Bacterial Outer Membrane Porins as Electrostatic Nanosieves: Exploring Transport Rules of Small Polar Molecules

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ABSTRACT: Transport of molecules through biological membranes is a fundamental process in biology, facilitated by selective channels and general pores. The architecture of some outer membrane pores in Gram-negative bacteria, common to other eukaryotic pores, suggests them as prototypes of electrostatically regulated nanosieve devices. In this study, we sensed the internal electrostatics of the two most abundant outer membrane channels of *Escherichia coli*, using norfl oxacin as a dipolar probe in single molecule electrophysiology. The voltage dependence of the association rate constant of norfl oxacin interacting with the se nanochannels follows an exponential trend, unexpected for neutral molecules. We combined electrophysiology, channel mutagenesis, and enhanced sampling molecular dynamics simulations to explain this molecular mechanism. Voltage and temperature dependent ion current measurements allowed us to quantify the transversal electric field inside the channel as well as the distance where the applied potential drops. Finally, we proposed a general model for transport of polar molecules through these electrostatic nanosieves. Our model helps to further understand the basis for permeability in Gram-negative pathogens, contributing to fill in the innovation gap that has limited the discovery of effective antibiotics in the last 20 years.

KEYWORDS: porins, transport, antibiotics, Gram-negative bacteria, single-molecule electrophysiology, molecular simulations, electric field

Transport of essential compounds like nutrients, ions, vitamins, or even proteins through biological membranes is a fundamental process, often driven by diffusion.1 Due to the hydrophobic nature of the membranes, polar compounds will likely use one or several membrane nanochannels as main path for overcoming the membrane barrier. In the case of Gram-negative bacteria, these channels, also called porins, are β-barrel transmembrane proteins constricted in the central region by the presence of an internal loop that hinders free diffusion. Other biological channels like the mitochondrial VDAC2,3 or the CymA pore in *Klebsiella oxytoca*4 share a similar architecture. In the *Escherichia coli* general porins OmpF/OmpC the constricted area, which is decorated with charged residues, has a double function: to preserve the permeability barrier of the outer membrane and to filter both desired and noxious polar molar molecules like nutrients and antibiotics, making them a suitable prototype for electrostatic nanosieve devices. In previous studies, these porins have been already recognized as nanodevices for ion-current rectification5 and for orientation-based filtering of small molecules,6–8 e.g., aquaporins.9,10 However, the molecular mechanism modulating passive transport of small polar molecules is still unknown.11 Both the lack of knowledge on the physical/chemical rules for filtering and of robust methods to measure transport through bacterial membrane represent today a severe bottleneck in drug discovery.12–15

Nowadays, mass spectroscopic techniques are available to measure accumulation of molecules in relatively large compartments, whereas the small bacteria are still a challenge.16 Intrinsic fluorescence has been used as a detection method to quantify both *in vitro*17 and *in vivo*18,19 the uptake across proteins, but unfortunately it is limited to only certain classes of molecules. Previous attempts have shed some light into
molecule-channel interactions using electrophysiology combined with all atom modeling. In a number of cases, the penetration of antibiotics into the channel causes substantial flickering in the ion current.20 In case of strong interactions current blockages can be used to propose a translocation model, though blockages themselves provide information on the interaction with the channel and only indirectly on the transport.20 Nevertheless, application of an external electric potential can have an effect on the residence time that allows to clearly distinguish between translocation and repulsion of charged molecules.20 Experiments of pulling charged polymers like DNA or proteins have been performed quite extensively in model pores to understand their translocation mechanism and for biosensing applications.21,22 Charged molecules like peptides can be pulled through the pore23 by applied electric potential, and neutral molecules may be dragged by electro-osmotic effect when ions diffuse through the charge selective pores.24−26 However, in the case of transport across porins of small polar molecules, like nutrients or drugs, detailed voltage effects on the kinetics have not been reported so far.27,28

In this study, we revealed the rules behind transport of polar molecules by using OmpF and OmpC porins as prototypes. Unlike previous investigations, where ions were used to sense the internal electrostatics of channels,27 here we used a rigid dipolar (zwitterionic) molecular probe, the norfloracin antibiotic. In contrast with the linear signature of charged polymers pulling or electro-osmosis, we report here an unexpected strong exponential voltage dependence of the kinetic rate constants of the antibiotic interacting with the pores.

