

# Prediction of the possible inhibitory effect of 6-(methylsulfinyl)hexyl isothiocyanate (6MITC) and its analogs on P-glycoprotein (P-gp) by *in silico* analysis of their interaction energies

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## ABSTRACT

In the present study, we performed *in silico* analyses of the ligand-residue interaction energies between P-glycoprotein (P-gp) and 6-(methylsulfinyl)hexyl isothiocyanate (6MITC) and its analogs to predict possible inhibitory effect of the ITCs on P-gp. In total, 12 residues were identified as the preferred interaction residues in P-gp. Possible involvement of the moieties at C6 of the ITCs in forming hydrogen bonds in the ITC/P-gp complexes was revealed. Five of the eight tested ITCs had hydrogen bonds with either Asn-721 or Gln-725, indicating that these residues may play important roles in the ITC/P-gp interactions. Further, on the basis of the highest values for the ITC/P-gp interaction energies, the possible accumulation of the ITCs in cells was predicted in the order of 6MITC > 2b > 2e > 2c ≈ 2d ≈ 2h ≈ 2f ≈ 2g. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report to predict possible inhibitory effect of ITCs on P-gp with *in silico* structural analyses of the ligand-receptor interaction between ITCs and P-gp.

**Keywords:** 6-(Methylsulfinyl)hexyl isothiocyanate (6MITC); ATP-binding cassette (ABC) transporters; *in silico*; P-glycoprotein (P-gp); structural analysis

## ABBREVIATIONS

ABC, ATP-binding cassette; ASE-Dock, alpha sphere and excluded volume-based ligand-protein docking; ITC, isothiocyanate; MDR, multidrug resistance; MOE, Molecular Operating Environment; P-gp, P-glycoprotein; 6MITC, 6-(methylsulfinyl)hexyl isothiocyanate

## INTRODUCTION

Isothiocyanates (ITCs) occur widely and abundantly as thioglycoside conjugates known as glucosinolates in *Brassica* species, such as broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, wasabi, and watercress, and *Raphanus* species, such as daikons and radishes [1,2].

Glucosinolates are hydrolyzed by myrosinase ( $\beta$ -thioglucoside glucohydrolase) and ITCs are formed by a Lossen rearrangement [3]. In humans, such reactions can be catalyzed by intestinal microflora [4]. Many standard chemotherapeutic agents, such as cytarabine and daunorubicin, have been found in natural sources,

and since ITCs are present in the above edible plants and consumed by humans in considerable quantities [5,6], they may offer preventive and therapeutic activities against degenerative diseases, such as cancer [7]. In fact, ITCs have been drawing much attention because of findings from *in vitro* and *in vivo* models that they offer possible chemoprotection and chemotherapy against cancer [3, 8, 9]. ITCs have been reported to induce apoptosis in several cancer cell lines, and have been tested in animal models for leukemia, breast cancer, colon cancer, and prostate cancer [10-14]. The factors targeted by ITCs for controlling cancer are antioxidant response elements, Bax, caspases, cyclin A, cyclin B1, cyclin D1, cytochrome P450, Kruppel-like factor 4, p21, p53, and poly ADP-ribose polymerase [15-20]. Modulation of carcinogen metabolism through induction of phase 2 enzymes and/or inhibition of phase 1 enzymes also plays a role in the anticancer activities of ITCs [21-25]. Furthermore, the PI3K/Akt signaling pathway was found to be largely involved in the survival of cancer cells, and an ITC sulforaphane restricted this pathway and inhibited the cell growth [26].

