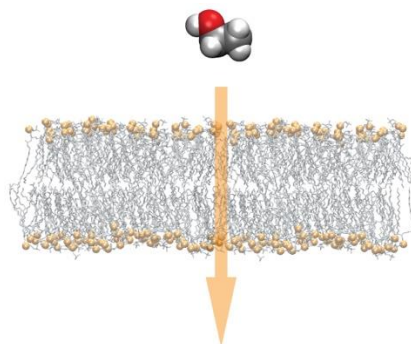
Computing time



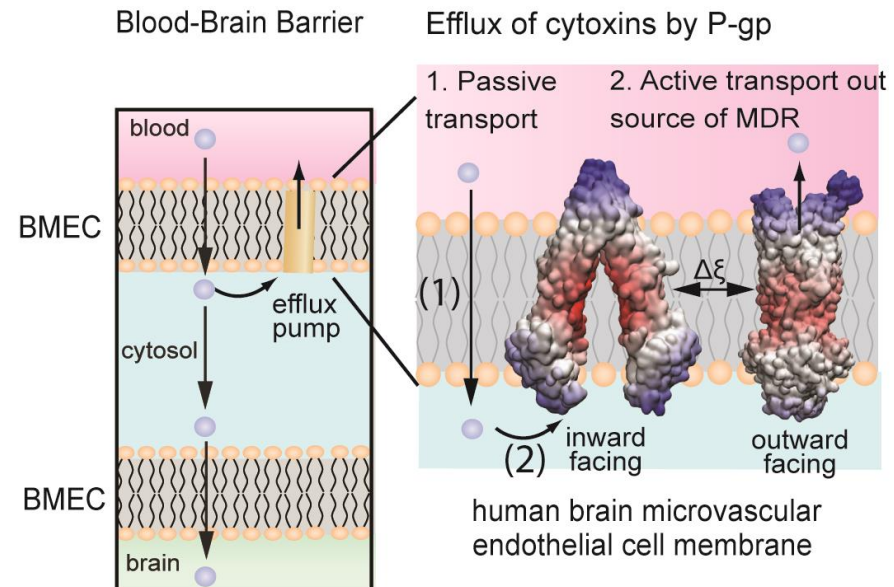
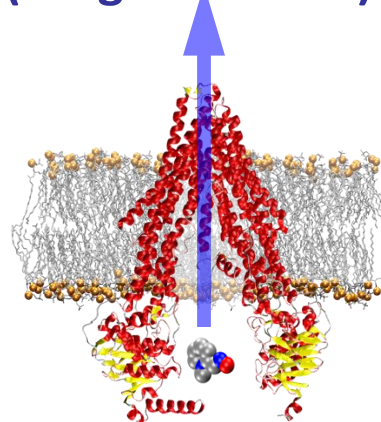
Funding: MSCA IF 101023783



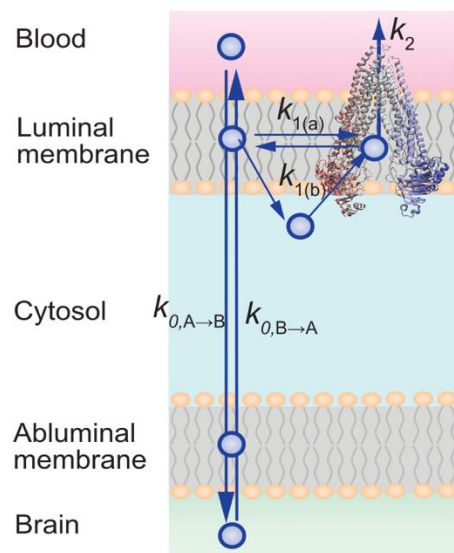
1. Passive CNS penetration



2. Efflux out (drug resistance)

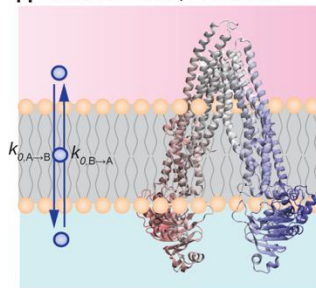


1. Kinetic model

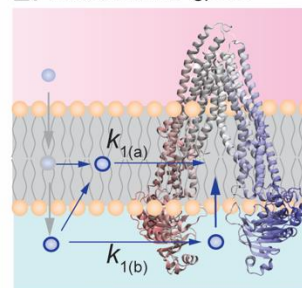


- Understand substrate interaction with P-gp in terms of rate constants k_0 , $k_{1(a)}$ and $k_{1(b)}$
- Use simulations to estimate the three k values to mathematically **understand** efflux

