Colourimetric Determination of Phospholipase Activities in *Balamuthia mandrillaris*

Syed Razi Haider
School of Biological and Chemical Sciences, Birkbeck College
University of London, WCIE 7HX London England UK

**Abstract:** *Balamuthia mandrillaris* is a recently identified protozoan pathogen that can cause fatal granulomatous encephalitis however the pathogenesis and pathophysiology associated with *Balamuthia* encephalitis remain unclear. We have recently isolated *B. mandrillaris* from a 33-years old male who died of encephalitis. Using this isolate, we demonstrated for the first time that *B. mandrillaris* exhibited phospholipase activities. More specifically, *B. mandrillaris* exhibited phospholipase A2 and phospholipase D activities. For the first time we used colourimetric technique based on spectrophotometer and designed phospholipases assays to determine these phospholipase activities. The functional role of phospholipases was determined in *in vitro* assays using human brain microvascular endothelial cells (HBMEC). We observed that PLA2-specific inhibitor i.e., cytidine 5'-diphosphocholine significantly inhibited *B. mandrillaris* binding to HBMEC. Similarly PLD inhibitor i.e., compound 48/80 inhibited *B. mandrillaris* binding to HBMEC. Moreover, both inhibitors inhibited *B. mandrillaris*-mediated HBMEC cytotoxicity. Overall these results clearly demonstrate that phospholipases are important virulence determinants in *B. mandrillaris*. Further studies will identify the precise role of phospholipases in the pathogenesis of *B. mandrillaris*, which may help develop therapeutic interventions. Using a novel spectrophotometric-based assay we demonstrated for the first time that *B. mandrillaris* exhibit phospholipase activities.

**Key words:** *Balamuthia mandrillaris*, Phospholipase A2, Phospholipase D, Adhesion, Cytotoxicity

**INTRODUCTION**

*Balamuthia mandrillaris* is a recently discovered protozoan pathogen that can cause fatal granulomatous encephalitis. It is believed that this organism is widely distributed in fresh water, soil and dust throughout the world. The first known isolate of this amoeba was from a mandrill Baboon who died of *B. mandrillaris* granulomatous encephalitis (BGE) [1]. The first time *B. mandrillaris* was recognised as causing encephalitis in humans in 1990 when first case was reported at Santa Cruz hospital California U.S.A [2]. Since then more than 105 fatalities attributed to *B. mandrillaris* [3] [4]. There have been only two survivors of BGE [5]. Thus the mortality is more than 98%.

Phospholipases are the enzymes, which catalyse the hydrolysis of specific ester bonds in phospholipids. Individuals enzymes are grouped on the basis of the bond they hydrolyse and are further categorized. The phospholipases are thus called phospholipase A, B, C and D. For the phospholipase A, a subscript 1 or 2 is added depending on whether the cleaved bond involved is at the sn-1 or sn-2, position of the phospholipid substrate.

The term phospholipase A is used for those enzymes, which catalyse the hydrolysis of the terminal or central acyl group from a membrane phospholipid. Phospholipase A is further classified into phospholipase A1 (PLA1) and phospholipase A2 (PLA2). Phospholipase A1 catalyzes the hydrolysis of the terminal acyl group from a phospholipid, generating a free fatty acid and a lysophospholipid and referred to as PLA1 because of its 1-acyl specificity. Phospholipase A2 represents a class of heat-stable calcium-dependent enzymes catalyzing the hydrolysis of the 2-acyl bond of 3-n-phosphoglycerides, generating a free fatty acid and a lysophospholipid. This enzyme is named phospholipase A2 to denote its 2-acyl specificity. Phospholipase A2 enzyme plays a significant role in the liberation of arachidonic acid from the sn-2 position of cellular phospholipids in most mammalian cells. The released arachidonic acid is used in many cases of the biosynthesis.

Phospholipase B (PLB) (synonyms: lysophospholipase, lysophospholipase-transacyclase) refers to an enzyme that can remove both sn-1 and sn-2 fatty acids, its...
nomenclature is confusing. This confusion arises because PLB has both hydrolase (fatty acid release) and lysophospholipase-transacylsylase (LPTA) activities. The hydrolase activity allows the enzyme to cleave fatty acids from both phospholipids (PLB activity) and lysophospholipids [lysophospholipase (Lyso-PL) activity], while the transacylsylase activity allows enzyme to produce phospholipid by transferring a free fatty acid to lysophospholipid.