ATP-binding cassette (ABC) transporters are involved in the absorption and elimination of compounds, and act as efflux pumps at cellular membranes to transport molecules against concentration gradients. For some compounds, such as anticancer drugs, that are structurally and/or functionally unrelated to cells, ABC transporters export them across cell membranes and decrease the intracellular concentrations of these foreign compounds [27]. ABC transporters are endogenously expressed in normal cells, but overexpressed in cancer cells. Consequently, they actively export anticancer drugs, decrease the concentrations of the drugs below therapeutic thresholds, and confer multidrug resistance (MDR) on cancer cells. MDR is one of the major problems that needs to be overcome in chemotherapy [28]. P-glycoprotein (P-gp) is an ABC transporter and often overexpressed in MDR cancer cells. It acts as an ATP-dependent efflux pump to transfer a wide variety of compounds, including chemotherapeutic agents. P-gp has also been positively correlated with poor prognosis in cancers. Anthracyclines, epipodophyllotoxins, taxanes, and vinca alkaloids are examples of anticancer drugs that have been identified as substrates of P-gp [29]. P-gp has also been studied for its interactions with ITCs, and certain ITCs showed inhibitory effects on P-gp [30]. Recently, we found that a naturally occurring ITC from wasabi (*Wasabia japonica*), a Japanese indigenous herb, exhibited significant growth inhibitory activity toward a macrophage-like tumor cell line [31]. We have been focusing our attention on the ITC 6-(methylsulfinyl)hexyl isothiocyanate (6MITC) as a possible new candidate for controlling cancer cell progression and metastasis. 6MITC suppressed the growth and survival of breast cancer and melanoma cell lines [32], and also showed anticancer activity in a mouse model of pulmonary metastasis [33]. Taken together, these findings suggest that targeting P-gp

with inhibitors from natural origins, such as 6MITC, can be utilized as a potential therapeutic option for controlling cancer.

In the present study, in light of the above-described anticancer activity of 6MITC, we performed ligand fitting of 6MITC and its analogs to P-gp with a molecular modeling method to estimate their possible effects on the P-gp mediated efflux.

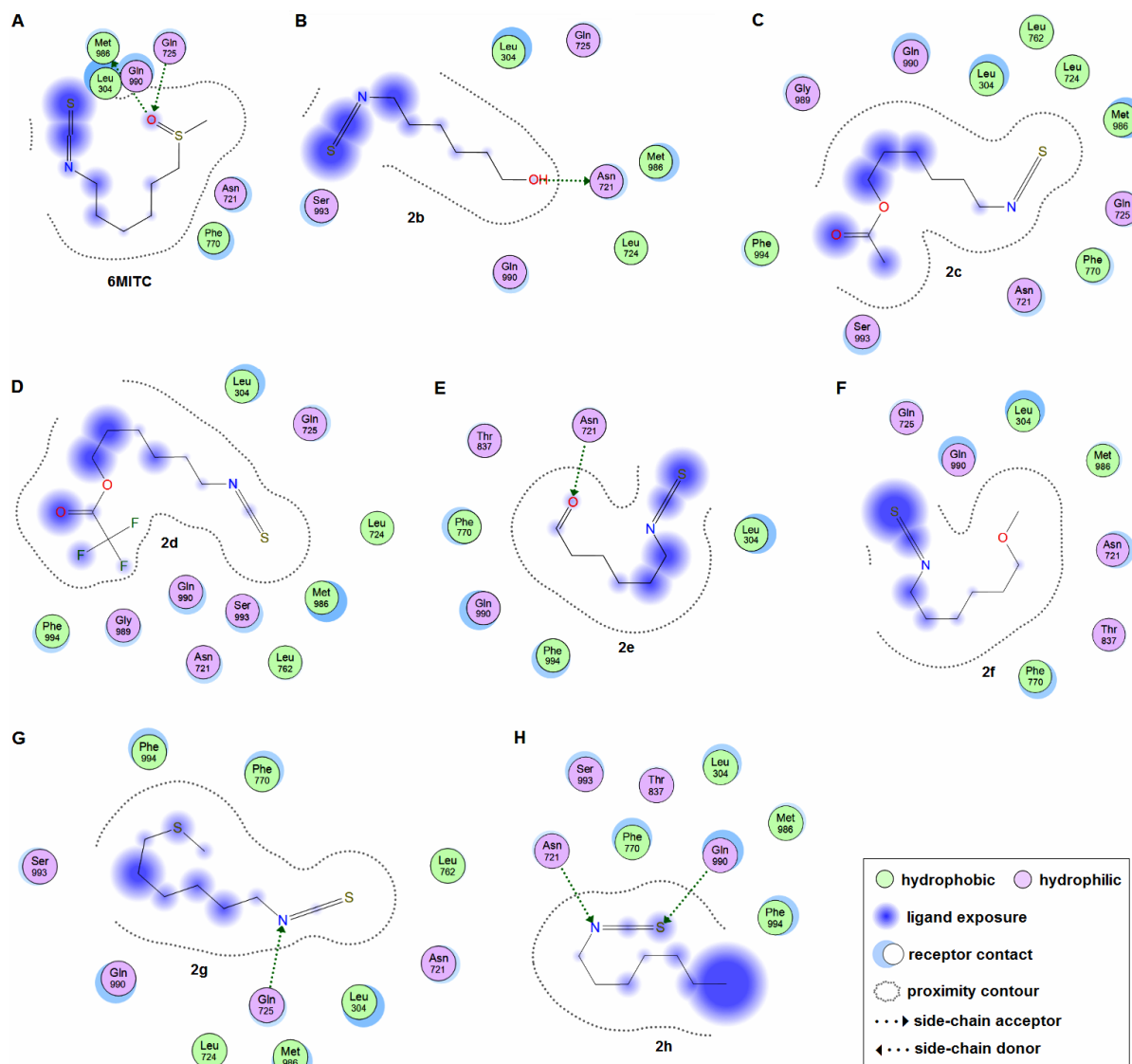
## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Homology modeling of human P-gp*