By combining enhanced sampling molecular dynamics simulations with single-channel electrophysiology experiments on selected mutants, we propose a two-step kinetic model for the transport of polar molecules through the OmpF model pore. By using this simple model, we can estimate the transversal electric field in the narrowest region of the channel and quantify the distance where the applied potential drops, ultimately suggesting general rules for polar molecules transport across electrostatic nanosieves.

RESULTS

Experimental Results. Norfloxacin is present in a zwitterionic isoform at pH 7 with a large electric dipole moment, 44 D compared to its anionic (25 D) or cationic (27 D) forms (SI, Figure S1).8 In order to investigate at a macroscopic time scale the interaction between norfloxacin and OmpF, we performed single-molecule electrophysiology experiments (Figure 1 as described in Materials and Methods Section) with single OmpF trimers reconstituted in planar lipid membranes. Upon addition of 100 μM norfloxacin to the cis (extracellular) side of the channel we observed well resolved full monomer blockages with a long average residence time, about 1.5 ms at −100 mV. In contrast, at +100 mV, we observed a significantly less number of events with lower average residence time, about 0.2 ms. On the other hand,
addition of norflaxacin to the trans side (periplasmic) of the channel causes visibly fewer fluctuations with an average residence time of 50 μs at +100 mV, while no significant events were observed at −100 mV. This asymmetric behavior upon voltage and side of addition, SI, Figure S2, reveals at least two different affinity sites for norflaxacin inside OmpF: a high affinity site (characterized by large residence times; at negative polarity) accessible from the extracellular side (referred as extracellular side 1: ES1) and a low affinity site (characterized by short residence time; at positive polarity) accessible from the periplasmic side (referred as periplasmic side 1: PS1).

The voltage dependence of both the association and the dissociation rates were measured at high and low salt concentration, 1 M KCl and 200 mM KCl, respectively, at pH 7 in the range of −200 to 200 mV. As shown in Figure 2c, an interesting exponential increase of the association rate is observed with increasing negative voltage when the antibiotic is added to the extracellular side, unexpected for a neutral molecule. The dissociation rate increases with increasing applied voltage at both polarities (Figure 2d). At both salt concentrations the trend of voltage dependence is similar, but the association rate and the residence time (reciprocal to the dissociation rate) are higher at 200 mM KCl than at 1 M KCl in the voltage range considered. A stronger interaction at lower salt concentration in both kinetic rates (Figure 2) indicates that the antibiotic interaction with the channel is dominated by electrostatic interactions. At voltages greater than 125 mV (negative polarity) we observed a second type of event with distinguishable shorter relaxation times, referred to as ES2 affinity site, SI, Figures S3 and S4. For such events we do not have a sufficient range to conclude on the voltage dependence, as the bilayer and the pore become unstable above 200 mV.

**Activation Enthalpy Calculations.** We measured the temperature dependence of the kinetic rate constants for norflaxacin/OmpF-WT in the 200 mM KCl solution from 10 to 35 °C. The exponential dependence of the measured kinetic rate constants for the system (SI, Figure S5a–d) on the applied voltage and on the temperature suggests that the antibiotic kinetics inside the channel is regulated by a free energy barrier described by a Van’t Hoff-Arrhenius type law.30–32 Therefore, we can define a two-state kinetic model and determine the energy barrier from the electrophysiology data for the entry into the current-blocking binding site (the association barrier), and for the exit from the same site (the dissociation barrier). Following the classical result of the transition-state theory,27 one may represent the kinetic rates as

\[
k = A e^{-\Delta G^*/k_B T} = A e^{\Delta S^*/k_B - \Delta H^*/k_B T}
\]

where \(\Delta G^*\) is the activation free energy, \(\Delta H^*\) and \(\Delta S^*\) are the activation enthalpy, \(\Delta H^*\), and entropy, \(\Delta S^*\), respectively, and \(k_B\) is the Boltzmann constant. In eq 1, the kinetic rate, \(k\), stands for either the association rate constant, \(k_{on}\), or the dissociation rate constant, \(k_{off}\), with its corresponding activation free energy, activation entropy, activation enthalpy, and pre-exponential factor, \(A\).