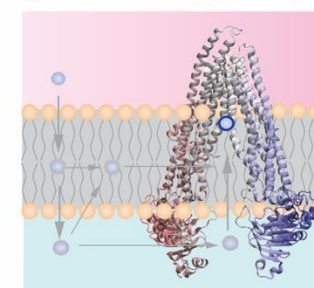
1. Passive CNS penetration



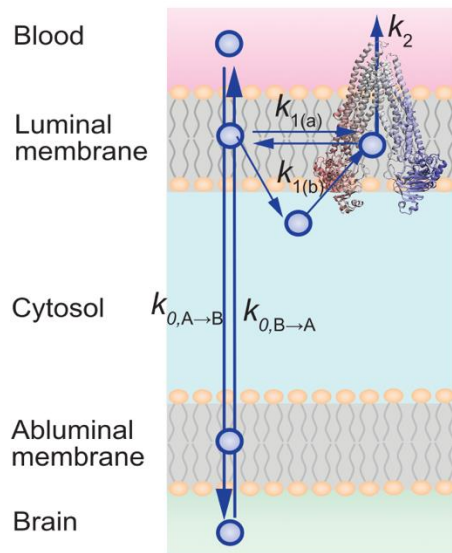
2. Diffusion into P-gp site



3. Substrate binding in cavity

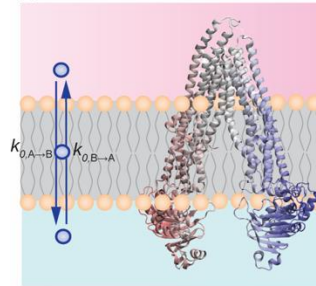


1. Kinetic model

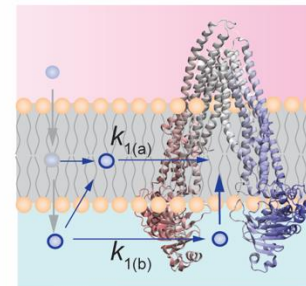


- Understand substrate interaction with P-gp in terms of rate constants k_0 , $k_{1(a)}$ and $k_{1(b)}$
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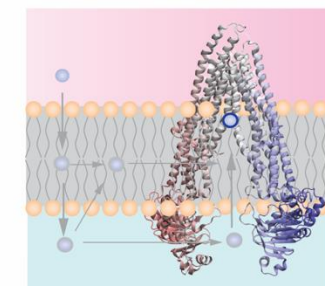
1. Passive CNS penetration