Phospholipase C enzymes catalyze the hydrolysis of the phosphoric ester bond of a membrane phospholipid and generate a phosphorylated alcohol and diacylglycerol. They are important in the digestion of dietary phospholipids and in various processes dependent on hormonally induced calcium mobilization or arachidonic acid production, they occur in all mammalian tissues and as toxic secretion products of pathogens. Phospholipase D enzymes catalyze the hydrolysis of the alcohol group from a phospholipid, and generate the corresponding phosphatidate. They occur in various forms, predominantly in plants (e.g. cabbage), but in humans they may be a part of a mechanism to generate diacylglycerol for the mobilization of calcium in response to hormones. These enzymes are non-haemolytic but only in the presence of the cholesterol oxidase these PLDs show haemolytic activity. These enzymes have generally not been well studied but some of them are haemolysin, which are active preferentially towards sphingomyelin and degrades phospholipids [6]. The aim of this study was to determine Balamuthia mandrillaris special emphasis on their possible role in the virulence of this pathogen.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Human brain microvascular endothelial cells (HBMEC): Primary brain microvascular endothelial cells from human origin were obtained from our collaborator (Prof. K. S. Kim, John Hopkins University Baltimore, MA, USA). HBMEC were routinely grown in tissue culture flasks in RPMI containing 10% heat inactivated fetal bovine serum, 10% Nu-Serum, 2 mM glutamine, 1 mM pyruvate, penicillin (100 U/ml), streptomycin (100 µg/ml), 1% non-essential amino acids and 1% vitamins as previously described [7]. Media reagents were filtered using 0.2 M pore size filter and stored at 4°C and used within two weeks. Briefly, HBMEC were collected using trypsin and transferred into a 50 ml centrifuge tube. The cells were centrifuged at 750 x g for 5 min. The supernatants were aspirated and the pellet resuspended into fresh HBMEC media and inoculated into flasks. Flasks were incubated at 37°C in 5% CO2 incubator. For cytotoxicity and adhesion assays, HBMEC were grown into 24-well plates by inoculating 5 x 10^5 cells/well/ml. At this cell density, HBMEC formed confluent monolayers within 24 h and used for assays.

Balamuthia mandrillaris cultures: Two isolates of B. mandrillaris were used. First isolate was from the brain of a mandrill baboon (ATCC VO39) and the second isolate from the brain of a 33-year old patient who died of encephalitis [8]. Both isolates were cultured using HBMEC monolayers as food source. Briefly, 5 x 10^5 B. mandrillaris were incubated with HBMEC in serum free media (RPMI containing 2 mM glutamine, 1 mM pyruvate and 1% non-essential amino acids). Flasks were incubated at 37°C in a 5% CO2 incubator and observed daily. HBMEC monolayer degradation was observed within 3-4 days and resulted in approximately 5 x 10^6 amoebae (more than 95% amoebae in trophozoite forms).

Balamuthia mandrillaris were subsequently used in phospholipases, adhesion and cytotoxicity assays.

Phospholipase assays: Phospholipase D and Phospholipase A2 activities were determined by using a spectrophotometric-based assay.

Phospholipase D assays: Briefly, the trophozoite forms of B. mandrillaris were collected. Various cell numbers were pelleted by centrifugation at 750 x g and resuspended in 0.1 ml of phosphate buffered saline (PBS). The parasite cultures were frozen at -80°C (approx. 20 min). Following this, cultures were thawed at room temperature and vortexed. This process was repeated 4X and resulted in complete cell lysis, (confirmed by observing under the microscope). The lysates were incubated with 0.9 ml of cold substrate solution [0.14 M choline chloride (stock solution was prepared by dissolving in 0.1 M Tris-HCl buffer, pH 8.0), 0.48 mM 4-aminoantipyrine (stock solution was prepared in H2O), 2.1 mM phenol (stock solution was prepared in H2O), 4.92 U/ml peroxidase from horseradish (110 purpurogallin units/mg, Toyobo Grade)] The mixtures were incubated at various temperatures. The substrate solutions without B. mandrillaris lysates were used as blanks. In addition, B. mandrillaris lysates, incubated with PBS alone, were used as negative controls. Following this incubation, mixtures were transferred into cuvettes and determined
their absorbance values at 500 nm. The absorbance values were converted into Units per ml activity as follows:

\[
\text{OD (sample)} - \text{OD (blank)} \times \frac{V_t}{12 \times 0.5 \times 1} \times V_s = \text{Units per ml activity.}
\]

OD is optical density, Vt is total volume of the cuvette, Vs is sample volume. 12 is millimolar extinction coefficient of quinoneimine dye under the assay conditions (cm²/micromole), 0.5 is a factor based on the fact that one mole of \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) produces half a mole of quinoneimine dye, 1 is light path length (cm).

**Phospholipase A2 assay:** The trophozoite forms of *Balamuthia mandrillaris* were collected. Various cell numbers were pelleted by centrifugation at 750 x g and resuspended in 0.1 ml of phosphate buffered saline (PBS). The parasite cultures were frozen at -80°C (approx. 20 min). Following this, cultures were thawed at room temperature and vortexed. This process was repeated 4X and resulted in complete cell lysis, (confirmed by observing under the microscope). The lysates were incubated with 0.9 ml of cold substrate solution \([98 \text{ mM D-L- } \alpha-\text{glycerophosphate (stock solution was prepared by dissolving in 50 mM Tris-HCl buffer, pH 8.0, contg.0.049% triton-x-100), 0.48 mM 4-aminoantipyrine (stock solution was prepared in H}_2\text{O), 5.4 U/ml peroxidase from horseradish (110 purpurogallin units/mg, Toyobo Grade III)].\) The mixtures were incubated at various temperatures. The substrate solutions without *B. mandrillaris* lysates were used as blanks. In addition, *B. mandrillaris* lysates incubated with PBS alone were used as negative controls. Following this incubation, mixtures were transferred into cuvettes and determined their absorbance values at 500 nm. The absorbance values were converted into Units per ml activity as follows:

\[
\text{OD (sample)} - \text{OD (blank)} \times \frac{V_t}{13.3 \times 0.5 \times 1} \times V_s = \text{Units per ml activity.}
\]

OD is optical density, Vt is total volume of the cuvette, Vs is sample volume 13.3 is millimolar extinction coefficient of quinoneimine dye under the assay conditions (cm²/micromole), 0.5 is a factor based on the fact that one mole of \( \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \) produces half a mole of quinoneimine dye, 1 is light path length (cm).

**Adhesion assays:** The purpose of the experiment was to determine if *B. mandrillaris* bind to *in vitro* to HBMEC. A 75 cm² tissue culture flask containing the amoebae were examined under a light microscope. The amoebae could be assumed to be healthy if present in the trophozoite stage and appeared to be actively attached feeding trophozoites on the flask base. The amoebae cultures were collected by flask agitation. The flask was then examined under the microscope to check that amoebae were free in the RPMI 1640 medium and collected by centrifugation as described above. Next, amoebae were counted (amoebae/ml) using a haemocytometer. *Balamuthia mandrillaris* \((5 \times 10^5 \text{ cells/well/500 } \mu\text{L})\) were incubated with HBMEC grown to monolayers in 24-well plates as previously described [9]. Plates were incubated at 37°C in 5% CO2 incubator for 2 h. HBMEC incubated alone in RPMI 1640 were used as negative controls. Each condition was performed in duplicate for each experiment. After this time the plates were removed and the wells gently mixed. Six µl was pipetted out from each well for a haemocytometer count. The counts were recorded. The numbers of *B. mandrillaris* recorded can be related to the numbers bound to the HBMEC since we know how many were inoculated into each well initially.