Thus, by using the temperature dependence of the kinetic rate constants, determined in the electrophysiology measurements, it is possible to calculate the corresponding activation enthalpies (Figure 3 and SI, Figure S5) from the slope of the linear fit of \(\ln k\) vs \(1/(k_B T)\).

In the range \([-75 mV, +75 mV]\), the activation enthalpy for dissociation is constant (9 kcal/mol), while the association activation enthalpy linearly depends on the applied voltage:

\[
\Delta H_{on}^* = c + \beta V
\]

where the coefficients \(c\) and \(\beta = \partial \Delta H_{on}^* / \partial V\) determine the voltage-independent and the voltage-dependent part of the activation enthalpy, respectively, which values are presented in Table 1.

At large negative voltages the linear regime is broken and the association activation enthalpy saturates to the constant value of −10 kcal/mol (Figure 3). In contrast, the activation enthalpy for the dissociation stays within 5 to 10 kcal/mol without any specific trend at higher negative voltages.

**Mutagenesis and Validation of Affinity Sites.** In order to identify the affinity sites of norflaxacin, we performed
channel mutagenesis in the central region of the pore, R167E/R168E, D121A, D113N, and E117Q, and reconstituted the mutated porins in a planar lipid bilayer. In the double mutant R167E/R168E, the channel exhibits an asymmetric behavior in the association rate, with respect to voltage and side of addition of the antibiotic (Figure 4a). Further, the exponential dependence on applied voltage is maintained. On the other hand, the dissociation constant (Figure 4b and SI, Figure S7) is voltage independent and is enhanced by a factor 40 with respect to the WT, suggesting the involvement of these two residues in the binding process. The same asymmetry, upon addition and voltage, and exponential dependence with respect to applied voltage holds in OmpC WT but with a less steep slope (SI, Figure S8).

The substitution of one of the three acidic residues present in the constricting loop with neutral amino acids destroys the asymmetry upon side addition, as shown in Figure 4c,d and SI, Figure S9 for D113N and SI, Figure S10 for D121A and E117Q. Likewise, the exponential dependence of the association constant disappears for D113N and is weaker for the other two (D121A and E117Q). The dissociation constant for D113N is voltage independent, suggesting the involvement of this residue in the binding site ES1.

**Molecular Description with MD Simulations.** Starting from the available high-resolution structure of OmpF (PDBID: 2OMF) we used enhanced sampling molecular dynamics simulations (metadynamics) to provide an atomistic view of the interaction of norfloxacin with the channel along the diffusion path. In previous works,35,36 two crucial regions for transport along the axis of diffusion (z, Figure 5a) were identified: (i) the preorientation region (PR), (from 5 Å < z < 10 Å; shaded in yellow in Figure 6) with R167, R168, and D121 as key motifs, and (ii) the constriction region (CR) (from 5 Å < z < −5 Å; shaded in purple in Figure 6) which key motifs are the positively charged residues of the basic ladder (R42, R82, R132, K16) and the negatively charged residues of the constricting loop L3 (D113 and E117). These two regions have been previously described as the positive and negative selectivity filters of OmpF.35 Both regions are characterized by a strong electric field component perpendicular to the axis of diffusion, more intense in the CR than in the PR.33