2. Diffusion into P-gp site

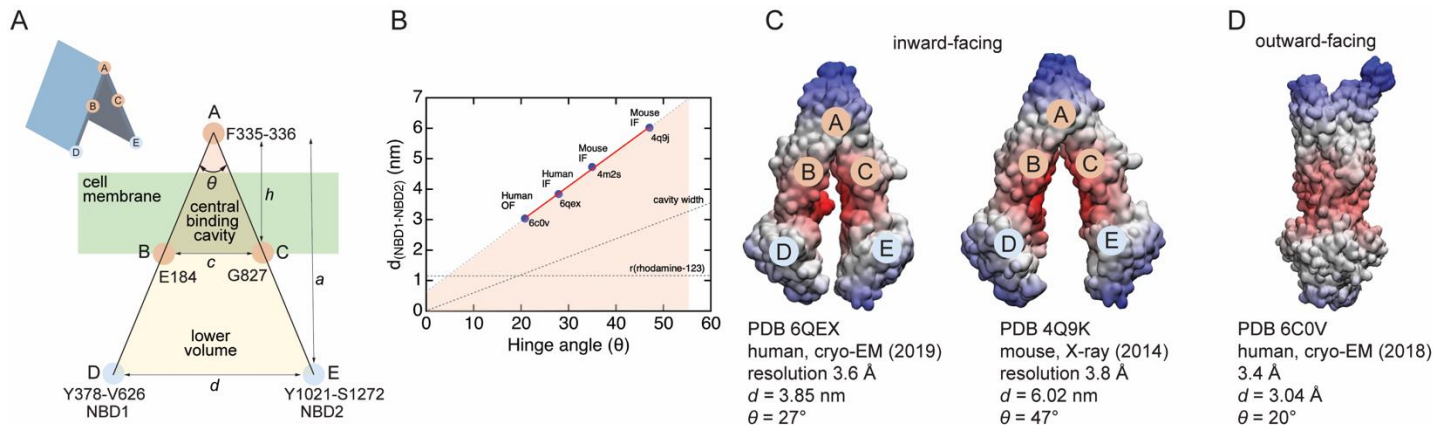


3. Substrate binding in cavity

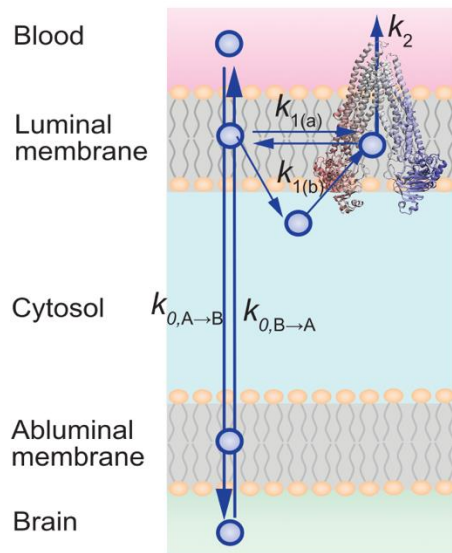


2. Geometric model

- Understand P-gp conformational dynamics



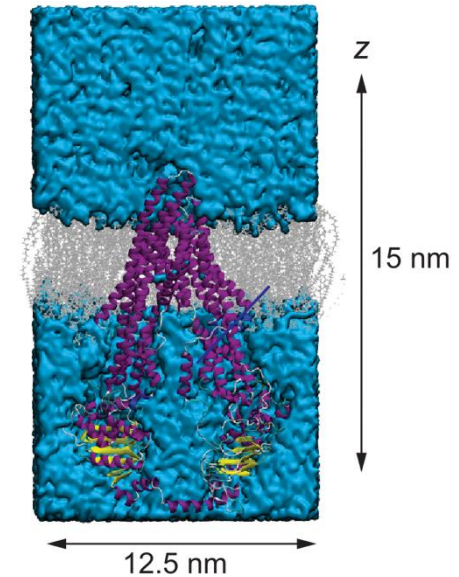
1. Kinetic model



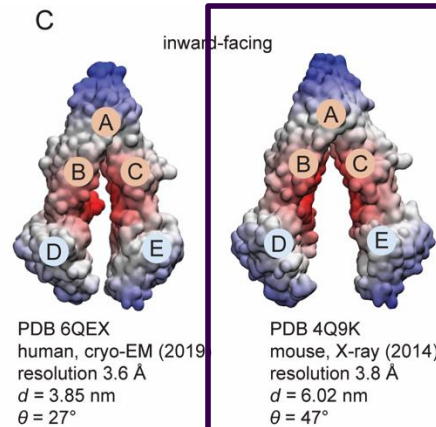
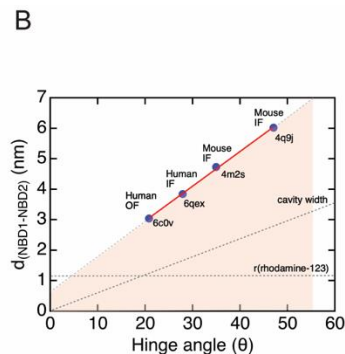
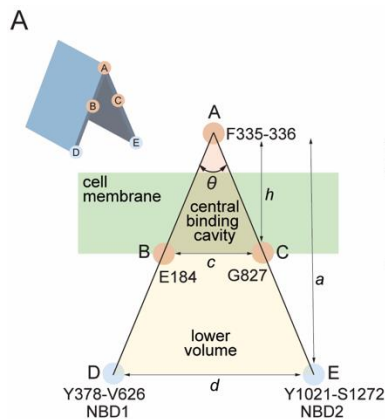
- Understand substrate interaction with P-gp in terms of rate constants k_0 , $k_{1(a)}$ and $k_{1(b)}$

- Use simulations to estimate the three k values to mathematically **understand efflux**

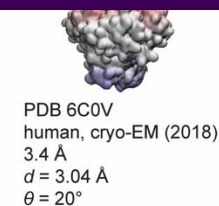
3. Simulation model

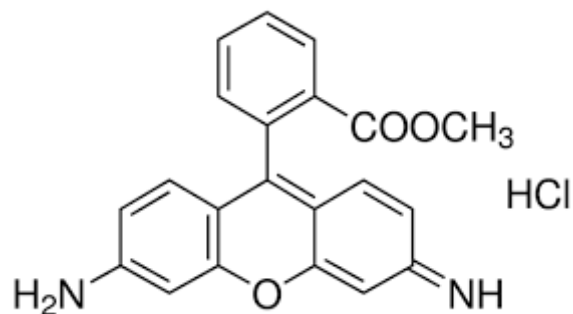


2. Geometric model



We believe this structure gives us best chance to observe spontaneous entry on tractable timescales

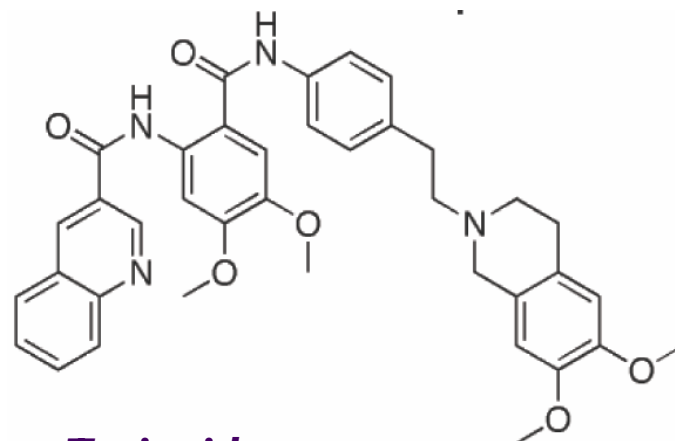




Rhodamine-123

$P_{app} \sim 1 \times 10^{-7} \text{ cm s}^{-1}$ (slow transport)

Efflux ratio ~ 5 (i.e. P-gp substrate)



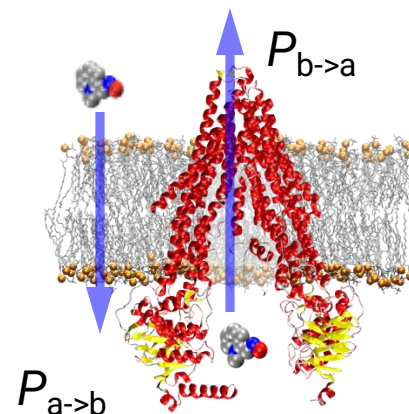
Tariquidar

Potent third-generation inhibitor

$k_d = 5.1 \text{ nM}$

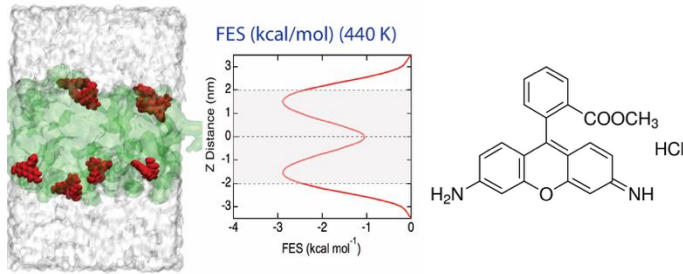
- Direct substrate entry into P-gp has **never** been observed experimentally or in a simulation
- 1st gen. inhibitors have been observed crystallographically bound in P-gp central binding cavity but the **mechanism of inhibition** is disputed