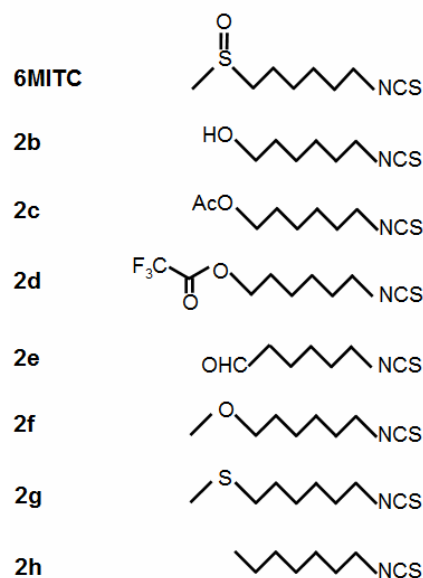
Homology modeling of human P-gp and its binding site selection and exploration were carried out as previously reported [34]. Briefly, mouse P-gp (PDB code: 3G5U) [35] was selected as a template for the structural modeling of human P-gp (NCBI reference sequence: NP\_000918.2) because of its good crystal structure resolution (3.8 Å) and because its information was recent (from 2009) among the reported P-gp models. For construction of the P-gp model, 100 independent models of the target protein were built using a Boltzmann-weighted randomized modeling procedure in Molecular Operating Environment 2011.10 (MOE; Chemical Computing Group Inc., Montreal, Canada) that was adapted from reports by Levitt [36] and Fechteler *et al.* [37]. The intermediate models were evaluated by a residue-packing quality function, which was sensitive to the degrees to which nonpolar side-chain groups were buried and hydrogen-bonding opportunities were satisfied. The P-gp model with the best residue-packing quality function and full energy minimization was selected for further analyses.

### *In silico ligand-receptor interactions between P-gp and 6MITC and its analogs*

Hydrophobic or hydrophilic alpha spheres, which were created by the Site Finder module of the MOE, were utilized to define potential ligand-binding sites (LBSs). Analyses of the ligand-receptor interactions between the ITCs (the structures of 6MITC and its analogs are shown in Figure 1 [31]) and the P-gp model were performed with the alpha sphere and excluded volume-based ligand-protein docking (ASE-Dock) module of the MOE [38]. In the ASE-Dock module, ligand atoms had alpha spheres within 1 Å. Based on this property, concave models were created and ligand atoms from a large number of conformations generated by superimposition with these points were evaluated and scored by the maximum overlap with the alpha spheres and minimum overlap with the receptor atoms. The ligand conformations were subjected to energy minimization using the MMF94S force field [39], and 500 conformations were generated using the default systematic search parameters. Five thousand poses per conformation were randomly placed onto the alpha spheres located within the LBS in P-gp. From the resulting 500,000 poses, 200 poses were selected for further optimization with the MMF94S force field. During the refinement step, the ligands were free to move within the binding pocket.