Figure 5b shows the reconstructed free energy surface of the translocation of norfloxacin through OmpF WT without any applied voltage (0 mV) at 1 M KCl salt concentration. A first deep minimum (MD-ES0) is located in the PR (highlighted in green): as it can be observed in Figure 5c, MD-ES0 norfloxacin interacts with the key motifs of the PR, the two arginines R167/168 and D121 of loop L3, exactly in the same conformation as ampicillin in the cocrystal structure recently obtained by soaking.35 It is worth to note that ampicillin and norfloxacin, with their charged groups located at the two end sides, share similar shape and electrostatics properties but different flexibility.6 From this position there are two alternative pathways in the free energy surface, which allow norfloxacin to be transported through the CR of OmpF: it can enter the CR (i) either with its carboxylic group pointing toward the basic ladder (left-side, from 0 to 100 degrees, highlighted red path) (ii) or with its positive (amino) group interacting with the constricting loop (right-side, from 100 to 180 deg, highlighted blue path), toward the MD-ES1 minimum. These two paths are also observed when simulating norfloxacin in OmpF at low salt concentration (SI, Figure S12).

Additional MD experiments were performed for the passage of norfloxacin with an applied potential (−500 mV) at high salt concentration (1 M KCl), for the OmpF-WT (Figure 5c) and for the double mutant OmpF-R167E/R168E (Figure 5d), with norfloxacin added always to the cis side (positive z values) of the pore. In the case of OmpF-WT, as it can be observed in Figure 5c, the applied potential favors the passage through the second pathway (highlighted blue path in Figure 5c, f, and g), characterized by norfloxacin approaching the CR with its positive group toward the constricting loop L3. At high voltages (−500 mV) MD-ES0 is no longer present and a different minimum is found in which the molecule maintains its contact with R167 and R168 (MD-ES2 Figure 5f). From the MD trajectories, it is also noticeable that at high voltage R167 an R168 are oriented toward the CR following the applied field, accompanying the insertion of norfloxacin. The mutation of these two arginines (R167 and R168) with aspartate has strong consequences on the channel-molecule interactions. As shown in Figure 5d and g, the ampicillin-like minimum in the PR is lost because the preorientation transversal electric field is reduced (SI, Figure S13) and the insertion of norfloxacin in the CR with the positive group (blue pathway) is enhanced.

**DISCUSSION**

**Kinetic Model.** Combining MD results and mutagenesis data from electrophysiology, we propose a kinetic model for the applied voltage dependence observed (Figure 2c) for norfloxacin association rate. Upon cis addition, electrophysiology experiments suggest the presence of two different
affinity sites in which the molecule blocks the current, ES1 and ES2, the latter observed only at high voltages and negative polarity. ES1 corresponds to MD-ES1 (Figure 6) in MD simulations. In this conformation the ionic current of the trimer, calculated from the MD, is decreased by a 30% (2.2 nS with respect to 3.1 nS for the empty trimer, SI, Figure S14, SI, Table S1). ES2 corresponds to MD-ES2 (Figure 5 c,f) in the middle of PR-CR (Figure 6).

In the absence of the applied voltage (Figure 5b,e), before arriving to the high affinity site (MD-ES1/ES1), norflxacin is aligned in the PR region (MD-ES0, Figure 5b,e) to the internal electric field of the channel33 (SI, Figure S13), forming an angle of ∼55° with the diffusion axis (Figure 6). Due to its size and rigidity norflxacin cannot enter in the narrow CR in this conformation (MD-ES0). Consequently, it is obliged to reorient and misalign with respect to the internal electric field. This reorientation, from MD-ES0 to MD-ES1, is driven by the selectivity of the CR for positive charges. Thus, the permeation process can be described with a two-step kinetic model: aligning and flipping of the molecule inside the channel (Figure 7).

The addition of a negative external voltage reduces the barrier for norflxacin reorientation (or flipping) from the MD-ES0 conformation to MD-ES1 (∼90° rotation at 0 mV, Figure 6). As norflxacin is neutral under the chosen measurement conditions, the only direct (linear) interaction between the molecule and the constant applied electric field, $E_a$ acting along the channel diffusion axis is via its dipole moment projection, $D_z$. Thus, at small-applied voltages, the voltage dependent part of the activation enthalpy for the association (eq 2) reads:

$$\beta V = -E_a \Delta D_z$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

$\Delta D_z = D_{z1} - D_{z0}$, is the difference between the molecular dipole moment projection onto the channel axis at the top of the barrier and that in the PR, MD-ES0. This explains the observed linear dependence of the activation enthalpy for association on the applied voltage in the range $[-75; +75]$ mV, Figure 3.