$$\text{Efflux ratio} = P_{b \rightarrow a} / P_{a \rightarrow b}$$

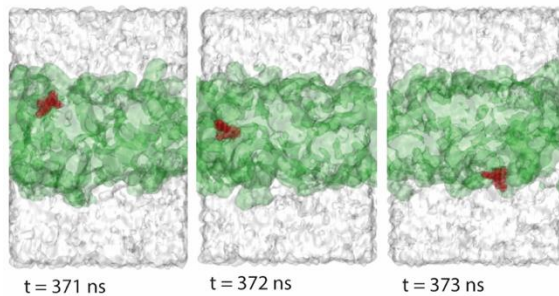


(1) Passive diffusion k_0

A. Rhodamine membrane partitioning

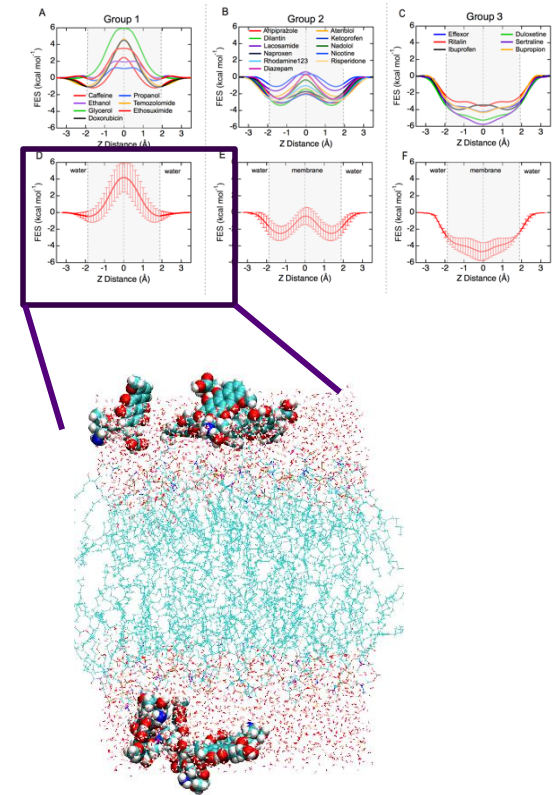


B. Rhodamine passive translocation (440 K)

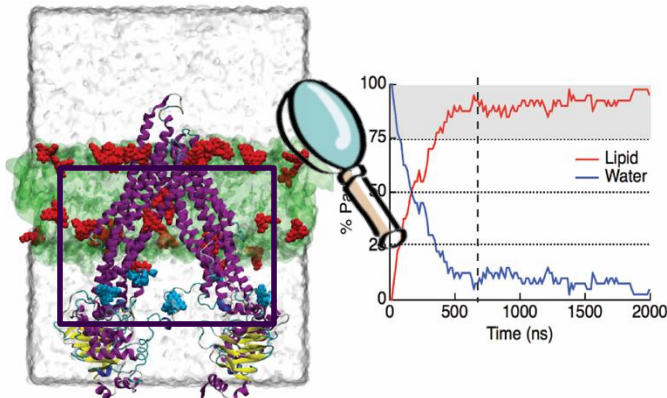


- The free energy surface for partitioning of rhodamine at 440 K has an **energy maximum** at the **hydrophobic core** of the bilayer ($z = 0.0$ nm) and **energy minima** (with respect to bulk solution) in the polar headgroup regions ($z = \pm 1.7$ nm)

- Consistent with the observation that rhodamine-123 accumulates in mitochondrial membranes.



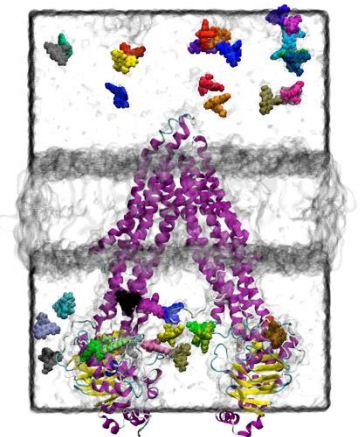
(2) Flooding simulation for k_1 of rhodamine in a P-gp BBB system



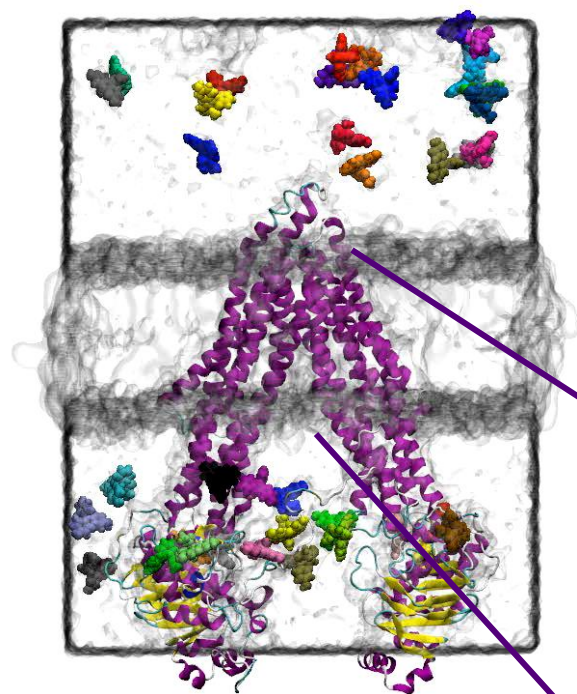
- **80% of rhodamine-123** molecules accumulate in the membrane