**Figure 2.** Ligand-receptor interaction plots for the tested ITC/P-gp complexes. (A-H) All of the tested ITCs can bind to the LBS in the P-gp model. (A) The S=O oxygen at C6 of 6MITC is identified as an element that forms hydrogen bonds with Gln-725 and Met-986. (B) The presence of a hydrogen bond is found between the hydroxyl group of 2b at C6 and Asn-721. (C) The 2c/P-gp complex. (D) The 2d/P-gp complex. (E) The C=O oxygen at C6 of 2e forms a hydrogen bond with Asn-721. (F) The 2f/P-gp complex. (G) The presence of a hydrogen bond is found between 2g and Gln-725. (H) The presence of hydrogen bonds is found between 2h and Asn-721 and Gln-990.



**Figure 1.** Structures of 6MITC and its analogs used in the present study.

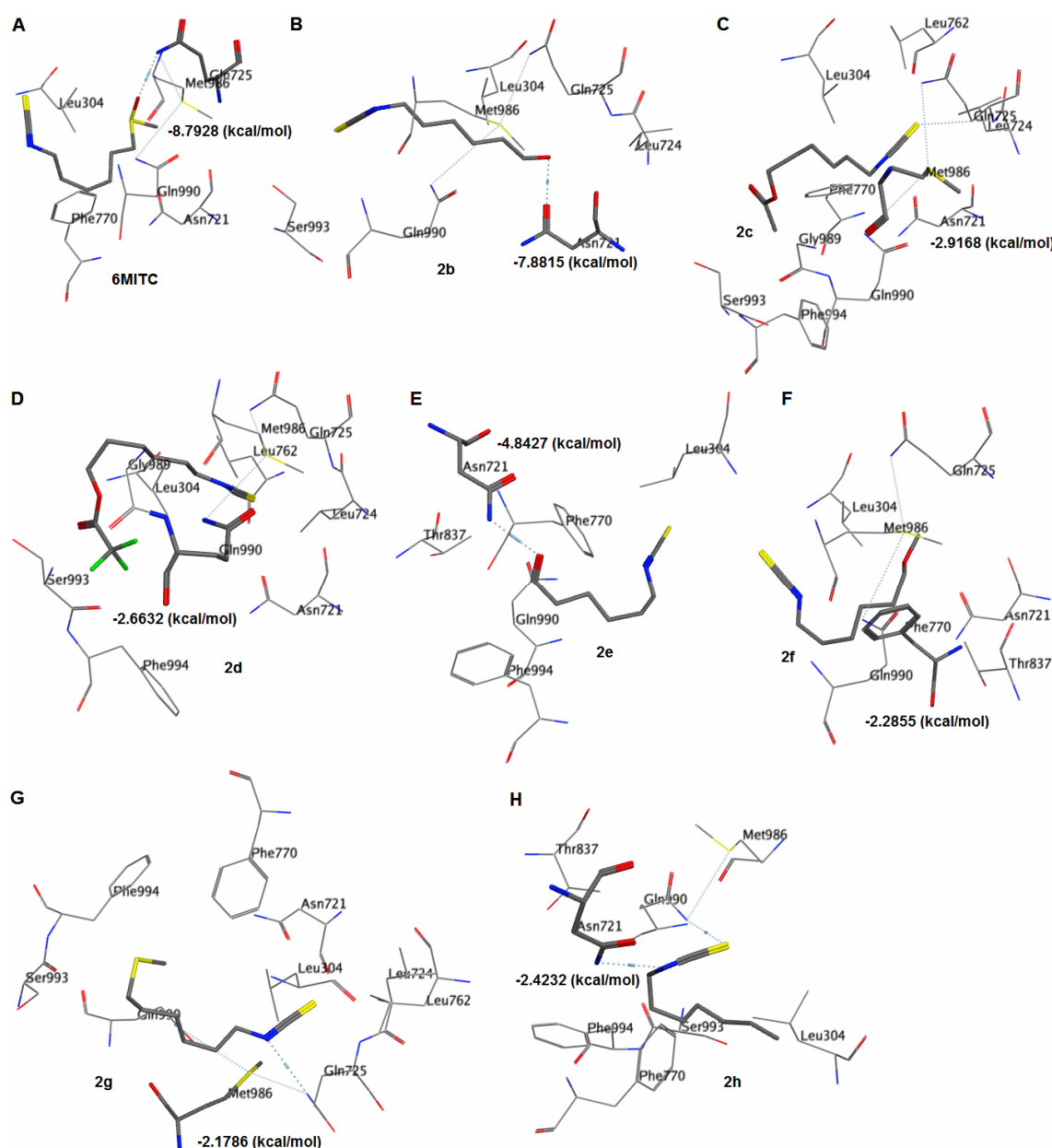
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *In silico structural analysis of the tested ITC/P-gp models*