**Adhesion assays in the presence of phospholipase inhibitors:** To determine the involvement of phospholipases in *B. mandrillaris* binding to HBMEC, adhesion assays were performed in the presence of phospholipase inhibitors, i.e., cytidine 5’-diphosphocholine, a PLA2 inhibitor; and compound 48/80, a PLD inhibitor. These inhibitors were used at various concentrations. Briefly, various concentrations of inhibitors were incubated with *B. mandrillaris* for 30 min prior to adhesion assays. Adhesion assays were carried out as described above in the presence of inhibitors.

**Cytotoxicity assays:** To examine the pathogenic potential of each isolate used in this study, cytotoxicity assays were performed as previously described [10]. Briefly, *B. mandrillaris* isolates \((5 \times 10^5 \text{ parasites/well/500 } \mu\text{L})\) were incubated with HBMEC monolayers in serum free media (RPMI 1640 containing 2 mM glutamine, 1 mM pyruvate and non-essential amino acids) at 37°C in 5% CO2 incubator. HBMEC monolayers were observed periodically for cytopathic effects for up to 24 h. At the end of this incubation period, cytopathic effects were assessed
visually after hematoxylin staining. In addition, supernatants were collected and cytotoxicity was determined by measuring lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) activity release (Cytotoxicity detection kit; Roche Applied Science, Lewes, UK) as previously described [10]. This assay is based on the measurement of LDH activity released from damaged cells using the 96-well plates. Briefly, cell supernatant containing LDH catalyzes the conversion of lactate (solution from kit) to pyruvate, generating NADH and H⁺. In the second step, the catalyst (diaphorase, solution from kit) transfers H and H⁺ from NADH and H⁺ to the tetrazolium salt p-iodo-nitrotetrazolium (INT) yellow, which is reduced to formazan red, and absorbance is read at 492 nm. Percentage LDH release was detected as follows: (sample value – control value / total LDH release – control value x 100 = % cytotoxicity). Control values were obtained from HBMEC incubated alone. Total LDH release was determined from HBMEC treated with 1% Triton-X-100 (w/v).

Cytotoxicity assays in the presence of phospholipase inhibitors: To determine the involvement of PLₐ and PLD in *B. mandrillaris* cytotoxicity to HBMEC, cytotoxicity assays were performed in the presence of phospholipase inhibitors. These inhibitors were used at various concentrations. Briefly, various concentrations of inhibitors were incubated with *B. mandrillaris* for over night prior to cytotoxicity assays. Cytotoxicity assays were carried out as described above in the presence of inhibitors

**RESULTS**

*Balamuthia mandrillaris* exhibit phospholipase A₂ and D activities: To determine whether *B. mandrillaris* exhibit phospholipase activities, assays were performed as described in materials and methods. Our results demonstrated that both *B. mandrillaris* isolates possess phospholipase A₂ and phospholipase D activities. As observed in Fig. 1, *B. mandrillaris* exhibited more than 0.1 U/ml PLₐ activities, but showed up to 0.48 U/ml PLD activities. Interestingly, *B. mandrillaris* exhibited higher PLD than PLₐ activities.

![Fig. 1: *Balamuthia mandrillaris* exhibit phospholipase A₂ and D activities.](image1)

Phospholipase A₂ and D activities of *B. mandrillaris* are time-dependent: To determine the effects of time on phospholipase activities, assays were performed using various time intervals for up to 2 h. As shown in Fig. 2, phospholipase activities are time-dependent. Maximal activities of 0.16 U/ml (for PLₐ) and 0.48 U/ml (for PLD) were observed after 2 h. Again, higher PLD activities were observed as compared with PLₐ activities.

![Fig.2: A). Phospholipase A₂ activities of *Balamuthia mandrillaris* are time dependent.](image2)

![Fig.2: B). Phospholipase D activities of *Balamuthia mandrillaris* are time dependent.](image3)
Maximal PLA₂ and PLD activities were observed at 37°C: To determine the effects of temperature on phospholipase activities, various temperatures were tested. We observed optimal PLA₂ and PLD activities at 37 °C, i.e., 0.144 U/ml and 0.255 U/ml respectively (Fig. 3). Interestingly, both PLA₂ and PLD activities were inhibited at 60 °C. Overall, these findings suggest that B. mandrillaris exhibit optimal PLA₂ and PLD activities at 37 °C indicating their physiological relevance.