Simulation specs

GROMACS 2020
CHARMM-36 ff
2.0 μ s simulation
40 rhodamine in box



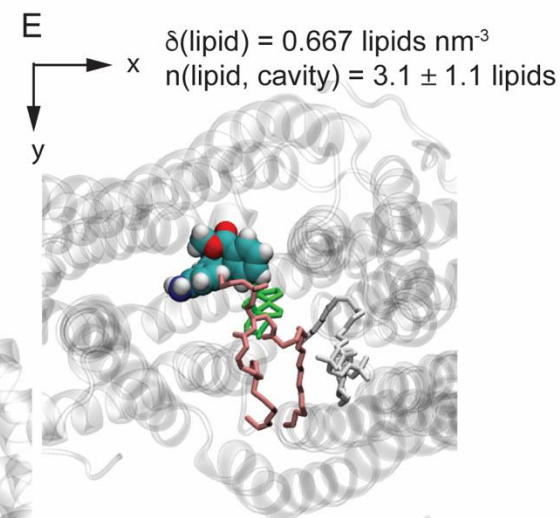
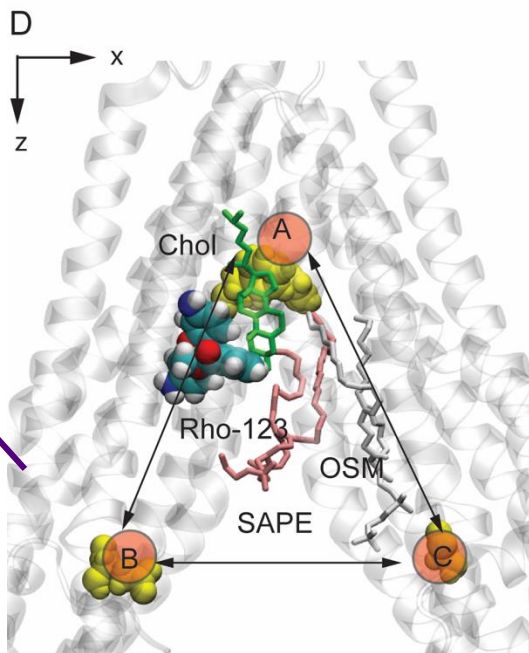
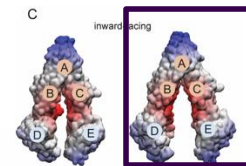
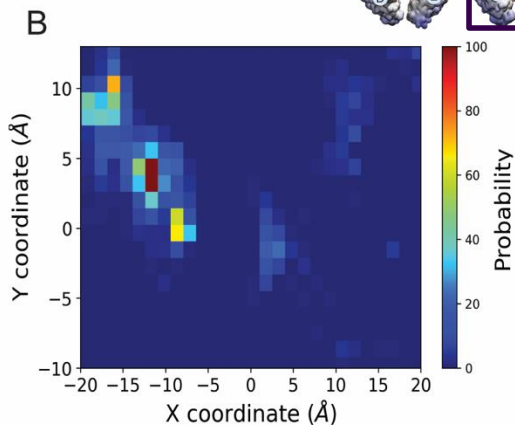
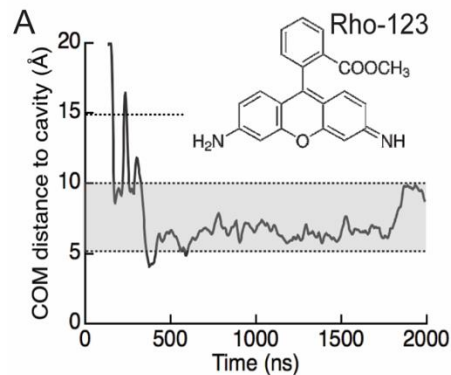
➤ Substrate entry observed for the first time via simulations



Simulation specs

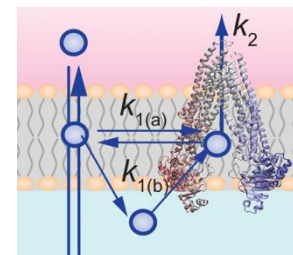
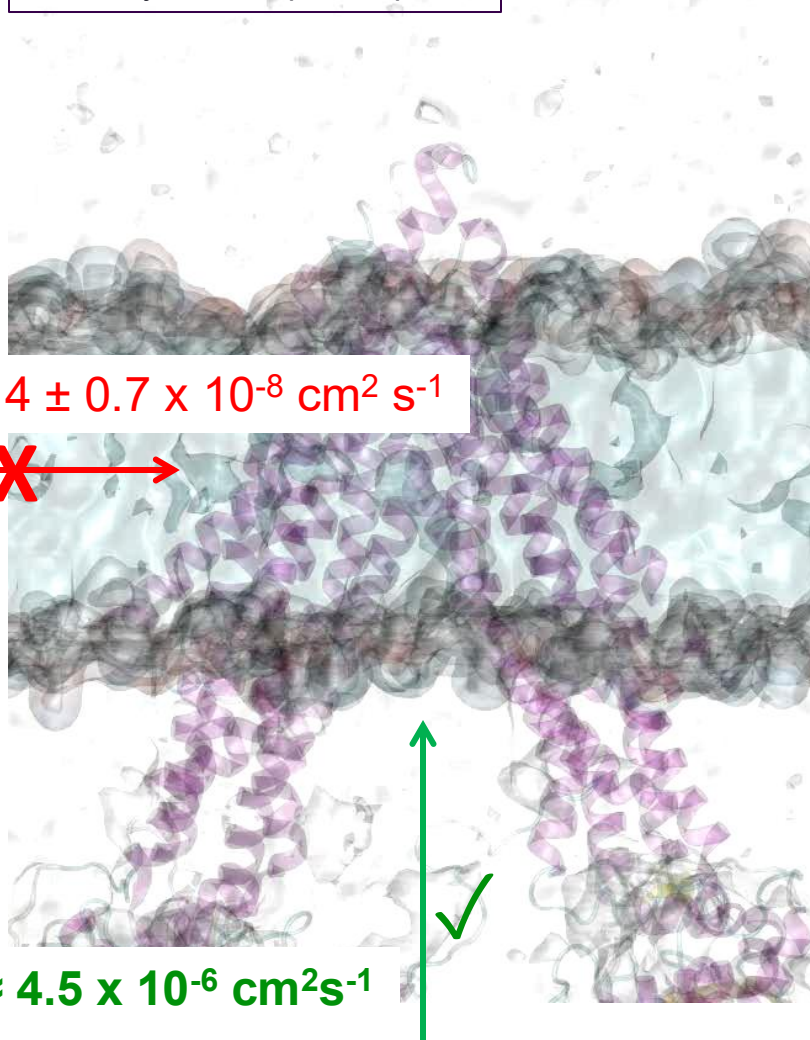
GROMACS 2020
CHARMM-36 ff
2.0 μ s simulation
40 rhodamine in box