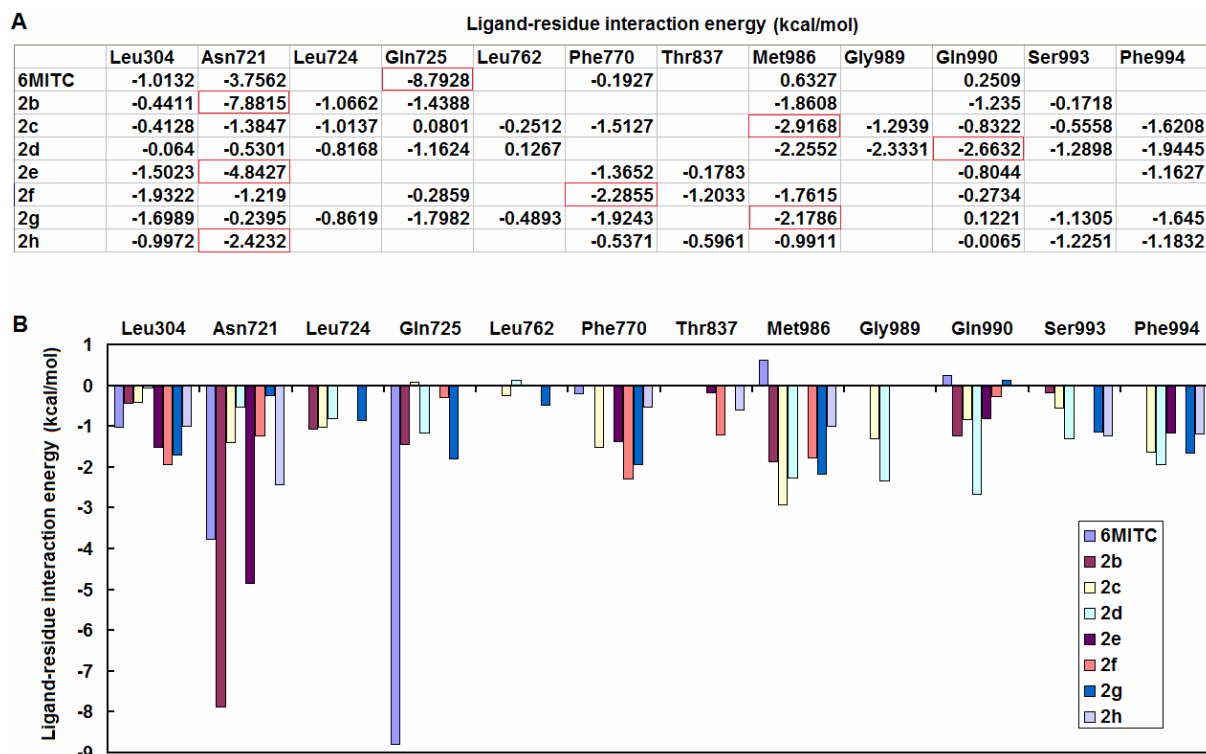
Although ITCs are prospective naturally-derived anticancer compounds, they are xenobiotics in humans and destined to be exported from or metabolized in cells. ABC transporters, such as P-gp, are involved in the elimination of such foreign compounds and ITCs can be substrates of P-gp [40]. Interestingly, no difference was found between the LBSs of the substrates and inhibitors for P-gp [41], and therefore ITCs have also been reported to be inhibitors of P-gp [30]. In the present study, to predict the inhibitory effects of 6MITC and its analogs on P-gp, we first performed *in silico* structural analyses of the tested ITC/P-gp model to ascertain whether the ITCs could bind to P-gp. Our previous analyses of the structural properties of P-gp and docking simulations of 6MITC/P-gp complexes suggested that our methods