Maximal PLA₂ and PLD activities were observed at pH 8: To determine the effects of pH on phospholipase activities, various pHs were tested. As shown in Fig. 4, that optimal PLA₂ and PLD activities were observed at pH 8 i.e., 0.178 U/ml and 0.53 U/ml respectively.

Balamuthia mandrillaris exhibited extracellular PLA₂ and PLD activities: To determine whether B. mandrillaris exhibit extracellular activities of PLA₂ and PLD, assays were performed using B. mandrillaris conditioned medium. Conditioned medium were collected by incubating B. mandrillaris alone in RPMI and cell-free supernatants were collected by centrifugation and used in phospholipase assays as described in methods and materials. As observed in Fig. 5, conditioned medium exhibited PLA₂ and PLD activities, however their levels were significantly less than whole B. mandrillaris lysates.

Fig.3: A). Maximal PLA₂ activities were observed at 37°C.

Fig.3: B). Maximal PLD activities were observed at 37°C.

Fig. 4: A). Maximal PLA₂ activities were observed at pH 8

Fig. 4: B). Maximal PLD activities were observed at pH 8
**PLA₂ and PLD inhibitors partially inhibited B. mandrillaris binding to the host cells:** In order to understand the *B. mandrillaris* adherence with the HBMEC, adhesion assays were performed in the presence and absence of phospholipase inhibitors. As shown in Fig. 6, these inhibitors play important roles to inhibit the binding of *B. mandrillaris* to HBMEC. It was observed that in the presence of cytidine (PLA₂ inhibitor) *B. mandrillaris* binding to HBMEC is 17% while in the presence of compound 48/80 (PLD inhibitor) this binding is more than 20%.

**PLA₂ and PLD inhibitors partially inhibited B. mandrillaris-mediated host cells cytotoxicity:** The major tasks to perform these assays were to confirm PLA₂ and PLD activities in *B. mandrillaris*, to understand *B. mandrillaris* roles in the blood brain barrier changes, to know how could we inhibit these activities and what is the effect of inhibitors on HBMEC. These assays were done by using cytidine (PLA₂ inhibitors) and compound 48/80 (PLD inhibitor). As shown in Fig. 7, these inhibitors inhibit *B. mandrillaris*-mediated host cell cytotoxicity. It was
observed that *B. mandrillaris* in the presence of 25 µM cytidine and 15 µg compound 48/80 showed decreased HBMEC cytotoxicity without showing significant cytotoxic effects on HBMEC.

![Graph showing the effect of cytidine and compound 48/80 on HBMEC cytotoxicity.]

Fig. 7A). PLA₂ inhibitors partially inhibited *Balamuthia mandrillaris*-mediated host cells cytotoxicity.

![Graph showing the effect of compound 48/80 and *B. mandrillaris* on HBMEC cytotoxicity.]

Fig. 7B). PLD inhibitors partially inhibited *Balamuthia mandrillaris*-mediated host cells cytotoxicity.