1. Unbiased flooding simulation



➤ k_1 estimation: Lateral ($k_{1(a)}$) vs. aqueous ($k_{1(b)}$) pathways

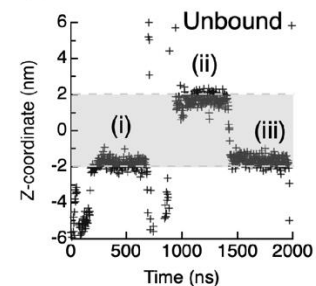
~100 days on a supercomputer



➤ **Lateral diffusion mechanism**

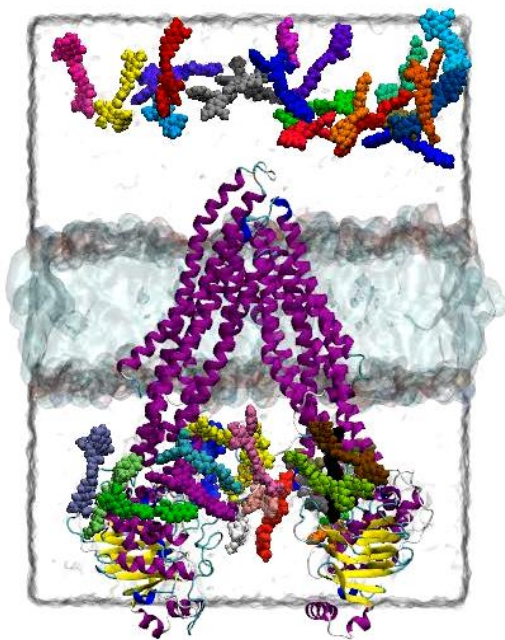
$k_{1(a)}$: Lateral diffusion constant, D_L , of a rhodamine in the minimum free-energy well was estimated from least-squares fit of the mean-square displacement (MSD) as $D_L \approx 4 \pm 0.7 \times 10^{-8} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$

B Lateral diffusion



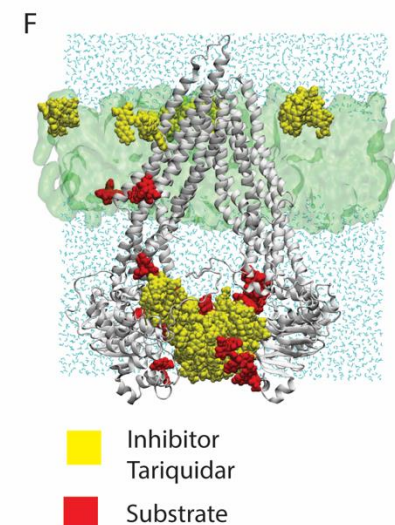
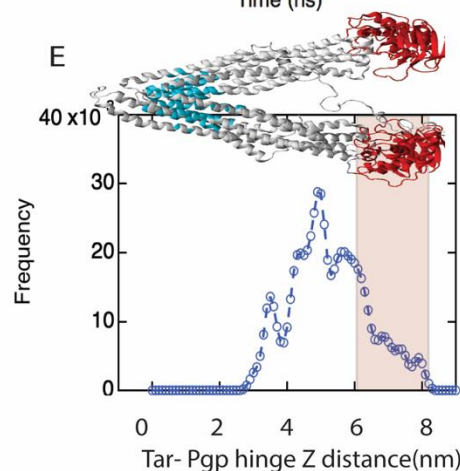
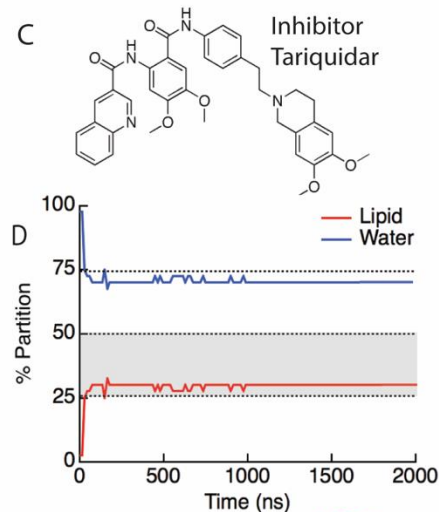
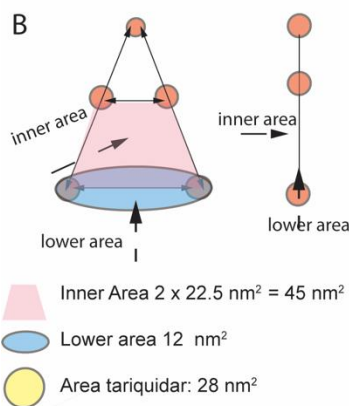
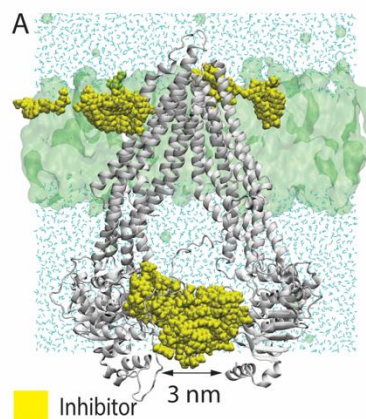
- **Aqueous diffusion mechanism $k_{1(b)}$** : From MSD of rhodamine-123 diffusion in bulk: $D \approx 4.5 \times 10^{-6} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$
- **Conclusion**: Aqueous pathway much more likely. We estimate **only 5.6 %** rhodamine molecules crossing the membrane laterally into the P-gp cavity.