were capable of generating a P-gp model that was similar to the near-native P-gp [34]. To create ligand-receptor interaction plots for each ITC/P-gp complex, the Ligand Interactions module of the MOE was used, which provided a clearer arrangement of the key intermolecular interactions that aid in the interpretation of the 3D juxtaposition of the ligands and the LBS in P-gp. The ASE-Dock module of the MOE [42] revealed that, in addition to 6MITC, all the other tested ITCs could bind to the LBS in the P-gp model (Figure 2A–H). In total, 12 residues were identified as the preferred interaction residues, and the presence of hydrogen bonds was found between 6MITC and Gln-725 and Met-986 (Figure 2A), 2b and Asn-721 (Figure 2B), 2e and Asn-721 (Figure 2E), 2g and Gln-725 (Figure 2G), and 2h and Asn-721 and Gln-990 (Figure 2H). The S=O oxygen at C6 of 6MITC was identified as

the element that formed the hydrogen bonds with Gln-725 and Met-986 (Figure 2A). The presence of a hydrogen bond was also found between the hydroxyl group of 2b at C6 and Asn-721 (Figure 2B). Furthermore, the C=O oxygen at C6 of 2e formed a hydrogen bond with Asn-721 (Figure 2E). The isothiocyanato (-NCS; one end of the ITCs) group of ITCs undergoes conjugation with GSH to form dithiocarbamates [43]. Our present results revealed the involvement of the moieties at C6 (other end of the ITCs) of the ITCs in forming hydrogen bonds in the ITC/P-gp complexes. Five of the eight tested ITCs had hydrogen bonds with either Asn-721 or Gln-725 (Figures 2A, B, E, G, and H), indicating that these residues may play important roles in the ITC/P-gp interactions.



**Figure 3.** 3D structures of the LBS and the highest interaction energy values for each ITC/P-gp complex. (A) Among the tested structures, 6MITC/Gln-725 has the highest interaction energy value of  $-8.7928$  kcal/mol. (B) 2b/Asn-721 has a value of  $-7.8815$  kcal/mol. (C) 2c/Met-986 has a value of  $-2.9168$  kcal/mol. (D) 2d/Gln-990 has a value of  $-2.6632$  kcal/mol. (E) 2e/Asn-721 has a value of  $-4.8427$  kcal/mol. (F) 2f/Phe-770 has a value of  $-2.2855$  kcal/mol. (G) 2g/Met-986 has a value of  $-2.1786$  kcal/mol. (H) 2h/Asn-721 has a value of  $-2.4232$  kcal/mol. Blue: nitrogen; gray: carbon; red: oxygen; yellow: sulfur.