At high voltages the linear regime is no longer valid (Figure 3), and the molecule is aligned by the superimposition of the applied voltage (external electric field) and the intrinsic electric field, leading to the new low affinity MD-ES2/ES2 site (Figure 6) in which norflxacin forms 130° with the axis of diffusion. This also results in the saturation effect of the activation enthalpy for the association, Figure 3.

Conversely, the activation enthalpy for the dissociation, is voltage independent in the $[-75; +75]$ mV range, Figure 3: norflxacin in both the MD-ES1/ES1 site and at the top of the barrier is already inside the constriction region and cannot change orientation. The strong voltage dependence of the dissociation rate constant starts at higher voltage and is probably related to the perturbation of the system, and in particular to the formation of binding site MD-ES2/ES2 at negative voltage.

Validation of the Kinetic Model with Mutagenesis Experiments. In the case of the double mutant (OmpF-R167E/R168E), the exponential voltage dependence of the association rate is present but, with a steeper dependence on the applied voltage, suggesting a lower activation barrier to enter in the CR (Figure 4a). The new negative charges reduce the electric field in the PR and induce the molecule to orient...
with the positive amino group ahead, already prealigned to enter the binding site, thus decreasing the barrier.

The point mutation on the negative residue of the PR (OmpF-D121A) also affects the initial orientation of norfloxacin. In this case, the molecule orients in the PR with its negative group ahead, requiring a larger reorientation (higher barrier) to enter ES1/MD-ES1 (SI, Figure S10).

If one neutralizes a negative charge in the CR (OmpF-D113N), both the entry and the exit barrier of the molecule are affected, as reflected in the disappearance of the exponential voltage dependence of both the kinetic rates (Figure 4c,d). Because of the lower selectivity (SI, Table S2) and the reduction of electric field (SI, Figure S13), norfloxacin can enter with both orientations guided by the polarity of the

**Figure 5.** Top: (a) Graphical description of metadynamics collective variables: Cv1 is the position of norfloxacin center of mass (cm) with respect to the cm of the channel along the axis of diffusion (Z) and Cv2 is the orientation angle of the dipole moment of norfloxacin with respect to the axis of diffusion of the channel (Z). (b,c) Reconstructed free energy surfaces for the translocation of norfloxacin through OmpF-WT, respectively, without and with an applied voltage of −500 mV; (d) the same as (c) for OmpF-R167E/R168E. Each isocontour corresponds to a free energy difference of 1 kcal/mol, with the absolute minimum equal to zero. Bottom (e,f,g): Cartoon representation of OmpF with norfloxacin affinity poses for the most relevant minima highlighted in green in the corresponding free-energy maps. The loop L3 is highlighted in orange and the intrinsic macroscopic electric field direction is depicted as black arrows. Norfloxacin is represented in licorice and with its electric dipole moment depicted as an arrow. Charged residues are represented in licorice, colored according to the net charge.

**Figure 6.** Representation of the three affinity sites of norfloxacin identified with MD simulations: MD-ES0 in the preorientation region (PR), interacting with R167-R168 and D121; MD-ES1 inside the constriction region (CR), interacting with D113-E117 and the basic-ladder; and MD-ES2 in between the two regions, interacting with R167-R168 and D113. For each site norfloxacin pose is represented in licorice as well as the OmpF charged residues, colored according to their net charge and appropriately labeled. The preorientation region is highlighted in yellow and the constriction region in purple. The orientation of the main axis of norfloxacin with respect to the axis of diffusion of the channel is reported on a polar plot for the three affinity sites.
Figure 7. Schematic representation of the kinetic model suggested in this work. From top: norfloxacin seen as a rigid dipole; norfloxacin interacting with the internal electric field near and at the CR; energetics of norfloxacin near (MD-ES0) and at (MD-ES1/ES1) the CR. The purple square indicates the affinity site where the current is blocked.