Inhibition of P-gp by tariquidar via MD simulation

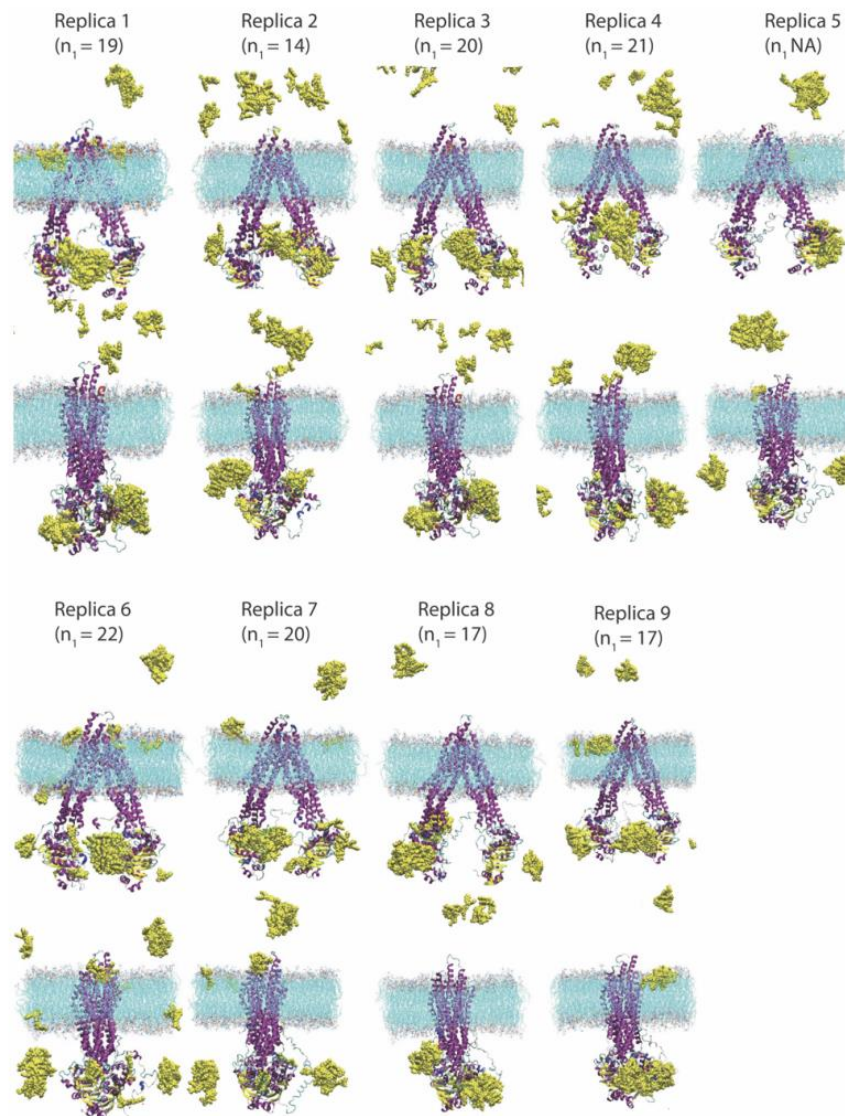
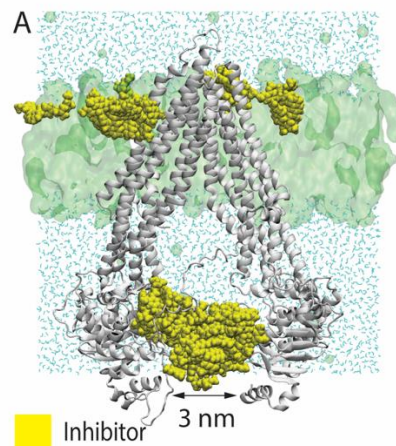