**Figure 4.** Ligand-residue interaction energies for the 12 preferred residues. (A) The highest values for the 2d, 2f, and 2g/P-gp ligand-residue interaction energies are 1.3, 1.2, and 1.1 times higher than the second highest values, respectively. For 6MITC, 2b, 2c, 2e, and 2h/P-gp, the highest values are much higher than the second highest energies. The highest values for each ITC are enclosed in red rectangles. (B) Graphical presentation of the data in (A). Based on the highest values for the ITC/P-gp ligand-residue interaction energies, the intracellular accumulation of the ITCs (inhibition of P-gp by the ITCs) can be predicted in the order of 6MITC > 2b > 2e > 2c ≈ 2d ≈ 2h ≈ 2f ≈ 2g

#### Analysis of the interaction energies between the tested ITCs and P-gp

We also analyzed the residues exhibiting the highest interaction energy values for each ITC/P-gp complex to identify the most influential residues for the ITC/P-gp interactions. The ligand-residue interaction energies were calculated by the method of Labute [44], which assigns energy terms in kcal/mol for each residue. Generally, a negative value indicated that the residue attracted the ligand, while a positive value indicated that the residue repelled the ligand. The 3D structures of the LBS and the highest energy values for each ITC/P-gp complex are shown in Figure 3A–H. 6MITC/Gln-725 had the highest interaction energy value of -8.7928 (kcal/mol; Figure 3A), -7.8815 for 2b/Asn-721 (Figure 3B), -2.9168 for 2c/Met-986 (Figure 3C), -2.6632 for 2d/Gln-990 (Figure 3D), -4.8427 for 2e/Asn-721 (Figure 3E), -2.2855 for 2f/Phe-770 (Figure 3F), -2.1786 for 2g/Met-986 (Figure 3G), and -2.4232 for 2h/Asn-721 (Figure 3H). These findings confirmed the importance of residues Asn-721 and Gln-725 for the ITC/P-gp interactions, based on the comparatively high interaction energies of -8.7928 (kcal/mol; 6MITC/Gln-725; Figure 3A), -7.8815 (2b/Asn-721; Figure 3B), and -4.8427 (2e/Asn-721; Figure 3E). No compounds can exert effects without entering the inside of cells, unless their functions are mediated by receptors on the cell membranes. We surmised that the intracellular accumulation of ITCs could be attributed to the binding of the ITCs to P-gp, and therefore conducted further *in silico* structural analyses of the ITC/P-gp model to

predict the possible intracellular accumulation of the ITCs. All of the ligand-residue interaction energies for the 12 preferred residues were calculated (Figure 4A), and the values are shown graphically (Figure 4B). The highest values for the 2d, 2f, and 2g/P-gp ligand-residue interaction energies were 1.3, 1.2, and 1.1 times higher than the second highest values, respectively. For 6MITC, 2b, 2c, 2e, and 2h/P-gp, the highest values were much higher than the second highest energies, suggesting that the highest value for the interaction energy is crucial for the ITC/P-gp interactions. With due consideration of these results, we can predict the intracellular accumulation of the ITCs (inhibition of P-gp by the ITCs) in the order of 6MITC > 2b > 2e > 2c ≈ 2d ≈ 2h ≈ 2f ≈ 2g. This order is proposed mostly on the basis of the highest values for the ITC/P-gp interaction energies.

#### CONCLUSION

In the present study, we performed *in silico* analyses of the ligand-residue interaction between P-gp and 6MITC and its analogs to predict possible inhibitory effects of the ITCs on P-gp. Our results revealed that the tested ITCs could bind to the LBS in P-gp and can predict their biological potency, such as the ability to inhibit P-gp and to accumulate in cells. The ITCs with higher *in silico* ligand-residue interaction energies, that indicate possible higher inhibitory effects on P-gp, may be accumulated at higher concentrations in cells. This suggests that the ITCs showing stronger binding to P-gp possibly function against the P-gp-mediated efflux. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report to



predict the possible biological potency of ITCs with *in silico* structural analyses between the ITCs and P-gp. *In silico* structural analyses have gained great importance in drug discovery and development [45], and further *in silico* analyses between cancer-related proteins and the ITCs are ongoing in our laboratories to elucidate the more detailed mechanism underlying the inhibitory effects of the ITCs on cancer.

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