### DISCUSSION

*Balamuthia mandrillaris* is a causative agent of fatal granulomatous encephalitis in humans and other mammals. *B. mandrillaris* is believed to be widely distributed in the environment and dust throughout the world. Human infection resulting from *B. mandrillaris* has increased significantly. There are more than 105 human cases of *B. mandrillaris* granulomatous encephalitis (BGE) reported throughout the world. Previous reports show that *B. mandrillaris* can affect both healthy and immunocompromised patients but still there is no specific treatment for *B. mandrillaris* infections. Lack of effective treatment and delay in the diagnosis of most reported cases may have contributed to the high mortality rate. Earlier diagnosis and treatment with the known marginally effective agents may result in better clinical outcomes. Several lines of evidence suggest that *B. mandrillaris* invasion of the central nervous system (CNS) is a result of haematogenous spread from the primary site of infection [11]. However, it is not clear how circulating amoebae cross the blood brain barrier. Thus understanding the molecular mechanism associated with *B. mandrillaris*-interactions with HBMEC and crossing the blood brain barrier may provide opportunities to develop novel strategies for treatment. Due to the ability of *B. mandrillaris* to penetrate host tissues, we hypothesize that this amoeba exhibits hydrolytic activities. In this study, for the first time we have shown the presence of phospholipase A₂ (PLA₂) and phospholipase D (PLD) activities in *B. mandrillaris*. This is an important finding as both PLA₂ and PLD have been shown to be important in the pathogenesis of other microbes including bacteria such as *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* [12] and *Vibrio damsella* [6]; fungal pathogens including *Aspergillus fumigatus* [13], and protozoans such as *Acanthamoeba* [14]. For example, Langton and Cesareo [15] have shown that PLA₂ produced by *Helicobacter pylori* can degrade phosphatidylcholine-rich gut lining which can directly lead to gastric ulcer disease. Using PLA₂-specific inhibitors, it was further shown that *H. pylori* were significantly less able to produce gastric ulcer in human [16] clearly indicating that PLA₂ plays important roles in pathogenesis of disease. Similarly, Muckle and Gyles [17] have shown that PLD produced by *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis* causes increased vascular permeability and leads to the lymphadenitis or lymphangitis disease in ruminants or horses. This was
further supported with the finding that PLD mutant of 
C. pseudotuberculosi might itself be used as a vaccine
[18]. Similar roles may be attributed to B. mandrillaris
phospholipases, however it remains to be determined.
Among variable temperatures, the optimal B. 
mandrillaris phospholipase activities were observed at
37°C. Similarly a range of pH was tested to determine
the optimal activities and alkaline pH exhibited optimal
activities indicating their physiological relevance.
Next we determined PLA2 and PLD activities in B.
mandrillaris conditioned medium, which could suggest
that both enzymes are extracellular. Our results showed
that B. mandrillaris exhibit extracellular PLA2 and PLD
activities. These findings are novel as they suggest
that PLA2 and PLD may be used as contact-
indirect virulence factors of B. mandrillaris.
We next tested the role of phospholipases on B.
mandrillaris binding to the host cells as well as their
cytotoxicity on the host cells. We made use of HBMEC
as host cells and performed adhesion assays. Our
findings revealed that in the presence of cytidine (PLA2
inhibitors) 17% B. mandrillaris bind to the HBMEC
and in the presence of compound 48/80 (PLD inhibitor)
this binding increased up to 25%. It is important to
observe that in the absence of these inhibitors 
Balamuthia mandrillaris-mediated HBMEC binding
increased up to 90% indicating that phospholipases of
B. mandrillaris may play important roles in the
HBMEC disruption. It is interesting to note that, of the
two major phospholipases observed in this study,
lycetate dehydrogenase (LDH) assays in the presence of
cytidine (PLA2 inhibitor) showed only 17% B.
mandrillaris-mediated HBMEC cytotoxicity while
compound 48/80 (PLD inhibitor) showed only 42%
cytoxicity which is another evidence to prove that
B. mandrillaris phospholipases play important roles in the
blood brain-barrier changes. However, the precise
targets and underlying mechanism of phospholipases-
mediated HBMEC cytotoxicity remain unknown. It was
also observed in adhesion and LDH assays that cytidine
showed significant inhibition, which suggests that
cytidine is a good inhibitor against B. mandrillaris
PLA2. Moreover cytidine showed very less cytotoxic
effects on HBMEC even at higher concentration which
indicating that these inhibitors could be important for
therapeutic interventions

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, we have shown for the first time that B.
mandrillaris exhibit phospholipase activities i.e.,
phospholipase A2 and phospholipase D activities. Our
results show that these phospholipases are involved in
B. mandrillaris binding to HBMEC and play vital roles
in B. mandrillaris-mediated HBMEC cytotoxicity,
which may lead to amoebial traversal of the blood-brain
barrier. Thus understanding the molecular mechanism
associated with B. mandrillaris phospholipases may
provide opportunities to develop novel strategies for
treatment.
In this study we have shown the roles of phospholipases
in B. mandrillaris virulence, the future work will be to
use these enzymes in drug discovery efforts to
identify and design inhibitors and/or their use as a
vaccine. The utility of phospholipases as diagnostic
markers of B. mandrillaris infections is yet another
area of study that may prove to be fruitful.

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associated with a case of amoebic