Sim. Specs

GROMACS 2020
CHARMM-36 ff
2.0 μ s simulation
40 tariquidar in box



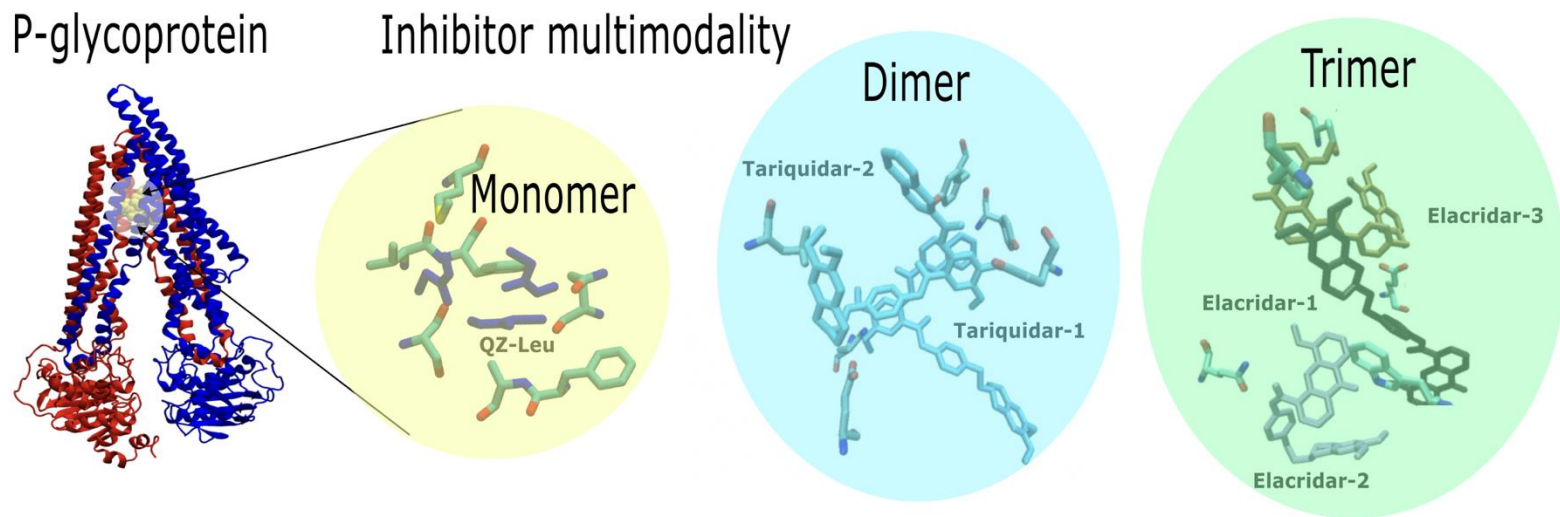
Replicates suggest tariquidar aggregation (19 ± 1) is an early stage in the inhibition mechanism



Sim. Specs

GROMACS 2020
CHARMM-36 ff
2.0 μ s simulation
40 tariquidar in box

Replicates suggest tariquidar aggregation (19 ± 1) is an early stage in the inhibition mechanism



Special Issue

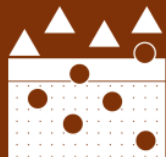
Simulation and Artificial
Intelligence Method
Development for Complex
Membrane Transport

Guest Editor

Dr. Christian Jorgensen

Deadline

10 May 2026



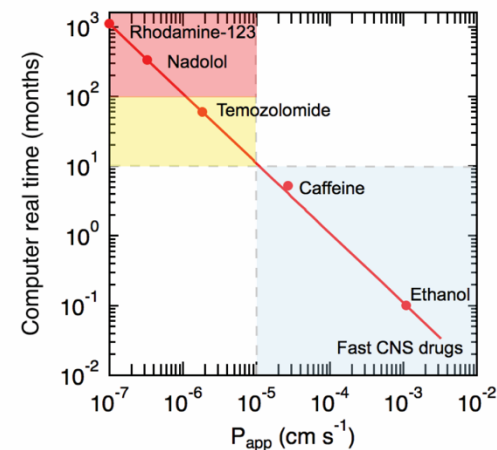
membranes

IMPACT
FACTOR
3.6

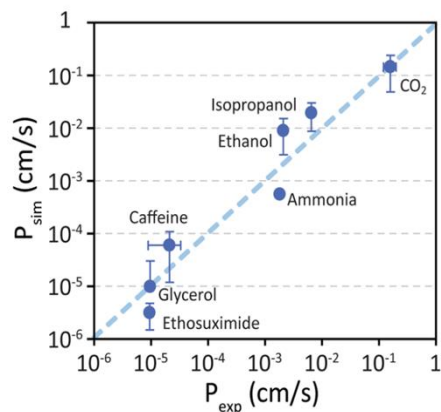
Indexed in:
PubMed

CITESCORE
7.9

- ❖ **Kramers-based methodology (1)** yields closest agreement to experiment but is a costly procedure.
- ❖ **Linear regression analysis (2)** yields sub 1 OM agreement. Larger library size needs to be considered
- ❖ Bayesian post-hoc corrected values from Adaptive Biasing Force, as well as **Steered MD permeabilities from Green-Kubo (3)** eqns. yield ~2 OM faster perm. wrt P_{app}

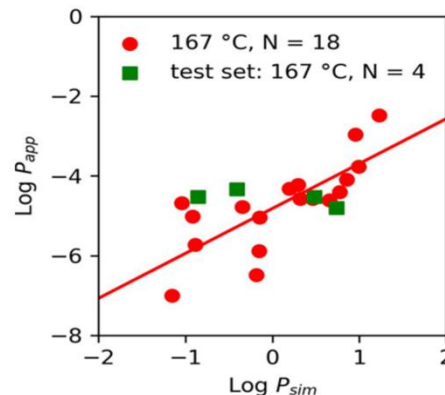


1. Kramers-based Arrhenius model Arrhenius extrapolation to 310 K with a correction in non-linear regime. Not routine.



Wang et al. *Sci. Rep.*, 2019

2. Regression based models Regression with high-T data. Accuracy to ~1~2 OM on one GPU. Routine ranking of $>10^1$ molecules is now routine



Jorgensen et al. *JCAMD*, 2023
Jorgensen et al, *ACS Omega*, 2022

3. Permeability via the Green-Kubo equations with steered MD

$$\frac{1}{P} = \int_{-d}^d \frac{\exp(\beta \Delta G(z))}{D_z(z)} dz$$

$$D_z(z) = \frac{(RT)^2}{\int_0^\infty dt \langle \Delta F_z(z,t) \Delta F_z(z,0) \rangle}$$

Jorgensen et al. *JCIM*, 2025