CONCLUSIONS

We used OmpF as a model pore to understand the electrostatic filtering mechanism of small polar molecules. In the absence of a transmembrane potential, the filtering mechanism is modulated only by the internal electrostatics of the channel, thus acting as an electrostatic nanosieve. We used norfloxacin as a rigid dipolar molecular probe to sense and quantify experimentally the internal electric field inside OmpF. A two-step kinetic model is suggested to describe the molecule pore interaction. Within our model, the dipolar molecule is aligned to the electric field inside the channel in the first step (MD-ES0 conformation) and must be reoriented (MD-ES1 conformation) in order to be transported, due to the size-exclusion effect imposed by the constricted region of the channel (Figure 7). This reorientation or flipping step is affected by the applied voltage and favors the insertion of the positive charged group before, displaying a marked exponential signature in the association rate measured by single-molecule electrophysiology.

Our results show that the central regions of OmpF (PR and CR) ultimately dictates a few basic rules for transport: (i) the charge selectivity of the channel determines which is the chemical group of the molecule penetrating first into the CR, positive in the case of WT-OmpF (ii) the ability of the molecule to rearrange its conformation in order to align its dipole to the intrinsic electric field of the channel and at the same time to fit inside the channel, helps to reduce the steric barrier. According to these rules, a small polar molecule with charged groups, designed so that its dipole moment has a component perpendicular to its main axis, will partially compensate the steric constraint by aligning at the same time its main axis and dipole inside the charge decorated constricted area. The proposed model also shows the importance of using temperature and applied voltage dependent single-channel/ single-molecule electrophysiology measurements to extract the key parameters of the molecule-channel interaction.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Experiments and analysis for bilayer experiments have been performed as described in detail previously. We have used Montal and Muller technique form phospholipid bilayer using DPhPC (Avanti polar lipids). A Teflon cell comprising an aperture of approximately 30–60 μm diameters was placed between the two chambers of the cuvette.
reconstructed free-energy for norfloroxacin through OmpF at low ion concentration; internal electric field of OmpF/OmpC and mutants OmpF R167E/R168E, OmpF D113N; calculated ion current for OmpF with and without norfloroxacin bound; ion selectivity of all measured channels; calculations for activation enthalpy and details on electric field calculation (PDF)

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+H.B. and S.A.G. contributed equally to this work. H.B. performed electrophysiology experiments. S.A.G. and G.M. performed modeling of antibiotics and MD simulations. I.B. and H.B. performed analysis and fitting of temperature and voltage electrophysiology data. M.A.S., M.W., and M.C. designed the research. All contributed to writing the manuscript.

Notes
The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research leading to these results was conducted as part of the Translocation consortium (www.translocation.eu) and has received support from the Innovative Medicines Initiatives Joint Undertaking under Grant Agreement Nr. 115525, resources which are composed of financial contribution from the European Union’s seventh framework programme (FP7/2007-2013) and EFPIA companies in kind contribution. S.A.G. is funded by EU FP7-PEOPLE-2013-ITN Translocation network Nr. 607694. MC thanks the PRAE consortium for the use of the Research Infrastructure CURIE based in France at TGCC through the project Tier-0 nr. RA2699.

REFERENCES


ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information
The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acsnano.6b08613.

Structure, charge, and dipole of norfloroxacin subforms; single channel ion current traces for OmpF/OmpC WT and mutants OmpF R167E/R168E, OmpF D113N, in the presence of norfloroxacin; association and dissociation kinetic constants of norfloroxacin as a function of voltage in OmpF/OmpC, OmpF-D113N, OmpF-D113A, OmpF-E117Q; single channel ion current traces for OmpF in the presence of ciprofloxacin with association and dissociation kinetic constants as a function of voltage; power spectrum of norfloroxacin in OmpF and association/dissociation kinetic constants as a function of temperature; activation enthalpy for association/dissociation of norfloroxacin with OmpF as a function of temperature and voltage;


